

Accessibility Planning in Regional Australia

Discussion Paper by the Bus Industry Confederation



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Introduction

Accessibility planning is key to ensuring individuals are able to engage in their own communities, and governments are able to deliver services to those who need them (Lucas 2004). In recent years, the lack of an overarching policy framework for regional accessibility has led to inequitable outcomes for regional Australians, facilitated by the inefficient use of regional transport resources. The urgent need for reform in this area has recently been recognised by the Australian Transport Council (ATC, 2 May 2008), The National Transport Commission (NTC 2008) and in the establishment of a House of Representatives inquiry into Regional and Local Community Infrastructure.

This paper provides practical advice in how to “promote social inclusion by connecting remote and disadvantaged communities and increasing accessibility to the transport network for all Australians” (ATC 2008). This aim is underpinned by the principle of “equitable access for all users” (ATC 2008) not only to transport services themselves, but to the social opportunities and connectivity that transport services provide.

By viewing regional transport through an *accessibility* lens, we can see the necessity of moving beyond the ‘silo’ funding approach to a consistent, outcome focused planning framework. Through addressing the fragmentation of government responsibilities, we can re-connect passenger transport service delivery with its core values of meeting personal accessibility needs and fostering social inclusion (Stanley & Stanley 2004).

Practically speaking, the Bus Industry Confederation of Australia recommends the establishment of Regional Accessibility Planning Councils throughout Australia, to achieve the “effective integration and linkage of Australia’s transport system with urban and regional planning at every level of government” (ATC 2008).

Prior Research and Case Studies

Following the work of the UK Social Exclusion Unit, The Bus Industry Confederation (BIC) has supported research by its member organisation BusVIC into the extent of the passenger transport inefficiencies and inequities in regional Australia. In conjunction with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Monash University and the Victorian Department of Infrastructure, BusVIC has conducted case studies and developed recommendations for institutional reform (Stanley & Stanley 2004; Currie et al 2007).

The primary recommendation to arise from this research is the establishment of Regional Accessibility Planning Councils, and the development of a Regional Accessibility Plan for each region. The implementation of Regional Accessibility Plans aims to close accessibility ‘gaps’ through increasing the productivity of existing passenger transport resources and targeting future investment to where it is most needed.

Regional Accessibility Planning Councils

Local Governments should be provided with institutional ownership over the identification of accessibility needs, and an institutional framework to effectively manage change. To this end, Local Governments linked through transport activity should be assisted to establish Regional Accessibility Planning Councils (Regional Councils) that will:

- undertake transport needs assessments within their regions
- identify priorities for improving regional accessibility, particularly for people facing transport disadvantage
- work with various transport service providers to improve accessibility throughout each region
- develop and implement a Regional Accessibility Plan

Each Regional Council should be funded to appoint a Regional Transport Resource Coordinator (Coordinator) to carry out the practical aspects of research and the development of the Regional Accessibility Plan.

Involvement of Key Stakeholders

Learning from the BusVIC Warrnambool case study and subsequent policy implementation, it is recommended that key stakeholder groups and transport service providers are represented on each Regional Council (Stanley 2004). The inclusion of private and community sector stakeholders in this way is aimed at ensuring the Regional Councils remain active, grounded and outcome focused.

Overview of the roles for each level of Government

Federal Government

- approve a geographic system of Regional Accessibility Planning Councils based on regional transport activity
- provide a consistent policy framework for Regional Accessibility Planning Councils to make regional improvements in accessibility through productivity gains in passenger transport
- jointly fund with State Governments a Regional Transport Coordinator position for each Regional Council
- provide joint funding with State Governments for significant regional infrastructure improvement projects
- review the nation-wide operation of the Regional Accessibility Planning Council system to determine regional accessibility improvements and ensure the social inclusion agenda is being met equitably throughout Australia

State Government

- propose a geographic system of Regional Accessibility Planning Councils based on regional transport activity for Federal approval
- consolidate State Government responsibility for coordinating the system of Regional Accessibility Planning Councils in a single department
- jointly fund with the Federal Government a Regional Transport Resource Coordinator position for each Regional Council
- provide joint funding with the Australian Government for significant regional infrastructure improvement projects
- review Regional Accessibility Plans to ensure intra-State consistency
- receive, approve and fund tenders for service delivery on advice from Regional Councils

Local Government

- cooperate with State Governments determining regional transport activity catchments to form the geographic basis for Regional Accessibility Planning Councils
- establish Regional Accessibility Planning Councils comprised of local government, community and passenger transport sector representatives
- oversee the development of a Regional Accessibility Plan to:
- improve the effectiveness of current service provision from a personal accessibility perspective

- advise State and Federal Governments of investment priorities to improve regional accessibility

Employ a Regional Transport Resource Coordinator to:

- consult broadly with stakeholders and the regional community
- analyse regional transport resources and accessibility needs
- deliver productivity gains and efficient service outcomes by drawing on existing regional transport resources
- identify priorities for regional investment and initiatives

Submit accessibility improvement programs and report their outcomes to State and Federal Governments

