

News from Newtown: NCOSS Transport Project



Council of Social Service of
NCOSS New South Wales

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The Council of Social Service of New South Wales (NCOSS) is the peak body for the social and community services sector in New South Wales. NCOSS works with its membership on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities towards achieving social justice in New South Wales.

NCOSS was established in 1935 to promote cooperation in the provision of community services and influence social legislation. Today our constituents are:

- disadvantaged and low income people and communities in NSW
- our members
- other peak community service agencies in NSW
- service providers
- other agencies working in the social policy and social services field
- individual members interested in social policy and social service issues .

NCOSS provides an independent voice on welfare policy issues and social and economic reforms and is the major co-ordinator for non-government social and community services in NSW.

We act as a channel for consultation with government and between parts of the non-government sector with common interests and diverse functions.

NCOSS is a membership organisation. Members range from the smallest community services to the largest major welfare agencies, state and regional level peak councils, churches, hospitals, local government and consumer groups.

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NCOSS would like to acknowledge and thank the public transport users who participated in the project and provided customer feedback about their experiences of public and community transport.

Thanks go to Newtown Neighbourhood Centre and its two groups, Wrap With Love and the Older Yugoslav group; and to Leichhardt Community Transport and its Marrickville Jetstream bus.

Robyn Edwards (NCOSS Senior Policy Officer) conducted the project with the assistance of Madeleine Cherrington, a student from UTS Social Inquiry Course. NCOSS thanks Madeleine for her excellent work engaging with public transport users and drafting a report on the study's findings.

Copies of the report

The report is available from the NCOSS website:

ncoss.org.au/resources/20130825-newtown-transport.pdf

If you would like a hard copy please contact NCOSS:

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Photos and posts about the Newtown project also appear on the All Aboard NSW Facebook page: www.facebook.com/allaboardnsw

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NCOSS considers that this small project could be effectively replicated in other areas of Sydney. Please feel free to contact NCOSS for advice.

Executive Summary

The Council of Social Service of New South Wales (NCOSS) report discusses findings from a small qualitative study exploring public and community transport use in the inner Sydney suburb of Newtown and its surrounds. The study had a focus on accessible public transport and linked with the 'All Aboard NSW' social media campaign.

A total of 137 public and community transport passengers participated in the study; 68 rail passengers at Newtown Station, 51 participants of Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) and 18 Community Transport passengers on the Marrickville Jetstream. They were asked questions relating to the physical upgrade at Newtown station, accessibility, disability, social inclusion, safety and their experiences as consumers of public and community transport.

Responses from the study's participants about the recent upgrade of Newtown Station were very positive, identifying improved elements of accessibility, safety, and information. There was an emphasis on the station's newly installed lift; respondents said the lift had improved access for people with disability (especially people in wheelchairs), older people with mobility limitations, and parents with young children and prams. Focus groups conducted at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre identified a range of issues with bus usage, including criticism directed at the unreliability of buses within Newtown and surrounding areas. Participants were also critical of some bus driver behaviour, commenting on lack of courtesy and unwillingness to assist patrons. Other feedback affirmed the importance of transport for social inclusion, as well as fostering independence for older users of public transport. Social inclusion and independence were key themes raised by Community Transport passengers. Interviews conducted on board the Marrickville Jetstream showed there are many barriers to using public transport for older people with limited mobility and/or health issues. Community Transport fills an important gap and niche for this population group.

