

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

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

**At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Monday, 19 September 2016**

**The Committee met at 10:30 am**

**PRESENT**

Mr A. Marshall (Chair)

Mr K. Conolly

Mr A. Greenwich

Mr B. Notley-Smith

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Committee on Community Services hearing for the inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional New South Wales. Joining me this morning are Kevin Conolly, the member for Riverstone and Deputy Chair of the Committee, Bruce Notley-Smith, the member for Coogee, and Alex Greenwich, the member for Sydney. A few members were unable to be here this morning. I thank the witnesses for appearing before the Committee today. Does anyone have any questions about the proceedings today?

**Ms LANGLEY:** No.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** No.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** No.

**LISA LANGLEY**, Council on the Ageing NSW, sworn and examined

**ILLANA HALLIDAY**, Chief Executive Officer, Aged and Community Services NSW, sworn and examined

**ELLIS BLAIKIE**, Senior Policy Adviser, Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association of NSW Incorporated, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Would any of you like to make an opening statement or some remarks before we proceed to questions from Committee members?

**Ms BLAIKIE:** Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's hearing. The Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association of NSW [CPSA] represents low-income older people and people with disability. A significant proportion of our membership resides in rural or regional New South Wales, with 72 of our 108 branches located outside the Sydney metropolitan area. New South Wales is a vast State, and people living outside the major cities generally need to travel a fair distance to access shops, services and social activities. Be it in a private car, on an XPT train service, a coach or community transport service, regional New South Wales residents need a range of reliable and affordable transport options to connect them with their communities.

Transport is the glue that holds all the pieces together, and it underpins an individual's capability to access the goods and services that they need to maintain their wellbeing. We can offer the best services in the world, but unless the people who need them can access them, they are of no use to the community. An accessible, affordable and well-integrated transport system is critical in supporting the social, physical and economic wellbeing of New South Wales residents. However, people living in rural and regional areas of the State experience significant transport disadvantage relative to those living in the city.

People living in regional New South Wales rely heavily on private cars to get around. However, country roads are much more dangerous. That is made worse by the fact that rural journeys are on average much longer and much higher speeds are involved, which significantly increases the risk of an accident occurring. Once older drivers reach the age of 85 they are arbitrarily discriminated against through mandatory on-road testing, which has been shown time and again to have zero effect on crash involvement. Public transport services are few and far between, and rural and regional customers pay significantly more for a lower level of service. In addition, there are physical barriers that stop many people getting onto a train or a bus in the first place.

There are also the people who need to travel to access health care. This is a growing problem as the New South Wales Government moves to consolidate smaller regional hospitals and treatment facilities into bigger hospitals in major regional towns. A lack of transport should never be the reason for people not getting the medical care they need, regardless of their capacity to afford that transport. The CPSA welcomes the opportunity to unpack these issues today, and in doing so we hope to start breaking down some of the barriers.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** Aged and Community Services is the leading peak organisation representing the church charitable not-for-profit sector of aged care. That includes large and small providers; 83 per cent of our members are small, standalone regional providers. We seriously represent the sector. I will not go over the submission, but I will add something that we did not include. As our population ages, more older people will remain in their own homes. The Government wishes to help them to do that, and will nearly double the number of homecare packages in New South Wales. We have about 23,000, and that will increase to 46,000 by 2020. That means there will be more people living in their own home who are frail and who historically have gone into an aged care facility.

The supported care packages that they use are called "consumer-directed care" packages. My rural and remote members call it something completely different, that is, "travel-directed care". There is a strong limitation on the money available and the hours of care that can be provided. Consumers can use that money to pay for transport, but when they do they quickly run out of money to spend on care. It is a very real consideration given the amount of care that people can get to stay in their own home. It leaves very little for the other support they need. Clients on a package or living in a facility are not allowed to use community transport. I note the confusion about that in some of the submissions. If someone is receiving a homecare package or if they are living in a facility, they are not entitled to use community transport—it is outlawed.

Another tranche of reforms for the aged care sector will be implemented in 2018. We will be looking at the Home and Community Care and the Commonwealth Home Support Program—that is, the community transport system. We are not sure what that will look like, but it will provide us with an opportunity to add another strategy; that is, that the New South Wales Government lobby, just as we will, that community transport receive increased funding, or block funding, and that people living in their own home and getting a package and those in a facility should be entitled to use community transport as well as other services.

**Ms LANGLEY:** I agree with everything Ms Halliday has said. The Council on the Ageing NSW has recently conducted some research on this issue. We went around New South Wales and spoke to people about their experience of getting around. As you would imagine, we found that the experience of someone living in a city is very different from that of someone living in a regional town. As was said, most older people living in or outside country towns rely very heavily on their motor vehicle to get around. If they do not have a motor vehicle or for some reason they cannot drive, they are severely disadvantaged. That kind of disadvantage can lead to much worse situations, such as isolation, depression, and sometimes suicide. As members know, many rural men, particularly those over the age of 85, commit suicide. There are extremely serious consequences.

Transport is related to many other issues, such as housing and connection to the community. We believe that it cannot be separated. Consideration of the transport needs of older people is an equity issue. We recognise that public transport is difficult to deliver in some regional areas because of the tyranny of distance, but there is an opportunity to look at alternatives—such as community transport—to make up the difference. We believe that, even if there is limited funding, older people in rural and regional areas have just as much right to access transport as their city counterparts.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We will now proceed to questions. I will address my questions to all of you and you should all feel free to answer. Other members may address their questions to each of you individually, but my questions will generally be to all three of you. You have all touched on community transport. During the site visit the Committee undertook, and in the submissions, many people talked about community transport and the possible expansion of that as one of the strategies to address the inequity, if we can call it that. From your perspective, what initiatives could we take forward to continue or expand the community transport service to try to fill the gap that exists at the moment? How would we do that?

**Ms LANGLEY:** What a question! One of the problems with community transport is that it is fragmented. The funding for it is also fragmented. It would be great to be able to step back and consider community transport as just another arm of public transport in a real sense. That would give a new perspective on what it means to provide community transport, particularly in rural and regional areas. We are facing a situation where it will be impossible to provide public transport in between all the country towns. Imagine, for example, connecting someone on a rural property to a country town when that person might have just got off a plane and needs to get home. These are the wicked problems for people living in the country. We cannot ignore them.

That person might not have access to a motor vehicle. It could be a man who has been told by his general practitioner that he cannot drive anymore. There he is, sitting on his country property, wondering what his alternatives are. If he had access to some kind of transport alternative it might be the difference between him staying on his property or moving into town or to a regional centre, which he might not want to do. He should be given the option. I do not know enough about the details of community transport to pull it apart and say what should be done logistically, but there is an opportunity, with the move to Commonwealth funding, to have a conversation about it. Given the weird and wonderful ways that community transport is funded, there need to be conversations with the Commonwealth about how that can be better dealt with. Otherwise it is a lost opportunity. It is a squandering of resources too. That would be my suggestion, on a broad scale.

**The CHAIR:** Any other thoughts?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** I like to think outside the box.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, please. That is what we are keen to hear.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** It is a vitally important service for rural and regional areas. We throw in ideas to try to stimulate thinking. A strategy that we suggest in our paper is to join up older people who are not using their cars with other people. This is the type of thinking you do in the shower, but in a regional centre where there is a university why do we not have an Uber type of system where the cars are used by the younger people at the university? The consequence of that would be that they would then provide X number of hours of transport to the person who made the car available. There are limited resources and people out there. There are information technology platforms now that make some of these things possible. How can we tap into the values of the many younger people who really care about older people? They care about their communities. Is there some way we can make that work better? Obviously more money will help to expand the service. We already fit the criteria. We are just unable to access the service. It would free up resources and help people to volunteer. Many of our volunteers are quite elderly themselves.

I worked for a council where I had to fight tooth and nail to keep the community transport service operating. They did not want the liability of the buses and the volunteer program and how expensive that was. We need to encourage local government to stay involved in that. They are not; they are leaving. We need to look at what we can do to stimulate other influential points within the community, such as Rotary, Lions or a university, that might be able to pick up some underused resources such as cars to use in a more flexible program, because social isolation problems are going to get worse.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** I agree with everything that has been said. We are also concerned about the shift to individualised funding for community transport services and what that means for rural and regional providers. We are very concerned that the services will have no choice but to close because they do not have the money to continue. There is individual funding under the National Disability Insurance Scheme and there is individual aged care funding. We are losing the block funding that enables community transport providers to upgrade their fleet so that they have good vehicles. There are also the growing costs of insurance, particularly when an organisation has a large number of volunteers working for it. From a financial perspective it is becoming much harder for community transport providers to continue to provide these services. It is even harder in regional New South Wales, where there are not as many people who receive individual funding. We would like to see New South Wales funding for community transport services appropriately targeted to those services that are most at risk of closing down as a result of the shift to Federal funding.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** I add that we are not opposed to co-payments in order to inject some more funds, but the co-payment has to be about the capacity of the person to pay. The service is so important that we have to do that. It is a fact of life these days.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, definitely. Thank you very much. With regard to the more remote far western areas of the State where population centres are very small and where it may be difficult for a community transport service to remain viable—and I certainly know that from experience—there is the suggestion in some submissions that the Committee should look at implementing the Western Australian Country Age Pension Fuel Card. I do not know whether you are familiar with that as an option for providing support to people who have no choice but to use private vehicles because there is no other service available. Are the three of you familiar with that scheme? Do you have any thoughts on its application, potentially, in remote western communities in New South Wales?

**Ms LANGLEY:** I do not know about that scheme specifically, but in our paper we recommended that such a scheme be looked at, particularly for people on the age pension who have limited income. They are reliant on their motor vehicles. There is no alternative. It is a great idea and it should be investigated.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** Likewise, we recommended it as a strategy, not knowing about that scheme in particular. In a lot of places there will be no alternative. The social isolation factors are harder to overcome. Sometimes you can use remote health services, and people will be able to dial in using broadband, when it eventually works, but that does not overcome the fact that people need face-to-face contact.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is right.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** I cannot comment on the specifics of the scheme, but we would like to see similar sorts of models investigated for use in western New South Wales; it is critical.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** I would like to start with a comment that Illana made, that if you receive a home care package you are not eligible to use community transport. Obviously eligibility criteria for various schemes is set up to target the purpose and the group that they are intended to help. Can you explain to me what you think the criteria might have been set up to do in the past and how they might be adjusted to better meet the needs that you see?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** The irony is when you look at the criteria set up for the NSW Community Transport Program, they are a good match. The Commonwealth Government decided it would be a process of double dipping, given that it was already funding a home care package. If you are able to dip into the Commonwealth Home Support Program, you are then double dipping into two different forms of subsidy, so it put the ground rules in place. The criteria for the community transport program are quite good. We are covered by that, so they do not need adjustment. The Commonwealth ruling has said that you are not allowed to use it.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Yet there would be some circumstances where a person receiving a home care package would have a legitimate need to visit a centre for a specific purpose that the Commonwealth would approve of as well?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** Absolutely. The irony is that they would have used community transport. We cannot use community transport which may have an appropriate vehicle, so we have to use the Ambulance Service, which is a totally inappropriate use of—

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** And probably costs more.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** It is a higher cost. It is weird.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** That is something we would need to take up with the Commonwealth to smooth out?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** We have attempted to do it, so you would be joining our voice. It is an inappropriate use of Government resources.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** I am keen, as all Committee members are, to look at underutilised resources or assets that exist already that could be put to better use. Some things have already been mentioned, but I also think of pub and club courtesy buses that often are not totally utilised for the whole day. Is there scope for a scheme where, at various times, they are incorporated into a transport model that is subsidised? I also looked at the costs of taxis. I wonder whether we have, in Government, costs embedded in the taxi service that are no longer appropriate or certainly not appropriate if we want them to act as public transport in areas where there is no alternative. Do you have ideas that could see us access other forms of transport that already exist but which are out of people's reach?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** I love the idea of using club buses. One of the things that people tell us is that they do not want people surrounding them to know how vulnerable they are. So when they get a disabled taxi set up for disabled people, it shows they are vulnerable and they are worried that people will see them get in and out of them and the fear of something happening is much higher than that the reality of something happening. So seeing that it is some specialised form of transport can be harmful for people. If we can use those sorts of buses, provided they have disability access and people can get on and off them, then we would be comfortable with seeing that happening; it is a great idea. When I worked at Wollongong Council, we used the taxi services quite a lot because there were taxis. A lot of regional places of course do not have a good taxi service.

When they are there, it allows the person to pick and choose, so that if they make a medical appointment they do not have to spend 18 hours out of the house trying to get somewhere early, getting trapped and being unable to get home. A subsidised taxi service can work, but there are not so many places where that can work, because the taxis are just not available. Alternative uses of those buses or unmarked vehicles that may look like they have just gone to the club is a great thing. Sometimes the drivers may need special assistance, or if you are using somebody else's car because having done this myself, we do not want them to be damaged. They will need to be taught how to lift and turn, because getting people in and out of cars is a skill if they are unable to do things themselves. We must ensure we do not expose them to problems. It is not hard to teach someone.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Any other comments?

**Ms LANGLEY:** No.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** That leads to the next question, and it is one I will have to put to the local government representative later on. Ellis made a comment about the cost of premiums scaring off some councils from wanting to run community transport. Can you elaborate on the scale of risk we are talking about and what is the council being asked to carry in terms of insurance liability?

**Ms BLAIKIE:** I cannot comment on the specific costs that a council would incur. I made a general comment more in regards to the growing cost of public liability insurance that a lot of organisations are having to face and the costs are growing, I guess, particularly when you are working in such a sensitive sector with

vulnerable clientele. There are significant risks in terms of things that can go wrong when you are providing the service.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Do you believe that has deterred some authorities from undertaking community transport or continuing to do so?

**Ms BLAIKIE:** My understanding is that the Community Transport Organisation, the peak body, has identified that as an issue for community transport providers. I am not sure of the specifics, but I am sure that the Community Transport Organisation would be able to provide you with more information about the economic issues arising.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Thank you.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Thank you for everything that has been said. Clearly we have underutilised assets in a lot of areas. There is the option of fuel cards, Uber, taxi vouchers, a more efficient form of community transport where different providers might be able to have a more efficient or centralised approach. In respect of the people you all represent, how do you make the process easier for them if we are able to say, "Here are your choices and options" without them feeling overwhelmed to ensure that we can tailor the right product or service to their needs?

**Ms LANGLEY:** We identified in our submission the issue of information. It absolutely has to be communicated. When we went around New South Wales asking people about this, we found that the move to everything electronic, everything being online—even New South Wales Government services under Service NSW is heavily reliant on people going online. A lot of people, particularly in regional areas, are not necessarily tech savvy. They are just not. We found that in a lot of our consultations people missed having written information that they could access. I know it sounds really silly and basic, but a local council manual that fed out what the services were and how they could access them. Someone also mentioned to me having something in the front of the White Pages. We were really surprised that some people still go to the front of their White Pages to find information. For us, it is hard to think about because we go straight to Google. We found that although there are a lot of older people who are tech savvy, getting them that kind of information, better coordinated services, how they can access them, you have to not only think about communicating that information online, but you have to look at local councils, local community groups and how they can disseminate that information.

For some reason sometimes it is difficult for them to tap into where they can get that information. We found that it is getting the information. Very often the services are there but often they do not know where to find the information; they do not know the service is there. Of course, you cannot prompt someone to look necessarily. There is limited control over how you can support someone to be proactive about finding information. Certainly we need to recognise it is not just about putting up a website. It is also about finding ways to disseminate that information to people as well. The community aged care services would be a great way, but we also find that a lot of people we talk to do not access—they still are needing to get around, but they are not yet at a point where they are using aged care services.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** From our point of view, anyone receiving a service from us, we have a good feel for what services are out there so we are able to help them find the packaged services and support. A lot of the people who are drawing down on aged care services my members provide come to us through their children. So the other thing is to target those people who are at that age, and they are baby boomers too, who are looking after their parents. It is two different things. One is about getting the information out to the older person and they are unlikely to be online; I agree with Lisa. Some will be, but most will not. Making sure that their children have access to that, making sure that providers of aged care services know what is available and, of course, the perennial place they all trust is their doctor's surgery. So having information available there—"Transport difficulties? Call this number"—something short and sweet, like fridge magnets, would be good. Have you seen what these oldies have on their fridge? For something like that, an "If you need help, here's something you can call" would be a good way of getting information to them.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** Definitely. We find that our members want to speak to a real person over the phone or in person. I guess an issue is that we have a decline in station staff and transport staff out in the community and a shift to online information, and that is very much being read as "Your needs are not important". We would like to see some significant effort put into non-online communication. Also, on the back of online communication, in rural areas it is harder. There are issues with connectivity that mean sometimes you are not going to be able to connect to the internet to find out about a service, so there needs to be that paper information as a backup always.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Ms Halliday, you have talked about Uber. Although there may be technology issues for some of the cohort being able to access it, potentially the app is something that could be run out of a council or a doctor's surgery. If the cohort you look after is using the app, or someone is using it on their behalf, how do you think that would go in terms of them trusting a new technology—and having that uni student pick them up and take them to the doctors?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** So long as the uni student picks them up with a smile, you would be surprised! They expect to be able to have a chat. It is all about relationships. Some of the most successful models overseas for aged care have been where they have university students living in the facility at the same time as the oldies, and they develop great relationships and care for and support each other. They can be fairly trusting. It would be about where they first heard about that and who actually made the connection in the first place. They are not likely to jump into an Uber because they have heard all the scare-type stuff, but if they heard about that from the doctor or an aged care provider and they were able to explain that this is a special one just for people that need a little bit of extra support but it will not look like that—it does not look like you are using specialised support—I think you could make that quite attractive to them.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** This question is for all of you. We spoke a lot about isolation for elderly people. A lot of elderly people have companion animals. Have there been any barriers to access to community or other forms of transport for people who want to, say, go to the vet or take their companion animal with them anywhere?

