



Council of Social Service of New South Wales

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23 April 2013

Disability Transport Access Secretariat
Department of Infrastructure and Transport
GPO 594
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Sir/Madam,

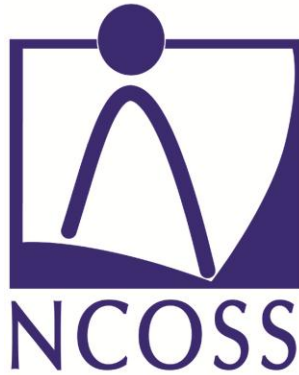
Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the 2012 Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (Transport Standards). We hope that our submission will assist the Review process.

NCOSS looks forward to further engagement in the Review, including participating at your public hearing in Sydney later this year.

If your secretariat has any questions regarding our submission, or would like to discuss further, please contact Robyn Edwards, Senior Policy Officer on 9211 2599 ext. 128 or robyn@ncoss.org.au

Yours sincerely

Alison Peters
Director



Submission to the

**2012 Review of the Disability Standards for
Accessible Public Transport
(Transport Standards)**

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About NCOSS

The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) is the peak body for the non-government community services sector in NSW.

NCOSS has a vision of a society where there is social and economic equity, based on cooperation, participation, sustainability and respect. NCOSS works with its members on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities towards achieving this vision in New South Wales.

Established in 1935, NCOSS is part of a national network of Councils of Social Service, which operate in each State and Territory and at the national level.

NCOSS membership is composed of community organisations and interested individuals. Member organisations are diverse including unfunded self-help groups, children's services, registered training authorities, emergency relief agencies, chronic illness and community care organisations, family support agencies, housing and homelessness services, mental health, alcohol and other drug organisations, local indigenous community organisations, church groups, peak organisations and a range of population-specific consumer advocacy agencies.

Recommendations

1. That accessibility be framed and actioned *across* the integrated CityRail network, rather than only on individual stations and individual infrastructure upgrades.
2. That Transport for NSW continues to provide, update and improve hard copy information about the transport network, including timetables and accessibility maps.
3. Given that Transport for NSW has not met the Transport Standards compliance target of 55% of stations achieving accessible status, NCOSS argues that further station upgrades are required as a matter of urgency, with priority given in the first instance to Redfern Station.
4. That the presence of transport staff at train stations and bus interchanges be considered integral to the implementation of the Transport Standards and critical to improving the 'whole of journey' experience of people with disability. NCOSS recommends that current staffing levels on trains, stations and bus interchanges be maintained.
5. That the exemptions applying to School Buses and Community Transport organisations be removed, and every effort made by Commonwealth and State Governments (including funds and provision of accessible vehicles) to assist providers to comply with the Standards. Any removal of exemptions needs to be made hand-in-hand with timely compliance periods.
6. That a package of strategies to implement the Standards be developed, including powers for the Australian Human Rights Commissioners to bring complaints before the courts on behalf of people with disability.

Introduction

This NCOSS submission aims to contribute to the current Commonwealth Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (Transport Standards). The broad purpose of the Standards, which were introduced in 2002, is to enable transport operators and providers to remove disability discrimination from public transport services. Target dates for compliance are clearly prescribed by the Standards. The Standards requires the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, in consultation with the Attorney-General, to review their efficiency and effectiveness within five years of taking effect, with subsequent reviews every five years. The first review was conducted in 2007, followed now by this 2012 review.

In preparing our submission, NCOSS has consulted with a number of disability and advocacy organisations and attended stakeholder forums aimed at examining NSW responses to the Standards. NCOSS has a history of working across the policy areas of transport, disability and community care in NSW, and this cross-sectoral understanding is reflected in our submission.

We have responded to the questions (as outlined in the Issues Paper¹) for people with a disability, their representative organisations and the community generally. Our submission is structured around these questions.

1. Has your accessibility to public transport improved since the commencement of the first Transport Standards review in 2007?

- *How has your accessibility to conveyances (eg trains, buses and coaches, trams, ferries, wheelchair accessible taxis and aircraft) changed? Can you provide examples?*

NCOSS considers that physical accessibility to public transport, at least in Sydney, has improved since the commencement of the Transport Standards (2002)² and Review in 2007. However, public transport in rural and regional areas is often not available, with the possible exception of the school bus which is exempt from complying with the Standards. While taxis may have wheelchair accessibility, they are often not affordable for people with disability in NSW, even with the Taxi Transport subsidy. Therefore, NCOSS considers that accessibility needs to be examined within a wider context of availability and affordability of public transport (including taxis).