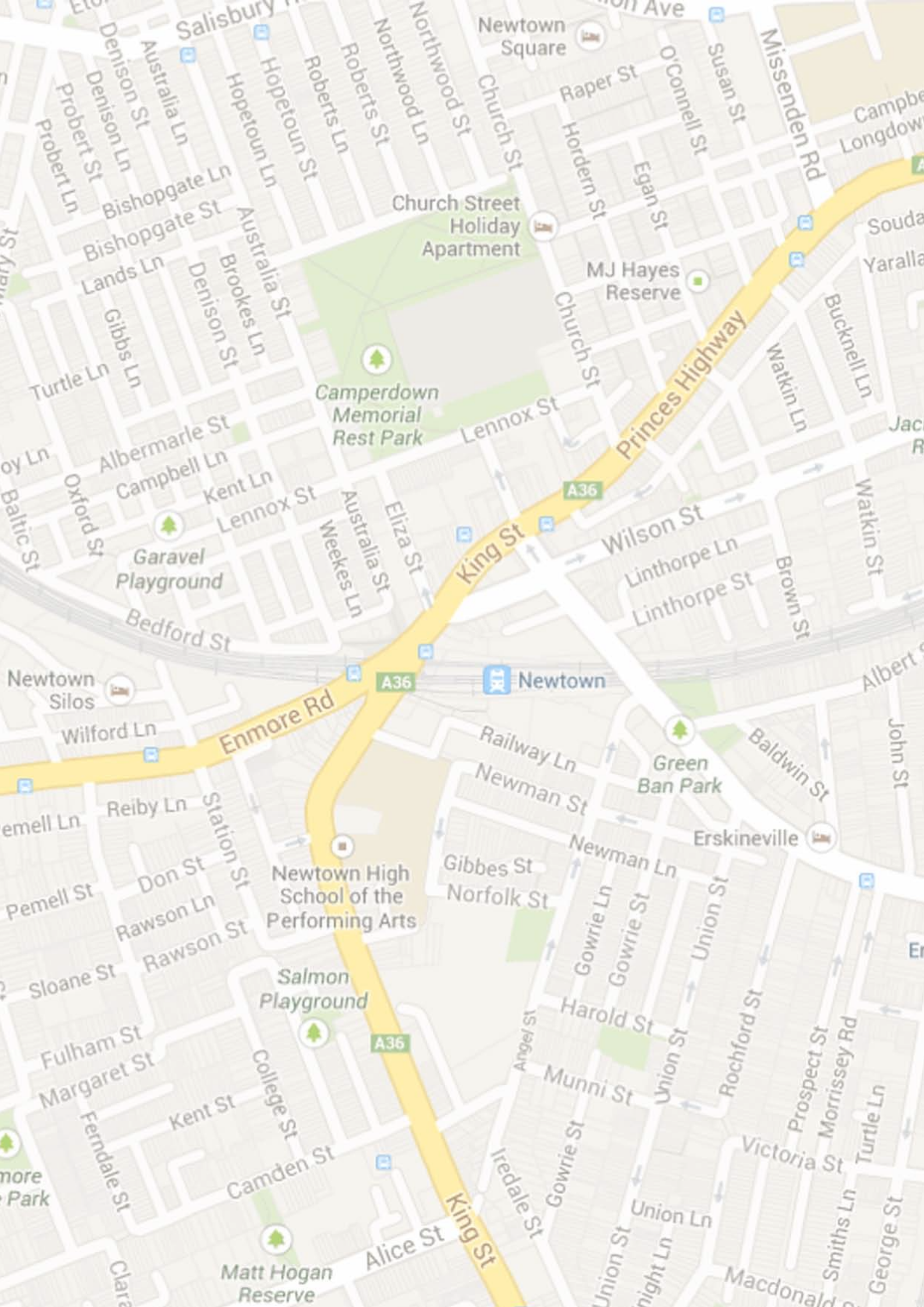
The report makes the following four key conclusions:

- The importance of lifts within train stations
- The need for bus services to improve frequency and driver behaviour
- Public and community transport is an enabler of independence for older people, and
- The critical role of public transport (which includes Community Transport) in fostering social inclusion.

Our study found that the Newtown station upgrade has improved public transport users' access to trains, and this in turn enables people to be included in their wider community. We found that working lifts not only provide access to people using wheelchairs; they also provide access for the growing demographic of older people, many of whom have limited mobility. We recommend that lifts be prioritised as an essential piece of infrastructure for train stations across the Sydney Trains (previously CityRail) network.

NCOSS hopes that this report contributes to further improvement in transport across Sydney neighbourhoods, specifically regarding the accessibility of train stations.

Footnote: On 15 August 2013, Minister Berejiklian announced that lift access would be provided for one platform at Redfern. A start to what will hopefully only be the beginning of a new accessible Redfern station. NCOSS welcomes the announcement and congratulates the Lift Redfern campaign.



Introduction

'News from Newtown' discusses findings from a small qualitative study exploring public and community transport use in the inner Sydney suburb of Newtown and its surrounds. The study, conducted by the Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS), had a focus on accessible public transport and linked with the 'All Aboard NSW' social media campaign.

Participants of the study were drawn from Newtown Train Station, Newtown Neighbourhood Centre and Leichhardt Community Transport. They were asked questions relating to the upgrade at Newtown station, accessibility, disability, social inclusion, safety and their experiences as consumers of public and community transport.

The aims of the study were:

- To investigate consumer views of public transport in the Newtown and surrounding area;
- To investigate passenger views of the recent upgrade completed at Newtown Station;
- To explore issues of accessibility on public transport, focusing on people with disability and older and frail aged people, and
- To gather information directly from public transport consumers, which then informs public transport developments and service improvement.

While this was a small study located in a small inner city neighbourhood, the project was able to successfully tap into and integrate all transport modes within its scope: rail, bus, Community Transport and Active Transport (walking). When referring to public transport in the aims above, we are including Community Transport. We focused on consumer views because NCOSS contends that the perspectives of public transport consumers, including people with disability, are critical to ensuring improved access across an integrated public transport system.

