



Submission
from the Public Transport Ombudsman

The Whole Journey Guide – consultation draft

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The Whole Journey – Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport Review

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the “The Whole Journey” guide consultation draft produced by the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development (the Department). As highlighted by the guide, public transport accessibility is vital to the provision of an equitable environment, which allows for everyone to access and benefit from the full range of opportunities.

A whole of journey approach to public transport builds community confidence in the system, which encourages participation and inclusion in society for all - not just those with a disability. The review itself provides a valuable resource to all organisations throughout the public transport industry, by renewing aspirations and guiding progress in the area.

I welcome the guidance being provided by the Department to encourage the ongoing development of best practice by public transport service providers.

The Role of the Public Transport Ombudsman (PTO)

The PTO is an industry based dispute resolution scheme, established in 2004 to receive, investigate and resolve complaints about public transport services in Victoria. I can look at complaints about public transport operators who are members of our scheme. Our members include passenger train, tram and bus operators and other organisations that provide public transport services, such as Public Transport Victoria (PTV). The membership of the PTO includes a mix of private and government entities, including the recent additions of the Level Crossing Removal Authority (LXRA) and Melbourne Metro Rail Authority (MMRA).

The PTO provides an informal dispute resolution service for customers that complies with both Government and peak body benchmarks. The Federal Government’s *Benchmarks for Industry-based Customer Dispute Resolution* are reflected in all levels of the PTO’s activities, from strategic planning and policy development to complaint handling and engaging with consumers.

The Benchmarks are:

Accessibility | Independence | Fairness | Accountability | Efficiency | Effectiveness

The PTO also identifies, investigates and resolves systemic issues facing the public transport industry. We work constructively with public transport operators to address systemic issues that are identified through complaints to my office. This collaborative approach has the

effect of improving services, reducing complaints and restoring and maintaining public confidence in the public transport system.

Closing the Accessibility Gap

The PTO has made comment on the accessibility of the public transport system in 2013 with our *Closing the Accessibility Gap* report, which provides insight into how customer service delivery can impact the accessibility of public transport.

Our report found that poor customer service and inadequate or ineffective information provisions could be as great a barrier to accessibility as outdated infrastructure. We observed that inconsistencies in operating training, policies and approaches result in increased complexity and subsequent confusion surrounding the overall public transport process. Our report recommended a review of training and auditing practices with the intention of fostering a greater level of standardisation throughout the system.

Addressing the submission questions

Thinking about parts of the journey – 3.3.3 Real time information

In response to section 3.3.3 Real time information, I would suggest further guidance and examination regarding the use of real time information. The current technology that makes use of or integrates real time information appears problematic in certain circumstances, with consumers often citing inaccuracies throughout real time information provision.

I have received complaints suggesting users assume that real time information will provide arrival information of services that is accurate to the minute. Particularly where they are relying on a display or app that shows a countdown to arrival of a service. However it appears that in some cases real time information provides a predictive calculation of a service, rather than an actual depiction of its current location.

The PTO recognises that real time information plays an integral role in the achievement of a truly whole of journey approach. This applies to the “at the stop” stage of the journey, as well as to the interchange, disruption management and journey planning stages. My view is that operators must try to align the provided services with the expectations of users, or else commit to educating consumers as to the actual function of real time information provision.

Thinking about parts of the journey – 3.4.2 Audible announcements

The increased use of audible announcements has enhanced the consumer experience and made travel on modes such as trains and trams more accessible. Similarly, app technology has made onboard information more accurate and targeted. For example the Metro Trains

Stop Here app uses the location of a consumer's smart device to provide push alerts to let them know when they are approaching their train stop.

Thinking about parts of the journey – 3.4.5 Driver and staff training and awareness

I agree that driver behaviour and conduct is a key element when considering the provision of an accessible public transport system. Particularly in the case of bus services where drivers play a major role in both the delivery of the public transport service, as well as on the spot customer service.

Operator training is a major avenue through which accessible practices are developed and implemented. One of the reasons for incidents that compromise the accessibility of a service is the failure or absence of formal practices that instruct staff when assisting passengers with a disability. My office recently investigated a complaint from a consumer with a wheelchair who fell off a bus ramp because the driver did not lower the bus before engaging the ramp. My investigation established that at the time of the incident, the bus company did not have a documented procedure that instructed drivers in the use of the ramp. A documented procedure was subsequently developed and issued to all of the company's bus drivers to ensure safe operation of the ramp in future.

The PTO endorses the approach that training plays a vital role in ensuring that drivers and staff are equipped to provide a positive whole of journey experience. I also agree that there is a role for education and awareness programs to draw the attention of other public transport users to appropriate and courteous travel behaviours.

Along with public transport operators and other passengers, Government policy also plays a role in enabling accessible journeys. People who use wheelchairs and require the assistance of the train driver to board a metropolitan train are limited to travelling in the first carriage. In the past, my office regularly received complaints from consumers who were travelling in wheelchairs and were unable to access the allocated area in the first carriage of metropolitan trains, due to cyclists either in the doorway or in the allocated area.