**Ms LANGLEY:** No, I have not even thought of that.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** I have not thought about it for elderly people but I can assure you I have that problem with mine. My husband does not drive so, if something happens while I am at work, how does he get the dog to the vet? There are very limited opportunities for people to do that. Companion animals is an area where there is a whole new sphere of services. I have jokingly said I could go into an aged care facility, but I do not know what I would do about my dogs because they would have to come with me, and I would probably want my husband as well. There is more hope of sharing a room with him than taking my dogs with me. It is so important. They are part of these people's families, and it is a silent need that we have not gone near. I guess we have been thinking we cannot find enough service for the older person—

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Let alone their companion animal.

**Ms HALLIDAY:** —let alone their companion animal. One thing that I am encouraged by is a metropolitan service that is just starting that has vets coming to us, but I do not think that is going to happen so much. They will come out for a horse but I do not know if they will come out for your dog.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Chair, did you need somebody to explain what White Pages is?

**The CHAIR:** I know what White Pages is.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Sorry—I am just jealous of your youth.

**The CHAIR:** That is all the time we have for your questions!

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Further on from Uber and technology, what sort of feedback are you getting in the remote and regional areas about connectivity and reliability?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** I can answer that if you like: it is rubbish. I am sorry: Everything comes out from the Commonwealth Government requiring a connection to fill in the forms and to lodge reports. Sometimes, if they cannot be saved, we have problems because the connection will just fall out. Or they have a good service at the aged care facility but when staff are out and about on the road and we are hoping to stay connected to them using tablets and phones—and that can even be the record-keeping system—they may not be able to do that because the service drops out as they get away from the town. There are real problems once you get outside a regional centre. They keep promising us that it will get better and we keep waiting for that nirvana associated with satellites or whatever to happen. But it is still a major problem and that is why telehealth has not taken off in the way that we would have liked it to.

You need to be able to see the person to diagnose them and start looking at how their treatment is going. If the connectivity is not 100 per cent, you cannot do that. It is a problem for people in those regional centres. There are a lot of people signing up. There are very tech-savvy seniors who are either doing it themselves or their kids are putting them online. There is rapid growth of Facebook. We have some providers who use a special tablet, not an ordinary one. These tablets have been set up saying, "Speak to my aged care provider," and they push a button. There is one saying, "Speak to my family," and they push it. It has been made very simple for them. You can have an Uber button-type thing: "Call transport." That kind of thing could be set

up as well so it is clean and simple, provided you have the connectivity. The technology and the software is in place but the connectivity is not yet there. That would be the very strong feedback from my members outside a regional centre.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** Particularly in terms of the mobile network and mobile data. You might be able to have a connection in the office but as soon as you are actually out in the community trying to do something or pick someone up, then you have lost your connection and you cannot do whatever it is.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Just over the horizon there is possibly a whole new world in self-driving vehicles that you will be able to book. We could really make a lot of the problems disappear in five years time if it evolves that quickly, as long as we have got the coverage. On another track, when we were in Armidale last week—

**The CHAIR:** Uralla and Walcha.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Sorry, yes. We were in the community health centre talking to the transport provider, and they said, "There is a 22-seater bus sitting next door in the garage in the hospital which never gets used. It is only a couple of years old, and the NRMA gets called out to kickstart the battery every now and then because nobody ever uses it." The government silo of that hospital will not cooperate with the community transport operator. They are willing to pay money and lease the vehicle. Do you have much experience with examples like that?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** We live in a very siloed world, unfortunately. If that bus was made available to the men's sheds operators, for instance, the people coming in to volunteer in the men's sheds may well be prepared to do the volunteering to drive buses and things. There is a lot of community goodwill and desire, and we have still a siloed world in terms of government resources, whether they be people or capital things like a bus. So, yes, I have seen examples of that.

We are working on the ground with NSW Health to look at better models of sharing the resources, to attempt to break down some of those. It comes down to local resources. Sometimes finding a small project like "How can we all get better use out of that bus?" can get people talking together in a constructive way, so that taking something like that means that we stop playing the blame game and get people sharing a resource. I think if you have something like that to put on the table and say, "We've got access: Do you want it, and how might we arrange that?", that could be a very helpful trigger for things to flow from better use of other resources as well. Of course, you would have seen that NSW Health is out with a tender at the moment for what role it has of an ongoing nature with the provision of aged care services. Maybe that is something that could come up in that process.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** At a slightly higher level, we would really like to see a bit more collaboration between health and transport, particularly at the project planning phase. If you are going to consolidate services into a major regional centre, that obviously makes economic sense and you can provide better services. But how are people going to get there? Quite often that is not considered, or not adequately considered. We would really like to see the transport needs of people who will be utilising health services considered at the project planning phase.

**The CHAIR:** As there are no further questions, thank you very much for appearing today. We may send you some additional questions in writing. Are you happy to receive those?

**Ms HALLIDAY:** Absolutely, no problem.

**Ms BLAIKIE:** Of course.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)



**JESSICA LOBO**, Senior Sector Development Officer, National Disability Services, affirmed and examined

**JORDANA GOODMAN**, Policy Officer, Physical Disability Council of NSW, affirmed and examined

**PAUL ZELLER**, Member, Disability Council NSW, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** I welcome our next witnesses and thank them for being part of our inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional New South Wales. Do any of you have any questions about the hearing process today?

**Ms LOBO:** No.

**Mr ZELLER:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Before we commence questions, would you like to make an opening statement or some initial remarks?

**Ms LOBO:** Yes, I will. As you probably know, National Disability Services [NDS] is the peak body for non-government disability services. We represent over 1,100 support services across the country. I hope you will consider the insights outlined in our submission to the inquiry around the different transport needs for people with a disability and how the different transport systems may be improved for people with a disability living in regional and remote areas of New South Wales.

We wish to highlight that the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS], which NDS supports, will see an increased reliance on the mainstream services sector, and especially public transport, to ensure that access and inclusion for people with disability is achieved. As outlined in our submission, the NDIS creates a series of major transport gaps, which undermine the very opportunity that the scheme presents to address longstanding social and economic participation issues for people with a disability. Recent appeals heard at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal around transport allowances have interpreted the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Act policy and NDIS rules to establish that transport is simply an incidental cost of everyday life for people with disability, and that these responsibilities for funding transport are not the responsibility of the NDIS. This is even where transport is ancillary to a funded support, which is critical for most people with disabilities when they require pick-up and drop-off services to access the support they need.

Something else we highlighted in our submission is the diminishing capacity of disability support services to provide transport under the NDIS. The model of funding the NDIS limits transport options for people with a disability, and inadequate allowances for NDIS participants also make transport unaffordable and will lead to further disadvantage. While we do acknowledge the recent and long overdue increase in funding provided by the State Government to the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme, there is still a persistent shortfall in transport funding in regional and remote areas, and it is a continuing challenge for State governments. However, responsibility to respond to the increased demand created under the NDIS is the responsibility of State governments and so is the responsibility to ensure accessible and liveable communities.

The NDIS will be ring-fenced with a very clear line of sight between disability-related transport and transport that lies within the responsibility of other State departments like Health, Education and Transport for NSW. The clear view of the National Disability Insurance Agency [NDIA] is that public transport is part of a universal service obligation of State governments, and this includes a responsibility to make any reasonable adjustments required. To sum up, increased investment and better coordination of shared transport options at a State level are required to enable better use of public transport, and they would go a long way to capitalising on the change that is underway with the NDIS.

**Ms GOODMAN:** I am really talking specifically about the people I represent. I have things in my head to convey for the Physical Disability Council of New South Wales [PDCN]. In July 2015 PDCN received responses from 76 people with disabilities living in the regions of New South Wales, who responded to a survey. They came from Gosford-Wyong, Hunter, Tamworth area, mid North Coast, Richmond-Tweed, Illawarra, South Eastern, Murray, Murrumbidgee, Central West and North West. Unfortunately, I did not get anyone from the Far West that I was really keen to get, but I did not get anyone. Due to the significant differences in the numbers of recipients received from the different regions, I could not really compare one against the other to try to find a best practice for the regions. They all varied a lot, as from some of the regions I only received one or two responses whereas from other regions I received up to 17, so I could compare them. To compare those responses to the Sydney and greater metropolitan area was not very feasible either. The survey covers buses, trams, trains and community transport. That brings me to taxis and wheelchair accessibility.

**Mr ZELLER:** My name is Paul Zeller and I am a member of the Disability Council NSW. Thank you very much for this opportunity to appear before the Committee. The Disability Council NSW is the official adviser to the New South Wales Government on issues that affect people with disability, their families and carers. The Disability Council is made up of 12 members who have a variety of disabilities and backgrounds. Members include people from Aboriginal or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people and people from rural and regional New South Wales. The current Disability Council members were all appointed in December 2015.

The Disability Council makes sure the policies important to people with disability are being carried out. It tells the Government and the community about things that are important to people with disability. It gives advice about Disability Inclusion Action Plans, and the State Disability Inclusion Plan, and it helps make sure that people with disability can take part in our community. It also talks to people with disability to find out what they think, and works with other organisations to address the barriers to inclusion that people with disability face.

In 2016 the focus of the Disability Council is on the issues of the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS] transition, disability inclusion planning, housing and employment. However, the council also believes that the ability to get where you need to go is really important for people with disability, and particularly for people with disability in rural and regional New South Wales, and that is why the council made a written submission to the inquiry. The Disability Council believes that the value of transport is not just mobility, it is opportunity. People with disability in rural and regional New South Wales will benefit the most from valuable opportunities like jobs, educational opportunities or health or community services, but are less likely than others to reach these opportunities because there are not many transport options available to them.

We would like to see a transport system that is accessible, affordable and appropriate to meet complex and changing needs of people with disability. Currently people with disability in rural and regional areas face a number of issues which affect their access to transport. But depending on where you live, you might face different issues. This is why it is important to have inquiries like this, to find out the specific issues in each area and make sure they are addressed.

Some of the common issues people face include that public transport infrastructure is not accessible, and there are not enough services to meet people's needs. There are also limited taxis available, and cars are more expensive to run in rural and regional areas, so people with disability end up having to rely on friends or family to get around, or they just do not take the journey at all. Transport issues also create problems for people with disability because they limit choice. People may end up being "locked in" to a particular service provider because they cannot travel to somewhere else where they might have more choice. This goes against the principles of choice and control that the National Disability Insurance Scheme aims to uphold.

My own experiences in my home town show how lack of access to transport can influence people with disability. I live in Merimbula, in southern New South Wales. Over 18,000 people live within a 10 kilometre radius of the Merimbula town centre. I have a driver's licence but as a person with a low income on a disability support pension I cannot afford to buy and maintain a car. I like living by myself and I have lived by myself for a few years.

On weekdays there are five buses a day that go from Eden to Bega that run through Merimbula, and five buses a day that go from Bega to Eden that run through Merimbula. On Saturdays there are usually only two buses that go from Eden to Bega or Bega to Eden, and on Sunday there are no buses. There are also two buses a day from Tathra to Merimbula, and Merimbula to Tathra but these only run on weekdays. The buses only run through some of the towns, and some towns like Candelo, which is about 24 kilometres north east of Merimbula, are not serviced by buses at all. There are only about four taxis in Merimbula, but at any one time on weekdays there are usually only two in operation, and taxis generally do not operate after midnight.

There is a local bus that goes to and from the airport from Merimbula town but there are only a few services a day. I usually have to wait at least half an hour for a taxi to take me to or from the airport so I try to get a lift with friends rather than wait for the taxi. If I want to go to the shops on a Sunday, I have to ask a friend to drive me. If I have to go to hospital on a Sunday, I have to call an ambulance or pay the \$100 taxi fare to get to the South East Regional Hospital in Bega. The closest hospital in Pambula no longer accepts emergency patients. I am always relying on friends to drive me to and from the places I need to get to. Sometimes I can feel isolated and I feel like I miss out on things because I cannot get there. I hope that by sharing my experiences, more people will understand how difficult it can be when you do not have good access to transport.

The Disability Council believes that more needs to be done to improve access to transport in rural and regional New South Wales and assist with the costs of private transport. In particular, the council would like to see: greater engagement with people with disability to determine their transport needs and how they think these

can be met; acknowledgement that transport needs of people with disability vary greatly between different rural and regional communities and the importance of implementing strategies that meet the distinct local needs of different communities; more public transport services in rural and regional areas, especially on weekends; better coordination between different modes of transport; more incentives and investment in accessible vehicles in each community; more innovative approaches to overcoming the barriers to accessing transport options in rural and regional communities; additional subsidies to assist with the cost of taxis; and additional support to assist with cost of private transport, including fuel.

**The CHAIR:** Some members of the Committee and I will ask questions of you generally so if you wish to say anything in response please do so. Other members may have questions of you individually. In all the submissions the Committee has received so far, if I were to try to break it down, there are two areas of concern. One is the availability of the transport service itself, or the lack thereof, and with that the physical infrastructure particularly for people with a disability to easily embark or disembark from that service. The other issue that was raised by the Disability Council is the customer experience. Is it easy to book? Were people friendly? If people with disabilities are not treated with respect it is easy for them to be dissuaded or turned away and they will not engage again with that service. From the perspective of your organisations, how well do the services that exist now actually make it easy for people with disability to access the customer service side? Do you feel that people with disabilities are being turned away from some of the existing services because it is all too hard for them? What are your thoughts on that? Is it easy for people with disabilities to access what is available now? Do you feel you are an inconvenience for those people operating those services or are they happy to have you?

**Mr ZELLER:** I feel that with the transport down in my area, the transport companies are trying their hardest to get people with disabilities where they need to go. But there are people who live out of the main centres, in small villages, where you will only have school buses, and then that is it. You can feel isolated when you are out in the middle of nowhere—in Candelo and Brogo—and if you are not on the main road then you miss out.

One of my biggest criticisms of our local bus service is that one of the main bus runs, which is the 10 am bus that goes to Merimbula, does not have wheelchair facilities. I have seen elderly people with walkers turn up to the bus stop. The bus driver actually needs to go outside, get the walker, fold it up and put it on a seat. The elderly person—and actually a friend of mine as well—has to rely on holding the railing to get up the stairs.

**The CHAIR:** Are there any other thoughts?

**Ms LOBO:** I work for a peak body but I do not have lived experience of disability. I have worked with people with disability in the past. From our big-picture understanding of the transport needs of people with disability—especially how those needs are playing out in the Hunter trial site of the National Disability Insurance Scheme—my experience is that there has been a huge increase in demand for transport services under the NDIS. A lot of people who are currently accessing the scheme in the trial—and as the NDIS rolls out more broadly—have never received support before in their lives. Those who have received support have had their support increased or in some cases doubled, which means that more transport is required to get them out into the community and to cater for the supports that exist for them now, that might not have been available before.

In saying that, the affordability issue is clearly one of the biggest barriers for people with disability. Disability services used to provide a lot of that transport—pick-up and drop-off services—to respite programs, community participation activities or community venues.

**Mr ZELLER:** Yes.

**Ms LOBO:** In regional areas providers provided transport to medical appointments and to get groceries—things that are not really part of their responsibility but which have been part of the organisations' missions and values. Those organisations have gone beyond their responsibilities, but under the NDIS the funding is no longer there for them to provide that transport. The unit price has dropped from around \$55 a hour, which was provided by Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC), to about \$40 to \$45 to deliver the exact same service. So the organisations have zero capacity to deliver transport within this package of services that they deliver. So the issue is huge.