The NSW Transport Access Program has provided upgrades to a number of train stations across the CityRail network, with a focus on providing accessibility for people with disability. NCOSS supports the work of this Program and argues it needs to be funded and rolled out as a matter of priority. One example of a station which underwent a major upgrade as part of the Transport Access Program is Newtown station (inner Sydney suburb). NCOSS recently carried out an accessibility audit of Newtown station after the upgrade. We identified the following accessibility features: disability access is provided through level walkways, lift, wheelchair

¹ Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Transport (2012), *Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (Transport Standards), Issues Paper*, Canberra

² Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*, Canberra

accessible toilet, audio announcements on platforms and tactile markers; safe access is provided by good universal design and lighting; public access is facilitated by excellent signage and a help point. The audit also identified the presence and visibility of transport staff at the station. This is critical; people with disability say that their interactions with staff can help to make their journeys accessible. The result of the Newtown upgrade is a transformation of a busy urban space which benefits all rail passengers, including people with disability.

Feedback provided directly to NCOSS by passengers at Newtown station shows how the accessibility features (in particular the level walkways and lift) are assisting people to access the station and trains. For example we spoke with a woman in a wheelchair commuting to work by train. Before the upgrade at Newtown she was physically unable to access the platform and had to catch taxis to and from her workplace. She said that the upgrade and access has significantly improved her working life. She also told us that the lift was 'always working', something not always evident across the network. We also spoke with a young man with an intellectual disability, who proudly told us that he uses the trains a lot, likes the new station and finds it is a safe place. From conducting over 70 short interviews with passengers at Newtown station, during the morning and afternoon periods, NCOSS concludes that disability access is a mainstream issue which positively impacts all transport users. With only a couple of exceptions, all passengers (whether they had a disability or not) provided very positive feedback about the upgrade and how it had improved their travel. Many passengers noted (without being prompted) that the upgrade helped people with disability access the station now. For example, passengers said that people in wheelchairs could get down to the platform now because of the level walkways and lift, there were audio announcements on the platform for vision-impaired people, and non-slip surfaces for older people with mobility difficulties. We felt that passengers were developing positive understandings and awareness of disability, through their experience of the upgrade.

While individual stations on the CityRail network have benefited significantly from upgrades and from the funding provided through the Transport Access Program, other stations on the network remain with old and inaccessible infrastructure and steep steps rather than easy access ramps and lifts. Meaning that while a person using a wheelchair may be able to board the train at Newtown, there will be many stations where they are prohibited from getting off, for example busy Redfern station where there are no lifts or ramps.

NCOSS supports the work being carried out through the Transport Access Program, and Newtown station is an excellent example of an upgrade and station transformation which should increase patronage by people with disability. However, accessibility may need to be framed and actioned across the integrated network, rather than focused on individual stations. This would respond to the need for 'whole of journey' accessibility, as raised by the Allen Consulting Group in their report on the last Transport Standards Review³.

³ Allen Consulting Group (2009), *Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport*, Final Report to the Commonwealth Government

Recommendation: That accessibility be framed and actioned across the integrated CityRail network, rather than only on individual stations and individual infrastructure upgrades.

- *How has your accessibility to information (eg, maps, timetables, announcements, etc) changed? Can you provide examples?*

NCOSS is aware of the innovative NSW 'Wayfinding' project currently being developed by Transport for NSW, which should improve information available for customers to navigate their way around the public transport network. Disability advocates and organisations have provided input to the project on making information accessible to people with vision and hearing impairment.

One concern repeatedly raised by disability advocates is the need for information (for example timetables and network maps) to be available in hard copy as well as on the web. Older people with mobility problems and older people with disability are just two groups who may not have access to the internet or to a computer at home. People dependent on the Disability Support Pension may not have the funds to pay for an internet provider and connection. It is important that transport brochures be freely available at community centres, clubs, neighbourhood centres, councils and libraries, and other places where older people visit. Having a hard copy timetable at home or in your bag may be a good way to improve an individual's patronage of buses and trains.

Rail passengers NCOSS interviewed at Newtown Station noted the excellent and clear signage, screens with real time information about the next trains and audio announcements on platforms. We were pleased to see a stand at the ticket barrier with hard copy brochures for passengers to take, providing information on 'safe travel', 'travelling with a pram', and 'Family Funday Sunday'.

Recommendation: That Transport for NSW continues to provide, update and improve hard copy information about the transport network, including timetables and accessibility maps.

- *How has your accessibility to infrastructure immediate to boarding a conveyance changed? (eg, any structure or facility that is used by passengers in conjunction with travelling on a public transport service). Can you provide examples?*

NCOSS argues that the provision of working lifts at train stations is critical to ensuring people dependent on wheelchairs and people with mobility problems are able to access the train system. For example Redfern station, the sixth busiest on the CityRail network and an important interchange station, is not accessible because it does not have lifts to any of its 12 platforms. NCOSS (along with 11,000 petitioners to the State Government) supports the 'Lift Redfern' campaign to upgrade the station and provide lifts. As stated on the Lift Redfern website <http://liftredfernstation.wordpress.com/>

'People with disabilities, older people, parents with young children, pregnant women, people with short term mobility issues through illness or injury, and people with luggage or shopping have great difficulty in accessing or cannot access the Station as there are no lifts to any platform'.

