

**Submission
No 72**

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

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Mr Adam Marshall, MLA
Committee Chair
Legislative Committee on Community Services
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr Marshall,

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission for consideration during your Committee's inquiry into *access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW*.

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is the leading provider of orientation and mobility services to people who are blind or vision impaired in NSW.

As part of our broad range of services, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT has significant advocacy experience and regularly delivers expert advice individually and through forums such as the Accessible Transport Advisory Committee to private and public institutions to ensure safe and equitable access for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Should further comment or expansion on our submission attached be of assistance to the committee, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,


Dr Graeme White
CEO, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT Submission

Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW

Introduction

As NSW's leading and largest provider of specialist orientation and mobility services to people who are blind or vision impaired, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT welcomes the opportunity to provide comment for consideration as part of this Inquiry.

With offices across regional NSW with a significant client base in rural areas, we appreciate the complexities and barriers to travelling for people who are blind or vision impaired.

We work with our clients to provide them with specialist tools and services to enable independent access to all aspects of work, education and community life. Access to safe and reliable public transport is an essential tool in achieving this independence.

Through extensive consultation and observation, it is apparent that significant barriers to accessing public transport services still exist for people who are blind or vision impaired.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that at least 400,000 people are living with blindness or vision impairment in Australia.

The prevalence of age related vision loss, when considered in conjunction with our ageing population, strongly suggests these statistics will substantially increase. Given this trend, the number of people who are blind or vision impaired that rely substantially on public transport will similarly increase.

It is an inherent right (and reasonable expectation) of people with a disability to access public transport with minimum stress and maximum efficiency. Regrettably we are still some way off achieving this goal.

The ongoing delays in addressing and rectifying existing barriers continue to impact on the ability of people who are blind or vision impaired rely on public transport to access employment and participate in community activities.

The foreseeable result of these remaining barriers is social isolation and inherent disadvantage and as such, we hope this Inquiry will be able to affect real improvement.

Response to the terms of reference

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

It has been previously establishedⁱ, and continues to be widely evidenced through anecdotal reporting, that limited access to a frequent and reliable public transport system within rural and regional areas can significantly contribute to educational, economic and social disadvantage.

Inarguably, people who are blind or vision impaired are substantially reliant on public transport as a key facilitator in their ability to access social activities, community and health services, education and employment. As such, the risk of disadvantage and lack of access to education, employment and social participation is heightened.

Of significant importance in addition to the availability of public transport in rural and regional areas, the challenges associated with accessing public transport and the broader community often predisposes people who are blind or vision impaired to the significant risk of situational vulnerability.

The provision of appropriate mobility training coupled with an effective 'aid' such as a guide dog, white cane or electronic travel aid can facilitate independent and meaningful participation within an individual's community.

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

Compliance with the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport Cth*, the pending *Wayfinding Standard* and with the relevant local Council's *Disability Inclusion Access Plans* sets a minimum standard which can be enhanced by ongoing consultation with blind and vision impaired people in the affected communities to ensure their needs are being met.

In recognising that public transport services are neither as frequent or available in rural and regional NSW as in metropolitan areas, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT strongly advises that adherence to accessible design and standards of existing and future transport infrastructure and services is essential to remove any barrier to accessing limited services.

Infrastructure design and wayfinding to public transport modes can be complicated by the lack of defined pathways as can limitations on GPS signals necessary to using assistive technology such as the Guide Dogs NSW navigation App or Stop Finder, which gives rise to additional considerations

Availability of a reliable GPS signal, the cost of acquiring a 'smart phone' and necessary training to competently employ technology to assist with access to transport services will greatly impact on an individual's experience and independence.

Accessible technology solutions such as automated realtime data and announcements at stops, stations, and on public transport services can improve the travel experience for people who are blind or vision impaired. However, in order to be successful this must be implemented consistently across all transport services.

Difficulty locating bus stops and stations can be further complicated in rural and regional areas due to the lack of infrastructure surrounding these transport stops, unpaved footpaths and limited pedestrian traffic.

Additionally, the lack of station staff who could provide assistance makes reliance on accessible information points, accessible technology even more vital.

Smaller stations often have platforms shorter than the trains themselves, causing an inability to access or exit a carriage if not aligned with the platform. The accessible information which enables a passenger to identify accessible carriages on all trains at each platform is essential.

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

As intimated in the questions itself, a logical improvement to existing and future services would be a more synergistic alignment and smooth connection between different transport modes, connections between routes including timetabling.

In order to consider address specific limitations of local transport modes and infrastructure and the needs of local communities, stakeholder consultation in regional areas with people who are blind or vision impaired is vital. Additionally, specialist education on the access needs of people who are blind or vision impaired needs to occur with transport providers, local councils and infrastructure planners at a local level.

As Guide Dogs NSW/ACT has offices and orientation and mobility specialists across regional NSW with access to rural areas, we would be happy to work with the NSW Government to facilitate these local consultations.

(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;

As canvassed earlier in our response, the lack of available or accessible public transport creates a significant barrier to independent access of community for people who are blind or vision impaired.

In communities where improvement to the frequency and availability to public transport services is identified as urgent and unlikely to be remediated in the short term, additional funding and provision of community transport is a necessary 'stop gap' to ensure people who are blind or vision impaired do not continue to remain isolated and disadvantaged.

Where taxis are available, the recent doubling in the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme may slightly improve opportunities for accessing the community, however it is recognised that there are often limited availability of taxi services and certainly limited scope for ride share services to expand into these areas.

We are aware that at a local level, where customers who are blind or vision impaired have raised concerns about barriers they face or discrimination they have experienced, the processes to achieve recognition and resolution of their concerns have often been complex and unsatisfactory.

Ongoing consumer consultation and improved recognition and responsiveness to specific concerns should also be addressed.

ⁱ The relationship between transport and disadvantage in Australia, Kate Rosier and Myfanwy McDonald
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/relationship-between-transport-and-disadvantage-austr>