Disability providers in the trial site, and as the NDIS rolls out, are providing transport but they are required to bill their clients at about 78 cents per kilometre. So, if you can imagine the distances in regional and remote areas, and how much the costs would add up, you can see how difficult it becomes for people with disability to afford. A trip from Maitland to the hospital in Newcastle—I think it is the John Hunter Hospital—costs \$90 for one round trip with community transport. You also now have both disability providers and community transport charging a lot for transport support.

To give the Committee a sense of the transport allowance allocated to participants under the NDIS, level 1—the first tier—would be around \$31 a week. The second tier would be around \$47 a week, and the third tier would be around \$66. In exceptional circumstances—for people living in very remote areas—it would be around \$115. So, if you look at the price of that \$90 round trip just for one hospital visit, it does not leave much for a trip to access the community to be part of social activities.

While there is some funding there for people to make basic trips to the hospital or to get groceries, there is absolutely no other funding for them to access social activities. There have been some very troubling stories from the Hunter trial site. There was a hearing recently in Newcastle of the Federal Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme. A witness at that hearing stated:

Before the NDIS I was able to do everything I wanted when I wanted. I had a wonderful life accessing the community. I have been with the NDIS for two years. Now I spend 90 per cent of my time at home. I have gone backwards because of the cost of transport. It is astronomical. I cannot understand how anyone can have a life of their own with the NDIS. It is a very, very degrading lifestyle.

That is just one of the many troubling experiences that people with disability have had under the NDIS because of the cost of transport.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to cut across you. Would it be the submission of your organisation that the way it is currently structured, the NDIS, in terms of transport for people with disability in rural and regional New South Wales, could have quite a detrimental impact on their ability to get around—even more so than was the case prior to NDIS?

**Ms LOBO:** That is right. There is increasing demand but less transport.

**Ms GOODMAN:** So when you are assessing what is reasonable it becomes even more complex.

**Ms LOBO:** That is right.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to divert you a little bit, but what discussions has your organisation had with the NDIA or, indeed, the Federal Government around those classifications or those transport allowances in those various categories? Is there any scope for movement there? Is there any recognition that they are a bit—actually a lot—on the skinny side?

**Ms LOBO:** There have been several case studies collated by providers that we work with. We have provided a lot of those to the NDIA around the cost of providing support and the inability of providers to deliver transport support. However, it is the belief of the NDIA that it is the provider's role to negotiate with the participant for that transport to be included within that package or within that cost. It is something that the NDIA believes providers should do but it is clearly impossible for providers to operate within the very tight funding environment.

The NDIA recently—it might have been in 2015—released an applied-principles document defining the roles of the NDIS and the roles of other systems. It is very clear that the NDIA has also encouraged State governments to increase the amount of public transport. They have really distinguished their responsibility and said that funding will only be available in certain circumstances for people with disability, where it is directly related to their functional impairment. If it is a health-related need of someone with a disability then State health departments are responsible. So there is a very clear distinction between what the NDIA will fund and what it will not. Basically, my short answer to your question is that there will not be any budge on that transport allowance funding.

**The CHAIR:** We have talked a lot, and heard a lot already in submissions, about community transport and the fact that it is a wonderful service. Obviously demand is increasing and community transport has limitations. My question to you all is: what role do you see community transport playing, longer term, to cater for that increased demand and flexibility? How can we ensure that community transport can, as much as possible, plug some of the gaps which you have already identified, for people in rural and regional New South Wales?

**Ms GOODMAN:** I have identified that 75 per cent of vehicles provide access. We should ensure that the remaining 25 per cent are made accessible.

**Ms LOBO:** Any form of transport is required at the moment, and any coordination of community transport with other types of transport would be beneficial. Community transport has never really been oriented towards supporting people with a disability, even though about 15 per cent of funding of community transport comes from State governments specifically for people with disability. Even though that is a very small amount, it has never been reflected in the number of people using community transport. Ms Goodman mentioned that community transport is not required to meet the standards for accessible transport. That may be a reason people

with a disability have not traditionally taken advantage of community transport services. It would be a viable option if it were expanded.

**Mr ZELLER:** Community transport could be a bit more innovative, like car sharing.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard that before.

**Mr ZELLER:** We could have car-sharing facilities in rural and regional areas that allow people to have access to cars when they need them for a small fee, instead of having to pay for ongoing maintenance and running costs. There was a recent accessible vehicle pilot for GoGet, which locates a fully wheelchair-accessible vehicle for the use of all GoGet members. That is a good example of an innovative way to overcome one of the issues people with disability face in accessing transport. Local councils could also invest in an accessible vehicle that could be shared as a way of increasing transport options for community members with disability.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Ms Lobo, I would like to pursue what you said about the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS] supposedly funding the transport costs of the person getting the package. If I heard you correctly, community transport services are now required to charge a per kilometre rate.

**Ms LOBO:** Disability service providers are charging the per kilometre rate. I am not sure about the charging model used by community transport services, but I believe it is a set rate per trip.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Are people who are receiving packages under the NDIS eligible to access community transport in the same way that they were before they moved to the NDIS?

**Ms LOBO:** I believe so, but I will take that question on notice. I understand that the 15 per cent of funding currently allocated to community transport providers is being withdrawn given that the National Disability Insurance Scheme is rolling out. Perhaps community transport providers are altering their charging model and moving to that individualised model. I will take that question on notice and provide the information to the Committee.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** It seems clear enough that while the NDIS is a great way to reach out to more people, it is a bit artificial if it says that the package must now cover the cost of something that they can no longer afford to access. I am sure that that is not the intended consequence. However, if that is the way it is playing out, we need to understand the modelling, particularly for those for whom travel is a very large component of their costs.

**Ms LOBO:** Definitely. As I said, people with disability have access to the transport allowance—I mentioned the three tiers—and some have what is called a "core support budget" in their plan. It might be \$10,000 depending on the individual's needs. If it were \$10,000, that amount could be bundled or used flexibly, so it could also be used for transport. The data from the trial sites suggests that the amount that should be used to allow people to access the community and to find employment is being used for transport because that is the only way participants can pay for it. Given that the transport allowance and some of the funding in the package is being used for transport, people are not getting out into the community.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** If I received the \$47 a week transport allowance and I spent only \$40, would the \$7 carry over?

**Ms LOBO:** Yes, it does. It goes into the participant's bank account and it is totally self-managed.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** What smarter and more efficient ways of using our existing capacity and resources do you see? What is not being used as well as it could be?

**Ms LOBO:** From the NDIS perspective, we are currently undertaking some research into the capacity of disability service providers that have fleet services. They might have a fleet of buses, vans and cars. As I said, because of the tight funding environment, providers are selling off their vehicles because they cannot afford to maintain and insure them. We are researching whether it would be commercially viable for those vehicles to be used as part of an Uber-type scheme. While those vehicles are not being used to transport people with disability—they are often used only during peak hours—perhaps they could be used to generate a profit for providers. Perhaps that could be examined for other types of transport as well.

**Mr ZELLER:** Is this about improving transport?

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** It is about anything that could be done smarter or more efficiently with existing resources.

**Mr ZELLER:** We would like to see more services, especially on weekends and in rural areas. We need better coordination between town buses and regional coach services and trains. We need changes to bus

stops and routes to better meet the needs of people with disability in each community, and a commitment to staffing rural and regional train stations, because not all are staffed full time.

**Ms GOODMAN:** I understood that your suggestion was about extra funding. Perhaps we could work out the relationship with local councils a bit better. In the end, local councils get funding to provide infrastructure. In Sydney we have bus stops every 400 metres, but that would be totally unrealistic in the country. We should establish where the bus stops are in the country areas. Is the transport more point to point or are there separate transport routes?

We need to define whether a transport route is a regular transport route or is based on individual need.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** We need to look at what flexibility there can be in the way that route is run.

**Ms GOODMAN:** Yes.

**Ms LOBO:** I know that a lot of other sectors, such as education, health and children's services, also rely on transport. There is an opportunity to partner with other sectors. So far, there has always been a funding dilemma and everyone's business is no-one's business—that is, nobody will take ownership of the coordination. There is opportunity there that needs to be explored further.

**Ms GOODMAN:** That applies to school buses too.

**Ms LOBO:** Yes.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** I have questions about the consumer experience of people with disability accessing different forms of transport, whether public, community or private. What are your thoughts on how the consumer experience could be improved?

**Mr ZELLER:** I suggest that additional taxi subsidies for people with disability in rural and regional areas should be considered to increase the available options for getting to and from locations. One scheme in operation in Toowoomba, Queensland, is the subsidised taxi service trial that costs eligible residents just \$2 a trip to get to shopping centres, business or social appointments. The local council has spent \$50,000 on the trial, which allows people with disability, people aged over 60 and carers to get to and from their home and local shopping centres or business districts for the cost of \$4 for a return ticket. Eligible people can pre-book the service, which is run by a local taxi operator. Each service area of the council catchment is assigned a designated day each week, with set drop-off locations and times.

Where taxis are not available, as is the case in many smaller regional communities, another possible support that could assist with the costs of transport is a fuel card. In Western Australia the Country Age Pension Fuel Card provides eligible pensioners with up to \$565 a year towards the cost of fuel and/or taxi travel from participating providers, to offer more support for the transport needs of eligible pensioners living in country areas. Eligible applicants living in non-metropolitan areas do not need to hold a driver's licence or own a vehicle. For all fuel card transactions, both the cardholder's pensioner concession card and fuel card must be presented to the participating provider at the point of purchase. This is an innovative approach that enables people with disability to contribute to the costs of fuel for family and/or friends who may drive them. It increases their access to inclusion and participation in the community.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Thank you. What is your experience of interaction with drivers or the staff of Transport for NSW and community transport? What is their approach to people with disability and how could that be improved?

**Ms GOODMAN:** Through the survey conducted by PDCN there was one complaint about the withdrawal of paper based timetables and the replacement of these only available in an electronic format.

**Mr ZELLER:** From my experience with bus drivers, if they have a wheelchair accessible bus they will lower the bus when they pull up at stops where the kerb is lower than the bus. They make it pretty easy for you to get on and off the wheelchair accessible buses.

**Ms LOBO:** If people with disability do not have a great experience or have one bad encounter, that might mean they are reluctant to use transport following that encounter. There are a lot of opportunities under the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS]. People with disability will be supported through travel training. There will be more intensive support to help people get out there and have that experience in a more positive way. That might improve under the NDIS. The issue is the lack of public transport in regional areas. There are great bus drivers and there are other bus drivers who perhaps are unaware of the needs of people with disability and do not know how to support them on transport. I know that Uber runs uberASSIST and provides training to drivers of uberASSIST vehicles to support elderly people and people with disability, perhaps when

they need help getting from their doorstep to the vehicle and in and out of the vehicle. Some really good things are slowly emerging.

**Ms GOODMAN:** I reinforce what Jessica said, but not everyone is NDIS eligible. It is important to make that known. These programs are for people who are NDIS eligible, but many people do not get NDIS funding. Older people over the age of 65 do not receive NDIS assistance but still need to access transport.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Paul, you mentioned that you thought all train stations should be staffed. Would you talk more about that?

**Mr ZELLER:** Where I live there is no train station. The nearest one is in Canberra. When you go past places like Bungendore you do not see much activity at the station. Country areas are known for not having as many staff at the train station as you would see in a city like Sydney. I have been to Grafton a few times. Sometimes you have to wait until someone goes into the station before you can book in your luggage.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** You believe that not having somebody there has an impact on people with mobility issues?

**Mr ZELLER:** Yes. Sometimes people with mobility issues can feel unsafe if there is no-one there to assist them.

**Ms LOBO:** If there is nobody there, obviously there is no-one to put a ramp in place for that person to get on or alight the train.

**Mr ZELLER:** Yep.

**Ms LOBO:** Also, just someone to provide reassurance or assistance is really important psychologically for people with disabilities or any member of the public.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Paul, we heard a proposal from somebody else earlier, perhaps somebody like yourself. You said you cannot afford a car.

**Mr ZELLER:** Yes.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Perhaps you could be put in contact with somebody who could no longer use their car and you could use their car occasionally in return for driving them to their medical care.

**Mr ZELLER:** That sounds like a good thing. It sounds like a good plan. It is almost like the car sharing that I was talking about. Another example of car sharing is something that is being done in France. It is called the Wheeliz app. It is a car-sharing app currently available in France. It connects people with disabilities to owners of adapted cars. Wheeliz offers the opportunity for adapted car owners to earn extra money by renting out their vehicles, helping out someone who needs assistance with transportation. Car owners can list their vehicles on Wheeliz at a recommended daily fee of 50 euros to 60 euros, which is \$72 to \$80. Wheeliz takes a 30 per cent commission and provides insurance. Investigating car-sharing options like Wheeliz is an innovative approach to improving access to transport options and could be particularly useful in larger rural and regional communities.

**Ms GOODMAN:** One comment that I had would be perhaps giving people trying to purchase a car ongoing car benefits—benefits on green slips and insurance so they can access their own car.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing today. We really appreciate your time and your evidence; the answers you have been able to give to our questions. It will certainly help us in our deliberations.

**Mr ZELLER:** I have something that I would like to present to the Committee. It is a copy of the bus timetable from one of the bus services that I actually use.

**The CHAIR:** One of our staff will take that from you now, Paul. We may have some additional questions that we may like to submit to you in writing. Are you happy to receive those and respond to any questions we have post this hearing?

**Mr ZELLER:** Yes.

**Ms GOODMAN:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before us today. We appreciate it.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**TRACY HOWE**, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Council of Social Service, affirmed and examined

**ADAM FARRAR**, Senior Policy Officer, Shelter NSW, affirmed and examined.

**The CHAIR:** I welcome our next two witnesses. Thank you for appearing before the Committee this afternoon for our inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional New South Wales. Would either of you like to make an opening statement?

**Ms HOWE:** NCOSS has some brief opening remarks. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today. NCOSS welcomes the Committee's recognition of how integral access to transport is to building resilient and sustainable communities in rural and regional New South Wales. As you will know, NCOSS has made a comprehensive submission to the inquiry. I would really like to use this opening address today to talk about the opportunity that exists to significantly strengthen our rural and regional communities, making them more resilient, inclusive and sustainable by working to improve the access and accessibility of their transport services. We see this Committee as a real circuit-breaker and look at this as a way of enabling opportunities.

As part of our annual prebudget submission process, NCOSS spent a number of weeks travelling around rural and regional New South Wales. We consult directly with our members and organisations, working with vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our communities. The scope of that is 25 regional consultations, which include the informal one-on-ones we have directly with service providers and individuals in the community. Everywhere we went we met local communities wanting to build better education, training, health, employment, economic and social opportunities. I note that NCOSS also convenes the Transport Policy Advisory Group [TPAG]. Everywhere we went the same communities told us how transport is often inaccessible, unaffordable, disconnected, overburdened or non-existent. It is curtailing ability to access broader opportunities. We have heard evidence of people missing out on education, training and apprenticeship opportunities either because there are no reliable transport options or the transport that does exist is unaffordable. Those missed opportunities could actually enable future employment, economic independence and a better quality of life. Transport means more than just transport.

We heard evidence of people not seeking or not being able to get to vital medical or mental health treatment because transport is either impractical or too costly, and we have seen higher mortality rates of cancer, kidney disease and other chronic health conditions in many rural and regional areas as a result. We heard evidence of people unable to get to towns and regional centres to access the employment opportunities that would actually help them to become more independent—the lack of reliable and affordable transport acting as a disincentive or impediment to taking up the casual and part-time opportunities that may present themselves, which is often the first rung up the ladder from isolation to independence.

While these realities affect many people in rural and regional New South Wales, the impact is much more keenly felt by older people, people with disability, people on income supports, Aboriginal people and others for whom private transport is simply not an option. For many people in rural and regional New South Wales but particularly those on income supports—those who are unemployed, those trying to access health and training—the cost of the transport that does exist is a fundamental barrier to accessing jobs, training, health and community. The concessions that exist for these groups are inadequate to offer genuine support. NCOSS continues to advocate for improvement to the concession system. We put forward that the \$2.50 pensioner excursion daily ticket should be available to more people, and a greater cross-section of disadvantaged people, where it would engender genuine independence. It is a real investment and also links with the Premier's priorities in many cases.