Responding to transport disadvantage needs to be included as one key goal of making public transport accessible for all population groups. This is especially the case in Redfern and neighbouring Waterloo, home to Aboriginal communities and to one of the highest populations of social housing communities many of whom are elderly, frail and suffering from terminal illnesses, relying on public transport to access city hospitals and other medical facilities. Generally, they do not own a car. Redfern Station fails to provide accessibility and respond to transport disadvantage.

Recommendation: Given that Transport for NSW has not met the Transport Standards compliance target of 55% of stations achieving accessible standards, NCOSS argues that further upgrades are required as a matter of urgency, with priority given in the first instance to Redfern Station.

- *What do you currently see as the greatest areas of need with regard to accessibility of public transport for people with disability? Can you provide specific examples?*

NCOSS would like to identify the three areas of bus-stop infrastructure, the NSW Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme and the presence of transport staff at stations and bus interchanges across the network.

Bus-stop infrastructure

NCOSS would again like to highlight the need for accessible bus-stop infrastructure in NSW, and in particular across the Sydney metropolitan area. People with physical disability, in particular people using wheelchairs and older people with mobility problems, may be able to board a bus which is wheelchair accessible and has a low floor. There have been significant improvements in making buses wheelchair accessible. However, getting off a bus where the bus-stop is inaccessible due to an absence of curbing can defeat the purpose of having a bus which is wheelchair accessible. Again the focus needs to be placed on an integrated and accessible public transport network, where both getting on and getting off are equally possible and equally important components of the journey.

NSW Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme

Some people with a disability, in particular people with a severe physical disability and confined to a wheelchair, have informed NCOSS that they are dependent on taxis in order to travel to work, family or social activities, health appointments or job interviews. In order to access taxis, they need to be not just wheelchair accessible, but also affordable. In NSW, the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) provides a very inadequate subsidy for people with disability eligible to join the scheme: 50% towards the cost of the taxi journey, with a \$30 cap. NCOSS has joined with many disability advocates in NSW seeking for the cap to be raised to \$60 per journey, and the percentage raised to 75%. Other States provide a much more generous scheme. For example Victoria doubled the cap for their equivalent scheme from \$30 to \$60 in 2008, while SA and WA have increased the level of subsidy available to wheelchair users from 50% to 75%. An increase to the subsidy is overdue; the last time it was increased was in 1999, and only by \$5.00.

A survey of 117 people using the TTSS (December 2012 – January 2013), conducted by advocacy organisations in NSW including the Northern Rivers Social Development Council and NCOSS, found:

- 'The subsidy is too low and does not enable people with disability to travel to employment, health and medical appointments or social and recreational activities.
- Taxis were the only transport option for approximately one third of the survey respondents.
- Taxis provide a level of independence which people with disability value, rather than having to always rely on family and friends who may not be available.
- People with disability are rationing and limiting their travel, and hence participation and inclusion in wider society, because the cost of taxis, even with the TTSS, is prohibitive⁴.

Need for transport staff on train stations and bus interchanges

At a public forum held at Parliament House in Sydney on 15 March 2013, to consider the State Government's Disability Action Plan (2012 – 2017)⁵, people with disability spoke about their need to have 'journeys which were quick, safe, comfortable and dignified'. People said their journeys were often 'undignified'. They spoke about the need to have transport staff available at train stations, and for bus drivers to be respectful and helpful towards wheelchair users. Often it was positive interactions with transport staff which made all the difference. A young man with an intellectual disability spoke about how he used public transport a lot because he didn't have a car or driver's licence. He spoke about the need for staff to be present at stations and transport interchanges. He said that people like him with an intellectual disability were scared they might get attacked or abused by other passengers, because of their disability, especially at night.

During our visits to Newtown Station, NCOSS was impressed with the high visibility and general helpfulness of station staff, including the station manager. Staff were visible at the ticket office, the ticket barricades, and on the station itself. Many of the passengers we interviewed said this helped to make the station safer, gave them a sense of confidence in using the CityRail system, and that having staff available if passengers had questions about their trip was very helpful. One woman described how the old Newtown station was 'creepy' and 'unsafe' and how you never saw any staff at the station.

However, Newtown is not typical of other stations across the network. Instead the reality of unattended stations, removal of station managers from busy stations and concerns that RailCorp is wanting 'to get rid of guards', creates many potential problems for the travelling public. The basic question needs to be answered to make the Transport Standards work: Who will be at the station to put the ramp up/down for a person travelling in a wheelchair who wants to get on, and then off, a train? There is a role for both train guard and station staff in facilitating access.