In 2015, the Victorian Government made changes to the Transport (Compliance and Enforcement)(Conduct on Public Transport) Regulations ("the Regulations") to make it an offence for cyclists to bring a bicycle into a metropolitan train through the first door of the first carriage. The creation of this as a clear offence assisted transport operator staff in enforcing the ban, which had previously been part of the conditions of travel. I have not recorded a complaint about this issue since the Regulations were introduced.

Thinking about parts of the journey – 3.5.5 Platform/stop changes

I strongly agree with the proposition that where late platform or stop changes are made this should be communicated by both audible and visual means. Consumers tell us that they often do not receive the information clearly or have insufficient time to make the necessary stop or platform change. Providing information by both audible and visual means should also be a matter of course where a regular service is changed to an express service.

Thinking about parts of the journey – 3.8.5 Positive use of feedback

In addition to providing consumers with clear and direct channels to provide feedback about their experiences, public transport operators need to ensure that consumer complaints are welcomed, promptly addressed and acted on.

A failure to provide accessible transport can have a significant impact on a person with a disability, and where that failure is supplemented by an unsatisfactory response to their complaint, the consumer may lose confidence in their ability to travel independently on public transport. Therefore a clear, robust and effective complaint handling procedure is an essential part of the consumer journey.

Being open to constructive feedback from key stakeholders, such as the PTO, consumer advocacy services and other dispute resolution bodies should form an essential part of planning and design in the public transport industry - whether it is new infrastructure, training or policy and process development.

Thinking about what does this mean for you? – an effective set of key principles for stakeholders

I hold the view that there should be a key principle which requires a public transport operator to recognise the impact of failures and disruptions on the customer experience and ensure that complaints are heard and addressed.

Not only for the purpose of knowledge capture and journey improvement, but to give consumers a voice and to acknowledge that their experiences and confidence in the system are at the heart of a successful journey.

In most cases, consumers do not have a choice of public transport provider, so it is of vital importance that complaints are received and addressed in a way that restores their confidence in the operator and their own ability to continue to use public transport. We know however that the most vulnerable users of public transport are also less likely to feel comfortable making a complaint about poor service or products. So the process to make a complaint should be accessible and welcoming.

In 2011 we commissioned an independent survey of organisations representing people who were socially, economically, intellectually or physically disadvantaged and who used public transport. We found that people who have no choice but to rely on public transport are often unable, reluctant or unwilling to complain when things go wrong. Reasons for not complaining included communication impairments, a lack of awareness of their right to complain, a fear or lack of trust in authority, concerns that complaint systems are too complex to use and a lack of confidence that the complaint would be resolved.

The challenge for public transport operators is to create an environment in which all consumers feel that their complaints are important and their experiences are valued.

In Victoria, consumers with unresolved public transport complaints have recourse to my office. The public transport operators who are members of the PTO scheme are required to advise consumers about the PTO, and about their right to refer a complaint to the PTO. It is empowering for consumers to have access to a free, quick and independent service that can investigate an operator's response to a complaint and ensure they get a fair outcome.

Thinking about best practice examples

Stakeholder Collaboration

Cooperation between operators in the public transport system is particularly important due to the overlapping of services and responsibilities throughout the industry. My office has observed and in some cases facilitated collaboration between stakeholders when addressing accessibility issues in the public transport system. Through our investigation of systemic issues, we are able to investigate, highlight and resolve complex issues arising from complaints that have the potential to affect more consumers.

My office investigated a complaint regarding the accessibility of a metropolitan railway station, where a visually impaired passenger was unable to effectively access the platform due to the installation of barriers at the entrance. The passenger had been issued with a myki card that was shown to staff upon request and did not require her to touch on or off.

Following the installation of barriers at the railway station, the passenger was required to wait at the barriers for a member of staff to notice them from the office and then open the barriers remotely. During peak times this proved ineffectual as staff were often distracted, resulting in the visually impaired passenger relying on fellow passengers to alert staff to her presence. As a consequence, the customer felt like a burden on other passengers and began to lose confidence in her ability to use public transport.

In the course of our systemic investigation, we consulted both PTV and Metro, as the issue spans fare enforcement as well as station procedures. My office was able to constructively facilitate collaboration between the two operators to address the issue with a focus on fulfilling their obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*.

Both operators reiterated their commitment to ensuring accessibility for all passengers by proposing a suite of changes to address the issue. The proposed changes included leaving the accessible barrier open during peak travel times and further staff training to ensure that their obligations were understood throughout the organisations. There was also an undertaking to feed the outcome back to the network development areas, to ensure that the lessons learnt were incorporated into future station design.

Further information

If you require any further information to support this submission, please contact Barbara Schade Policy and Communication Manager at bschade@ptovic.com.au.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Treasure Jennings'.

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