For older people and people with disability in rural and regional New South Wales, the physical inaccessibility of existing transport services in rural and regional New South Wales serves to further limit their access to education, medical treatment, employment and social inclusion that others in the community just expect. Addressing the issues that we have heard about is not simply a case of investment in new resources and services—although it is true that in many remote, rural and regional communities the transport they need cannot be provided without strong publicly funded services—but across the State there is a need to make the most of the infrastructure and resources that currently exist and hence there is an opportunity to ensure that they are full and efficiently utilised, coordinated and accessible to all. In many cases, transport resources that could make a real difference already exist with embedded transport resources attached to clubs, churches, schools and community organisations and often lie idle or underutilised for much of the time.



NCOSS believes that having recognised the importance of regional coordination, Transport for NSW should strengthen rural and regional delivery and the role of positions called regional officers. These officers need to be better resourced and more proactive in taking a visible lead in local communities and identifying opportunities to broker and build partnerships within this existing infrastructure. Transport for NSW could work better with local communities, business chambers and local government to ensure that their services go where they can make the most difference and that they respond to the specific and individual needs of communities. There is currently scope to support pilots for new local services. These pilot periods currently do not allow necessary time to establish and do not have the scope to attract ongoing funding support which, in many small rural communities, is essential for making services viable.

There is a long-term program to upgrade the accessibility of the State network train stations and major transport interchanges, but there is frustration that there is no comprehensive program setting out the future upgrade costs. Almost 50 per cent of the network remains to be upgraded; much of it is rural and regional. The lack of a schedule complicates and impedes planning. While there is an increasing recognition of the importance of the accessibility of our transport services, there are still significant issues with the way that older people and people with disability experience those services on a day-to-day basis, leaving them excluded and disadvantaged.

There needs to be a recognition of the vital information and support role played by staff at train stations, rural and regional, and major bus and coach stops in rural and regional areas. Staff need to be regarded as a community resource, not a cost. They are part of the infrastructure, and they are quite particular to rural and regional areas. These important community hubs should be fully staffed during all hours of operation, with staff adequately trained and equipped to offer the information and support that are key to the accessibility of transport to older people and people with disability and the community as a whole.

**Mr FARRAR:** Shelter NSW would also like to thank you for the opportunity to make some additional comments. I am struck, in having listened to what Ms Howe has had to say, with the similarity of the kind of message that has come from a parallel but entirely independent process. Shelter NSW has also been in the process of consulting with its members across the State, and I will come back to the sorts of points in the two processes that are very, very similar. I do have to say that at the time that we put in our very brief submission, we had completed about the first half of our consultations, which were eight different meetings. Most of those meetings were in the greater Sydney region, although clearly that included the Illawarra, the Hunter and the Central Coast. To some extent we had the beginning of a flavour of rural and regional issues, but only the beginning of that. Sadly, the second round of consultations in rural and regional New South Wales start tomorrow, so we would be more than happy to make available to the Committee anything that comes from those more directly relevant, if you like, meetings.

**The CHAIR:** That would be good, thank you.

**Mr FARRAR:** We would have loved slightly better timing, but there we are. That being said, as I said, I was struck by the similarity in the findings even within those regions of greater Sydney. I should say that our interest is primarily in housing for low-income and disadvantaged households, whether they are in the private rental market, home ownership or social and affordable housing. Clearly, the greater proportion of those who are the disadvantaged in housing—or at least a high proportion—are likely to be in social housing. Again, it is probably worth noting that in social housing, a very high proportion of tenants now are older people or people with very specific barriers to social inclusion—either a disability of various sorts or simple poverty.

They are also likely to have been experiencing their forced location into areas where they can afford to live. This applies both to the private rental market and public housing—that is, they may have preferred to live in locations where they could have better access to transport and to services, but because of the unaffordability of housing, which is true in many regional centres not just in metropolitan Sydney, although that is critically unaffordable, people are forced to relocate. That means that they are frequently excluded from access to public transport. People in public housing estates or other public housing, even when it is more diffuse, are likely to have worse access to transport. That was certainly one of the findings that came from our discussions with our members and other service providers in the same areas.

That meant that even though it was very hard for many people to afford it, they had to rely on cars—not because they could always achieve cars, and many people are simply excluded from access because they just could not access transport or cars. For others it is quite well known that you will find that low-income households, even when they do have cars, have unreliable cars and higher costs of maintenance. They are therefore forced into a cost burden, which in very low-income households, they simply cannot manage.

Support services are one of the critical areas where low-income households simply cannot get access because of the lack of appropriate transport. These may well be services for people who are at risk of

homelessness, so they are critical interventions. We see that the Government at the moment has put out a discussion paper about early intervention and how to do that better, so that we prevent people from falling into homelessness. One of the areas of early intervention is access to the sorts of support services that will allow people to find a different pathway. But if they are excluded by access to transport then we are cutting off one of those critical circuit-breakers that might prevent homelessness. The same goes for people with other kinds of needs such as mental illness.

We found from the groups that we spoke to—and I should say that this may reflect the service providers who happen to be in those groups—that there was a sense that for young people in particular, so not just older people, there was a real risk associated with a lack of access to transport and therefore their lack of ability to access the sorts of support and of training that they need if they are to find a suitable pathway into adulthood. We found that support workers would often provide direct assistance, so drive kids to appointments. By the same token, they are saying that that took people out of generally fairly under-resourced services, and so they could not meet the needs of others. It might be worth noting that there was frustration expressed about one of the other options, and that is particularly for homelessness, to centralise a telephone service linked to home. It is a great thing to have that kind of service, but what was experienced was a lack of understanding of the transport needs and the transport opportunities of people who are not in the middle of metropolitan Sydney. It was a belief that it was possible to refer people to services that were just in any realistic terms unreachable. It might have been fine—perhaps a burden—in metropolitan Sydney but simply did not work in a regional area and there was a lack of understanding about those kinds of impacts.

Again the sorts of responses and solutions that people proposed, two broadly speaking, the one that Tracy has already mentioned and that is to have a far more effective use of service hubs so that when people do have to travel they do not have to make multiple trips, they can access the services they need because of the existence of service hubs. Secondly, again this is possibly more reflective of, if you like, the edges of greater Sydney, but top-ups to the kinds of things like Opal cards so that young people and other people who are disadvantaged can actually access the transport that is available, which they cannot do because of their very low incomes. Let us remember that young people are living on income support which is well below the poverty line. Any additional transport cost is often a hurdle that is just too high.

I think possibly the only other comment that I would want to make is a broad one and that is that as we try to improve our social housing system and our affordable housing system—you will be aware that the Government has a document, Future Directions for Social Housing, which tries to map out a much more responsive social housing system—we need to understand that transport is the link between where you live and the life that you can lead, and the opportunities that are available. If we want that kind of future social housing system to be effective, particularly as people are relocated to more marginal locations, then we have to see transport as part of that solution, and not just provide, if you like, on the built form at either end of those travel routes.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Howe—and Adam may have a view on this—I note in your submission that you talk about the Isolated Patients Transport and Accommodation Assistance Scheme [IPTAAS] and some of the criteria around that. You comment also about the lack of awareness of the scheme. My questioning relates more to the criteria that are somewhat limiting in rural areas with people travelling vast distances for medical appointments. How can that be improved and/or more access given to it? How can that system be improved to try to make it easier for people to get to those essential appointments?

**Ms HOWE:** What we would say around IPTAAS is, first of all, there needs to be some kind of community awareness process about the existing opportunities that it offers. I have gone around the State and I have actually gone to some of those stakeholder engagement meetings and sat in a room in Broken Hill and heard someone talk about using IPTAAS. Then you can hear another service provider who is working with people who need to use dialysis or have mental health issues, whatever it may be, who do not even realise there is a process, for example, where a doctor can get an exemption from the up-front payment. Who knew? When we actually look at one of the prohibitors of IPTAAS it is the concept that you have to pay up and get a reimbursement but a doctor can actually get you an exemption for that. At NCOSS we only just found that out in a community consult.

**The CHAIR:** I have just found out right now.

**Ms HOWE:** Exactly, and when we heard it everyone said, "Really?" Then, of course, we do not know how restrictive that mechanism is. Again that kind of process should not be something that is hidden. In fact, what we would say about access to IPTAAS is that you should not expect this complex situation where someone who is already vulnerable has to find the payment up front and then go through a reimbursement process. That just seems like a very clunky process. The other thing that we see when you look in the rural and regional

context is that you have vehicles that are attached with an IPTAAS frame around them but you also have community transport that might be in another town, and then in another town you might have a bus that is attached to a preschool, for example. There needs to be some kind of, I guess, assessment of what is in an area to see if something more flexible and creative can be done with the resources that are there.

An example I can give is we went to Condobolin and heard about a Condobolin day service for people with disability and their bus is falling to bits. It is 15 years old and in terrible condition and just to get it serviced is so onerous that they toss up whether to actually make that investment. They know across the road in another particular medical service that a Health funded bus is sitting there idle, but they are bound by this inflexible regime with the contract. It just sits there in this place where you have one bus in and out of town a day.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we have heard examples of that from other parties.

**Ms HOWE:** You have probably heard about the same bus.

**The CHAIR:** No, not Condobolin, another bus in another place.

**Ms HOWE:** But it is a pattern. I could talk to you. We go to Lismore and we have been to Parkes and you hear it again and again. It is the same story. But it always has a little local flavour. It is under a different regime. It is community transport as opposed to IPTAAS or it might be that it is a neighbourhood centre that has invested in its own, but really what needs to be done is almost an assessment of what is in each region and say, "How can we make the best of that?" We feel like there are a lot of solutions already sitting dormant in communities.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** That is just what I was going to ask. Earlier you mentioned churches and clubs but it is a theme we have been interested in. How do you see the framework or legislative basis for making that better? What do we have to change to get access to those things?

**Ms HOWE:** I think legislation on its own is not really the lever in the first instance. I think it is a policy approach in the first instance to try to bring in the non-traditional stakeholders with the existing stakeholders. When you actually look at the contractual regime that refers to the use of vehicles for IPTAAS, for example, or community transport there should be some relaxing and discretion allowed to the service provider who has access to those. I think your first issue is a policy issue which is around an openness to creating the environment where we can look in a community and bring together the stakeholders and ask, "What is there? What is your solution?" It is too simplistic to say that you could legislate for that; it is more a direction. It is that collaborative, collective impact approach that could be led by government to say, "This is something we want to try in communities." The willingness is there but it is almost like the impetus and the permission is not there from a government context.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** We will be interested to pursue that. You also listed some adjectives around transport, describing it in some cases as inaccessible, unaffordable, disconnected, unreliable, impractical or non-existent. I will focus on disconnected. Where is that an issue? What can we do about that?

**Ms HOWE:** I think when we went into some detail around the importance of having, for example, train stations manned by real people there becomes a disconnection when you automate the train stations. I know that sounds like, why would that be like a magic bullet? But it makes such a difference in a community where there are few options and the train station is a place that is automated. That is actually a place where having someone there is like infrastructure for that community. For us we would see that as a huge investment in communities to stop any disconnection. It is almost like you are isolated. As soon as you look at a small town and you pull out the person, the human being, behind the station and you make it an automated service, it may as well not exist. For us we see that as an inexpensive infrastructure investment.

The other way that it is disconnected is just that idea that I highlighted to the Committee before where you are sitting in Condobolin, which is actually tiny in the scheme of things, we get walked across to services to meet people just on the fly when we come into town but they do not know who is doing what, or who has what, or how you access vehicles, how the bus could be used in a better way.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** That is a liaison kind of disconnect?

**Ms HOWE:** Totally. And this is where you have an infrastructure that you have already put in place which is the regional officer concept. For example, you have one who sits in Dubbo for the west. You know how big the west is? It is massive. It is not sufficient, but it is not to say that the model is not one that could be a really strong model. What NCOSS is saying is that in a wish to centralise and automate, which all makes perfect sense, in some worlds we need a different approach for regional and rural.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** In terms of the dissemination of information to people in social housing or the clients of the Department of Family and Community Services [FACS], are people able to understand their current transport options, or should transport options be improved in the future in that respect? I am interested to know the level of information that the contact centres have, the level of information people who work in the larger States have, and the improvements that could happen there.

**Ms HOWE:** I can say something briefly. Adam is probably more the expert. My view is that there is no concerted effort to have a position on transport. The information that tends to be on the table is around access to accommodation, mental health services and those kinds of things. Transport is possibly a bit of a side bar. Adam may have better information.

**Mr FARRAR:** That is partly the issue. The other part of the issue is very similar to what we were saying before, although we are now not talking about stations. In a lot of public housing estates, for example, we have seen a withdrawal of front-line workers, whom tenants saw as their first point of contact. With the non-government housing providers—community housing providers—one of the findings from the report on government services, for example, is that because they have people on the ground and they have much more regular engagement and contact with tenants, there is a much greater likelihood that there will be a level of referral—and hence a level of usage—across a whole range of services, including transport. That comes back to whether you have people on the ground who understand the needs of their community and are able to act as a referral point.

At the moment we are seeing that being withdrawn. Tenants, for example, talk about how they have now become invisible. We have seen a shift to call centres. There are some real strengths in call centres. If there is somebody on the end of the line when it is called—it varies but it may take some little while—then at least there is someone who presumably has access to quite a range of information. Again, I go back to the example of Link2home. If the call centre person does not appreciate the difference between rural areas and what the officer is used to in Sydney, that kind of information is not going to replace the on-the-ground, hands-on, face-to-face, contact.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** If a person were to call the contact centre for the district or the area in which the social housing is situated, is there that level of information about their transport options? If a person in a rural or regional centre calls and says, "I want to know what the community transport providers are and which community centres or councils provide some sort of transport," is that level of information available for them to access?

**Mr FARRAR:** I do not know the answer to that but my intuition is that it is not.

**Ms HOWE:** I could take that question on notice and find out from our policy lead on that. However, I could give you a case study, which I got after going around the State.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** That would be great.

**Ms HOWE:** We heard at Broken Hill that women may phone to get support about escaping domestic violence or to get court advocacy support. They are then told to attend a particular court, but there is no understanding of the fact that the court might be four hours' drive and there is no plan around how to make that happen. That is certainly what we are hearing about in the domestic violence space. The west is so huge that we have been hearing that it is a huge issue there. There is a lack of understanding that the distance between towns means that there will be a whole day gone for a person. In fact, in that situation a person may even need accommodation the night before. You can imagine that a person may be vulnerable, on low income, escaping domestic violence, have childcare responsibilities and that there may be a whole raft of other complexities attached to that. That is an issue that we heard about. It is not an isolated incident but a pattern that occurs when women are phoning for support.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** You mentioned a lack of understanding. Is it a lack of understanding or just a lack of commitment and interest? I am interested to know because you both said similar things. You were surprised at how similar your submissions were. They are not dissimilar to others that we have received. What is the mindset of the departmental bureaucrats or officers that means we have to have a hearing like this, and these problems have not been identified, recognised or appreciated, and fixed?

**Ms HOWE:** I feel that I am well positioned to respond to this because of my position in my organisation. We have always consulted but until recently it has been a little ad hoc. We now, over the last two years, introduced an approach where we will go around the State every year. I go around the State and my deputy goes around the State, and we start to connect with our members in that way.

As an advocate for an NGO I can say that until you get out and see the issues, they are almost not real. I feel that by getting out there the knowledge has settled. So I can totally understand that in a department you may have a homogenised, flat approach to doing things. I am not saying that you should all go out and travel around the State. I am saying that we do not necessarily need to beat them with a stick but we should know that the issues are quite unique. When you see the issues in real life and connect with people who can explain the situations that they are faced with the penny will drop.

So there is almost a lack in the ability to feel what that is like. New South Wales is so huge and the impacts on people are so huge. There are so many little towns and big centres that people cannot access for a variety of reasons. It must be a nightmare. Imagine being in a department thinking that every area needs a bespoke response. That is not to say that the issues are insurmountable. It is about going to those communities and seeing what is there and creating a bespoke response. So, often those in government want to say, "This is the model; this is what will fit." This is the one area where that is not going to be a helpful approach.

**Mr FARRAR:** My comments are going to focus on housing rather than other parts of the service system, but I suspect there is a parallel. We have seen a real trend. I want to acknowledge very clearly that there are some strengths in a centralised information base, but there are also some inevitable, massive disadvantages. First of all it means that the officer is likely to be concentrating most on information about the particular service area or program that is his or her main interest. The officer may know that area backwards but may not know how that applies in each and every location. That does not occur unless there is an on-the-ground service delivery. For example, I was talking about the benefit of non-government community housing providers but equally, housing officers in FACS who are locally based in regional centres will have much more insight than anyone on the end of a telephone. I think that is inevitable. The more we rely on that kind of centralised advice and information the more we abandon the locationally specific knowledge.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Who should be at the local level? What agency, person or NGO should coordinate all the agencies so that we reach that ideal where we are using all the resources available to us most effectively so the school bus is not passing the community bus where they could be sharing that resource? Is it local government?