NCOSS hopes this report will contribute to further improvements in accessible public transport across Sydney neighbourhoods. In particular, NCOSS advocates the continued roll-out of the Transport Access Program (TAP). The TAP is responsible for providing disability access and upgrades on stations across the Sydney Trains network. Transport for NSW (TfNSW) priorities for selecting stations are customer need and demographics, station patronage, proximity to key services such as hospitals, and accessibility of nearby transport interchanges. Installation of lifts, (and/or ramps), on Sydney Rail stations is a requirement under the Commonwealth's Disability Transport Standards. The Standards require all stations on the Sydney Trains network to be fully accessible by 2022.

The next section briefly discusses the study's methodology.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were selected for this study, in order to elicit the opinions and perspectives of public transport users, as well as explore the issue of accessibility. We chose Newtown and its surrounding neighbourhoods in order to focus on one of Sydney Trains recent accessibility upgrades. Newtown Station completed its upgrade in February 2013 so it was timely to seek consumer views about what had changed. Three separate sites were chosen in order to include a diversity of population groups and community responses. This allowed inclusion of the transport modes of rail, bus, and Community Transport, as well as active transport (walking).

The first site was the newly upgraded Newtown Station. Individual unstructured interviews were conducted with patrons using Newtown Station, on two separate occasions on the station's platforms. A total of 68 passengers were interviewed as they waited for their train. The two interviewers, Robyn Edwards and Madeleine Cherrington, asked passengers for their consent to participate. Generally they consented freely and were happy to provide feedback about the new station upgrade. A very small number of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people did not participate because they did not speak English. The interviews were short and conversational, focussed on passengers' experiences of the upgrade and travel on Sydney Trains.

The second site was Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC), which is located opposite Newtown Station on King Street. NNC was selected as part of the study because it had been active in the local campaign to upgrade Newtown station, and the Centre's participants were frequent users of transport within the Newtown area. Three community groups were interviewed using focus group methodology, the 'Wrapped With Love' knitters (2 groups) and the Older Yugoslav Group.¹ The convenor of the Yugoslav group assisted with translating, when necessary. Questions focused on how people travelled to NNC, people's experiences of using public transport (both trains and buses), perceptions of the station upgrade and suggestions on how to improve public transport. A total of 51 consumers from NNC participated in the focus groups, many of whom were from CALD backgrounds.

The third site was on board the Marrickville Jetstream, the regular Leichhardt Community Transport (CT) bus which navigates the neighbourhoods of Marrickville, Newtown and surrounds. Questions focused on why the CT bus service was important to passengers and experiences they had of using public transport. A total of 18 consumers participated in the interviews.

The project was conducted over a three month timeframe, April – June 2013. Interviews at Newtown station were conducted on 11 and 18 April 2013, at NNC on 2 and 6 May 2013 and Leichhardt Community Transport on 15 May 2013. Data from the interviews was analysed during June and a draft report prepared.

The project took a developmental approach, beginning with passengers on the train station, then moving on to NNC and a focus on Sydney buses, and ending with Community Transport. Active transport (walking) was also included during the focus groups at NNC. Each stage of the project informed the next stage. Regular feedback was provided about the study and its findings on the All Aboard NSW Facebook page.

¹ Multicultural Seniors Day Care for the Communities from Former Yugoslavia

Research findings

A total of 137 people participated in the study; 68 were rail passengers at Newtown Station, 51 were participants of Newtown Neighbourhood Centre and 18 were Community Transport passengers on the Marrickville Jetstream.

The findings of the study are discussed under three sections:

- Newtown Station Interviews
- Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) Focus Groups
- Marrickville Jetstream Interviews

Newtown Station Interviews

Newtown Station is located on busy King Street and borders the City of Sydney and Marrickville Local Government Area. The station is on the Inner West and South lines, however only peak-hour trains on the South line stop at Newtown. The station upgrade, implemented as part of the Transport Access Program (TAP), was completed in October 2012. Transport for NSW (TfNSW) and the Station Manager at Newtown supported the study, allowing us to interview passengers on the platform waiting for their train, or when they alighted at Newtown. Interviews were conducted on two separate occasions, the first after the morning peak and the second during the afternoon. We did not interview during peak times when passengers may not have had the time to respond to the study's questions.

Description of cohort

A total of 68 passengers were interviewed on the platforms of Newtown Station. Interviewees varied in age, from teenagers attending school to older people visiting grandchildren. There was a fairly equal gender division and while the majority were Anglo-Australians there was also a significant number from CALD backgrounds. Most were non-commuters, which may have resulted in a more diverse cohort and diverse viewpoints. Passengers were asked to provide feedback on the new upgrade, what they liked and did not like, and in what ways the station upgrade had improved accessibility.

Key Findings

Interviews were analysed and the following key themes identified: accessibility features, information, improvements in safety, physical appearance of upgrade and impact on patronage.

