

Review of the Disability Standards for
Accessible Public Transport
The Allen Consulting Group
GPO Box 418
Canberra ACT 2601



23/1/08

Dear Allen Consulting Group,

**Review of the Disability Standards
for Accessible Public Transport**

the Penrith Photo-voice Project would like to present to you our answers to your questionnaire below and to tell you some of our recent research findings as we, too, have explored accessibility issues encountered by people with learning difficulties on Sydney's public transport system. We have also been encouraged to contact you by John Evernden, Access Consultant for the Independent Living Centre. The Penrith Photo-voice group is an inclusive participatory action research group made up of people with mild learning difficulties from Western Sydney. The group is facilitated by Janice Ollerton, a PhD research student from the University of Western Sydney. Over the past nine months we have been looking into the social barriers which limit our self-determination. During 2007 the group used cameras to identify things in society that we believed unnecessarily prevented us from having control of our lives. The public transport system in Sydney featured as a common social barrier for all of us. Apart from unreliable timetabling or cancelled services (which affect all the travelling public) we found that there was a heavy reliance on textually-based technology (such as electronic indicator boards or ticket machines) and the use of text-based information signage that is inaccessible to people who have limited English literacy skills.

When considering "access" and "disability" in the same sentence many people immediately think of physical and sensory disabilities and believe the access answers lie in ramps, lifts and tactile surfaces. Yet for people with invisible disabilities, like those with mental health or cognitive impairments, mobility problems such as getting on and off trains and platforms is not the issue. Accessing the information provided by Railcorp, Sydney Ferries, Hillsbus and other transport providers is a major problem for people who cannot read or have difficulty processing complex information.

In October 2007 our group conducted an excursion from Penrith into the city of Sydney during which we travelled on buses, ferries and trains. We photographed all the signs and written instructions that we saw which had been put in place by the transport system to inform the public. We found that some of us were unable to access (or understand) many of these instructions. We took over 80 photos but attached are some examples of inaccessible information on the signs. These significantly impact our lives and can mean that we are unable to travel safely or independently, although we are mobile and have the ability to learn how to catch transport from one destination to another. We think that many signs could be made more accessible if enhanced with pictorial representations. Occasionally pictures are used to make plain the message and we applaud the transport system for this. However, most signage is written and inaccessible to the non-reading public.

Over all, our research group found that the most significant social barrier preventing access to public transport was the heavy reliance on technology and the assumption that the travelling public could read English and use the technology provided. Everyone in our group found that ticket machines were difficult to use. Those with limited literacy and numeracy skills simply could not use them. Not all ticket machines are alike. Some stations (such as Parramatta) have ticket machines with a limited destination selection, (for popular stations only). So, after lining up and waiting to use the machine, we were confounded to find our station was not even listed on the destination options. Nor could our group members read the indicator boards (for those who could read the words went too fast), cancelled services and track-work notices. People with learning difficulties often must rely on Public Transport staff (who can sometimes be rude) for information. Some of the group members said that they sometimes travel without a ticket because there is no staff on duty and they can not use the ticket machine. They said that travelling without a ticket was stressful because they were afraid of getting into trouble for not having a ticket but felt that they had no choice. If trying to access public transport from a small railway station (such as many of our Blue Mountains or Central Coast stations) without permanent staff, this presents a significant problem for the commuter with learning difficulties.

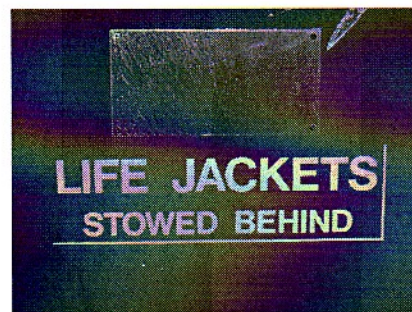
Others in our group said that they had encountered ticket machines that do not issue more than \$19.90 in change. This meant that if they inserted a \$50 or \$100 note they would still only receive \$19.90 change, even for an inexpensive pensioner ticket. Rather than lose money they decided to not buy a ticket. A ticket machine with limited change-giving capacity means that the travelling public is expected to know beforehand how much money they will need to bring and in what currency, to the station. Many people with learning difficulties do not have the sequential cognitive functioning skills to foresee and fore-plan in this way.

The following are photos of social barriers preventing us from accessing public transport in the way other commuters are able to.

