

**Submission  
No 53**

**ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR SENIORS AND  
DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN RURAL AND  
REGIONAL NSW**

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# **Draft Submission to the Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services' Inquiry on Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional NSW**

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## Table of contents

<b>Opening:</b> _____	<b>3</b>
<b>Purpose:</b> _____	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary:</b> _____	<b>3</b>
<b>LGNSW response to Terms of Reference</b> _____	<b>4</b>
<b>Conclusion:</b> _____	<b>8</b>

## Opening:

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) is the peak body for councils in NSW, representing NSW general-purpose councils and associate members including special-purpose county councils and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council. In essence, LGNSW is the organisation for all things local government in NSW. LGNSW facilitates the development of an effective community based system of local government in the State.

## Purpose:

LGNSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Parliamentary Inquiry on Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional NSW*.

## Executive Summary:

The Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services (The Committee) is currently investigating access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people (including but not limited to Aboriginal persons, persons with disability and social housing tenants) in rural and regional NSW. The Parliamentary Inquiry (The Inquiry) emerged from a request by Deputy Premier Troy Grant. Matters to be considered include:

- (a) Specific issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW;
- (b) Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW;
- (c) Potential strategies to improve access, including better alignment between different modes of transport, available routes and timetabling generally;
- (d) Support that can be provided to seniors and disadvantaged people to assist with the costs of private transport where public transport is either unavailable or unable to meet the needs of these groups; and
- (e) Any other related matters.

The Committee will provide its report on this matter on or before 30 November 2016.

Between 1994 and 2014, the proportion of the NSW population aged 65 years and over increased from 11.8% to 14.7%. This group is projected to increase swiftly over the next decade, as baby boomers turn 65 years old (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014).

Rural and regional councils in NSW understand the needs of local residents. They frequently fill the gaps in service delivery such as meeting transport needs. For seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW, as elsewhere, access to transport is one of the key factors in living an independent life. In rural NSW, older people and people from disadvantaged backgrounds are forced to rely on their private cars. Alternative modes of transport such as public transport (trains and buses), community transport or services such as taxis and *Uber* are in limited supply or too costly to access for many people in rural NSW.

Access to transport is necessary to experiencing a good quality of life and sustaining normal activities. In particular, seniors and disadvantaged groups in rural and remote NSW need transport for executing household chores, and attending medical and social appointments. With limited, or no, access to transport, their lives are diminished. In areas of limited transport, local government is often called upon to fill the gaps.

Transport is fundamental to people with disability. As part of the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, people with disability have demonstrated that social participation is one of the most important areas on which they spend their individual package income. This has emphasised the importance of flexible service delivery to meet individual needs (such as out of hours and weekend transport).

LGNSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and anticipates future opportunities to contribute to further Inquiries relating to meeting the needs of communities, particularly in rural and remote NSW. Rural and regional councils in NSW understand the needs of local residents. They frequently fill gaps in service delivery such as meeting transport needs through community transport services. Councils are also crucial to providing information on services that support people to live independently in their communities.

In summary, the LGNSW submission highlights the following key points:

- The main issues affecting the ability of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW to access transport include: lack of driver's licences, limited supply of accessible public transport and alternative modes of transport and lack of adequately-trained staff within public and alternative transport providers.
- LGNSW proposes several solutions to the issues named above, including increasing the frequency, connectivity and number of accessible trains, buses and alternative modes of transport (domestic flights, accessible taxis, community transport and privately provided transport); improving the access and safety of public transport stations, hubs and related infrastructure; providing more annual funding opportunities to NSW rural and remote councils for specific transport projects; rolling out relevant training for public and private transport providers; providing the right balance of automated and human services; and ensuring that there are available pools of funding to address the unmet needs in relevant areas, such as driver training for Aboriginal people.

## **LGNSW response to Terms of Reference**

*(a) Specific issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW*

The main categories of transport issues relating to seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW include:

- **Lack of driver's licences**

Seniors, specifically those living in rural and remote NSW, value their driver's licence and their ability to drive. It enables them to function independently and travel to their medical appointments, support their household needs, and continue their social networks. It also enables them to assist family members and friends and to volunteer in their local communities, enhancing their self-worth and contributing to a rich, tightly-knit community fabric. Rural and regional councils in NSW have reported situations where the loss of a driver's licence in this context due to medical or disability factors, has led to social isolation and depression. This in turn puts added pressure on other social support services.

Transport options for Aboriginal people in remote communities are limited. The Australian Institute of Family Studies ((Rosier, K and McDonald, M, *The relationship between transport and disadvantage in Australia*, 2011) reports that a significant proportion of Indigenous Australians living in remote areas have no access to public transport and one-third have no access to a car.

The 2013 Auditor-General's Report to Parliament, *Improving legal and safe driving among Aboriginal people*, also highlighted the issue that less than half the eligible Aboriginal people in NSW currently hold a driver's licence compared to seven out of ten for non-Aboriginal people. The NSW Government programs to address the barriers Aboriginal people face in obtaining and retaining a driver licence have had limited success at reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal people charged with or imprisoned for traffic offences. Driving programs have generally been only available in limited areas and for a short time. They also suffer from constraints in insurance coverage and volunteer driver reimbursements, lack of program ownership, uncertain funding and poor evaluation. The Auditor-General recommended that NSW develop a coherent and coordinated approach led by the key departments of Transport for NSW and the Department of Attorney General and Justice.

- **Limited supply of accessible public transport and alternative modes of transport.**

Councils report irregular train and bus timetables, and high costs associated with lack of competition (some rural and regional areas only have one existing taxi provider or one air carrier, or, only one accessible taxi). The cost of taxis makes them unaffordable for the majority of seniors and disadvantaged groups, especially the after-hours service. There is no taxi service in smaller localities (for example, Barraba and Manilla).

