



**COTA NSW Submission
July 2016**

Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services

***Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and
disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW***

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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.

COTA NSW submission

This submission focuses specifically on the needs of older people living in rural and regional NSW - particularly the needs of those who are also disadvantaged. Our submission refers to the findings of our 2015 **COTA Consumer reference group consultations** held in Nowra, the Central Coast, Coffs Harbour, Armidale, Liverpool and Sydney and the results of our **2015 COTA NSW survey** that investigated how people get around their communities and neighbourhoods.

We wanted to know more about the ways the built environment and access to various transport options either helped or hindered a person's ability to get around across a variety of communities in NSW. The consultations were not just about trains, buses and cars. We also wanted to ask about the ways that the built environment influenced a person's ability to access transport or walk from place to place. What we found was quite a different situation for older people living in rural areas compared to those who lived in the city. With few public transport alternatives and dwindling community transport resources, older people in rural and regional areas are mostly dependent on a car to get from place to place. Those who have to give up driving or who don't own a car at all can become significantly isolated and more disadvantaged as they age.

Older people in rural and regional areas are transport disadvantaged

It is no surprise that transport in rural areas in NSW, with scattered, low density populations is a challenge. While regional centres in NSW usually offer some public transport in the form of a regular bus services, smaller towns and villages are often limited to community transport providers. In addition, there are also limited bus services between the towns, villages and regional centres and limited train services available to and from regional centres and major metropolitan areas. Roads are often not sealed and there are often no curb and guttering or footpaths.

According to Nutley (2003), public transport in rural and remote areas of Australia has been over looked by researchers and policy makers with the assumption that most people drive a car. However this doesn't take into account the fact that older people often limit their driving or give up driving altogether as they get older and that there are a proportion of older people who don't drive at all. These older people run the risk of isolation, loneliness and poor health if they are cut off from their communities.

The **COTA NSW 2015 survey and consumer consultations** investigated how older people got around their communities. In the survey we took the broadest possible view, asking questions about people's primary form of transport, the types of public and community transport options available to them and also the accessibility of the built environment around them. The survey found that transport accessibility was inextricably linked to the built environment.

Most of our survey respondents across NSW indicated that their preferred mode of transport was driving. Almost all of the respondents (96% of the 3,983 respondents state-wide) had a drivers licence at 75 years of age and even at 85 years of age, 85% still retained their licence. We found that older people living in rural and regional NSW were much more reliant on a car compared to their city cousins. Only 10% of respondents from rural and regional towns said they used buses or trains to get around.

As far as public transport was concerned, 85% of respondents in the Sydney East/Inner suburbs indicated they used public transport compared to 15% of those on the North Coast and Western regions. Even among those who had public transport to use, many – almost 50% - had issues with it. Of these, 22% reported it was under available; 16% reported they'd encountered unexpected changes to the timetable and 13% said it was hard to get public transport in the first place.

The survey revealed that the challenges of getting around for older people in rural and regional areas were particularly difficult. For those without a car, or those older people who have given up driving, there were few transport alternatives and often poor community infrastructure (such as a lack of footpaths) that would allow older people to get out and about easily and safely.