Accessibility features: The Lift

Of the 68 people interviewed, 31 respondents (nearly half) referenced the lift directly. There was an overriding consensus about the importance of the lift, with many patrons stating that Newtown Station was now more accessible for older people, those using wheelchairs and parents with young children and prams. Many commented on how the station's previous steep and narrow stairs meant those who had a disability or limited mobility were excluded from accessing the station. One woman in her 30s with children said she did not use the station for two years because she could not get the pram up or down the steps. Others mentioned how family members or friends could now access the station because of the lift. Older people may have struggled to use the stairs, and were also at risk of falling. One woman stated she did not understand how anyone with disability could have accessed the station before the lift's installation. One of the positive consequences of the upgrade is that people have gained

awareness and understanding about the access needs of people with disability, and how the station upgrade has supported these needs. A typical comment from passengers about the upgrade was, 'it's wheelchair accessible now so that's a good thing.'

Case example

One patron who was interviewed was a woman in her 40s in a wheelchair. Before the upgrade, she had relied on taxis as a mode of transport, unable to access the station because of the steps. She lives in the City and commuted to Newtown by taxi. However because of the lift and level walkways, she is now able to access the station and commute to and from work by train. She claimed it has had a major positive impact on her working life. Hopefully it has saved her a lot on taxi fares as well. The station staff assisted her off the train using a portable ramp, then she wheeled herself to the lift (she said it was always working) and was ready for another working day.

Other Accessibility Features

Patrons identified various other accessibility features resulting from the upgrade, including level walkways and audible announcements on the platform and trains. Many commented on the newly installed toilets, one of which is fully accessible. There had been no toilets at the station before the upgrade, which may have caused inconvenience for some patrons when travelling.

Others commented on the increased seating on the platform, near the ticket gates and at the station entrance. This would benefit older people, people less mobile, pregnant women and passengers who may be unwell. Passengers returning from nearby Royal Prince Alfred (RPA) hospital may need seating as they wait for their train. A few patrons commented on the wider ticket gate, with one man stating it would improve wheelchair access.

There was a lot of discussion surrounding the new sets of wide stairs, and how they were improving flow during peak hour. With two sets of stairs, passengers can access and exit the station more easily. Patrons commented on how these stairs were a safer alternative to the old very steep set, with one man saying 'the stairs were so dangerous before, but they're much better now'.

A young man in his 20s made reference to the level walkways, non-slip tiles and emergency help points. He noted that these improvements and amenities would be helpful for people with mobility limitations.

Information

Access to information was a common theme. Many respondents commented on the newly installed 'real-time signs' on each platform, indicating to passengers when trains were due to arrive. Passengers said these signs helped to improve their journey. Other comments were directed at the clear signage and staff assistance. Passengers said staff were now visible and available to help, compared with before the upgrade when 'you could never see any staff.' One female in her 20s explained how there was signage and directions on all station features. By comparison there was a considerable lack of signage before the upgrade. However one interviewee was critical of the lack of signage pointing towards the toilets, and felt more should be done to make the toilets visible. A female tourist spoke positively of station staff, stating they were very helpful in explaining the different tickets to her.

Safety

Another common theme was that of safety. Many patrons commented on feeling much safer within the new station compared to the old one. Two students explained how (since the upgrade) they feel safe using the station, and that staff are always visible. A man in his 40s



Newtown Station, King St entrance: One passenger suggested that the entrance to the station could showcase buskers, local musicians, and talent from schools such as Newtown School of Performing Arts

explained the open spaces make you feel secure and safe. One woman in her 40s stated 'you don't feel like you are going to get mugged'. Overall, it appears that the upgrade has improved the sense of safety and security patrons feel. This is especially the case when passengers are travelling at night, when it was important to have staff visible at the station. A young man with an intellectual disability said that he liked the new station a lot, he felt safe and used the trains a lot.

Physical appearance of upgrade

Many passengers commented positively about the overall physical appearance of the new station, with some describing it as clean, modern and spacious, another as 'futuristic' and others as blending in with the Newtown neighbourhood. Young people also liked the upgrade, with one young man saying it set an example for other public buildings, with its 'interesting architectural features, like the angular roof.' He said that the station was now an 'inviting place' because of its good design, and that 'it's inclusive, welcoming, like Newtown itself.' He compared it with other spaces which are enclosed and shut, where you feel trapped and under surveillance. He said there was a sense of both freedom and safety at the new station. Patrons also commented positively about the new shelter above the platforms. They felt they were now protected from weather conditions, such as strong sunlight or rain. Such shelter did not exist prior to the upgrade.

Passengers compared the new station very favourably with the old, which they described as 'scungy and awful', 'the pits', and 'scary'.



All Aboard NSW Facebook post 14 April 2013

Newtown station: it's welcoming, modern and inclusive, like Newtown itself. This was the view of many passengers All Aboard spoke with. 'Futuristic' was how one man described the upgrade. One woman using a wheelchair told us how she can now commute to work by train. Before the upgrade she couldn't access the station and was dependent on taxis. Stay tuned for more news from Newtown station!

