

**Submission
No 66**

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

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Uniting

Submission to the Inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional New South Wales

Ability Links
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About Uniting Disability

UnitingCare Disability plays a lead role in the provision and development of services for people with disabilities and their families.

UnitingCare Disability services focus on enabling people with disability and their families to participate in their communities. To achieve this we work with individuals and their local communities, building the capacity of communities to be inclusive of people with disabilities. The majority of our clients have an intellectual disability; however we offer assistance to people with a range of primary disabilities. These include autism, hearing and vision impairments, acquired brain injury, physical disabilities and learning disabilities.

Our services include accommodation support, assistance with employment and education, financial support, respite care and crisis support. We offer practical support in skill development such as social skills. We also provide intensive short-to-medium term case management services for people with disability and their families who are experiencing difficulties with their current support arrangements.

About Ability Links

Ability Links is a values based initiative underpinned by the principle that people with disabilities are valued and equal members of society. The program seeks to promote the rights of people with disability to live inclusive lives in community, public, private and social spheres. Linkers work locally with individuals and the community to enhance participation in and contribution to local community.

The work of Linkers in the Ability Links program gives them the opportunity to identify barriers to participation in the community. In the period July 2014 to June 2016, Uniting Linkers have worked with more than 300 people with disability and/or their families and carers in rural and regional area in NSW. Linkers work with diverse communities, including people from culturally and linguistically communities and Aboriginal communities. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the numbers of people Linkers have worked with in rural and regional Local Government areas across New South Wales.

Introduction

Uniting Ability Links welcomes the NSW Legislative Assembly Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional New South Wales. We see this inquiry as an opportunity to explore and respond to issues faced by individuals and families with disability using Ability Links who are living in rural and regional New South Wales. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities.

This submission focuses on:

- The shortcomings and difficulties that people who are disadvantaged encounter when accessing transport in regional and remote communities in NSW
- The impacts these shortcomings and difficulties have on the ability of people to access health, education, work and the ordinary activities of community life
- Solutions and recommendations to address the shortcomings and challenges.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is the largest social welfare reform in Australia since the introduction of Medicare in 1975¹. The NDIS aims to fund ongoing supports for individuals and families with disability to assist them to live more independent, meaningful lives. To realise this aim, the New South Wales Government should consider implementing additional transport and access provisions for individuals and families living in regional and rural communities in New South Wales with disability who are transitioning to the NDIS. Adopting and incorporating these provisions ensures individuals and families with disability have equal access to public transport services, enabling their continued participation and contribution to community life.

The National Disability Strategy Consultation Report outlined some of the key challenges people with disability face accessing transport in rural and regional areas (Deane, 2012). Key challenges found in the report included:

- the slow pace of transport reform (with some reforms being carried out over 30 year timeframes)
- lack of access to public transport which, in many cases, forces individuals to rely heavily on an expensive, uninformed, untrained and sometimes unresponsive taxi system.

¹ National Disability Insurance Agency (2014). Building the National Disability Insurance Scheme Progress Report: Year One, July 2014.

Uniting Ability Links notes the wide breadth of scholarly analysis on the correlation between inadequate transport access and accessibility with chronic and systemic social exclusion²³. These reports speak to the importance of access to transport, as it gives access to valuable life opportunities including education, employment, health and community life⁴.

The difficulties people with disability face accessing transport in rural and regional areas are compounded by lack of alternatives and the higher costs associated with private transport⁵. This has a large impact on independence and quality of life. It is indicative of the importance of accessible transport in those areas.

The situation people living in rural and remote communities face has been told by one of the participants in the Ability Links program, Lisa*. Lisa lives on the South Coast of NSW and was born with Cerebral Palsy. Lisa is affected from her hips down and uses mobility aids to assist her. Lisa works two days a week, relying on buses for transport. Lisa says of her situation:

"I rely a lot on the bus company going to work or if I have to go to appointments or meetings and it is great if the bus company ran the buses more frequently for people like me or other people with physical disabilities that use aids like walkers, walking sticks, motorised scooters or wheelchairs that are unable to drive. Hopefully something can change about the transport issues or lack of down the south coast of New South Wales and the Bega Valley and beyond and rural areas because I really want people with disabilities are more involved in the community or people with disabilities that have to travel to work or go to appointments or meetings".