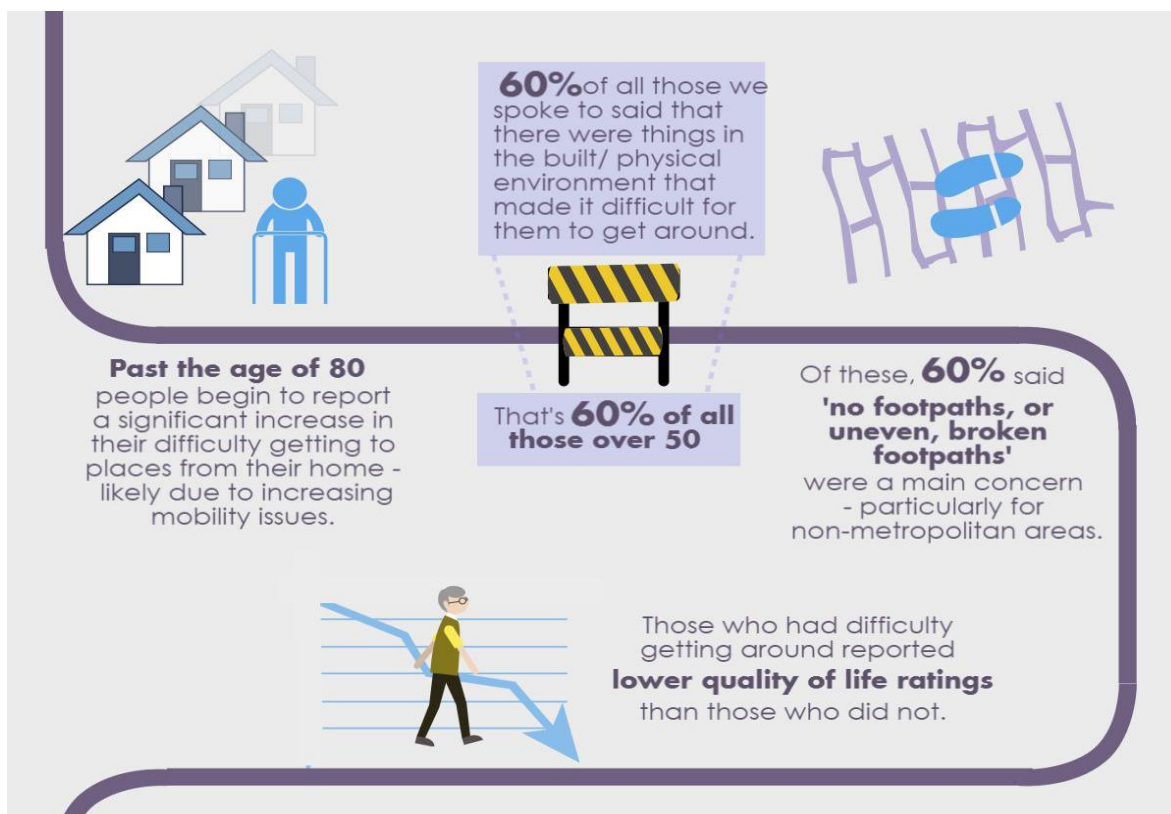
The built environment

If we walk from place to place, to the shops or to public transport hubs, we need good urban infrastructure such as footpaths, seating, lighting and other amenities such as public toilets. If we drive, we rely on accessible parking areas close to shops and good drop off and pick up points at hospital and doctor's offices.

The COTA NSW survey not only revealed a lack of transport options for older people living in rural and regional areas, but also factors in the built environment that made getting around even more difficult. One of the most important factors reported by our survey respondents and consumer reference group members was a lack of footpaths, or uneven or broken footpaths. They also cited a lack of toilets, lighting and seating in public places, including bus stops, parks and train stations, as major concerns.

Not surprisingly, we found that people living in rural and regional areas were more affected by a lack of infrastructure in the built environment. These deficiencies, combined with a lack of good public transport options in many rural and regional communities, further reduced people's ability to get around.

COTA's recent survey and consultations reveal that when driving is not an option, the ability to get around depends on a variety of factors: not just on access to public and community transport alternatives, but also on the availability of good public infrastructure such as wide, even footpaths and seating, as well as access to information about a community's specific transport options.

