



Disability Council NSW

Submission to

Inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and
Disadvantaged people in Rural and Regional NSW

21 July 2016

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Disability Council NSW

The Disability Council NSW (also known as 'the Council') was established under the *Community Welfare Act 1987* (NSW), and was re-constituted under the *Disability Inclusion Act 2014* (NSW) on 3 December 2014. The *Disability Inclusion Act 2014* provides a rights-based legislation framework for the Council.

The Council's main responsibilities under the *Disability Inclusion Act 2014* are to:

- Monitor the implementation of Government policy;
- Advise the Minister on emerging issues relating to people with disability, and about the content and implementation of the NSW State Disability Inclusion Plan and Disability Inclusion Action Plans;
- Advise public authorities about the content and implementation of Disability Inclusion Action Plans;
- Promote the inclusion of people with disability in the community and promote community awareness of matters concerning the interests of people with disability and their families;
- Consult with similar councils and bodies, and people with disability; and
- Conduct research about matters relating to people with disability.

The Council has 12 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson. Each member is appointed for up to four years by the Governor of NSW on the recommendation of the Minister for Disability Services.

Members are selected to be on Council because:

- They live with a disability
- They are an expert on disability
- They want to improve the lives of people with disability.

The Council's members have a variety of disabilities and backgrounds. Members include people from Aboriginal or cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), young people and also people from rural and regional NSW. In addition, the Council includes members who are carers or family members of people with disability.

The Council is funded and resourced by the NSW Government through the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) and is supported by a secretariat team within FACS.

The Council members meet bi-monthly.

Executive Summary

The importance of transport to the citizenship of people with disability cannot be overstated. The ability to get where you need to go is an important part of life for all people, but is particularly important for people with disability in rural and regional NSW. An accessible, reliable and affordable transport system provides opportunities for people with disability to participate in all aspects of society and facilitates much sought after independence and autonomy. Without access to transport, quality of life indicators such as employment, social connectedness, civil and political rights, access to health, and education can be severely restricted.

The possibility of people with disability living life the way they choose to live it, working in paid employment, contributing to society and enriching the diversity of the community is greatly enhanced by a transport system that meets their needs. Better transport for disadvantaged people also means better transport for everyone in rural and regional NSW, and innovative responses to the unique transport needs of each rural or regional community can stimulate both jobs and the economy.

Drawing from the experience of the Council's members and networks, this submission outlines some of the issues relating to the transport needs of people with disability in rural and regional NSW, provides examples to illustrate the accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW and recommends potential strategies to improve access to transport in rural and regional NSW and supports to 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 co-ordination 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
- Additional support to assist with cost of private transport, including fuel

It is clear that the NDIS will not alone solve the systemic problems in access to transport that people with disability in rural and regional NSW face and greater investment in innovative solutions to the issues in access to transport are required. People with disability in rural and regional NSW need a transport system that is accessible, affordable and appropriate to meet their complex and changing needs.

A more co-ordinated response is required, one that meets the diverse needs of different rural and regional areas and the unique challenges each area faces. Local Councils, Transport for NSW and people with disability and their representative organisations all have a role to play in designing and implementing a transport system with a range of innovative and appropriate options that facilitate the greater inclusion and participation of people with disability.

List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Local Councils should engage with people with disability to identify local transport needs and strategies for improving transport as part of their obligations under the *Disability Inclusion Act* to implement Disability Inclusion Action Plans.

Recommendation 2: Introduce more public transport services in rural and regional areas, especially on weekends.

Recommendation 3: Facilitate better co-ordination between town buses, regional coach services and trains in rural and regional areas to increase transport options and opportunities.

Recommendation 4: Engage with people with disability to determine whether any changes to bus stops or routes are required in particular rural or regional communities to better meet their needs.

Recommendation 5: Provide incentives for Local Councils to invest in wheelchair accessible vehicles or vehicles that meet the needs of people with disability in each community that can be shared through a carsharing system (similar to GoGet)

Recommendation 6: Investigate and implement innovative approaches to overcoming barriers to accessing transport options including carsharing apps like Wheeliz that allow ways for people to share vehicles with others who need assistance with transportation.