Another participant in the Ability Links program Christine*, living on the far south coast of NSW, has spoken of her social isolation because of the lack of accessible options with transport:

"The last two years have been very difficult because of the lack of access to transport. We live two and a half kilometres from town, which I would be able to push in, but there is no safe place for me to travel. The track on the side of the road is sandy which makes it impossible to negotiate in a wheelchair. I have to say that part of one's recovery from a life changing event is to get back to some sense of normal activities. Social isolation does not help this at all and in fact, makes it even more difficult. I hope with all of my heart that something can be done to improve access for everyone to transport. Social Isolation is an extremely difficult and debilitating

² Currie, G., Gammie, F., Waingold, C., Paterson, D. & Vandersar, D. (2005). *Rural and Regional Young People and Transport. Improving Access to Transport for Young People in Rural and Regional Australia*. National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.

³ Randolph, B. (2008), Social Exclusion and Location: Why Place Matters. *Impact*, 15-17.

⁴Deane, K. (2012). SHUT OUT: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia. National Disability Strategy Consultation Report. National People With Disabilities and Carer Council.

⁵ Deane, K. (2012).

situation to deal with, particularly when there is no solution in sight ... Social isolation is awful and debilitating for confidence and so much more”.

A. Specific issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW;

Transport is required for purchase of goods and services

People in rural and regional communities often have to travel to purchase goods and services that they require. Access to transport that makes this possible is required. For many small communities private transport is currently the only option. The Ability Linker in Goulburn is aware of a community in that area where a 40 minute drive is needed to access the goods and services they require. Currently there is a community transport mini bus travelling about two days a week (only to and from once) and a school bus, which is not appropriate for many people simply wishing to travel for their needs. There are no local taxi services in this town. This situation limits the capacity of members of this community to access the things they need. It also places strain on the resources that are available.

One of the participants in the Ability Links program Donna*, who lives in a regional area, is learning to read. She is a carer for both her husband and son, managing on their collective pensions. Her husband is fully vision impaired and her son has learning difficulties and bipolar. Donna is not able to use the bus service because of the difficulties she experiences reading the timetable. She is able to get into town once a week, via taxi. This costs \$25-\$35 one way, using a significant amount of their fortnightly budget. This cost impacts the family's capacity to engage in other community activities. Community education on using timetables would greatly benefit Donna.

Transport is required for health, education, recreation, work

Many of our participants are unable to afford or use private transport. This makes them dependent on public and community transport options to travel for work, health appointments and recreation. Unfortunately, in many of the communities in which Ability Links works, public transport options are limited by frequency and access issues, particularly in regional and remote communities.

For example, one participant who lives in Lithgow was required to travel to medical appointments in Katoomba and Penrith using the Blue Mountains train line. The frequency or lack thereof (often a two hour time or longer between services) of services, means that her travel time and time away from home is much longer than if the service was more frequent. For this person this would result in tiredness and had a negative impact on her wellbeing. An increase in frequency of train and bus services in the Nepean/Blue Mountains region would help respond to this challenge.

Another difficulty that arises in rural and regional communities occurs with young people. Young people accessing work and social activities often have limited public or community transport available. There is a desire to obtain a driver's licence but they experience difficulty finding the money to pay for driving lessons, or are unable to meet the expenses of owning and running a car. This leaves them isolated and dependent on friends, family and the community for participation at local learning centres, social activities, sport and recreational activities and work. It may also mean that they are unable to participate in further education or work opportunities outside of their immediate community. Implementing a state-funded, community-run driving school could potentially respond to this difficulty.