Impact of the upgrade on patronage

Passengers suggested that a station upgrade, by itself, would not increase patronage; rather the critical factor was trains running on time. However, one woman in her 40s who was a long-time Newtown resident said that before the upgrade she only used buses, describing the old station as ‘the pits’ and the only thing she did not like about Newtown. With the station upgrade she is now using trains. Likewise, a man describing the new station as ‘spendid’ said that it ‘encourages people to use the trains.’ Two women in their 60s spoke of the transformation from the old station, ‘it was creepy before, it was horrible’ to the new, ‘now it’s amazing...it’s a big shock, it’s so clean. The entrance! It’s filled with light.’ A younger woman concluded, ‘We just want the trains to run on time now and it would be perfect.’

A woman who does not own a car and uses public transport regularly reflected that she did not think the upgrade encouraged more people to use public transport due to dependency on the car and because ‘public transport does not have a good image’.

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre Focus Groups

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC), located in the heart of busy Newtown opposite the train station, supports people through community action and provision of services to address their diverse needs. The Centre focuses on disadvantaged and vulnerable members in the community, has a strong commitment to social justice and seeks to create a more inclusive, resilient, vibrant and self-reliant community.

Description of cohort

Three NNC groups were interviewed, two from the ‘Wrapped With Love’ knitting group and one the Older Yugoslav group. While the cohort contained both men and women and people of various ages and nationalities, a majority were women, most were older and many were Yugoslav. A total of 51 individuals took part in these group discussions, 40 women and 11 men, 25 belonging to the Older Yugoslav group and 26 to ‘Wrapped With Love’ groups. Although many resided within the Newtown or neighbouring areas, others travelled from Brighton Le Sands, Fairfield, and Rockdale. Most were relatively mobile, and able to catch public transport independently. Car ownership and driving was the exception; one woman in the ‘Wrapped with Love’ group had a car and drove to NNC; two men in the Yugoslav group had cars and drove. There were many ‘active transport’ participants in the younger ‘Wrapped with Love’ group, who walked for pleasure and fitness as well as to NNC, bus or train stops.

Key findings

Interviews were analysed and the following key themes identified: accessibility features of Newtown Station, consumer perspectives on bus usage within the Newtown and surrounding area, and the relationship between public transport and independence.

Accessibility Features: The Lift

All groups interviewed at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) referenced Newtown Station’s newly installed lift positively throughout the discussions. All participants felt the lift had made the station more accessible, with many previously unable to use the station due to its inaccessible built environment. This was particularly noted in discussions with the Older Yugoslav group. Participants explained that they had lost many members over the years as people grew older and less mobile, because they could not access the old Newtown Station which had no lift. Ultimately this produced a sense of social exclusion for many members, because groups for older Yugoslav people are limited within the Sydney Area. This problem was remedied with the station’s new lift allowing members easy and safe access to NNC. Members from ‘Wrapped With Love’ also identified how the lift had improved their access to Newtown Station. A woman in her 50s stated that ‘since the lift, I use the train much more’. Another woman was equally supportive commenting, ‘my husband never wanted to catch the train because of the horrible steps! But now he catches it all the time’.



Newtown Neighbourhood Centre participated in the transport study

Comparatively, participants made several references to Redfern station, which has no lift on any of its 12 platforms. Many participants had to use Redfern, a key interchange station on Sydney Trains, to connect to other lines, including Newtown's inner west line. Participants said that Redfern needed a lift, in order to improve accessibility for older people and people with disability. Many commented on how they often needed to change at Redfern for connecting lines, yet struggled to access the station because of the large sets of stairs. A woman in her 70s stated, 'Stations without lifts are a great burden to people like us'. Members from the Older Yugoslav group often use shopping trolleys and walking sticks, and stated that without a lift the journey can be difficult and sometimes too hard to make.

Towards the end of the focus group one woman argued that lifts are imperative within train stations now, and will become even more so in the future, because of Australia's ageing demographic.

Other Accessibility Features

Many participants commented on the recently installed toilets at the station, including one which is fully accessible. Members identified that this part of the upgrade has made their journey to NNC a more convenient one.

Bus usage: passenger feedback

The majority of members belonging to the 'Wrapped With Love' and Older Yugoslav groups were regular bus users. They made reference to the bus systems operating in the suburb of Newtown, as well as surrounding suburbs. Issues raised included unreliable and late buses, problems related to driver behaviour and the positives of bus travel.