**Ms HOWE:** It will depend on the region. That is what we are seeing as we go around the State and connect more with our membership. In every place we go to there are different champions. Some may be at the local council and some may be at the local neighbourhood centre. It could also be a combination of both. It really is about not having a prescriptive view about what a community already has as infrastructure. Often the proponents or the champions are already there and are ready to pull this together. However, we do have a view in relation to transport that there is a real opportunity for the regional officer to have some specific role around holding that, even if it is in order to enable or to be the proponent who can bring together those champions in the community who already have those national relationships. I have not yet been to a community where there has not been some kind of group or interagency leader. It is just about giving them permission to work with a regional officer to come up with the best solution, to scope what is already there, and then to say what extra they need or what they might do differently.

**Mr FARRAR:** I absolutely take the point that it is horses for courses; there is not one structure that will work for everyone. Mention was made of local government. Housing providers, because they have to look at their tenants' entire lives, are a central point. Schools are the other critical central part of social infrastructure. I am bouncing a little off a point Ms Howe made earlier, but it is not only about having enablers but also getting rid of the silos that are embedded in contracts. Unless you have the flexibility to move, you can know as much as you like but you are bound by your contractual obligations. There are three issues: the lead agency or champion; the information hubs; and the permission to do it. That goes to some of those contractual and other silos.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Can you provide an example of a contractual constraint?

**Ms HOWE:** In Condobolin there is a bus attached to a medical centre. They have the leeway to allow the organisation across the road that has people with disability to use it for a day out. They can also hook up with an early childhood centre and share the resource. Often things do not appear to be rocket science, but sometimes they are. If there were some relaxing of that we could allow communities to make the best of what is already there. If there is a need for government investment, it should be done allowing for what already exists, and there should be no doubling up. There is nothing worse than seeing transport options sitting idle and people asking for more money. We say that we should be able to do all of that. Mr Farrar is correct in saying that all of those levers are important. These things are all important when we are looking for a whole-of-government response and results for people experiencing disadvantage or poverty, when older people need to access

employment or health options, and even when people need to attend court. We are looking across all agencies of government where transport is the key, or it can be a real impediment to community wellbeing.

**Mr FARRAR:** This comment is purely speculative because I do not know, but often there are some inherent limitations that we must resolve. For example, in the case of vehicles and funded programs, insurance may well be the thing that starts to create silos. It is about finding solutions to those reasonable impediments and working through them.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** I will make a comment to which you can respond. Insurance has been mentioned a few times today. I have had some experience where it has been used as a tool to obstruct. When I was a mayor I asked why something was banned and I was told that there was a problem with insurance. I demanded a meeting with the insurer, at which I discovered there was no problem. Would you say that people use insurance cover as an excuse?

**Mr FARRAR:** I would say that there are real challenges that can be solved if there is a will to do so.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. We may send you some additional questions in writing. Would you be happy to respond to them?

**Mr FARRAR:** Yes.

**Ms HOWE:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Again, thank you for your time and for the evidence you have provided to the Committee today.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**DARRYL MELLISH**, Executive Officer, BusNSW, affirmed and examined

**BETHANY SIMMONDS**, Chair of the Board, Community Transport Organisation Incorporated, sworn and examined

**ROY WAKELIN-KING**, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Taxi Council, sworn and examined

**BRIAN WILKINS**, President, NSW Taxi Industry Association, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee on Community Services today and for assisting the Committee with its inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional New South Wales. Before we proceed, does anyone have any questions about the hearing process today?

**Mr MELLISH:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would anyone like to make an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

**Mr MELLISH:** I have information I would like to put on the record, if that is suitable.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr MELLISH:** I want to inform the Committee that approximately 680 regional and rural bus contracts have recently been entered into. They cover approximately 3,350 buses in regional and rural New South Wales. They are a new generation of contracts. They cover the provision of services for passengers: adults and students and concession beneficiaries. They include seniors and the transport disadvantaged. The services covered by the contract are specified in the schedules in the contract. In this generation of contracts there are no restrictions of exclusivity or contract areas like the old contracts had. Therefore, there is greater flexibility in providing services. The contracts also specify the availability of a \$2.50 per day regional excursion ticket, which is equivalent to the pensioner excursion ticket for seniors and pensioners. Transport for NSW pays the operator based on an annual contract price that is built up by the resource inputs, which are the buses, kilometres and hours. These are gross cost contracts where the operator payments are no longer linked to the travel application of the student, as was the case in some of the previous models. Our members also provide charter and tourist services not covered by the contracts.

The reason for telling you this is that the new contracts have to ensure that the timetables for route and school services are publicly available and widely open to those passengers who are able to use them. They also provide for service variations initiated by Transport for NSW and/or the operator, but the variations have to be approved. The significance is that the rates payable for variations are all included in these contracts. So if you add or change services over time there is no disagreement or dispute about the rates that are paid for the services. They were set in consultation with industry. They include indexation provisions for the next eight years. The rates cover the capital costs, so the buses are largely paid for, with an interest and depreciation component. If there is a variation in how the buses are used then the operating costs depend on the kilometres/hours that are used.

The prescribed safety standards in the industry, as the Committee would know, come from Roads and Maritime Services [RMS]. There are accreditation standards for the driver, the operator and the vehicle. The contract holders in our environment can use the buses when they are not being used for the services required by Transport for NSW, which I think is an important message. This could include flexible demand services in partnership with other organisations, including community transport and taxis. The advantage is that the vehicles and the drivers are already there. The accreditation standards are met. If we can get coordination in carrying people then there is an opportunity to achieve value for money for seniors and the transport disadvantaged. As the Committee may know, Transport for NSW, with the bus industry, is looking at a new range of vehicles to offer in regional and rural areas to provide greater flexibility and use, with accessible services, easier access and better driving facilities such as seatbelts and wheelchair accessibility. I represent the private bus sector in that environment.

When we framed the \$450 million a year contracts we had in mind how we could better utilise the assets in transporting people in regional and rural areas. Probably one of the fairly obvious things to say is that not everyone knows that the restriction on dedicated school services and contract services has now gone. A passenger can get on any of the regional and rural services, as specified in the schedule of the contract. The concessions are there, the fares are there, the free travel is there and the pensioner excursion ticket is there. I hope that sets the scene about contracts. A reasonably large reform has just occurred in New South Wales.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Mellish. Ms Simmonds, would you like to make some opening remarks?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** I have a short statement about the history of community transport. The Community Transport Organisation holds that accessible, affordable and appropriate transport is a key factor in disrupting the cycle of disadvantage that exists in rural and regional New South Wales. Community transport in New South Wales grew organically from a need identified by people who cared about their neighbours, friends and family. They saw that transport services either did not exist or were not accessible for many people in their community. Since that time, more than 40 years ago, the community transport movement has grown to fill many transport gaps in rural and regional New South Wales.

We still rely on volunteers who have the same values and intentions as the first wave of community transport people—to serve their community and to improve the lives of the disadvantaged people around them. In rural New South Wales community transport works a lot in failed markets where there is not the critical mass of passengers and demand to sustain commercial, for-profit operations. For instance, for Bowraville and Dorrigo, small rural towns located on the North Coast, the closest major centre is Coffs Harbour, an hour or more away by car. Neither town has a taxi service and there are very limited route bus services. Without the services provided by the local community transport operator, aged, frail, disabled and disadvantaged individuals in those towns are at risk of social isolation and the inability to access vital medical services—the main medical centre being Coffs Harbour Health Campus—which can result in mental and chronic health issues.

Decent transport services in rural and regional New South Wales will be the key to allowing access to education services and health centres and thus the key to closing the disadvantage gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan New South Wales. That includes Aboriginal communities, which are particularly prone to the cycle of disadvantage. We see transport as a spoke in the wheels of that cycle of disadvantage. The Community Transport Organisation offers its full support for the improvement of transport for people throughout regional and rural New South Wales, in cooperation and in partnership with buses, taxis and other services that may be available. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Wakelin-King or Mr Wilkins, do you have some opening remarks?

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** Thank you, Chair. I extend our appreciation to the Committee for the opportunity to present information today. We also welcomed the opportunity to provide a submission. I acknowledge Mr Brian Wilkins, who is President of the NSW Taxi Industry Association but also President of the NSW Country Taxi Operators Association. It is good to have him here. I also acknowledge my colleagues in the bus industry and the community transport organisation. As has already been articulated, we work together in key locations to provide a continuum of transport for this particular purpose. The thrust of our submission is twofold. First, taxis provide a vital role in providing point to point transport services, particularly for transport disadvantaged and also seniors in rural and regional New South Wales. We are in the majority of towns in rural and regional New South Wales, ranging from large networks and places like Coffs Harbour and Wagga to one-taxi towns throughout the smaller regional centres.

We are privately funded, therefore, we have to pay our way. We do not receive any subsidies. There are subsidies for people with disabilities that are paid to them, but on the whole we do not receive any concessions or subsidies from the Government of New South Wales to pay for those services. We are committed to improving transport services for people with transport disadvantage, particularly the elderly, in rural and regional New South Wales. We know how important transport services are and the fact that we often provide the only form of transport 24/7—around the clock—throughout the whole week. We work in partnership with our colleagues, particularly community transport, but also the bus industry, and we look forward to those opportunities being expanded upon under the New South Wales Government point to point reforms, which the Parliament has voted on, and also in other reforms that may be impacting upon the bus industry.

The other key aspect of our submission is one of competitive neutrality. We are particularly interested in working with all members of Parliament to ensure that in the provision of transport services across this State, but particularly in rural and regional New South Wales, that competitive neutrality is achieved. We believe there are opportunities for the State when it procures point to point transport than what has hitherto been done to date. We know reforms are happening in this sector in the coming years, including under the home and aged care programs, and we would like to play an increased role in that regard. We want to demonstrate value for money for the State in providing those services. We recognise that for the State to procure transport services, they must be satisfied with quality, safety, reliability and, of course, value for money. We believe we can provide those things and, in fact, are investing heavily in the areas around quality, skill development and capability development for our drivers and owners. We look forward to making a contribution to the Committee and we welcome any questions that you may have and, once again, thank you for the opportunity.



**The CHAIR:** Thank you to all of you. I will kick the questions off. Members may have questions for individual witnesses or the whole panel. I have two questions. My first is to Mr Mellish. In the submission of BusNSW, you recommended that a matrix be prepared, identifying criteria, procurement and funding for all transport programs in the State to basically assist with streamlining or covering some gaps. I am interested if you could expand on that a bit more and identify for the Committee what the potential benefits would be of going down that path?

**Mr MELLISH:** We tried to do a matrix which identified the different service provision against the eligibility provision against the jurisdiction that was involved. I had a spreadsheet, which I did not bring with me, which was the first attempt at looking at it. It was quite interesting. The jurisdictions can vary from State to Federal. The eligibility seems to have a fair bit of overlap in definition of what is "disadvantaged", whether it be age or location or something physical, and then you look at the programs that are being undertaken for the provision of those services. They seem to be silo based. The matrix included the rural and regional bus service contracts, community transport, taxis, and some wheelchair accessible—it just occurred to me that if someone sat down with that matrix and had a look at how you are trying to match the eligibility with the service provision, with the policy and regulation, you could come up with a sensible recut of the way services may be procured and provided. I can provide that draft to the Committee as a follow-up, if you like. In respect of answering the terms of reference, it seems it was an exercise that was worthwhile and we did undertake an attempt to put it together. It shows a bit of duplication and inefficiency.

**The CHAIR:** I asked that question first simply for the benefit of the other members of the panel. It is a difficulty our Committee has because we have taken a lot of submissions and we have heard a lot of evidence already on exactly that. Within the current construct of transport assets, funded services and taxis, there is a whole host of things going on, but they are either duplicated and are leaving gaps or people are not aware of how to navigate their way through to find what they need to get to where they need to go. My question to everyone is what is the mechanism to formally make sure that all these silos—as Darryl coined it, although we have heard it a number of times today—are no longer silos and that we can come up with an integrated transport model that embraces competitive neutralities, but so that a consumer, an older person, an Aboriginal person, or a person with disability in country New South Wales can have a seamless as possible transport experience, whatever form that entails. How do we do that, and who is responsible for being the custodian of the matrix, or whatever facilitates it? I know it is a big question, but I was interested in teasing out your thoughts on that.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** An important reform needs to be undertaken in this space in the context with what Darryl has mentioned. It is the way the Government establishes procurement policy in line with social policy in respect of transport services generally, so there are a number of point to point transport services that are being procured. I will give you some examples. You have non-emergency patient transport, you have community transport, you have assisted school travel programs. At a Federal level, you have the Department of Veterans Affairs. All are procuring in our context of point to point transport services or similar. On top of that, you have social inclusion programs or enhancement programs to help people with disabilities, with ageing and a range of other social inclusion matters, and there appears to be the need for an alignment between the procurement policy and some of those social programs. Our view is that, clearly, for want of a better term, there is a whole-of-government approach that needs to be led, particularly at a State level, but also in concert with the Commonwealth Government.

Ordinarily it would need to be led out of the Premier's department, we would have thought, but there are opportunities for lead agencies to occur with transport agencies or the transport cluster, or with the secretary for Family and Community Services. There certainly needs to be a strong alignment between the two. There are some very good opportunities in that space in the future. The National Disability Insurance Scheme, which has not been mentioned thus far in this session, is also going to be a force for considerable change with how transport is procured. It is more the devolution of procurement to the individual or the carers and that will drive significant change at the service delivery level and at the operator level. There will be times when group buses may be required; there will be times when individual transport may be required. I definitely believe there is opportunity for significant reform in this area. We believe it needs to be led at potentially the highest level of Government or potentially through an appointed lead agency cluster with great collaboration or very close collaboration between the transport cluster and the Family and Community Services cluster.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Simmonds, do you have any thoughts on this?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Yes, I agree with Mr Wakelin-King in that it needs a whole-of-government approach, both State Government and Federal Government. The silos that are occurring in rural and regional New South Wales are very complex and individual organisations can be reluctant to share assets and resources. We have found that when service providers have approached other service providers who may not be in the

transport business but may be in the community services business, the disability field or aged care field, they are not eager to share their resources for a whole-of-community solution.

As far as community transport is concerned, we are probably facing greater and greater individualised funding in a greater and greater individualised funding environment, which means that it should provide some of that competitive neutrality once aged funding and the Commonwealth Home Support Programme shift into individualised funding. The Federal Government has not stated for sure that that will be happening with community transport. It could be mixed block individualised funding, but it will help to provide better access and better knowledge to the general community about what is available to it in rural and regional New South Wales, because it will be that open market that community transport can embrace.

As far as fixing it in the short term, the Transport for NSW trip planner has been excellent in assisting people who know how to navigate on the internet to access appropriate transport services. I have done some experiments of my own, thinking, "This will not work in rural New South Wales." I have said I need to go from here to another area in very rural New South Wales, and the NSW Transport trip planner has actually worked and showed me how I could get there—it took a long time, but it actually worked. Something like that involving more than just buses, trains and, I think, walking could be really handy. That is just on a practical level.

**Mr MELLISH:** I just pulled up the metrics. So far I think there are about eight organisations involved. For each one we try to look at where the funding comes from, who administers it, what the eligibility criteria are, what comments we have about the relationship, the number of operators involved, the dollars per annum involved, what the compliance and regulatory regime is, whether there were key performance indicators that indicated the Government's view of value and how the operator funding and procurement was arranged. This was an internal draft that we did in preparation for this. It was a desktop study that showed the level of support, supporting my colleagues.