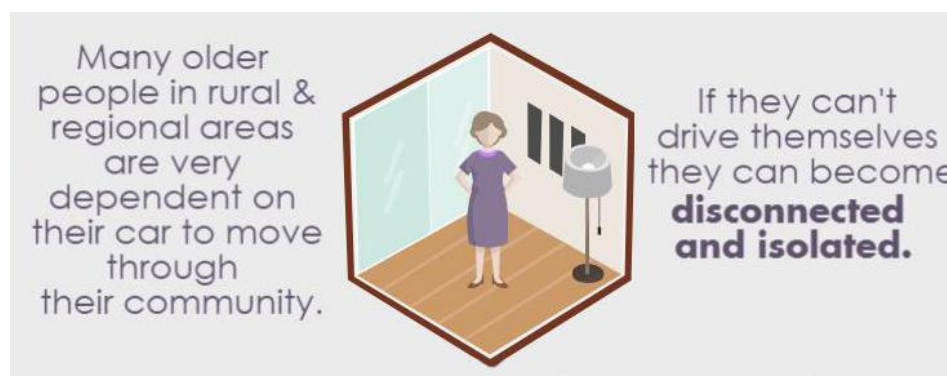


Issues

Older people in rural areas are dependent on their car to get around

In rural areas the car offers convenience and independence that cannot be matched by other means of transport. Many older people who drive consider a car as essential to their ability to get around and their quality of life. Eventually, however, many older people choose to limit their driving or give up driving altogether and then find there are faced with few transport alternatives.

Lack of access to transport can lead to social isolation



“Good access to transport makes the difference between being an independent active member of the community, or living a restricted and dependent life in which ordinary activities such as shopping, visiting or being visited by friends and getting to health

appointments becomes difficult or even impossible. Social isolation and depression then become a real risk, especially for people who live alone. “

(NSW Committee on Ageing 2000)

It cannot be assumed that all older people have a car in rural and regional areas and that there is no need to provide public and community transport. While a much higher proportion of older people in rural and regional areas use a car as their main form of transport than do older people in metropolitan Sydney, there are still older people who don't drive or can't drive and those who find that as they age they have to give up driving. It is important that there are other transport alternatives available to them to keep them connected to family, friends and essential services. Providing those services can help ensure that older people can age in place in their communities and avoid premature entry into residential care. The older people in rural and regional areas that we spoke to in our consultations feared that they would be cut off from friends, family and services if they couldn't drive anymore.

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

Nowra consumer reference group member

Limited transport options

All of the consumer reference groups outside the Sydney metropolitan area complained about the lack of frequent bus services around their regional towns and cities and the lack of both train and bus services, both to and from regional towns and to major metropolitan areas such as Sydney. In many cases there was either one service per day, or one service early in the morning and one returning in the evening. For the rural groups another major issue was transport to and from their town to other towns nearby, as well as regular connections to other cities such as Sydney or Brisbane by air or by train. For example, if travelling by bus from Brisbane to Armidale, the bus arrives in Armidale in the early hours of the morning. Getting from the airport to home is made even more challenging living in a rural area out of town. One participant who lives in the town of Guyra said there was only one bus service to Armidale was at 8 am and another one returning at 6.50 pm, making it a long day.

Affordability

The cost of transport can be a significant barrier to older people's mobility, particularly for those older people on a low income who are further disadvantaged by living in a rural or regional area. For older people living in rural and regional areas where services such as hospitals are scarce and access to concession fares in regional areas is inconsistent, the affordability of transport can become a significant factor in determining an older person's health and their wellbeing.

The cost of running a car on a low fixed income such as an age or disability pension can often mean that older people in regional areas cannot afford the upkeep and cost of driving. Given that older people living in rural and regional areas are dependent on their car as their major form of transport and have little access to alternative forms of transport, efforts should be made to support those older people who are significantly disadvantaged, with the cost of running their car, which are often their only means of remaining connected to family, friends, social activities and essential services. This support could be provided by way of a petrol subsidy or a discount petrol card. That same subsidy could be provided to carers or community volunteers using their own cars to transport people to and from appointments.

Not enough community transport

In rural and regional areas in particular, gaps in public transport provision are often filled by local Government or community based community transport services. These services are heavily used by older people and people with a disability, who often find it difficult to access regular public transport services.

Our reference group members, particularly those in the regional towns we visited, spoke about the importance of community transport to their communities. For those who didn't drive, community transport was often their only means of getting around, but the general complaint was that there wasn't enough of it. In addition, there was much confusion about whether existing services would continue to be funded. Certainly there appears to be a clear need to be met, but funding has not significantly increased and services cannot keep up with demand.