Recommendation 7: Provide additional subsidies for people with disability in rural and regional areas to assist with the costs of taxis, including services funded by Local Councils similar to the “Council Cab” pilot in Toowoomba.

Recommendation 8: Provide support for the cost of fuel for private transport through a scheme similar to the Country Age Pension Fuel Card in Western Australia.

Introduction

The Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Access to Transport for Seniors and Disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW.

People with disability living in Rural and Regional NSW should have equal opportunities to access a reliable and affordable transport system that meets their needs. This is a right enshrined in article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). For many people with disability living in rural and regional NSW, the lack of accessible, affordable and appropriate transport options means this right has not been upheld. Many of the issues relating to the transport needs of the population of people with disability generally are compounded for people living in rural and regional NSW because of the isolation, lack of availability of services, lower incomes, high cost of essential goods and services and other problems associated with remoteness.

The importance of transport to the citizenship of people with disability cannot be overstated. The ability to get where you need to go is an important part of life for all people, but is particularly important for people with disability in rural and regional NSW. An accessible, reliable and affordable transport system provides opportunities for people with disability to participate in all aspects of society and facilitates much sought after independence and autonomy. Without access to transport, quality of life indicators such as employment, social connectedness, civil and political rights, access to health, and education can be severely restricted. The possibility of people with disability living life the way they choose to live it, working in paid employment, contributing to society and enriching the diversity of the community is greatly enhanced by a transport system that meets their needs.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will contribute to improving access to transport for people with disability but alone will not solve the issues in access to transport that people with disability in rural and regional areas face. The transport infrastructure and supports available at present simply do not allow for the promise of choice and control to be delivered for people with disability in rural and remote areas. A more co-ordinated response is required, one that meets the diverse needs of different rural and regional areas and the unique challenges each area faces. Local Councils, Transport for NSW and people with disability and their representative organisations all have a role to play in designing and implementing a transport system with a range of innovative and appropriate options that facilitate the greater inclusion and participation of people with disability.

Drawing from the experience of the Council's members and networks, this submission outlines some of the issues relating to the transport needs of people with disability in rural and regional NSW, provides examples to illustrate the accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW and recommends potential strategies to improve access to transport in rural and regional NSW and supports to assist with the costs of private transport.

Underscoring the recommendations in this submission is the fundamental need to acknowledge that the value of transport is more than just mobility, it is opportunity. People with disability in rural and regional NSW stand to benefit the most from valuable opportunities such as a job, educational opportunity or health or community service, but are least able to reach them because they have the fewest available transport options available to them. People with disability in rural and regional NSW need a transport system that is accessible, affordable and appropriate to meet their complex and changing needs.

Issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW

The transport needs of people with disability vary greatly between different rural and regional communities as each community has its own geography, demographics, culture and unique challenges. Rural towns and smaller communities may have different issues that affect the access of people with disability to transport to larger regional centres, and it is important to acknowledge this when identifying what issues exist and the best ways to overcome them.

Although each community will have unique issues that affect the access of people with disability to transport, it is apparent that across rural and regional areas of NSW people with disability experience greater transport disadvantage in accessing transport and/or maintaining private transport than people in metropolitan areas. This is caused by a range of intersecting factors typical of rural and regional communities including:

- the need to travel further distances in order to get to services, employment or activities
- poor public transport infrastructure
- isolation
- limited availability of transport services
- higher costs of running private vehicles
- limited availability of taxi services
- higher costs associated with disability, including personal and health care, communications requirements and other services
- lower incomes and fewer employment opportunities
- higher cost of essential goods and services due to higher freight costs and less competition

For many people with disability in rural and regional NSW, the public transport infrastructure and the frequency of services are inadequate to meet their needs. In remote areas, the only transport options for people with disability are school buses, or buses that may not be physically accessible or frequently break down as they are not designed for rural roads. Safety is also compromised because not all buses in rural and regional areas are fitted with security cameras.