Recommendation: That the presence of transport staff at train stations and bus interchanges be considered integral to the implementation of the Transport Standards and critical to improving the 'whole of journey' experience of people with disability. NCOSS recommends that current staffing levels on trains, stations and bus interchanges be maintained.

⁴ Northern Rivers Social Development Council (2013), *TTSS: The Shrinking Circle, Report on a survey of NSW Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme*, NRSDC

⁵ Transport for NSW (2012), *Disability Action Plan 2012 – 2017*, NSW Government, Sydney

2. *As a public transport user, are there areas of the Transport Standards where you consider that a more specific requirement for compliance would improve accessibility?*

NCOSS has no comment to make on this question.

3. ***To what extent do you feel that the requirements in the Transport Standards address all of the accessibility requirements for people with a disability? Are there gaps in the coverage of requirements?***

NCOSS argues that two big gaps in coverage are those which exempt school buses and Community Transport organisations from complying with the Standards. NCOSS's regional and rural members inform us that there are often no public transport options in their towns, with the exception of the school bus which residents may use to travel into town to do their shopping, go to the bank or attend medical appointments. It is critical that school buses come under the Standards and provide wheelchair accessibility.

Community Transport organisations (CTO) provide personalised 'door to door' rather than 'curb to curb' transport support to younger people with disability and frail older people, under the HACC guidelines. NCOSS argues it is a contradiction that CTOs are exempt from the Standards, given they should be the organisations to model best practice transport provision for people with disability. NCOSS understands that this is a Commonwealth/State funding issue, however does not agree that this is sufficient reason to exempt CTOs from the Standards.

Recommendation: That the exemptions applying to School Buses and Community Transport organisations be removed, and every effort made by Commonwealth and State Governments (including funds and provision of accessible vehicles) to assist providers to comply with the Standards. Any removal of exemptions needs to be made hand-in-hand with timely compliance periods.

4. ***Do you find that the current processes with regard to making a complaint or seeking information are sufficient or sufficiently responsive?***

NCOSS contends that one of the major limitations of the Standards is its reliance on individual complaints for implementation. The current process places the onus on people with disability to bring complaints, rather than the onus being on transport operators and providers to comply with the Standards. Disability advocates have outlined a number of problems in the complaints process, including the length of time it can take for a contested matter to go through the court system, and the potential cost on the individual complainant in terms of time, emotional energy and money. For example, the recent case of Julia Haraksin who complained against Murrays Buses took over three years to resolve through the courts. Ms Haraksin won the case; a significant victory for her and the many people with disability wanting to travel with Murrays, on its busy route from Sydney to Canberra. Murrays are now required to provide for wheelchair accessibility.

We believe it is a serious limitation on the Standards that compliance relies on individual people with disability making complaints. Additional strategies need to be introduced, including the ability for the Australian Human Rights Commissioners themselves to bring cases before the court, on behalf of people with disability. NCOSS considers that a Standards Implementation Project Manager and/or Team, based in each State and Territory, could assist transport agencies and operators to meet the timetable for compliance. Further, there is a role for the

Transport Regulators to enforce compliance, thereby embedding a systemic (rather than individual) response to compliance and making the Standards a mainstream part of transport provision.

Recommendation: That a package of strategies to implement the Standards be developed, including powers for the Australian Human Rights Commissioners to bring complaints before the courts on behalf of people with disability.

5. *As a body representing the views of people with a disability, do you have any specific responses or perspectives with regard to the issues raised in the questions above?*

Other key issues you would like to see addressed?

The NSW Long-Term Transport Master Plan⁶ outlines new transport infrastructure to be built over the next 20 years, including the light rail connecting Sydney CBD with Kingsford's UNSW and Prince of Wales Hospital. The building of new transport infrastructure offers significant potential to improve and enhance accessibility, to employ 'state-of-the-art' technology and innovation, and offer 'seamless access' to people with disability as they board the new light rail conveyance.

In conclusion, the Standards are fixed in time, have lengthy timetables for compliance, and improve accessibility of old infrastructure and conveyances only to an acceptable level. However, it is in the building of new transport infrastructure which provides an excellent opportunity to get things right from the outset, avoid the need for 'catch-up' and expensive retrofitting, and deliver seamless access for people with disability. Such innovation would represent an investment for future generations and provide the independence which people with disability value. Transport is a key enabler for people with disability. Accessible transport enables realisation of the goals of full and effective participation and inclusion in society, as framed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability⁷, to which Australia is a signatory.

⁶ Transport for NSW (2012), *NSW Long Term Transport Master Plan*, NSW Government

⁷ <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

References

Allen Consulting Group (2009), *Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport*, Final Report to the Commonwealth Government

Australian Government Department of Infrastructure and Transport (2012), *2012 Review of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 (Transport Standards), Issues Paper*, Canberra

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