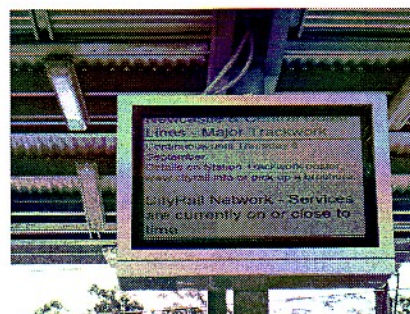
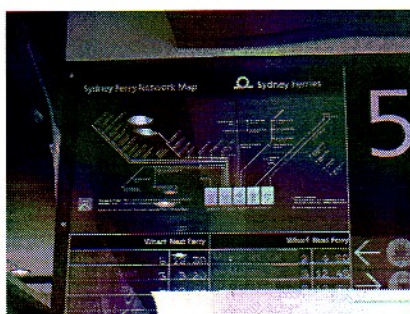
Our group was able to access the information displayed on signs such these;



However, they could not access the important and basic information on these signs



Nor could they access the complex information depicted below



Literacy is an assumed skill relied upon by the public transport system. This assumption informs many of their communication strategies and causes unnecessary social barriers for people with limited literacy.

The following are our answers to your questions

- 1. Do you use buses, trains, taxis, trams or ferries from your home? Tell us which ones you use.**

Yes, we regularly use trains, including Blue Mountains line, Penrith line, Seven Hills line, Quakers Hill line, Central Coast and Newcastle to Sydney lines. We regularly use Hillsbus from Seven Hills to Blacktown/Parramatta, Westbus from Llandilo to Penrith, Pearces' Bus from Mount Riverview to Blaxland and around the Blue Mountains, Busways from Quakers Hill to Blacktown and the Central Coast bus service from Springfield to Gosford. We occasionally (school holidays) use Sydney Ferries from Parramatta to Circular Quay or around Sydney Harbour. We often use taxi services to travel from Llandilo to Penrith, or when travelling at night from the railways Stations as there are no evening bus services around the Lower Blue Mountains, Blacktown/Seven Hills areas at night.

- 2. What do you use buses, taxis, trams or ferries to do? For example, to go shopping, meet friends or go to work.**

None of the Photo-voice group participants can drive and so for many of us public transport is our only mode of transport. We take trains, trams, ferries, buses and taxis to go and see friends, to travel to work, Doctor's appointments, disability service providers, recreational groups, shopping, to get to TAFE, to have an outing into Sydney, to visit our families on the Central Coast and in Newcastle.

- 3. Do you have any problems using buses, trains, taxis, trams or ferries? Tell us about this.**

We have had trouble with taxis. They charge you a booking fee. Sometimes they don't turn up when booked. Some of our group have taxi vouchers and they sometimes over charge us. They refuse a short fare (if we only want the taxi to drive a short distance, eg 2km). The drivers have poor English skills. This means that sometimes the drivers do not understand us and we also have trouble understanding them.

We have had trouble with buses. Some buses do not accept our pensioner cards. The Hillsbus route through Seven Hills is notoriously unreliable and can run at least 30 minutes late during peak hour. There is no way of knowing how late the bus is or if it is ever going to turn up. Railways stations have an indicator board that tells people how long the trains are delayed but roadside bus stops do not have this. Many bus stops just have a bus timetable stuck to the lamppost. Timetables are very difficult to

read and so we are unable to access this information. We must ring the transport info-line or ask someone. If we do not have a mobile phone then we cannot find out when the bus is coming. Some buses don't stop. Perhaps they are full, but commuters standing on the side of the road have no way of knowing why the bus did not stop. The city buses are great. They run every 5 minutes. However, buses in Seven Hills run every 45 minutes and so if you miss one, or it is full, it is a very long wait. School kids on the local buses are too noisy. There is no conductor to tell them to calm down and since the driver is busy driving the kids are just wild. Some local bus stops have no seat or shelter. We have had trouble with Trains. We cannot read the indicator boards, the timetables, the ticket machines, the notices throughout the station. Some of the auditory announcements are difficult to hear or are confusing. One of our group goes to the Central Coast regularly. He has had difficulty understanding the announcement that tells commuters which carriage to travel in if they wish to alight at particular stations (which have short platforms). On several occasions he has been unable to exit the train at his station because there was no platform outside his carriage. He has had to ring his mother and ask her to meet him further up the line at the next station with a longer platform. We have had trouble with ferries. Sydney ferries also rely on written signs to inform their passengers. We were surprised to find that while there was pictorial signage on how to use a life jacke there was no pictorial sign indicating where life jackets are kept. In an emergency travellers with poor English literacy would be severely disadvantaged and at risk. We love the trams in the city. There is no long queue because they run very often. You get on and the conductor collects the fare. We don't have to worry about the ticket machine. If all transport had conductors it would stop fare evasion.