Improving Regional Accessibility

The following is a practical step by step guide to developing a Regional Accessibility Plan through the creation of Regional Accessibility Planning Councils, the appointment of Regional Transport Resource Coordinators, and subsequent regional analysis and planning. Five broad steps have been identified:

1. Establish Regional Accessibility Planning Councils
2. Appoint Regional Transport Resource Coordinators
3. Conduct Regional Accessibility Needs Analysis
4. Create Regional Accessibility Plan
5. Reporting and Accountability

Identify transport activity regions and establish Regional Accessibility Planning Councils

Responsible entities: Federal, State and Local Governments

State Governments should determine geographic boundaries for each Regional Accessibility Planning Council (Regional Council), in consultation with Local Governments. While regional transport activity data would ideally be used to determine equitable local government groupings, existing Regional Road Groups or the new Regional Development Australia committees could also be used.

The Federal Government should approve the geographic allocation of Regional Councils to ensure broad consistency of transport activity catchments throughout Australia.

Once transport activity catchment boundaries are identified, Local Governments should identify representatives for each Regional Council, along with a single representative to take a leadership role, drawn from the Local Government responsible for a regional transport activity 'hub'.

Appointment of Regional Transport Resource Coordinators

Responsible entities: Federal Government and Regional Councils

The Federal Government should set consistent selection criteria and budgetary allocation for Regional Transport Resource Coordinator (Coordinator) roles throughout Australia.

Each Regional Council will subsequently be able to apply for Federal Government funding to employ a suitable candidate as Coordinator. Each Coordinator will be accountable directly to their Regional Council and through it the Federal and applicable State Government.

Conduct Regional Accessibility Needs Analysis

Responsible entities: Federal Government, Regional Councils and Coordinator

The Federal Government should approve a uniform set of guidelines to ensure comparability of data for:

- minimum data collection and reporting requirements
- minimum and maximum community engagement timeframes
- data analysis and reporting

Community and stakeholder engagement activities required for the regional needs analysis should be funded jointly by Federal and State Governments as part of the Regional Council budget.

The Regional Council should identify regional accessibility and passenger transport stakeholder groups, beginning with a small group of service delivery operators and passenger transport users and broadening across the community to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis.

The Coordinator should at first conduct an audit on behalf of the Regional Council, using at least the minimum data collection requirements to determine:

- existing regional passenger transport resources
- current regional transport activity
- 'gaps' in regional accessibility

Regional passenger transport resource and activity audit

The audit of resources and activity could be conducted through a series of interviews and focus groups, dealing with stakeholder groups separately. The audit aims to develop an overview of the existing situation, including:

- the demographics of the region, and projections where they are available
- the number, type, condition and utilisation of passenger transport vehicles in the region
- the capacity of the regional passenger transport workforce
- an overview of regional passenger transport activity, including:
 - passenger transport patronage numbers and profile
 - passenger transport route coverage, times and frequency
 - identification of regional transport activity hubs, nodes and connections
 - travel behaviour and accessibility needs of targeted groups within the community
 - under utilised vehicles and services

Service Delivery Operators

A broad range of passenger transport service delivery operators should be identified, including Public and Community Transport, Taxi, and School Bus operators. Where possible, it is desirable to interview operators directly to gain an understanding of their operating resources, capacity and constraints. Information should be verified with evidence such as route maps, timetables, vehicle inspections etc where practicable.

Example: Bus Drivers

Vital information can be collected both directly and indirectly regarding bus drivers. For example, the Warnambool case study (Stanley & Stanley 2004) did the following:

- collected information regarding bus drivers from passenger transport users through 'on board surveys' and associated service providers (hospital staff, community sector representatives etc) through interviews
- surveyed bus drivers directly

Other stakeholder groups

There are a range of methods available for gleaning information from passenger transport stakeholder groups. Where resources allow, focus groups might be used to gain both quantitative and qualitative information about travel behaviour. For larger groups and to target specific travel hubs, travel surveys are recommended as a practicable way of engaging stakeholders.

It is recommended that the Federal Government set a series of minimum and best-practice guidelines for community engagement of this type, ideally learning from the innovative practices being applied in Western Australia.

A baseline travel questionnaire (appendix A) should be developed for passenger transport users, and can be conducted through 'on board survey' techniques. Particular attention should be paid to engaging transport disadvantaged groups, by tailoring and targeting community engagement activities. Groups experiencing transport disadvantage are commonly identified as young people; seniors; those with low income; young mothers with children; people with a disability and rurally isolated people. Examples of consultation methods used to engage transport disadvantaged people from the Warnambool case study (Stanley & Stanley 2004) include:

Young People

- discussions held with four classes of senior students from two major secondary schools displaying different demographic characteristics
- students answered a short questionnaire (appendix A)
- qualitative interviews with a broad range of people interested in youth transport, including:
- regional access officer
- Local Government youth officer
- school bus coordinator
- learning and employment network director
- key figures within the major regional tertiary education institution
- students from a major tertiary institution surveyed (see appendix B), and further qualitative discussions held on a group basis

Older People

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- households of older people completed a travel questionnaire, distributed through a random letter box drop
- further consultation was recommended through utilising community facilities catering specifically to older people

People with a Disability

- travel diaries covering one week were distributed through a community facility catering to people with a disability
- information was sought through interviews with service delivery managers

Low Income Groups

- discussions were held with the residents' committee and project facilitators of a community renewal project

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

- information was sought through interviews with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and health sector representatives

Rurally Isolated People

- engaging people isolated by distance was noted as particularly difficult
- discussions were held with people working with rurally isolated groups

Further desirable groups to include in a passenger transport audit include major employers, the regional tourism sector and a number of households reflecting the diversity of the broader community.