Transport is required to support social inclusion and participation in community life

Overwhelmingly, participants in the Ability Links program speak of their risk of being excluded from the ordinary activities of community life. Travelling is difficult for these participants and their options around travel are limited.

For example Jodie*, who lives in a rural community and was asked to be part of a community panel. Jodie was excited about becoming part of this panel. The location of the panel meant travel. Jodie requested an accessible taxi, as the train services were too indirect. Due to some sort of miscommunication, the transport company booked had planned to send a general car, assuming that Jodie was able to transfer between the car and wheelchair, which was not the case. Unfortunately, Jodie then decided to cancel the trip and has not continued to be a part of the panel.

Another case whereby a participant has experienced social exclusion is Anne*, from Lithgow wanted to access groups available to her and suiting her interests that were located in the Blue Mountains. Anne is isolated from community and social activities because of her caring role. The infrequency of the train service on the Blue Mountains line meant that Anne was unable to attend any of the activities as she could not travel back home to care for her son in the timeframes the train timetable allows for. This situation further exacerbated Anne's sense of isolation and limited her capacity to develop important social networks.

Jodie and Anne could benefit from a state funded, community-run shuttle bus service to increase their mobility around their community.

Reliance on friends, family and community members

A further issue that arises for people living in rural and regional areas is that they are dependent on transport options from friends, family and members of the community.

While we fully appreciate the depth and importance of family and community support it limit opportunities and create dependence. These types of arrangements are also often not sustainable or are subject to breakdown for a number of reasons. The cost of private transport also places pressure on the individuals supporting people in the community. The cost of petrol and car registration has been identified as a barrier to supporting people in the community with transport alternatives.

For example Peter, who lives in a small rural town, does not a have a lot of opportunities to explore his interests and passions with others in his own community. There are some interest groups in the larger town, 40 minutes' drive away. Peter does not have a licence, and no public services travel for his evening activities. He could not afford such a taxi fare, so is reliant on any family member who may be able to drive him, which is not guaranteed.

An Ability Linker based in Goulburn, has seen how community groups can come together to provide transport to widen the reach of the activities run.

“Within our church, we have a community for young families, which consists of a variety of different groups who meet regularly (kids church, outdoor adventure, supper discussion, gaming group, prayer meeting, movie night and adult colouring). Many people attend a number of these groups, and others pick and choose. Many of the members do not drive or do not have vehicles. These groups all happen at different times, many in the evening, when walking is not a favourable option, particularly in winter. For the most part, a few key people in these groups pick others up and drop them home. In fact, some groups wouldn't run at all if the minister herself didn't do a few trips around town to pick up all the members. While this is a lovely example of community coming together and helping each other, people have busy lives and other responsibilities, and when the usual drivers aren't available, it limits others' access to their groups.”

B. Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW

We acknowledge the work of the NSW Government in formulating a Transport for NSW Disability Action Plan. We are concerned at the length of time this will take to implement and the current transport options. We are also concerned that in a number of regional and remote areas of NSW people remain isolated and affected by their access to transport.

Trains and buses are not accessible for people using mobility aids and families with prams

Participants in our program consistently speak of significant accessibility issues regarding public transport. This impacts people's capacity to travel independently to places they would like or need to go.

One of the participants in the Ability Links program who lives in Lithgow and uses a wheelchair to help her mobility identified the following issues with access. Platform access is adequate at Lithgow Railway Station. However, most Blue Mountains Stations do not have any wheelchair access. This restricts the independence of Carol* in attending appointments or events in townships with no wheelchair access.

Carol reports that she often has some difficulty finding staff to assist with the ramps provided to board and exit trains. Being able to get off at the other end of the journey is impacted by staff availability at that station. This is a barrier to full access to the rail network. It may also require rail patrons to leave trains at an accessible station, leaving them to complete their journey by private means or by taxis. This takes away from the individual's independence or may make the journey expensive if completed by the use of taxis. Carol also reports that train patrons often express impatience and frustration toward her when using the rail network.