The digital technology that we are seeing—whether it be the RouteMatch technology or the trip finder with the ability to have a central location where people can easily identify where they are and where they want to go—has, I think, got to be a big part of any new initiative. We have seen it in point to point, as Mr Wakelin-King said. We are about moving people, the eligibility of the people that we move and how to do it needs to be in partnership. We just want it to be the most efficient, matching the social with financial and economic needs. The Government is trying to do more with less in most of the sectors. We had a spaghetti diagram of trying to see where the funding and the decision-making linked with these services and it really was like an old Bedford wiring diagram: it was all over the shop! It is maybe worth having another look at that at some stage as well.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** My question is to Mr Wakelin-King. I think taxis have a real niche part to play in all of this in rural areas, given that we are not talking about mass transit all the time but often about an individual going from point to point at different times of day. The cost of travelling by taxi is often a barrier to some sectors of the community and, when you get into a small town, that can mean you do not have a big enough market to support a viable taxi service. I am wondering whether there are cost elements and inputs generated by government that could be removed from the equation to bring the cost to the customer down and make the taxi viable in more places than it currently is.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** Yes, there certainly are. We have been working with the Government and all members of Parliament as part of the Government's point to point transport reform process. Whilst that debate has largely been focused on ridesharing, there is a much broader issue at hand and that is the long-term viability and sustainability of the taxi industry. I come back to the issue of competitive neutrality because it is central to that particular reform. We would lead the reform. I should note that the Taxi Council and the taxi industry have not opposed reform. We obviously recognise that the world is changing, and indeed changing rapidly. What we are after is sensible reform that achieves genuine outcomes. We believe that there is a number of areas in which, whilst there has been some progress made, there remain structural inequities and therefore costs on our sector that put us in a position of competitive disadvantage.

First and foremost is the area of compulsory third-party insurance, and we do note that the New South Wales Government has announced that it intends to undertake reforms there. I will not go too far down that path other than to say it is becoming uneconomic to insure a taxi. I will give you an example. It was recently announced that to insure a taxi in Sydney will cost you in excess of \$9,000 if the vehicle is over four years of age, compared with our competitors, who are paying less than \$800. You can see there is significant structural inequity in the first place. In the country it is over \$4,500 versus about \$400. We hold that out as a very important issue that needs to be resolved. One of the things we can do, and these are some of the benefits of the reform process, is actually start setting our fares at much more competitive levels. It would be a deregulated fare-setting environment, so we have the opportunity to, where we get cost savings, pass them on to the consumer. Therefore, it makes it more attractive for someone who is on a lower income to actually use a taxi,

and that is particularly important in those small towns where it is currently uneconomic to provide a privately funded taxi service.

The other area, as we said, is in procurement reform. We do a lot of work for school runs and DVA, and we could do work for the health department on non-emergency patient transport. Our average fares are generally lower in rural and regional areas, so it is just about giving us opportunities. If I may, I will ask my president to comment on that, given his country experience.

**Mr WILKINS:** As well as being president, I am a current operator in a small country town. That is one of the biggest problems we have at the moment: the ongoing costs. For the last three years we have not applied for a fare increase, because we know it is going to be harder and harder to compete in the marketplace and, as you say, the smaller the town and the older the population of the town, the less opportunity it has to be able to afford that sort of transport. Hence we have been certain that we not ask for an increase over the last three years. We would like to be able to reduce some of the fares. We have plans, but the only thing that will allow us to be able to do that at this point in time is if we can get some success with the CTP insurance. I know there was an article in the *Telegraph* this morning where Minister Dominello was going to put forward the suggestions. We have had a lot of dealings with the insurance people who handle it on behalf of the Government. If we can get some stabilisation there, we will then be able to be competitive.

One of the biggest things that I have found in my 20 years in country areas and my over 50 years in the whole of the taxi industry is that with vehicles within a town, whether buses or community transport, there is not enough utilisation of the existing fleet in many cases. A few years ago Transport for NSW, or the Department of Transport or whatever they called themselves in those days, set up area—what were they called?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Regional coordinators.

**Mr WILKINS:** —regional coordinators to look at the vehicles that were available in certain towns. For instance, in my small town I have three maxi-cum-wheelchair taxis. They would be lucky to do two hours a day on most days—a wheelchair job in the morning and maybe one in the afternoon from a school or something like that. Elderly people have trouble getting into them, so you have vehicles that are sitting idle. Our community transport colleagues in the same town have noted that now most of their vehicles have wheelchair lifts as well. I heard Mr Mellish mention that they are talking about newer and probably smaller buses having wheelchair access. That is fine, but before we start spending millions and millions of dollars on an extra fleet we should be looking very closely at what is available in country areas so that fleets can be utilised.

I do not know if you remember that many years ago, when they first opened up the Ambarvale area—which is just south of Campbelltown, a little satellite city set up there—because it was not viable to operate a bus run at a weekend because of the costs and everything else, we had what they called a taxi bus. At midday on Saturday until eight o'clock on Saturday night that taxi had a cover put over the taxi sign which read "taxi bus" and that operated on bus tickets from Campbelltown station to Ambarvale. It did the normal bus route until eight o'clock and all day on a Sunday, until the business was big enough that the bus could take over. It has always amazed me that we have been ignored—and I have been in the industry many years—when we have talked to the Government about that sort of utilisation so that the Government can get better bang for its buck and everybody with an investment in vehicles et cetera will be able to better utilise what they have. Mr Wakelin-King's points are very valid.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Wilkins, you talked about regional transport coordinators. Who are these people and what do they do?

**Mr WILKINS:** Mr Wakelin-King was in the department at the time, so he can give you more information. I think they did nothing, but that is just my opinion.

**The CHAIR:** That is the answer I assumed I was going to get. That is what we need to hear, because on Friday we will have the government department representatives sitting where you are sitting. If people are meant to be sorting out some of these issues but they are not, again, we need to know.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** I can give you some background because I was in the department at the time. The Government, back in 2004-05, established the community transport division, which became a significant division within the structure. Part of that was the establishment of 11 or thereabouts regional transport coordinators, which were spread around the State. They had regions to look after and the basis of their role was to try to facilitate better integration between modes and better utilisation of assets, and to fill gaps. There were two significant weaknesses, in my mind, as to why the program was not as successful as it might have been. The people were very good, and I knew them well. They were very committed, but at the end of the day they were limited because they had no purchasing power. They had no delegated authority and very limited delegated capacity to make decisions and procure transport because the procurement of bus services was done through a

separate division and taxis were privately funded. The other limitation is that they were within the community transport division, so quite naturally—and this is not a criticism—they had a leaning in that direction, but they did not have whole-of-transport oversight to start informing policy and procurement activities for these services. That is not to say that they had a bias towards community transport; it was just within their reporting structure.

**The CHAIR:** Based on your earlier comments, if we are to try to suggest a way forward to fix this and if we believe there are some merits in having a position like that dotted at various points around the State, do you think that they should be domiciled within the department of transport, or should they sit, as you said earlier, at the highest level of government, in the Department of Premier and Cabinet [DPC] so they are not in one silo but looking at all modes of transport?

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** It has been a while since I was in the department, but I would say that from a policy establishment point of view I would suggest that needs to be led by DPC. Once it is established, in the context of transport, I think that Transport for NSW is very well-placed to coordinate the assets or control the procurement policy. It just needs to have the right people properly empowered in the right location to ensure that it is efficient and effective.

**Mr MELLISH:** I can probably add a little to that. Those regional transport coordinator positions were made redundant about six or seven months ago and new positions have been advertised. These new positions are called regional officers with the intention to broaden the scope beyond community transport to whatever transport services are procured by the State Government—Country Link, buses, community transport. This will be done with a view to looking at how the assets can be better used for the NDIS, the Assisted School Travel Program. When you have department representatives here on Friday, they do have a reform agenda to better utilise the digital technology, the service procurement and the regional coordination model. I think they have seven locations, down from 12, where they are locating people in those areas and empowering them with responsibility. I think it is still in its infancy. I am not sure how it fits in the governance structure of giving them effective control and allocation of resources, because the dollar component is still subject to other jurisdictions. I think Terry Lee-Williams is the person in Transport charged with looking at this reform. The department is fairly advanced in trying to reorganise what was a regional transport coordinator role.

**Ms SIMMONDS:** From my experience with the former regional transport coordinators—I think they are now called regional managers—they did not just concentrate on community transport. They were across most other transport modes in the regions, but there was not much outcome seen from the work that they did. Small projects, small bits of money going here and there, not necessarily to transport organisations, not to the taxis, not to community transport services—an effort was made to have some integration but it did not work. I have doubts that the new system will work as well. I think it might just be reinventing the wheel that did not turn anyway.

**The CHAIR:** I am interested in why it did not work and what we can do to make it work. Is there value in having those positions or those roles?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** I think it is a bigger job than seven individuals can do. I think it is a much bigger job and it needs a whole-of-government approach to it.

**The CHAIR:** It is at a whole-of-government policy level.

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Yes, it is huge. There are so many resources out there in the community that are not owned by transport organisations. Because they are private organisations or not-for-profit organisations they have no requirement to share resources with anybody else. It is up to individuals and the managers of those organisations to work with other organisations in the community to get a good outcome for the community. But quite often that does not happen.

**Mr MELLISH:** I agree. I think that the number of resources for one or two people per region does not match the task that is really expected.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** And the seniority as well. With no disrespect to individuals concerned, the fact is that the dollar amount involved in the procurement right across New South Wales is quite a significant amount. The person who is responsible, if this is to work as I understand it is intended to work, has to be of sufficient seniority and reporting at very high levels with the capacity to properly procure services. They will be within the framework of the policy that has been established, within existing bus contracts or other funding programs, but capacity to deliver is one of the reasons why the previous regime perhaps was not as successful as it was expected to be. With no disrespect to the individuals concerned, I think they were a bit out on a limb, a little bit isolated and operating a bit remotely from head office.

**Mr MELLISH:** If I can add, one of the key planks of the reforms going forward is the Government's intention to look at the service planning criteria, so how services are planned as well as how they are delivered. After the Long Term Transport Master Plan and the Sydney Bus Futures Plan there are now a series of regional transport plans that are applicable in country areas, but they are being changed. There is a new dynamic being developed within a different department to the contract area for designing services. So it is probably worth getting someone to give you an update on where the service design is up to, not just service delivery.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Ms Simmonds, in terms of the funding changes for the NDIS that may affect the community transport sector, what support has the sector been given in budgeting and planning? I imagine it is a completely different shift for a lot of the providers.

**Ms SIMMONDS:** As far as community transport services providers are concerned there has been transition funding through the Transition Assistance Program [TAP] through Ageing, Disability and Home Care [ADHC] that has recently come out up to \$35,000 per organisation. There has been the National Disability Services [NDS], another transition funding program that was available last year, or the year before. There has been support from NDS officers in the field. So there has been some support given to community transport service providers. The difficulty with the NDIS is transport planning by individuals or their caseworkers who hold the funding. Once people get individualised funding the cost of transport has often been overlooked before.

When money was coming from somewhere else and these individuals did not have to see it come out of their own package, it has been a really difficult problem that individuals were underestimating the cost of their transport; their packages will have no money left in it for their transport. They turn to community transport and say, "We need transport. We won't be able to get to our doctors' appointments. We won't be able to go shopping, whatever." And they are expecting community transport service providers to provide the services from other funding such as the Commonwealth Home Support Program or Community Transport Program, neither of which these individuals are eligible for because they have their own funding already and it would be double dipping.

There is a real problem and this will happen with senior Australians as well once individualised funding comes in. There is a real problem with planning about how they are going to use their own aged care package funding or their NDIS package funding. We are seeing it over and over again. As yet we have no solutions except for education and information to individuals and disability service providers.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** I imagine the complaints would go directly to the community transport operators even though you are stuck in the middle of this.

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Yes, they do. We do get complaints when people realise that they have to pay what we call full cost recovery because it is no longer subsidised transport. Then it is big shock to people who are unaware of the true cost of transport, which is quite a lot. I think my colleagues would agree on that.

**Mr MELLISH:** Yes.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** Yes.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** The Committee has heard about community transport operators who work really well and some who do not necessarily work well. What support does the sector need to help coordinate services?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Recently Transport for NSW started rolling out the Centralised Transport Allocation and Booking System [CTABS] which is the software platform that everybody will be required to use. It will unify the sector a bit. As far as working with other neighbouring organisations—are you looking at that?

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Yes.

**Ms SIMMONDS:** I have not seen many problems in rural and regional New South Wales. Those issues as far as I have seen occur in metropolitan and highly populated areas. I do not have any particular examples of that happening in rural and regional New South Wales. If it did I would say that they need to speak to the community transport organisation to have a bit of mediation happening there.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Is that service offered?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Absolutely we would offer that, yes we can do that. But I am not aware of any particular ones that have happened.

**Mr WILKINS:** Most of the country and rural towns have a fairly good working relationship with their community transport groups. There is talk now through Terry Lee-Williams that there will be sub-contracts offered to the taxi industry in most of those regions with their community transport group in the town. We

would encourage all of our members to have good working relationships. There has been, for the want of a better word, a bit of empire building over the years but in most cases now we have got a situation whereby the community transport groups are working—pretty well in taxis likewise—fairly well with the individual towns or regions that they are in.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** I understand that CTP insurance could be an incentive to support the taxi industry and that is across the board, not just in rural and regional New South Wales. In your view what incentives could be put in place to get drivers into rural and regional centres? Obviously you spoke of the one-taxi town and we need more taxis, particularly disability accessible taxis, in those areas. Apart from insurance, because that is something that for an existing operator is a big thing, but potentially for new operators or relocating operators from metropolitan areas where there may have been a drop of business into rural and regional centres, what other incentives will be needed in that area?

**Mr WILKINS:** We need to be able to be competitive in the market for bidding for government work, whether it be NDIS, non-ambulance patient transport and that sort of thing. We have got training programs going now for our drivers so that we can get them up a little in their training and competencies so that in fact these people, without the need for a carer, will be able to handle people who are not actually on a stretcher and can travel in a vehicle. That is probably the most important thing. The other thing, of course, is many of the small towns are dying on the vine because if you take away that school run, or the government work, there is not sufficient funds there.

Fifteen per cent of the cost of operating a taxi is insurances alone, and then you put your fuel costs on top of that and your drivers' 50 per cent on top of that and it does not leave very much fat at the end of the trip. In fact to make it more competitive the driver needs to be able to earn more money. In small country towns if it is not there, or they are trying to put too many slices in the cake because there is a bus operator, a community transport operator and every club has got their own courtesy bus, it does not leave very much. That is why a lot of these small towns, I mentioned a couple before, do not have them because they have gone broke, they could not survive. It is very important.

That is why we always have these programs of training for the drivers. We have got a voluntary code of conduct coming up so that any of our drivers, unless they undertake the voluntary code of conduct program, will not be able to either be bidding if they are an operator or driving as a driver to do that type of work with Veteran Affairs or whatever you like. We are saying, "This is the standard we want you at. If you can't get to that standard then I am sorry there is no work for you."

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** I might also add to that, that a key aspect of the Government's point to point reforms which we have supported is the incentives that have been increased and improved for wheelchair access for taxis. So there has been an increase in the subsidy, which is long overdue for people on the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme. There have also been increased incentives for drivers to offset the cost of the additional time taken to perform that work. There has been an increase in the interest-free loan and licences. There is no licence cost associated with a wheelchair accessible taxi.

What I would flag is that we have asked the Government, specifically Transport for NSW, to make sure that the allocation of those loans, incentives and free licences go to places of greatest need. What we are seeing starting to emerge is the market responding, in my view in an unintended way, where those incentives are actually going to towns which already have a high supply of wheelchair accessible taxis. I think there is a risk of market failure here, and we need to ensure that Government has positive oversight of the wheelchair incentive allocations so that we do not see a disproportionate allocation elsewhere, in areas of lower need.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** I have a question for everyone. Many elderly, disadvantaged or people with disability can deal with isolation. What is closest to them is their companion animal. Sometimes they need to travel with their companion animal. What are the policies in terms of companion animals for your modes of transport, across the different methods, and how could that be improved?

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** I can open the batting on that question. We have had a long association with Guide Dogs NSW/ACT in the training of our drivers for the acceptance of people with assistance animals. They must be taken; there can be no discrimination in that respect. We have been working very hard with that organisation and also with Vision Impairment Australia on the types of services that we can provide.

I have been involved with it. As an industry we have sponsored two guide dogs through their program, courtesy of the generosity of our drivers and others. It is a very positive aspect of our program, and we continue to work on that. Given the cultural diversity in our industry we need to educate and inform many of our drivers about the appropriate way of assisting people with guide dogs and assistance animals.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** Can you answer that in terms of the companion animals of people who are not vision impaired but who need to go to the vet or to travel with their dog or cat to an appointment et cetera.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** There is some ambiguity in that area. I think it would be fair to say—Brian might wish to comment further on this—that in a country town, particularly a small country town, the taxi owners, operators and drivers know the community very well, so there is an empathy and affinity. Whilst I cannot speak about all cases, we find that there are few issues around the transportation of those animals. There are laws that prohibit the carriage of certain animals but in terms of assistance animals we have a very positive attitude.