■ Problems with buses

Members commented that buses were often late and unreliable, for example one woman stated 'the 355 bus is always late and sometimes it's cancelled'. The 355 is typically an old bus, with no air conditioning and often no wheelchair access. Other members spoke of the 308 bus, commenting that it was an infrequent and unreliable service. Many group members were unhappy with weekend bus services, which ran less frequently than week days. There was general consensus that people sometimes 'give up on buses' because they were infrequent and unreliable. One woman from the Older Yugoslav group travels from

neighbouring Leichhardt, and stated that her bus, the 370, was often up to 45 minutes late. One woman in the 'Wrapped With Love' group comes from Marrickville, a neighbouring suburb; she reported that it takes her two buses and sometimes over an hour and a half to get to NNC. The equivalent journey by car would take approximately 15 minutes.

One woman commented there should be more lighting at bus stops to improve safety at night. Another woman from the Yugoslav group stated her bus stop did not have any shelter from bad weather while another explained how her local stop's shelter had been broken and in disrepair for a long time. One woman in her 50s explained how she lived in Brighton Le Sands and found it hard to access Newtown by bus. She said she is forced to drive because of poor connections between these suburbs.

It is important to note that we did not interview any commuters at NNC. It is probable that buses to and from Newtown into the CBD on weekdays during peak hours would be relatively reliable and frequent. While commuters generally use the more frequent direct routes, non-commuters may use less frequent more circuitous and neighbourhood routes. A common perception of non-commuters is that they receive a 'second-class' public transport service compared with commuters.

■ **Problems with driver behaviour**

Many members commented on poor bus driver behaviour, including a lack of courtesy and assistance during bus journeys. One man stated that bus drivers are often rude, and do not wait for people to sit down before continuing to drive. Others commented that some bus drivers speed, and are not always helpful. One participant said, 'they are not helpful with directions, for example when you ask them where you should get out if you are going to a place in the city'.

Another man stated that his wife was injured during a bus trip, falling over because the bus had not waited for her to sit before departing. Overall, members felt bus drivers should be more cooperative and considerate towards passengers, more patient with people whose first language was not English and respect older people travelling on buses. Some members suggested driver training programs could help to address these problems.

■ **Positive comments about bus usage**

Other respondents were more positive about their experiences catching buses. One woman stated that she preferred taking buses at night, because buses felt much safer than trains. Members were also positive towards the free buses operating in the city. One woman said that there is too much criticism of public transport stating 'people can't expect everything to be perfect all the time' and that 'on balance public transport is good'. Another woman said that although the 355 bus can be late, the drivers always wait for passengers to be seated before departing. Two men belonging to the Older Yugoslav group had very positive experiences in relation to bus travel. One said he found buses were generally frequent while the second man, who had vision impairment and travels from North Sydney to NNC stated that the bus driver always helps him on to the bus.

Participants also acknowledged that Newtown was well serviced by buses, with bus routes to the city, neighbouring suburbs such as Marrickville and to Coogee and Bondi Junction in the eastern suburbs. Certainly many other suburbs in Sydney are not as well serviced.

Public transport and independence

Participants identified how public transport supported and facilitated their independence. The theme of independence was particularly prevalent during discussion with the Older Yugoslav group, whose members generally relied on public transport for their everyday tasks and social interactions. Comparatively, members of the younger 'Wrapped With Love' group were positive about how public transport gave them independence (and a life) when travelling at night. One woman in her 50s stated 'just because you're over 50 doesn't mean you stop going out at night'. Here buses were important, seen as a safer choice than train travel. Members of the Older Yugoslav group however did not use public transport at night. Many felt that travelling at night was dangerous, and avoided public transport after dark.

Case example

A spritely Yugoslav woman aged 88 years spoke about how she valued her mobility and didn't want to stay inside her home all day. Instead she travelled around Sydney, using trains and buses, and a walking stick. She commented on how she enjoyed the experience of public transport, and the feelings of freedom and independence it gives her.



All Aboard NSW Facebook post 7 May 2013

All Aboard visited Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) this week. It's a vibrant community organisation opposite the train station, promoting social justice and a strong sense of community. We spoke with members of the Yugoslav group and Wrap with Love about their experiences of public transport. They told us that some bus drivers were rude and unhelpful, and drove off before they had a chance to sit down. They love the new train station, which is good because the Centre did a lot of lobbying to get the upgrade. Best thing is the lift which makes it easier for older people to access the train and get to NNC and join in the activities. Some people with disability travelled from as far as Fairfield and North Sydney, all by bus and train. Public transport - it's the big enabler for social inclusion.

Marrickville Jetstream

The Marrickville Jetstream is a Community Transport bus which runs a weekly service to and from locations within the Marrickville Municipality. Its designated pick-up and drop-off points include Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPA), Petersham Rail, Dulwich Hill, Woolworths Marrickville, and Marrickville Metro. It also has the flexibility to collect and return people to their homes. The Jetstream describes itself as a 'transport service that combines features of both a door-to-door service with a route service. It's like a cross between a taxi and bus service!' One interviewer joined the bus for the morning (15 May 2013) and asked passengers where they were going, why the CT bus service was important to them, and any experiences they had of using public transport.