Seating in Transport for NSW fleet is inadequate for people using mobility aids. Train patrons using wheelchairs are unable to access seating because of the width and weight of the doors to enter the carriage. Carol reports taking extra clothing and blankets when she travels by train to compensate for the cold temperatures travelling in the vestibule.

Carol is unable to use the toilet amenities provided on intercity trains. This is because of the location of the toilets, the width of the doors and the weight of doors for opening. This situation makes travelling difficult and at times uncomfortable.

Infrequency of Services

One of the main issues people living in regional and remote areas face is the infrequency of timetabled public transport services. The examples of people from Lithgow attending appointments or social activities spoken of previously exemplify this issue. More frequent public transport options in the regions where they currently exist would help to alleviate this situation.

In another regional town, a community member spoke to our Goulburn based linker about the local bus service. The bus service runs between the hours of 9-5 weekdays and also on Saturday mornings. While there are some accessible buses, it is recommended that people ring ahead to ensure that the bus that is running on that route is one of the accessible ones. The routes of the bus service are also limited. The people who are reliant on this system have no options for attending evening or weekend activities. The Linker has had a participant tell her, *“if it’s at night or on the weekend, I just can’t go”*, meaning that she misses out on a lot of community events.

Participants in the Ability Links program speak of using both taxi services and community transport. In the Lithgow area this requires pre-booking and both taxi and community transport use is time limited. Cost is also an issue for many of our participants who do not have access to subsidised fares. There are also limits on what community transport programs are available for.

C. Potential strategies to improve access, including better alignment between different modes of transport, available routes and timetabling generally

Transport Cooperative Bega Valley

In working with local communities the Ability Links program has had the opportunity to see how communities work together to support its members. Our Linker in the Bega region has observed that individuals support members of the community by offering to transport to medical appointments and social engagements.

The Ability Links program is looking at how we might establish a system of formal volunteering in providing private transport options. This would improve links in the transport and make use of the resources of the local community. This idea is in the early stages of development.

Shuttle Service Nepean Blue Mountains Train Line and Increased timetable service

The infrequency of train services is a recurring problem spoken of by members of the Lithgow and Blue Mountains Community. A shuttle train service operating along the Blue Mountains Line to Penrith as an addition to current service for people would increase the frequency of services available. Increasing the timetabled services between Lithgow and Central would also make a large difference to the options available for people.

An acceleration of the program to make more stations accessible for people with limited mobility

Accelerating the timeframe for making train stations accessible for people with limited mobility will increase the options for people accessing services, goods and recreation in any regional area where transport by train is available.

Development of a social enterprise using community assets

A Linker in the Nepean Blue Mountains has a vision to make use of the assets contained within the community. He has identified that there are many community buses that spend large amounts of time locked behind gates in community organisations.

The Linker would like to develop a way to make use of this resource to develop a transport system that would support members of the community to access shopping, services, health systems, work education and recreation. The Linker's vision includes developing a social enterprise where people in the community are trained to drive buses and derive an income from transporting people.

The Linker has held some discussions with Penrith City Council about developing the plan further. At this point it is an idea that the Ability Links team would like to develop in to a plan to pitch to interested community and government organisations. Any assistance that could be provided by members of this committee would be appreciated to take this idea further.

References

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Appendix A

Table 1: Breakdown of Ability Links Participants by Local Government Area (LGA)

LGA	Total
Bega Valley	45
Blue Mountains City	47
Bombala	8
Cooma-Monaro	7
Eurobodalla	83
Goulburn Mulwaree	49
Gunnedah	6
Hawkesbury City	23
Kempsey	1
Lithgow	33
Nambucca	2
Narrabri	1
Queanbeyan	9
Snowy River	2
Tamworth	1
Upper Lachlan	2
Wingecarribee	1
Yass Valley	4
Total	324