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Community transport is starting to move further and further towards servicing companion animals. We will always service assistance animals. There is starting to be greater demand. We are working with Legacy at the moment. They have identified that the companion animal issue is growing so we are starting to develop policies and procedures in order to enable people to take those animals to the vet or wherever they need to go. We are starting to look at the types of vehicles that we need in order to be able to carry those, and also the capacity of our vehicles and drivers. That has not been factored into our new software platform—because a companion animal may take up a seat, and we have to factor all of those things. So we will be working with Transport for NSW and RouteMatch Software, which has developed the software to enable us to carry companion animals when necessary.

**Mr MELLISH:** Yes, to guide dogs and yes to assistance animals. With respect to companion animals I think there is still a bit of a policy vacuum, but as far as I know most operators make it happen, just through contact with the people. I would like to add something to supplement what Mr Wakelin-King said. We have an ageing population problem with bus drivers in country areas because we cannot get enough hours for them. It is usually 15 to 20 hours a week—the morning school run and the afternoon school run. We have tried to overlap, where we have used them to drive taxis or community transport, as well. Young people in regional and rural areas need enough hours to be able to sustain themselves. In some cases we cannot give it to them. Working in coordination we may be able to do a better job of getting the hours up so that younger people may be attracted to it.

**Mr WILKINS:** In country New South Wales our industry is crying out for drivers. Over my 20 years in country areas I have used a lot of bus drivers for three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. They are probably some of the best drivers I have ever had. It would be good if we could let the bus industry know they want to encourage younger people to move to country areas. They cannot live on 25 or 30 hours a week; we understand that. We had a meeting as recently as yesterday. It was a meeting of the southern region, which covers the area from Kiama right through to the Victorian border and around via Goulburn and the Wollondilly areas. Every one of the operators there said the same thing: they are having trouble getting drivers.

We are looking for drivers in the age bracket of 35 upwards—35 to 65 or 70—because they are the stayers. I think it would be great if the industry knows about that. One of Mr Mellish's colleagues is in buses and taxis; that is exactly what they do, as well. That is another very good point, with respect to utilisation.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you all very much for appearing. We may write to you with follow-up questions. If we do, are you willing to accept the questions and respond accordingly?

**Ms SIMMONDS:** Yes.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** Certainly.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr WAKELIN-KING:** I have some information which I would like to pass to your Committee. It is our "Is it Dementia?" campaign which we are working on in partnership with Alzheimer's Australia. That is very important in a regional context. We also have information on our work with the Department of Veterans Affairs about assisting people with special needs. We also have Guide Dogs information which we would like to share with your Committee.

**The CHAIR:** Again, thank you all for appearing and for your evidence today for our inquiry.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**HENRY GREENACRE**, Uber City Lead—NSW/ACT, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions about the hearing procedure?

**Mr GREENACRE:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement before we begin with questions?

**Mr GREENACRE:** Yes. Thank you for inviting me, and I appreciate the opportunity to be here today. Uber has welcomed the New South Wales Government's reforms of the point to point transport industry. It has been a thorough reform process, and I acknowledge the bipartisan support this Parliament has shown for ridesharing. New South Wales has led the way here in Australia and globally in this area. I am the general manager of Uber for New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. When I started at Uber two years ago, we were just 12 people. It has been an interesting journey to say the least.

The focus of this inquiry is improving transport for rural and regional communities, with particular a focus on seniors and disadvantaged people. I grew up on a farm near Berry on the New South Wales South Coast. Having grown up outside town and the reach of public transport, I am personally aware of the added difficulty experienced by those living in rural and regional areas. My parents are getting older and their capacity to stay active is dependent on their continued ability to get in to and out of town easily. I am in a very privileged position to work for a company that has the potential to help solve this problem so close to home. I will not tell the Committee that Uber has all the answers to improving transport and accessibility in rural and regional areas, but it is keen to be part of the conversation. Our technology is used in more than 500 cities around the world, and the way it is used varies greatly. However, at its core it is using technology to connect riders and drivers. Many others have spent their careers helping to solve accessibility problems, and we believe that if we are included in the conversation our technology can be part of the solution.

Uber is a very simple concept. You press a button on your smart phone, a request is sent to the closest driver, and the driver arrives to take you where you want to go. As long as you have a full drivers' licence, an exemplary driving record, a good criminal history, and a vehicle that passes a manual inspection, you can be a ridesharing driver in New South Wales. The ease and simplicity of the New South Wales regulatory framework means that the benefits of ridesharing can easily be realised for many. For riders it is about being able to get a safe, reliable and affordable ride from A to B at the push of a button. For drivers it is about being able to access a flexible income using their personal vehicle. We now have 500,000 people in New South Wales catching rides through the Uber platform provided by 13,500 drivers who have partnered with Uber.

Of all the rides available on the UberX platform, a large portion are uberASSIST rides. UberASSIST is our mobility assistance service. It allows riders to request a vehicle on demand that can accommodate folding wheelchairs, walkers and collapsible scooters. The drivers who use the uberASSIST platform have undertaken information sessions on the needs and requirements of people with disability, accessibility and mobility issues. The training module they undertake has been developed in partnership with the Australian Network on Disability. UberASSIST is only one example of how Uber technology can be adjusted and customised to provide different levels of service to different groups and to cater for their different requirements. The whole idea of Uber for a driver is using technology to make better use of cars that sit idle on the side of the road 96 per cent of the time. We believe that the same technology can help to improve the utilisation of existing government- and community-funded accessibility vehicles around the State.

In April this year we launched the app in Newcastle and on the Central Coast. We are actively looking at expanding into other regional centres such as Wollongong and Byron Bay. Since our April launch, 25,000 riders have used the service in Newcastle and on the Central Coast, and 500 drivers are now earning a flexible income on the platform. We have seen huge demand for ridesharing in regional communities across New South Wales, particularly given that many regional centres are under-served by current transport networks. In places like Newcastle and the Central Coast, ridesharing is already helping to alleviate this pressure on existing transport networks. It offers a more affordable and reliable way to get around the local area. Then there are the indirect benefits, such as the boost to local business if it is easier for people to get out and about in regional communities, and the decreased incidence of drink-driving because there is now another option to get home. We are only at the beginning of transforming the point to point transport sector, and we are excited to be helping to solve some of New South Wales' most difficult transport issues using our technology. I am happy to take questions.



**The CHAIR:** You stated in your opening remarks and in your submission that Uber began operating in Newcastle in April this year. You indicate in your submission that you are considering expanding into other regional locations. Would you offer further information to the Committee about where, potentially? Will Uber be found in communities in the Far West of the State? Is there a limit to where these sorts of services can go, given the small population centres and large distances et cetera?

**Mr GREENACRE:** The short answer is no. There is no limit on it. Launching in Newcastle and on the Central Coast meant we needed to provide in-person support for drivers. We were launching in an area where we did not have a physical presence. Once the regulations were in place we worked with Roads and Maritime Services [RMS] to ensure that it could be accessed by people who are not in the Sydney metropolitan area. In the past, in order to get a hire car authority card people had to apply at the Parramatta centre, here in Sydney. We have worked hard with RMS to ensure there is a process in place whereby people can sign up to be an Uber driver without having to physically go to the Parramatta office. That has allowed us to think outside the box about where we go next. We have been trialling this in Newcastle for six months. It is working really well. So, to a certain extent, the sky is the limit. The reliability of the product changes when the population is different. The movement of people, drivers and riders in Newcastle is different from the Central Coast and Sydney. I would imagine it would be different again in much smaller regional centres.

**The CHAIR:** Would you expand on that? How is Newcastle different from the Central Coast and Sydney? How would it then be different in country areas? How would you adapt to make that work, particularly with reference to the more vulnerable people in the community? How would it look in country areas, working with community transport and other organisations?

**Mr GREENACRE:** Sydney, Newcastle and the Central Coast are different parts of the spectrum. In Sydney there is a huge amount of commuter traffic. Every morning drivers are greatly utilised, taking riders into the city. In Newcastle you see much less of that because it is very easy to drive around. People often cycle to work in Newcastle. It is a small community. In places like Newcastle you generally see higher demand at the weekend and people heading out for dinner on Wednesday and Thursday nights. The number of trips during those hours is greater than in Sydney. You see that again on the Central Coast. The important thing to remember about the Central Coast is that drivers do not often envisage earning a full-time income from the platform, particularly in the more rural areas. When they have downtime, they log on when they are sitting at home and then they are able to take rides as soon as the requests come to them. You do not see drivers out and about, trying to pick up rides in the more regional areas. That is what we have seen on the Central Coast.

**The CHAIR:** So, essentially, you respond if there is a cluster of potential drivers in an area. If a group of drivers in Narrabri come to you and say that they want to set up then you facilitate that. Whether they can make a go of it is a judgement call, looking at the loading in the community and whether people would support their services there. Is that how it works?

**Mr GREENACRE:** Exactly. We do not tell drivers when or where to drive. We try to advise them of the best times to drive if they want to earn the most money. It is very important to remember that 50 per cent of drivers, on average, including in Sydney, drive for fewer than 10 hours a week. A common misconception about Uber is that it is full-time. This is not full-time work for a very large proportion of people on the platform. This is part-time work. In places like Newcastle, the Central Coast—and Narrabri, we predict—it is great for schoolteachers who knock off early and want to log on and do a few trips in the evening. They know it will be busy at the weekend, so they earn some extra money then. The part-time element of the income is greater the more regional the area.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** When Uber started in Sydney, my perception of it was that it was really great for the driver who was going to that location anyway. If you were commuting to work you might as well use the space in your car and take someone else and get a few dollars for it. Is that still the normal pattern or do you find drivers are prepared to pick someone up and take that person somewhere else? Is that viable for an Uber driver to do, as it might be for a taxi driver? I mean if the driver was not going there anyway. Is it viable for them to go 20 kilometres out of their way to pick up someone and 20 kilometres back, and then drive another 10 kilometres to get home again?

**Mr GREENACRE:** That is a good question. The make-up of our drivers has not changed a huge amount over the past two years. It is people earning a part-time income, using the technology in their own vehicle. To your point about taking drivers to the right place at the right time, to share the ride, we have just released a feature in the app that means you can tell it where you are going and it will send you dispatches only of people heading in exactly the same direction. I think it means we will see more commuter traffic, where people know where they are going. They are going to the city, they put that into the app and they are more likely

to get a match on their way. As to what you were talking about in the first instance, I think we will see a rise in that, to utilise a part of the technology. We have not had it out there for very long.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** I assumed much of the traffic was already of that sort. I am thinking about Narrabri or Walcha. Say someone lives 25 kilometres out of town and wants to come into town. The Uber driver in town has to go out there and come back again. Is that viable for an Uber driver? Does it pay for them to do that? Will they be reluctant to pick up someone who is a long way away from them?

**Mr GREENACRE:** To a certain degree there needs to be something in it for them to go out of town and pick that person up. Otherwise, they are not going to take that dispatch, as you said. It is a free market.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** I am wondering, therefore, whether it is going to work.

**Mr GREENACRE:** We can make almost anything work in that regard. The Central Coast is moving towards that sort of situation. We call them estimated time of arrivals [ETAs] or dispatches, where the time taken may be above 10 minutes. You see a drop-off in acceptance from drivers. If we expanded into more regional areas such as Narrabri, we would need to look at how we would handle that. We would need an incentive in the app for the driver to drive for 25 minutes out of town to pick a person up. Those are all things we can do in the app already. We have not gone that regional just yet, so we have not encountered that problem.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Thank you.

**Mr ALEX GREENWICH:** My question is about subsidised travel. The cohort that we are dealing with, the disadvantaged, people with disability or the elderly, may have access to taxi vouchers or subsidised community transport. How could government agencies or service providers subsidise or incentivise people on an Uber journey? How would that work? I guess there would be promotional codes rather than taxi vouchers. Are there international examples that you can think of where governments have engaged with Uber in that way to provide that level of transport?

**Mr GREENACRE:** To answer your second question first, yes, there are instances of that in the United States. We have partnered with a number of cities over there to do that type of last-mile transportation. They realised it was cheaper to subsidise Uber transport and provide a more tailored transport solution than to put on empty buses. The last mile is traditionally very expensive. We have seen some solutions to that overseas. I cannot speak to the examples. To your first question, put yourself in the shoes of a rider who has access to the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme [TTSS]. They are faced with deciding between a subsidised product and an unsubsidised product, which is Uber. Generally they are going to take the subsidised product, no matter whether it is the most efficient outcome. The Government currently spends almost \$25 million a year on the TTSS. We think we can help to put that money to very efficient use. We made a recent submission to the Government on running a trial of something that would work in Newcastle. That has not progressed further. We definitely think that given added transparency, the traceability that you have on the Uber platform for making sure that riders are not mistreating the system, we think we can get much more efficient use of the \$25 million a year, whether that is the Government telling us who is on the TTSS platform, and we automatically provide that discount, or the promo code, as you indicated. They are the types of options we would definitely look at.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Henry, when we drove into Walcha a couple of weeks ago, I looked at my Uber app and wondered if there were any UberX available. Not surprisingly, there was not. Are there infrastructure issues around me being an Uber driver if I moved to Walcha? I can pretty much just set up there, can I not?

**Mr GREENACRE:** You need exactly the same accreditation in Walcha as you do—

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** But if I have been running in Sydney, I could move to Walcha and—

**Mr GREENACRE:** Exactly. How this would play out most likely in regional areas is the Tamworth Country Music Festival. You might get a few drivers from the surrounding area head to Tamworth for the country music festival because that is when they know they will get the most business. If the Molong races are on, all the people from Orange will head to Molong to cover the races because that is where they will earn the most money. One of our jobs is educating drivers where to be at the right time so that they can earn the most money. We do that in Sydney, on the Central Coast, in Newcastle, and we do it for regional New South Wales as well.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** I suppose one of the problems for a small town is that you would not be using UberX for regular trips. If Henry is the driver in Walcha and Mrs Frizzle goes to Armidale once a week and she thinks, "This is great. I can use him", you will probably cut out Uber. It would work out that we will sidestep Uber and set up our own little arrangement.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Just go to Uber privately.

**Mr GREENACRE:** Yes.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Yes. That is a disincentive, I suppose.

**Mr GREENACRE:** For Uber?

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Yes.

**Mr GREENACRE:** Those possibilities are now possible after the point to point reform. That is now a perfectly legal enterprise. We can ask drivers not to solicit their own work while on the Uber platform, but when it comes down to it, it has not been raised as a barrier for us to go into regional areas. We hear stories about it happening now and then, but of no serious nature. The thing you have to understand for a driver, and there has been talk of this in Sydney as well, and it might not be the case in regional areas, but if you were so busy on the Uber platform, it is not in your best while to drive halfway across town and pick up Terry because you are getting jobs back to back so quickly that there is not that incentive. How that applies in regional areas, we have not gone there yet. I am not too sure as to how big a problem it would be for us as a business.

**The CHAIR:** Henry, thank you very much for appearing before the inquiry today.

**Mr GREENACRE:** Thank you very much for having me.

**The CHAIR:** We may write to you with additional questions. If we do, you are willing to accept those and respond accordingly?

**Mr GREENACRE:** Yes, sure.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for being here and assisting us with our inquiry.

**Mr GREENACRE:** Thank you.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**DONNA THERESE RYGATE**, Chief Executive, Local Government NSW, sworn and examined

**MARGARET ALEXANDRA KAY**, Strategy Manager, Social and Community, Local Government NSW, affirmed and examined

**LEODELIA SAN JOSE**, Senior Policy Officer, Ageing and Disability, Local Government NSW, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome and thank you for being here today to assist us with our inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Regional and Rural New South Wales. Before beginning the formal proceedings do any of you have any questions about the hearing process today?

**Ms RYGATE:** No, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Does anyone wish to make an opening statement before we proceed to questions?

**Ms RYGATE:** I will make a very brief one. I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this public hearing for the inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged People in Rural and Regional New South Wales. I imagine you all know, and I am quite confident you do, Mr Marshall, that Local Government NSW is the peak organisation for local government in our State. We represent general purpose councils and we also have a number of associate members, including special purpose county councils, Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island, strangely enough, and the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council.

On this really important issue we invited councils to give us some feedback and, in putting together our submission, we got some advice on conversations they had had with their communities and largely anecdotal evidence from them about the challenges that are faced by the communities in rural and regional New South Wales. Local government recognises that people have the right to equal access to public transport and alternative transport in order to remain independent and well connected. We know that public transport is crucial to accessing infrastructure, particularly health and medical services, also education, employment and shopping hubs. The other thing I should say is that we also understand what it is like trying to deliver services in rural and remote communities on constrained budgets and the expectation that the State contribution to the provision of transport can be all things to all people is probably not realistic.