Description of cohort

A total of 18 people boarded the bus, several from a CALD background. All were older women aged 60 – 90 years, except for one woman's husband and grandson. One man in his 80s was booked on the bus for pick up, to be taken home after shopping; however he was not at the designated stop and the driver explained he was a keen walker and may have walked home. By comparison with the study's participants at NNC, the Community Transport cohort was considerably frailer, older and had limited mobility. Some used sticks or walkers and needed assistance to board and get off the bus. One woman had a hearing impairment. While a few Jetstream passengers still used public transport, more were at the stage where they could not access Sydney Trains or Sydney Buses anymore. Typically this was because of the steps at stations which had not been upgraded, and the walk to the bus-stop from their home being too far.

Findings

Accessibility

Accessibility features of the service included a door-to-door (rather than curb-to-curb) service. Most of the CT passengers were unable to walk to their local bus stop or train station; hence the need to be collected from and returned to their home. The driver assisted many passengers to get on and off the bus. The bus is wheelchair accessible; however no passengers in a wheelchair joined the bus on the day of the study. Some passengers used walkers and the driver assisted in dismantling the walker and placing it on the bus.

Case example

One woman, 90 years of age, uses a walker. She said that the Community Transport bus allows her to be independent. She said she has family but they all work and she doesn't want to rely on them for transport. She had to give up her car and licence a few years ago because of failing eyesight. She is unable to access buses anymore, 'the last time I tried to get on a public bus, I just couldn't, I had to turn back and go home.'

Affordability

Passengers pay a small fare/donation on boarding the bus. One woman living on the aged pension explained that 'living on a pension, there's not much money'. While the interviewer did not ask the passengers about their financial situation, it is likely that all depended on a disability or aged pension.



*Driver with
Marrickville
Jetstream bus*

Barriers to using public transport

Typically, passengers were either too frail to access public transport or had significant mobility limitations and/or health issues. For example, one woman with limited mobility is now unable to walk to the bus-stop and catch her local 'unreliable' bus, as she did in the past when she enjoyed better health. She is unable to use trains because, as she explained, 'Petersham Station has 50 steps'. Another woman told a story of how she got off a train at Newtown and tried to climb the narrow stairs before the upgrade, but she couldn't, so she boarded another train and got off where it was easier (presumably where there was a lift).

The few who still used public transport spoke of many barriers to continued use:

- Steps at the train station. Passengers were unanimous that all stations need lifts.
- Too far to walk from their home to the station or bus stop.
- Have to catch 2 or 3 buses to get to a destination.
- Buses are too unreliable, for example you might have to wait 40 minutes if one bus doesn't arrive.

Transport to Health

Two passengers were collected from their home and taken to medical appointments at RPA Hospital. For example, one Arabic woman in her 80s boarded the bus to travel to RPA with her daughter (carer), after a fall she had on the weekend. Other passengers said they catch the Jetstream to attend medical appointments; however one woman said she had to catch a taxi home after her appointment as it was too late for the CT bus (which finishes its run at 3.30 pm). Most passengers remarked that taxis were too expensive and they only caught them if there were no other options, or in an emergency.

Role of Community Transport driver

The driver knows all the regulars and was very helpful, assisting people on and off the bus. He was friendly as well as a competent and attentive driver who knew his route well. He had an excellent rapport with all passengers.



All Aboard NSW Facebook post 16 May 2013

This week with jets overhead in Marrickville, All Aboard takes a ride on the Marrickville JetStream. Run by Leichhardt Community Transport, we found it to be one of the friendliest bus rides you can take in Sydney. We spoke with passengers on the bus, like one 90 yr old who can't drive anymore cos she has limited vision says the JetStream means she can do her weekly shopping and be independent. Most passengers found it was too hard to use the trains cos of all the steps - one woman told us Petersham station has 50 of them! One passenger caught JetStream so she can join in with aqua-aerobics at the public pool. Without the bus she said she wouldn't be able to go, she'd just stay at home. The service helps to get people out and about in their community. Thanks to the wonderful driver and Leichhardt Community Transport for the ride!

Social inclusion

A number of passengers said they would not be able to participate in community activities without the CT service. For example one woman attends regular Aqua-aerobics at the public pool to help with her health conditions; she said she can't use public transport anymore and if it wasn't for the Jetstream service she wouldn't be able to go to the pool. Another woman in her 80s sees Wednesday on the Jetstream as her day out. She gets on and off the bus at various points across Marrickville and Newtown, including the Marrickville Metro shopping centre. Sometimes she catches a regular bus from the Marrickville Metro to visit her grand-daughter and great grandchildren. As the driver explained, the Jetstream can assist some of its passengers to access public transport.