Councils also report cross border issues with accessing medical specialists (such as limited or no bus, rail or air service to get to a nearby town, region or state).

In many regional and rural towns, wheelchair users have to book accessible taxis well in advance because of the limited supply. Community transport providers operated by councils reported an increased demand for services particularly for weekend and after hours services (for example, Narrandera Shire now has 496 clients).

- **Lack of adequately-trained staff within public transport and alternative providers.**

Due to inadequate training and often limited number of trained staff, seniors and disadvantaged people find it challenging to get assistance when needed (such as when boarding and exiting trains, setting up ramps, seeking directions, carrying luggage, and opening heavy doors).

Local taxi services are also inappropriately resourced (for example, in some areas, taxi services have provided a maxi taxi which is difficult for frail aged people to enter, rather than a regular taxi). In addition, taxi services' employees may be inadequately trained to work with these target groups, and therefore unable to sensitively respond to their needs (for example, councils report incidents involving some taxi drivers displaying rudeness, abruptness and impatience towards elderly customers and people with disability).

*(b) Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW*

There is a lack of accessible current public transport services in rural and regional NSW include. Some examples include inaccessible smaller train stations, large gaps between the train and platform, and the standardised ramp being too steep and unstable for many users. Such features limit the ability of older people and people with disability to use public train services, where these exist.

Limited or no bus service in specific geographical areas results in poor connectivity for many disadvantaged people. Councils report, for example, that there is no bus service between Broken Hill-Mildura to connect with services to Melbourne; limited bus service between Broken Hill-Adelaide which can be cancelled at short notice due to low numbers, and minimal bus services in various areas.

People on low incomes are adversely affected by the inability to access public hospital services by public transport, potentially forcing them to pay expensive taxi fares. The lack of alignment of bus routes to hospitals such as John Hunter in New Lambton and Wyong Hospitals exacerbates this issue.

Restrictions on staffing levels in transport services will impact on the ability of older people, and others requiring assistance, to travel independently, creating more pressure to use private services. Councils report that the community is concerned about a lack of an adequately trained workforce to provide assistance, such as with a ramp for trains or to provide audible messages. There are also concerns that replacing staff with automated machines at certain train stations will make train services difficult to use by many groups.

*(c) Potential strategies to improve access, including better alignment between different modes of transport, available routes and timetabling generally*

Several strategies have been suggested by rural and regional councils in NSW, such as:

- Improve the public transport system by increasing the number, frequency, connectivity of accessible trains and buses;
- Extend current public bus services to late shifts on weeknights and provide more coverage on weekends;
- Develop the accessibility of certain train stations and bus stops by prioritising those used by more seniors and disadvantaged people, or those routes associated with hospitals;
- Improve the access and safety of the main transport hubs;
- Roll out disability awareness, cultural competency and sensitivity training to all public and private transport providers to assist with understanding the needs of older people, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, etc;
- Retain at least one staff member at each train station rather than full transition to automated machines. Seniors and people with disability may need particular assistance;
- Ensure that community transport providers are well-funded, particularly in this period of aged care and disability care reforms, so that they can deliver adequate service to the ageing population and people with disability;
- Improve alternative modes of transport by increasing the frequency and number of transport services, accessible taxis, community transport, and private providers (for example, increase *Uber* and introduce *GoGet* in rural and regional NSW);
- Provide more annual funding opportunities to NSW rural and regional councils for transport projects (for example to improve bus shelters, signage and promotional activities; to operate free loop bus service; and to employ a local Transport Coordinator); and
- Review the criteria and improve access to Isolated Patients Travel Assistance Scheme (which currently requires an upfront payment with significant delays in receiving reimbursement).

*(d) Support that can be provided to seniors and disadvantaged people to assist with the costs of private transport where public transport is either unavailable or unable to meet the needs of these groups*

LGNSW recognises that it is unrealistic to expect that public transport services can be increased to cover all the needs of residents in rural and regional NSW. NSW councils have recommended the following strategies:

- Allocate a pool of funding, which is easily accessible for individuals experiencing difficulties accessing transport services, that suit their specific needs; and



- Enhance funding to community transport services to support individual travel needs, specifically to out-of-town appointments. Additional funding could not only increase the availability of after-hours and weekend services but could be used to allow community transport providers to sub-contract to other providers, provide cab vouchers or provide travel training to seniors and disadvantaged clients to help them gain competence and confidence to travel independently.

## Conclusion:

LGNSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and anticipates future opportunities to contribute to further Inquiries relating to meeting the needs of communities, particularly in rural and remote NSW. Rural and regional councils in NSW understand the needs of local residents. They frequently fill gaps in service delivery such as meeting transport needs through community transport services. Councils are crucial to providing information on services that support people to live independently in their communities.

LGNSW member councils highlighted the main issues affecting the ability of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW to access transport. These include: lack of driver's licences, limited supply of accessible public transport and alternative modes of transport and lack of adequately-trained staff within public and alternative transport providers.

LGNSW proposes several solutions such as:

- increasing the frequency, connectivity and number of accessible trains and buses and alternative modes of transport (air carriers, accessible taxis, community transport and private providers like *Uber* and *GoGet*);
- improving the access and safety of public transport stations, hubs and related infrastructure;
- providing more annual funding opportunities to NSW rural and remote councils for specific transport projects;
- rolling out relevant staff training for public and private transport providers;
- providing the right balance of automated and human services; and
- ensuring that there are available pools of funding to address the unmet needs in certain areas, such as driver training for Aboriginal people.

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