4. What would make it easier for you to use buses, trains, taxis, trams or ferries? What would help?

Bus timetables are in very small print. Perhaps these could be made bigger. Perhaps someone could also devise a simpler system than the timetable matrix. Maybe regular updates on how late the buses were running could be given on a standard radio station, or an electronic system could be built into bus stops indicating when the next bus was due (like on the railway stations).

Please do not rely on ticket machines to dispense tickets. Stations need staff because we need real people to speak with since we cannot read. More pictorial signage would also be a big help. Develop universal symbols (like the disability symbol) to represent things like toilet, danger, life jacket, emergency point etc. Introducing conductors on all types of transport would also help. They could replace the ticket inspectors on trains. (One of our group lived in the UK and said that the local trains in Cardiff run every 5 minutes. They are very short trains and are not over crowded because they run

so frequently. They all have ticket conductors so everyone has to buy a ticket and people behave in an orderly manner because of there is railway staff in the carriage).

5. Do you use information like timetables and maps on buses, trains, trams or ferries? Is this information easy to use?

Most of our group cannot read timetables or maps. They are not easy to use. However, with someone to assist them, they have found it informative to be shown how to follow the railway map and count how many stations there are until they reach their destination. One of our group has travelled to Japan and said the “worm” signage on Japanese trains was a good way of following the train’s progress when they did not speak or read the language.

6. If you catch the bus, do you have any problems getting to the bus stop?

No we do not. Bus stops are generally well located in our areas. However, we do find that the seats in buses are placed too close to the one in front. For tall people this is very uncomfortable as they cannot fit their legs in. One of our group is 6’4”. He must sit sideways (taking up room for two people) because his legs do not fit in the space provided. The alternative is standing up, but he has leg problems and cannot stand for long periods without much pain.

7. If you catch the train do you have any problems getting on to the train at the station?

Can you get in to the train station and to your platform?

Not all train stations are accessible. While this has improved in recent years, one of our group lives in Seven Hills and must walk up and down stairs to access the platform. He has significant problems with his legs (arthritis) and, especially if he is carrying a suitcase to go to the Central coast each weekend, getting onto the platform is an arduous and often painful experience. He rarely gets a seat on the Central Coast train from Strathfield to Gosford as it is already full with City commuters and so he must stand up all the way to Gosford. His disability is hidden in his bones and other passengers do not vacate the ‘disabled/elderly passenger’ seat.

8. If you use taxis, do you have any problems booking a taxi? Do you need a special kind of taxi? Are these easy to book?

We all use taxis on occasions. Sometimes you book them and they do not turn up. They get lost because there are streets with similar names in Llandilo. They turn up late and they still charge you a booking fee. We do not need a special kind of taxi.

9. If you catch the tram, do you have any problems getting on to the tram at the tram stop?

We rarely use trams and have always enjoyed our tram experiences.

10. If you catch the ferry, do you have any problems getting on to the ferry at the stop?

We do not often catch ferries as they do not run as frequently as trains. Also, we have lined up for the ferry only to find that it is full before we have had a chance to board.

11. Are you able to travel by plane? What problems, if any, do you have?

We have all travelled by plane on occasions. The main problem faced is cramped seating. This is particular difficult for our group member who is tall. When limited to a pension you must buy an economy seat with very little leg room. It is not always possible to book a seat near an exit that has leg room.

12. Has catching buses, trains, taxis, trams, ferries or planes become easier for you in the past five years?

Yes and no. Yes, there are more train stations with lifts and so people with mobility problems do not have to battle with steep ramps and stairs. However, the introduction of information technology that relies on literacy skills (such as computerised indicator boards and ticketing machines) has reduced our ability to access transport and information concerning it. We no longer have the option of interacting with real people to assist us and answer our questions about timetables, what carriage to ride in or how much the ticket will cost.

13. Did you know that you can ask for help to catch buses, trains, taxis, trams or ferries if you have a disability? No.

14. Do you know what kind of help you can ask for? No

Thank you for listening to our concerns regarding Public Transport. We would be interested in hearing about the outcome of your review.

Yours truly,

Janice Ollerton,
on behalf of the Penrith Photo-voice project

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