



Council on the Ageing (COTA) NSW Submission | July 2020
IPART Issues Paper, Review of the Rural and Regional Bus Fares 2021 – 2025

Council on the Ageing (COTA) NSW

COTA NSW is the peak body representing people over 50 living in NSW. We are an independent, non-partisan, consumer-based, non-government organisation. We work with politicians, policy makers, providers of services and products as well as media representatives to make sure wherever possible our constituents' views are heard and their needs met.

Submission Objective

COTA NSW supports the right of older people to access public and community transport across metropolitan, regional and rural NSW. Accessible public transport enables older people to readily meet their needs for health and community services as well as participate in and contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of their community. A core tenant of accessible public transport is affordability. As such, this submission focuses on three key areas -

1. Low-cost fares
2. Accessible fare, timetable and route information
3. On-demand services for older people in rural and regional NSW.

In realising these objectives, the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal's (IPART) review is an important step toward accessible public transport for older people in NSW.

Low-Cost Fares

Low-cost fares are an essential component of accessible public transport for older Australians particularly those on low and fixed incomes. There is a direct and proven link between the affordability of public transport and usage. A paper published by the Tourism & Transport Forum (TTF) states that “the price of tickets and patronage levels are strongly linked.”¹ Moreover, COTA NSW surveys with regional and rural respondents have consistently identified cost as a barrier to getting out and about.² Therefore, an increase in price for seniors will reduce usage. The current Regional Excursion Daily (RED) tickets, available for NSW Seniors Card holders, should remain capped of \$2.50 per day. This includes unlimited local bus travel daily. It is important to keep parity with the concessions for seniors available in other states and territories which, in some cases, provide free travel during off peak periods.

Accessible Fare Information

Accessible fare and transport information is essential for user friendly regional and rural public transport. COTA NSW's 2015 50+ Report on Access to Information showed that older people in NSW have diverse preferences for receiving information.³ While many older people

¹ Tourism and Transport Forum on Meeting the Funding Challenges of Public Transport, p. 31.

² COTA NSW 50+ Report on Getting Around 2015, p. 8.

³ COTA NSW 50+ Report on Getting Around 2015, p. 33.

increasingly are embracing a range of digital applications, they remain the least digitally included population cohort with many continuing to require non-digital options.⁴ As such, there should continue to be both digital and non-digital ways to access information about services, fares and updates and to purchase tickets. This includes email, face to face, internet, printed material and telephone. It is particularly important that eligible Seniors Card holders are made aware of the 'RED ticket' option when using public transport services. It will also be important to invest in support for older people not yet familiar with digital interfaces to learn new systems. Consumer groups like COTA NSW, with funding, can assist with this.

On-demand services

The challenge of distance and population density requires innovative models of transport provision. The current trials by NSW Transport of on-demand shuttle buses in eight locations and the driverless smart shuttle in Sydney Olympic Park have the ability to use technology and flexibility that will provide responsive and adaptable public transport options. If these trials prove successful, expansion of these services to regional and isolated metropolitan areas would be encouraged. Some local governments, such as Mosman Council, have sought to fill the breach of limited bus or train services by introducing shuttle buses that can be tracked using a smart phone app and covering routes to commonly accessed locations or services. Possible replication and grant subsidisation may prove viable for those areas not currently serviced by public and private bus operators.

Older People in Rural and Regional NSW

Older people are an important constituency in rural and regional NSW for several reasons.

According to the Regional Australia Institute, the ageing of our rural communities is perhaps the most significant change of the last 30 years with a third of older Australians now living outside major cities, and rural and regional areas are home to "more elderly people" (65+) than any other age group.⁵ The older population in rural and regional NSW also makes up a considerable portion of public transport users. Data from IPART's Issues Paper shows that seniors and pensioners constitute the second largest bracket of bus service user.⁶ It is clear that any discussion around reform and change of rural and regional public transport should

⁴ https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TLS_ADII_Report-2019_Final_web_.pdf.

⁵ National Rural Health Alliance Ltd, <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/book/demography>.

⁶ IPART Review of Regional and Rural Bus Fares 2021 – 2025, p. 8.

strongly consider accommodating the older population.

Older people living in rural and regional NSW also experience significant disadvantage with transport options in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts. According to COTA NSW's 2015 50+ report on 'Getting Around', 19% of respondents noted that living in an "isolated area" was a barrier to getting around.⁷ There is increasing pressure for people as they age to reduce driving but this can only be achieved if affordable, useable options are available. IPART must ensure that cost does not become another barrier to access.

There is a lack of affordable transport alternatives for older people in rural and regional NSW. Unlike metropolitan areas, rural and regional NSW residents do not have the same access to alternative transportation, such as taxis, cycling or other forms of private transport. It is true that a large portion of people over 75 hold their diverse license and rely on private vehicle transportation. However, it is also true that older people may choose to limit their or give up driving altogether.

"I hate my dependence on my car, especially as I no longer enjoy or want to drive."

Nowra consumer reference group member

In these cases, public transport must remain affordable to ensure its viability among older people.

A lack affordable access public transport in rural and regional areas will exacerbate loneliness and isolation. According to the 2015 COTA NSW 50+ Report, 20% of older people in regional NSW use trains and buses as the primary form of transport and 35 use community transport to get to "social activities".⁸ These older people run the risk of isolation, loneliness and poor health if they are cut off from their communities through unaffordable bus fares.

⁷ COTA NSW 50+ Report on Getting Around 2015, p. 8.

⁸ COTA NSW 50+ Report on Getting Around 2015, p. 63 & 73.

Recommendations

- That Regional Excursion Daily (RED) tickets, available for NSW Seniors Card holders, should remain capped of \$2.50 per day. This includes unlimited local bus travel daily.
- That fare information is available through a variety of both digital and non-digital formats.
- That any trials or permanent implementation of on-demand bus services in regional and rural areas should allow for discounted fares for NSW Seniors Card Holders and Pensioners Concession Card.