Councils are practical people and we are here to convey that practical view. Our councils in rural and regional New South Wales understand the needs of local residents and they are often called on to fill the gaps in service delivery and that includes meeting transport needs from time to time. In rural New South Wales, older people and people from disadvantaged backgrounds rely more on private cars than other forms of public transport. They face all sorts of barriers. There are issues about lack of drivers licences, whether it has to do with age and impairment, or whether it has to do with the challenges that would be well known to you for Aboriginal people gaining and maintaining licences; costs of owning and running vehicles, particularly when you are travelling over substantial distances; very limited supply of public transport, so access to public transport for everybody is pretty limited and the access to accessible public transport in the sense of people with a disability is even more so. There is a lack of alternative modes of transport. We have also highlighted in our submission the question of the training of transport providers, the staff and their ability to deal with people with a disability in a positive way.

We have made some recommendations in our submission about increasing the frequency, connectivity and number of accessible trains, buses and alternative modes of transport; improving access and the safety of public transport stations, hubs and related infrastructure; providing more annual funding opportunities to councils for specific transport projects; and rolling out relevant training for public and private transport provider staff. We talked in our submission about the balance between automated and human services. Automation is sometimes seen as a panacea but when you are dealing with people who, by virtue of age, disadvantage or disability cannot really take advantage of those automated things, it is not going to be helpful. We also recommended specific pools of funding to address unmet needs.

I think overall we would encourage the Committee to look at what it can do and to look at this question outside the square. What can be done with the transport services that are there and the modes of transport that are available in rural and remote communities? What can be done to get better accessibility outcomes for everybody? In so doing there is a set of questions around what sort of regulatory and other impediments there might be to using those services—for example, there must be something you are able to do about school bus services when they are sitting around in the middle of the day. That has been a live issue for us, which I am happy to talk about if you are interested.

I know our recommendations are much the same as the recommendations that have been made by individual councils that have also made submissions to you. They are talking about more funding for community transport; petrol subsidies; buses in areas of smaller towns; and more frequent and better connections between different types of transport, so feeding into hubs and making that work more effectively. Wheelchair accessibility is a really big issue. I suppose you have to have a cab first before you start worrying about whether it is wheelchair accessible, but if you are the one cab in town, you probably would want to make sure that it is. There is supporting the councils and communities through funding for community vehicles and that sort of thing. With those opening remarks, I will stop and thank you again for giving us the opportunity to come.

**The CHAIR:** In your submission, I think on page 7, you recommend that the criteria for the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme [IPTAAS] be reviewed to improve access to the scheme. Can you expand on that and on how the current transport concessions and funding area could be reformed in the association's view?

**Ms RYGATE:** It is interesting that you should raise that. I will let Ms Kay or Ms San Jose answer that in detail, but in preparing for this week we have had a look at what concessions were available and what the arrangements would be for people in remote communities who did want to access transport at concessional rates. We were somewhat overwhelmed ourselves, I think, by the complexity of the system and we actually had a conversation on the way up here about how we would probably need to be retired to have time to look into it and really understand how it works and what the options might be. I think part of the concessional system has got to do with it being terribly complicated—for example, whether you have to have a particular qualification to obtain a particular concession. The introduction of things like Gold Opal cards is fantastic. We would probably say it could have happened a little sooner, but if you are an elderly person or a person with a disability who does not necessarily access IT very well, you are not necessarily within cooee of a train station or a newsagency where you can get an Opal it is going to make things pretty hard for you. It makes it even more daunting if you want to undertake some sort of big journey. On the specifics, I wonder whether Ms Kay or Ms San Jose would like to comment.

**Ms SAN JOSE:** Councils in general actually do not have much to do with IPTAAS. Basically the councils that contributed feedback to us engaged with their local communities, and some of the feedback might have been when they came across something—

**Ms RYGATE:** I think the concern was about having to make payment up front and then waiting quite some time for the—

**Ms SAN JOSE:** The reimbursement to come.

**Ms RYGATE:** —reimbursement to come. I suppose the kind of logical thing you could do there perhaps is to have some sort of prepay or pay-on-booking or something like that. I know that is difficult because you are giving out money and they may not get on the train, but there has got to be a way around it.

**Ms SAN JOSE:** And make exemptions easy.

**Ms KAY:** Another issue that has been raised with us is about services not allowing people to go back and forward in one day to a medical appointment or hospital. That incurs costs of overnight accommodation and being away from home for a long time. That has been raised quite often by our members in terms of making services allow for that day return.

**Ms RYGATE:** If you are close enough.

**Ms KAY:** If you are close enough, yes.

**The CHAIR:** That is very similar to what we have heard already in evidence. It is clearly something that is a concern all around the place. My second question refers to evidence we have taken in submissions and orally today and that you also mentioned in your opening remarks that, before we consider recommending that government invest even more money in the transport sector for rural and regional areas, we have a thorough examination of ways we can better utilise the assets—and often the latent capacity of those assets—that already exist in country areas. We have already heard many stories of buses that are sitting in sheds at hospitals, MPSs, schools and various other organisations that could be being utilised but, because of the silo mentality, restrictions and rules, are hardly ever used while other services are crying out for more resources. We have had mixed ideas about how and who in the community or an organisation brings all that together. Who is the collection point for all of those transport assets? Who can coordinate where people need to go or what asset needs to be used? What role do you think local government can play—and it may vary—in making maximum use of those assets we already have in the respective communities in country areas?

**Ms RYGATE:** I think that the government agency responsible for that sort of thing probably should be Transport for NSW, because it is charged with having a statewide view of transport provision. It is also responsible for contracting all sorts of different services. Councils, as I said in the introduction, are often called in to fill the gaps where other spheres of government either do not do something or stop doing something that they previously did. We, as the peak organisation for local government, are very conscious of what we term cost-shifting from other spheres of government. We do a survey every couple of years. The last one came out in December and we have data now that the cost shift from State and Federal governments to local government is well above \$600 million a year.

I say that as a sort of preface to saying that if councils were to take on a larger role in doing this sort of coordination and the job of Transport for NSW and its regional offices, we would need to have some means of being able to transfer the resources to do that job properly, either by direct funding or some means of cost recovery. I do not know that cost recovery necessarily lends itself terribly well to this particular issue. Having said that on the basis that this was done not for free and as an additional burden by the already overburdened councils, in some of these places councils are well placed to perform that kind of role because they are the centre of those communities. They are the linchpin. They have that overview as the one bit of government that still exists in these towns and villages. I think that that is a conversation that we would be happy to have, and I am sure we would also find, if we engaged with some of our councils on that, that they would indicate to us that there is already enormous pressure on them to do that sort of thing.

At a statewide level, we have been looking at things like how you can better use school buses, because they seem to be the one bus that goes through most places every day. I have a bunch of emails about this, but I will give you the summary of how we tried to get to the bottom of how that might work. There has been a review recently of rural and regional bus contracts, and the contracts have recently been renewed. There is heavy emphasis on customer outcomes, but of course you have to be a customer before you get outcomes measured in the review. The contracts are for five years with the opportunity of a three-year extension. We have clarified that school services can be used by the public, as long as the passenger does not take the seat of a child, the passenger is suitable to use such a service—that means that they are not intoxicated or aggressive or the sort of person you would not want on a bus with a bunch of kids—and normal fares would apply under those circumstances. It was also suggested that there is nothing to stop school bus operators from offering seats on the bus when they have dropped off the kids and are going back to base.

**The CHAIR:** And they are eligible for the \$2.50 all-day excursion fare.

**Ms RYGATE:** Yes. The situation in their downtime is a bit more complicated. Apparently for a community to use the bus in their downtime as a regular service from one town to another or whatever, it would need to be contracted to Transport for NSW. That is the advice that we have received. That is about ensuring consistency of service, apparently. There would have to be a case made to demonstrate the cost or benefit to the community of instituting such a service, and then Transport for NSW could vary the contract to provide for that service to take place. The other suggestions we had from Transport included that if there was sufficient demand from the community, they could charter the bus and divvy up the cost of chartering the bus. Of course, there is no obligation on the operators to do any of these things, really. It seems like it would be pretty complicated to get some of the stuff off the ground, and that is what led us to the thought that this inquiry is a really good opportunity to understand—and I do not pretend that any of us are experts—the impediments, in terms of the regulatory framework. I imagine that people will tell you, "You cannot do that because of the insurance" and those kinds of things.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we have heard that.

**Ms RYGATE:** I do not know if it is true, but it would be great to find out. This is a real opportunity to try to take a fresh look at these services. The last thing in relation to your question is that it is probably the case that in addition to taking a fresh look there is a need for additional resources. The relative government spend on public transport in rural and regional New South Wales and the metropolitan areas is a little bit too far apart—maybe more than a little bit.

**The CHAIR:** On that point, how would you envisage that being corrected? Should more services be extended to communities that do not have bus or train services? What does that look like from your association's point of view?

**Ms RYGATE:** I think fundamentally it is about more of those services where there is a sufficient market to make those things sensible to do, enough people to make it worthwhile. It is also about providing some funding. For instance, if you have a community transport vehicle, maybe it would be a low-cost solution to have some funding and permission to use that in a different way—it is certainly cheaper than putting on another train.

**Ms KAY:** It is about the flexibility of using existing resources in a more efficient way and being able to take advantage of what is there, but also maybe to build up the capacity of the community in terms of volunteers or community drivers and that type of thing.

**Ms RYGATE:** That is true; that is a real issue. I know the State Government has taken some steps to make it easier for volunteer drivers to get their police checks and that sort of stuff. It is still the case that some additional petrol subsidies and those kinds of things would assist in rural and remote areas, mainly because they are travelling further. Also, they need a little bit more freedom around what it is people could do—if something is a Home and Community Care [HACC] funded service then I understand you have to have a medical appointment to be able to go to it. Am I right about that?

**Ms SAN JOSE:** You do not have to prove that.

**Ms RYGATE:** No, but you have to say that you have a medical appointment. That is okay and it is really important that people are able to access medical appointments—we would not prioritise things above that. But there may well be people with some kind of other important appointment in a neighbouring community, and if we looked at marginal changes to the funding of those HACC-funded vehicles, we could get more people about the place to things that they need to do.

**Ms SAN JOSE:** Some councils have had exposure to regional transport coordinators, and they have had positive experiences. They are really supportive of increasing the funding for those coordinators, and we can really see that position to be in charge of mapping out other community assets including available community vehicles, for example, and brainstorming the solutions with the community partners and stakeholders, be they groups of local councils or disability peak bodies and other support groups such as older people associations. They could map out what is out there and come up with solutions, but because they work for Transport for NSW there needs to be a different perspective on how to approach the issue. There needs to be more flexibility, basically the position being a little more flexible and being allowed to take control and manage some of these issues, and not be held back by rigid policies.

**Ms RYGATE:** There are transport services, then there are health services, then there are disability things—it is a hard mob to wrangle as well.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard similar things from the industry about the transport coordinators and the new iteration of those positions, which is on the way. We will hear more about that on Friday when we have the department appear before us.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** Given there are so many councils all over the State interacting with community transport providers, in particular, can you give me some examples of good practice and smart ideas by some councils that others could perhaps pick up and run with?

**Ms SAN JOSE:** A lot of the rural and regional councils operate their community transport services. In recent years, because of the ageing population, the demand has outstripped the supply, so they are in need of increasing funding for these community transport services. But they are truly a well-tested service that is well respected and enjoyed by their target groups, be they older people or people with disability. On the other hand, you might have councils servicing the needs of people with disability and older people, like Meals on Wheels services, where there might be some transport component involved, so it is basically an add-on or a bonus service that they deliver, be it in the form of paying their bills or taking them shopping. There needs to be buy-in from the community to get volunteers on board and those volunteers need to be acknowledged for their services. It has been very hard to recruit volunteers to service the needs of these disadvantaged groups, but some councils have a very good relationship with their volunteers. They acknowledge their volunteers, say in an end-of-year tea ceremony or they give them awards for 10 years of service or they give them petrol vouchers. Basically there is a whole host of different incentives to recruit and retain these volunteers—and obviously training as well. Some of these volunteers really value training.

**Ms RYGATE:** We would not want to favour any members over any others but I know that we quote in our submission Narrandera, for example, that has a huge number of clients for its community transport service which must suggest that either they are doing something right or at least that there is something going on in Narrandera. If you would like us to ask councils to nominate some examples of good practice and come back to the Committee secretariat we would be very happy to do that.

**Mr KEVIN CONOLLY:** We are certainly looking for ways to improve and make this work better. So if there are some out there the Committee would be happy to hear about them.

**Ms RYGATE:** Yes, we will send them a message that we have been here today so we will be happy to ask them whether they have got particular suggestions.

**The CHAIR:** It will vary from community to community. What works in Narrandera will not work in Narrabri, Broken Hill or Coonamble so it is horses for courses.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Earlier I asked who should be coordinating what the Chair had spoken about. Having come from local government, I understand its capacity to understand communities and know its resources. I am also acutely aware of cost shifting. Will you have a further think about the possible role of local government in coordinating those regional and remote transport services?

**Ms RYGATE:** I think that we would have the same challenges that Transport for NSW has in that there are some services that are public transport services contracted by them or regulated by them that they have some capacity to influence but there are Health-type transport services, disability—I know the world is changing there—transport services. I think part of the problem is, in fact, about the siloes and everybody doing their own thing and not pooling all of the resources together. But I am not sure how local government would achieve a better result unless there was some sort of fundamental change that enabled local government to tell all of the different agencies that either owned or funded different types of services what to do. I understand where you are coming from but I think that that could be something that needed to be considered.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** Perhaps they could have a seat at the table.

**Ms RYGATE:** If you are giving us the job of wrangling these people to get a better result for communities though, Mr Notley-Smith, I think we would need more than a seat at the table. We would need some capacity to get them to do what was in the overall best interests of the community and I am sure that that would lead to many interesting discussions.

**Mr BRUCE NOTLEY-SMITH:** No, that is the sort of answer I wanted to hear.

**The CHAIR:** What if, in this scenario of these new regional transport coordinators or regional transport managers, as I think they are going to be called, they could potentially be empowered to crack the whip, as it were, but would it be of value to have local government, as Mr Notley-Smith suggested, to have a seat at that table? There are things that a regional transport manager will never know about a community that local government intuitively knows. I am thinking particularly of various transport assets, buses in sheds; you have the relationship with the local services club that will probably tell the regional transport manager to go away when they ask to use their bus. But if the council approached them they would say, "When do you want it?" "Do you need a driver?"

**Ms RYGATE:** That is right, or the rugby club or whoever it might be.

**The CHAIR:** For those reasons would there be value in having local government at the table, that does not involve a cost or a responsibility to crack the whip but certainly, as a facilitator, grease the rails to make everything else work?

**Ms RYGATE:** I am confident that local government would want to be at that table. I imagine actually that those sorts of conversations are amongst those that will be had by the new joint organisations [JOs] foreshadowed by the Government as part of the local government reform program. As you would know, they are only going to apply in rural and regional New South Wales. Councils are getting together. They will have a statutory existence and they have got some core functions, one of which is about strategic planning. That does not just mean land use planning, it is actually the big picture strategic planning. One of the other critical functions is about interface with government. The third of the core functions is about advocacy on behalf of their areas.

The sorts of conversations we are talking about are probably ones that may well be had at the joint organisation. What we are hoping as part of the joint organisation process is that government agencies do take it seriously; that they are represented by people of an appropriate level of seniority to be able to make informed comment and to make commitments. That is a part of our position on the JOs as a whole and it is perfectly relevant to this issue. We want to be part of that conversation for sure but we want to be part of more than just a conversation. We would like to be part of getting coordinated government action to make the right things happen.

**The CHAIR:** If regional transport coordinators are to have an ongoing role you would surely see them as having to be of the appropriate seniority within the public service that they can compel some of these silo mentalities to be broken down in that region. There would not be any point having someone at the table that had to go back up the tree three levels to get a message back into that region that the practice has to stop.

**Ms RYGATE:** And then if they contact their counterpart in Health and they tell them to bugger off it will not help terribly well. Yes.



**The CHAIR:** Do you want them to be of a significant level that you can talk to them, they can make a commitment and they are senior enough to make that happen?

**Ms RYGATE:** Yes, there needs to be a whole-of-government perspective.

**The CHAIR:** I was just asking you to confirm what the Committee wanted to hear.

**Ms RYGATE:** I am happy to help.

**The CHAIR:** The Committee secretariat may write to you with additional questions. Would you be willing to accept them and respond within 21 days?

**Ms RYGATE:** Of course. We will do a bit of a trawl for some examples, no problem at all.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 4.42 p.m.)**