Low levels of public transport access and the limited availability of taxis and/or community transport mean that many people feel their only option is to drive a car, creating additional disadvantage for people who do not drive or cannot afford to run a car. In very rural areas, petrol is more expensive, distances between towns can be far and rural roads can cause greater wear and tear leading to higher costs of running a car. The only other alternatives that are available are to rely on family and/or friends or not take the journey at all. This can increase isolation and compromise quality of life by preventing access to services and opportunities for participation in the community.

Another issue is that choice of goods and services for people with disability in rural and regional areas is severely limited by the lack of transport options. People with disability may be “locked in” to a particular service provider or a particular retailer because they cannot travel to benefit from lower prices or a wider variety of services. This limited choice can significantly affect the autonomy, independence and control a person has over their life and is in direct opposition to the principles of choice and control that underpin the National

Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). It is likely that many people with disability in rural and regional NSW will be disadvantaged and may not enjoy the benefits of the NDIS to the same extent as people in metropolitan areas because of the limitations on exercising choice that a lack of transport options can impose.

There is currently a lack of data on the specific transport needs of people with disability in different rural and regional communities. This indicates that there is a need for Local Councils to engage with people with disability at a local level and find out their transport needs and what kinds of strategies or supports would satisfy those needs. People with disability are the experts in the lived experience of accessing transport in rural and regional NSW and must be provided with a range of opportunities to express their needs and suggestions for improved access to transport.

Recommendation 1: Local Councils should engage with people with disability to identify local transport needs and strategies for improving transport as part of their obligations under the Disability Inclusion Act to implement Disability Inclusion Action Plans.

Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW

The current accessibility of public transport services in rural and regional NSW is poor for a number of reasons, including:

- the limited frequencies of services
- limited availability of weekend services
- the shorter span of hours where services are available
- lack of timetable coordination between town buses, regional coach services and trains
- lack of connections between regional locations as the focus is on travelling to and from Sydney

The below example of the experience of Disability Council Member Paul Zeller highlights a number of issues relating to access to transport in rural and regional NSW and in particular the limited accessibility of current public transport services.

Case study: Disability Council Member Paul Zeller

Paul lives in Merimbula, Over 18,000 people live within a 10km radius of the Merimbula town centre. Paul has a driver's licence but as a person with a low income on a disability support pension cannot afford to buy and maintain a car. Paul chooses to live by himself and has done so for a few years.

On weekdays, there are 5 buses a day that go from Eden to Bega that run through Merimbula, and 5 buses a day that go from Bega to Eden that run through Merimbula. On Saturdays there are usually only 2 buses that go from Eden to Bega or Bega to Eden, and on Sunday there are no buses. There are also 2 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 24km North East of Merimbula, are not serviced by buses at all. There are only about 4 taxis Merimbula, but at any one time on weekdays there are usually only 2 in operation, and taxis generally don't 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. Paul usually has to wait at least half an hour for a taxi to take him to or from the airport so tries to get a lift with friends rather than wait for the taxi.

If Paul wants to go to the shops on a Sunday, he has to ask a friend to drive him. If he has to go to hospital on a Sunday, he would 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.

For Paul, the limited access to Public transport means he is reliant on friends to drive him to and from the places he needs to get to. Paul lives alone and his lack of mobility means he sometimes feels isolated and unable to interact with friends, especially on Sundays when there is no way to leave the house unless he walks or relies on the goodwill of friends.

Potential strategies to improve access to transport in rural and regional NSW

A “one-size fits all” approach to addressing the transport needs of people with disability in rural and regional areas is not appropriate given that each rural or regional community has its own unique challenges and characteristics that affects who does or might use public transport, their needs and how they may change in the future. This confirms the importance of local engagement with people with disability to determine how local needs can best be met.

Two strategies that are likely to work in many rural and regional areas are the introduction of more services, especially on weekends, and the better co-ordination between town buses, regional coach services and trains. These strategies are likely to contribute to addressing the problems of a lack of access to public transport; however, in some communities there may also be a need to consider changes to bus stops or routes to better meet the needs of people with disability in those communities.