"We get that it's not practical to run buses out here all the time, but what we need is more community transport. "

Armidale consumer reference group member

The ageing of the NSW population, particularly in rural and regional areas, combined with limited public transport options, means community transport should be considered as an essential transport option for older people in rural and regional areas, keeping them connected to their local communities. In addition, recognising that many older people give up driving as they age, it is essential, particularly in rural communities, to ensure that all older people have access to community transport - not just a narrowly defined group of frail elderly.

With the transfer of HACC services to the Commonwealth, community transport needs to be reinvented and considered as an essential service provided by Transport for NSW for all older people and people with disabilities, particularly those living in rural and regional areas. Funding should be based on geographical location, relative disadvantage and access to alternative forms of transport.

Inflexible bus services

Bus contracts are often inflexible, meaning that the contractor must follow a timetable and fixed stops and specific areas of operation. This unfortunately means that more creative use of buses, such as pick up and drop off services and utilization of buses during off peak hours during the day for other groups such as seniors, are not available. Policies that support flexible transport alternatives and compensate regional bus contractors for responding to local consumers' needs should be encouraged.

Finding information is often difficult

Many people we spoke to told us it was often a challenge to find information about what was available in their local communities. Many complained that everything was 'going online' and it was difficult to find printed information anymore. Yet providing easy access to information about alternative transport options is a low cost solution and often helps people plan getting around when they can no longer drive a car.

Community attitudes make a difference

Our consultations also revealed the difference that community attitudes can make to someone's confidence getting out and about. For example, considerate staff at transport hubs, bus drivers who wait for older passengers to be safely seated before driving, and shops and service staff who are courteous and helpful all help promote a positive environment that encourages older people to feel comfortable and confident to continue to get out and about in their communities.

Accessibility of current public transport services in rural and regional NSW

It's not just about Sydney

"In rural and regional areas of NSW, regular, reliable and inexpensive public transport options are required as a feasible alternative to the car for many trips, especially for disadvantaged groups, and to assist promotion of these regions as viable alternatives to Sydney for growth, development and investment."

(LGSA 2012, p.7)

Whole of journey accessibility

The NSW Disability Action Plan 2012-2017 provides an excellent framework for accessible transport in NSW. 'Whole of journey accessibility' offers 'barrier free access to the pedestrian environment, the different modes of transport and the road network' (DAP 2012-2017). For example, a typical journey might involve looking up timetable information, travelling to a bus stop, waiting, getting on and off the bus and then walking to your destination. The concept of whole of journey accessibility is supported by COTA consultations and research that shows the need for a seamless relationship between the various transport modes and the built environment. That in turn requires the cooperation and coordination of both state and local government to include accessible transport goals in Department of Planning's regional plans, Transport for NSW regional transport plans and local government planning and reporting mechanisms.

Access and equity

The NSW Government's funding of transport services must include a focus on accessibility and equity across NSW, particularly in regional and rural areas, which are significantly disadvantaged because of a lack of access to public and other forms of transport. Given the fact that there has been a long established migration of older people out of Sydney to regional towns and centres along the eastern seaboard of NSW and into inland towns (sea change and tree change) COTA NSW believes it is essential, from an access and equity perspective, to ensure that regional development plans include transport objectives that improve the accessibility of transport options in rural and regional areas, particularly for older people who often need to give up driving later in life and therefore need good transport alternatives.

The Integrated Planning & Reporting (IP&R) Framework

Local councils play an important role in delivering the community infrastructure such as footpaths, community transport services and information about availability of transport options that aim to keep people connected and involved in their communities. The Integrated Planning & Reporting Framework is the principal planning and reporting tool for NSW local councils. Incorporating accessible transport goals within a Council's planning

framework can ensure that the transport and community infrastructure needed by rural and regional communities are addressed at a local level.