Case example

Julie (not her real name) is a regular on the bus and was collected from her home. She is recovering from cancer and uses the Jetstream to attend medical appointments at RPA, one of the designated bus stops. Julie, despite her own health conditions, is the carer for a woman she lives with. She said it's hard catching regular buses, for example she goes to an exercise class at Balmain to help with her recovery. She said it takes 3 buses to get there. Julie uses CT a lot, for example the driver picks her up on Thursday and takes her to and from the Tom Foster Senior Citizens Centre (run by Marrickville Council) where they have a community choir Julie sings in. She said she loves going. Julie and the driver have a big joke about everything, including the football – despite her having to go into RPA for 2 days for more surgery related to cancer.

The next and final section of the report identifies the study's four conclusions.

Conclusions

From an analysis of the themes outlined above, NCOSS makes four key conclusions:

- The importance of lifts within train stations
- The need for bus services to improve frequency and driver behaviour
- Public and community transport is an enabler of independence for older people, and
- The critical role of public transport (which includes community transport) in fostering social inclusion.

Importance of lifts within train stations

The installation of Newtown Station's lift has created an accessible and safe station. Patrons interviewed on the platforms of Newtown Station and groups from Newtown Neighbourhood Centre identified the benefits of the lift for people with disability, older people and parents with young children and prams. Interviewees stated that the lift had improved accessibility for these groups, with many questioning how they previously accessed Newtown Station. While it is recognised that people using wheelchairs need a lift and level walkways to access public transport, our study also showed that older people benefit from these features. Interviews at the station, NNC and on the Jetstream all confirmed that older people and people with mobility limitations could not access public transport if there were too many steps to manoeuvre. With the ageing of the population, we conclude that lifts to the platforms are an imperative within all heavy rail stations. While there is an initial one-off cost involved, and smaller ongoing maintenance costs, there will be significant benefits of large numbers of older people being able to use public transport, possibly for another 20 - 25 years of their lives. Furthermore, there is the legislative imperative under the Commonwealth's Disability Transport Standards to make Sydney's stations meet accessibility requirements by 2022.

In any examination of access issues, it is important to consider access across the whole Sydney Trains network, not just individual stations. While people in a wheelchair can now board a train at Newtown, they cannot alight at nearby busy Redfern because Redfern has no lift on any of its 12 platforms. Stations like Redfern which are inaccessible only serve to compromise the accessibility and connectivity of the rail network as a whole. Many of our study participants commented on the inaccessibility of Redfern Station, which has large sets of stairs unable to be used by people with a physical disability and older people with mobility limitations. Redfern is a major interchange station, so again its inaccessibility is a problem for the whole network. Redfern Station is just one of many Sydney stations in need of upgrading. Petersham station is another with its 50 steps, counted by an older person who could no longer access the station.

Improvement of bus services

The importance of local and neighbourhood bus services has been highlighted by this study, with the majority of participants from NNC regular users of Sydney buses. They used buses to participate in their community, not for commuting. Issues raised by participants related to poor bus frequency and reliability, and bus driver behaviour. Criticism was directed towards irregular bus arrival times, and the unreliability this meant for participants. Some members were critical of bus driver behaviour, stating that drivers could be rude, lacking in courtesy and unwilling to provide basic assistance. Other participants, however, had positive experiences with drivers and buses. Some said they felt safer on buses than trains. The need for drivers to be respectful and patient towards older people, people with limited mobility and people whose first language is not English, is one of our study's conclusions.

Public and community transport is an enabler of a person's independence

This small study has shown that public and community transport is an enabler of independence for people with disability and for older people, especially those with limited mobility. Participants from Newtown Neighbourhood Centre were predominantly over the age of 55 years, generally did not own a car and relied heavily on public transport (both trains and buses) in their everyday lives. There were participants who genuinely enjoyed using public transport, and were positive towards the feeling of freedom and independence it gave them. For some aboard Community Transport's Jetstream, it was their day to go shopping, socialising and enjoy being out and about, instead of stuck at home. Some members from the 'Wrapped With Love' group enjoyed socialising and going out in the evenings, using public transport for these purposes. Improvements in connectedness and reliability of public transport, along with access upgrades at train stations, will contribute to the social and economic goal of supporting the independence of older people.

Public and community transport can foster social inclusion

Our study has demonstrated how public and community transport can foster social inclusion. Participants of Newtown Neighbourhood Centre relied on buses and/or trains to travel to the Centre and engage with its program of social inclusion. People with a physical disability accessing Newtown station, in particular those using wheelchairs, are now able to engage in employment and education as a result of the station's excellent upgrade. The overwhelming feedback we received from public transport passengers was that Newtown station's upgrade had opened up access to people previously unable to use the station. Community transport offers an important 'niche' for older people and people with disability who face barriers to accessing public transport. Despite the improvements which can be made to infrastructure, it is critical to acknowledge some people will be unable to access public transport (for example they are unable to walk to the bus stop) and that community transport is best able to support their mobility needs.