Accessibility is not only about physical infrastructure; it is also about good customer service and awareness of staff of the needs of people with disability. The roll out of disability awareness training for public transport staff in rural and regional NSW may contribute to more positive and accessible transport experiences for people with disability. Similarly, the continued commitment to staffing rural and regional train stations and key bus interchanges will ensure people with disability have access to the assistance they need to use public transport.

Another potential strategy to improve access to transport in rural and regional NSW is the introduction of more carsharing facilities in rural and regional areas that allow people to have access to cars when they need them for a small fee instead of the ongoing maintenance and running costs. The [recent accessible vehicle pilot for GoGet](#) which locates a fully wheelchair accessible vehicle at a hospital for the use of all GoGet members is a good example of an innovative way to overcome one of the issues people with disability face in access to transport.¹ If it meets their needs of their rural or regional community, Local Councils could invest in an accessible vehicle that can be shared as a way of increasing transport options for community members with disability.

A variation of this is the [Wheeliz App](#) a carsharing app currently available in France.² This 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 to €60 (\$72 to \$87 AUD). Wheeliz takes a 30% commission and provides insurance. Investigating carsharing options like Wheeliz is an innovative approach to improving access to transport options and could be particularly useful in larger rural and regional communities.

Recommendation 2: Introduce more public transport services in rural and regional areas, especially on weekends.

¹ GoGet (2016) *Carshare for everyone*, available at <https://www.goget.com.au/accessible-vehicle/>

² Mashable (2015) *How one Paris startup is becoming an Uber for people with disabilities*, available at <http://mashable.com/2015/10/04/wheeliz-car-sharing-disabilities/#aXF0.HS1Hugz>

Recommendation 3: Facilitate better co-ordination between town buses, regional coach services and trains in rural and regional areas to increase transport options and opportunities.

Recommendation 4: Engage with people with disability to determine whether any changes to bus stops or routes are require in particular rural or regional communities to better meet their needs.

Recommendation 5: Provide incentives for Local Councils to invest in wheelchair accessible vehicles or vehicles that meet the needs of people with disability in each community that can be shared through a carsharing system (similar to GoGet)

Recommendation 6: Investigate innovative approaches to overcoming barriers to accessing transport options including carsharing apps like Wheeliz that allow ways for people to share vehicles with others who need assistance with transportation.

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

Where public transport is unavailable or unable to meet the needs of people with disability, there are a number of supports that can assist people with disability with the cost of private transport.

The Disability Council welcomes the recent [increase to the maximum subsidy under the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme](#)³ but notes that for people in rural and regional areas \$60 per trip may still not be enough to cover the cost of necessary trips due to the distance and isolation of some communities. Additional 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.⁴ 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 return. Eligible people can pre-book the service that is run by a local taxi operator, and each service area of the Council Cab 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 rural and regional communities, another possible support that can assist with the costs of private transport is a fuel card. In Western Australia, the [Country Age Pension Fuel Card](#).⁵ 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 live in non-metropolitan areas and 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 that may drive them and increase their access to inclusion and participation in the community.

Recommendation 7: Provide additional subsidies for people with disability in rural and regional areas to assist with the costs of taxis, including services funded by Local Councils similar to the “Council Cab” pilot in Toowoomba.

Recommendation 8: Provide support for the cost of fuel for private transport through a scheme similar to the Country Age Pension Fuel Card in Western Australia.

³ Transport for NSW (2016) *Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS)*, available at <http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/customers/taxis/ttss>

⁴ The Chronicle (2015) *Council launches \$2 cab service for needy residents*, available at <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/council-trials-new-taxi-service/2805674/>

⁵ Government of Western Australia (2014) *Country Age Pension Fuel Card*, available at <http://www.drd.wa.gov.au/projects/Roads-and-Transport/Pages/Country-Age-Pension-Fuel-Card.aspx>

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