Strategies to improve access

Ensure that the transport needs of older people living in rural and regional NSW are integrated into Transport for NSW's Regional Transport Plans.

Accessible transport that meets the needs of older people and people with disabilities requires the cooperation and coordination of both state and local government to ensure that accessible transport goals are incorporated into the Department of Planning's regional plans, Transport for NSW regional transport plans and local government planning and reporting mechanisms.

Ensure regional development plans and council community development plans provide community infrastructure to improve the accessibility and walkability of local neighbourhoods and communities.

Transport needs to be supported by good community infrastructure such as walkways, footpaths, good seating, lighting and toilets in public spaces. Improving the walkability of communities encourages healthy ageing and has many benefits including social inclusion, independence, health environmental benefits for the whole community.

In rural and regional communities ensure funding for community transport is adequately funded to 'fill the gaps' in regional transport where public transport cannot meet local needs.

Community transport is well placed to meet the needs of older people in rural and regional communities, as it can offer flexible responses, based on local need. Community transport goals should properly be integrated into Transport master plan and regional transport plans.

Expand the eligibility criteria for community transport.

Community transport has traditionally been available for frail elderly, under narrow HACC criteria. COTA NSW strongly recommends that the eligibility criteria for community transport be expanded to include all older people over the aged of 65, particularly those who are disadvantaged, such as age pensioners.

Expand the Transport for Health Program

All health related transport needs (that currently takes up much of community transport resources) should be separately funded and coordinated with existing community based health programs through the Health Ministry.

Provide a legislative and regulatory environment that encourages a variety of flexible transport options.

Legislation and regulations around rural and regional bus contracts and community transport funding needs to be reviewed to encourage, not impede, more flexible transport options in rural and regional areas.

Provide more frequent Countrylink services between major regional cities and metropolitan areas

Considering the ageing of rural and regional populations, combined with the NSW Government and Regional Development Council's aim of promoting growth in EvoCity towns such as Wagga, Tamworth and Dubbo, a well-developed Countrylink service is essential. Reliable, regular train services that link rural and regional towns and cities to metropolitan areas was identified as a major issue in our consultations. Although in some cases trains have been replaced by bus services, our constituents told us that they found buses to be far less accessible and convenient to trains for longer distance travel. Older people who do not drive living in rural and regional areas are highly dependent on Countrylink to get around.

Ensure Transport for NSW Senior Regional Transport Officers are properly resourced and funded.

Transport for NSW Senior Regional Officers are responsible for developing partnerships between transport providers, integrating transport modes, reducing transport duplication, making greater use of existing transport resources, increasing transport options, improving access to community activities to reduce social isolation and provide flexible services that meet individual needs. These officers are well placed in local regional and rural communities to ensure resources are targeted to local need and older people and those who are disadvantaged are a priority and are linked to transport services when they are needed.

Support to assist with the costs of private transport

COTA NSW research confirms that for the majority of older people living in rural and regional areas their main form of transport is their car. From an equity perspective, if public or other forms of transport are not as available to them as to their city counterparts, it is important to consider alternatives related to supporting car use. Many older drivers in rural areas are living on the age pension and can struggle with the cost of running a car. Those who need to, or who are forced to give up driving for medical reasons, can become isolated.

1. Volunteer Uber Style App based Driving Program

An Uber style app could utilise low cost technology to coordinate volunteer drivers with older people in need in local communities. The drivers could either use the older person's vehicle or their own. A petrol subsidy could be provided to the volunteer drivers. This has been considered as part of the community transport options in some communities, but the

use of new technology could mean that the coordination and planning of such a program could become easier.

2. Provide a petrol subsidy for older people living in rural and regional NSW.

Recognising the fact that older people in rural and regional areas are far more reliant on their car to get around than their city counterparts, COTA NSW supports the idea of a petrol subsidy for those who own a car in areas that are poorly serviced by public transport. Older people don't usually drive long distances, but may need help with trips around town or with the 10-20 km drives to town. The subsidy could be provided to those older people whose primary form of income is the age pension.

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