Regional Accessibility Needs Analysis

Following the audit of regional passenger transport resources and activities, an Accessibility Needs Analysis is conducted across the region. This is the primary task of the Regional Council, and will inform future planning recommendations.

The Accessibility Needs Analysis is based on and expands further the information gleaned during the resource and activity audit.

Stakeholder groups

It will be necessary to involve a broad cross section of the community to develop an accurate impression of accessibility need. Rather than focusing on passenger transport users, the emphasis at this stage should be on determining accessibility needs of the community more generally, in order to compliment the previously gained information about travel behaviour.

As noted above, particular attention should be paid to those experiencing transport disadvantage, however it is also vital to build an integrated understanding of broad community needs.

Given broad Federal guidelines, the exact community engagement timeframes will depend largely on the region in question, including geographic, demographic and population size constraints.

Community engagement activities

The RTRC should be given scope to use an appropriate range of community engagement activities, as noted above. Attention should be paid to the inclusion of marginalised groups within the community. Survey and interview questions should be informed by the quality and quantity of data able to be collected during the previous audit process.

Analysis

Once adequate data has been collected, the Coordinator should conduct a Regional Accessibility Needs Analysis, marrying the audit data with the overview of accessibility need to identify:

- accessibility 'gaps'
- productivity gains to be made with little to no investment
- future investment priorities
- areas in which service delivery contracts may be restricting accessibility
- perverse regulatory incentives and outcomes

Create Regional Accessibility Plans

Responsible entity: Regional Council

Given the analysis of accessibility needs, gaps and potential, it is the responsibility of each Regional Council to develop a plan to improve the productivity of existing resources and further identify priorities for increased investment from Local, State and possibly Federal Governments.

The plan should:

- frame passenger transport service delivery issues in the context of personal accessibility need
- identify accessibility 'gaps' and prioritise their closure
- highlight productivity gains to be made with little to no investment, and propose a strategy for reorganising regional resources to better reflect accessibility need
- develop accessibility improvement programs for State and possibly Federal Funding
- advise State Governments on possible improvements to modes of regional passenger transport service delivery
- recommend amendments to future service delivery contracts and regulations
-

Further, each Regional Council might be well placed to feed in to the auditing task of Infrastructure Australia by highlighting 'nationally significant' regional accessibility infrastructure.

Reporting and Accountability

Responsible entities: RAPC and Federal Government

The Federal Government should approve uniform reporting and accountability criteria for each Regional Council. Ideally, there should be ample opportunity for feedback from Regional Councils and Coordinators, with the information used to inform future developments in the program at both State and Federal levels.

A triennial report of regional improvements in accessibility, budgetary savings and social and environmental benefits should be developed by State Governments and compiled by the Federal Government.

References

- Australian Transport Council, 2 May 2008, Joint Communique,
<http://www.atcouncil.gov.au/communique/files/27thATC-Communique.pdf>, accessed 5 May 2008
- Currie, G., Stanley, J., & Stanley, J. (eds), 2007, *No Way to Go: Transport and Social Disadvantage in Australian Communities*, Monash University EPress, Victoria
- Lucas, K. (ed), 2004, *Running on Empty: Transport, Social Exclusion and Environmental Justice*, The Policy Press, Bristol
- National Transport Commission, February 2008, *National Transport Plan*, Volume 2,
<http://www.ntc.gov.au/filemedia/Publications/NationalTransportPlanVol2Mar2008.pdf>, accessed 2 April 2008
- Stanley, J., & Stanley, J., 2004, *Improving Public Transport to Meet Community Needs: a Warrnambool Case Study*, Report prepared for the Bus Association of Victoria and Warrnambool Bus Lines

Appendix C –

Extracts from the Australian Transport Council Joint Communiqué, 2 May 2008, Canberra

A NATIONAL TRANSPORT POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA

Australians want a national transport system that is safe and secure, efficient, competitive and integrated, sustainable and reliable and which supports and enhances the nation's social, environmental and economic prosperity.

This will be achieved when:

...

- People can access employment and the services and community resources they need safely, reliably and routinely without undue delay because of urban congestion or lack of public transport; and

...

ATC agreed that the National Transport Policy would be guided by the vision, objectives and principles set out at Attachment A to this communiqué. Ministers agreed to the arrangements set out in the following paragraphs.

ATTACHMENT A

Vision for Australia's Transport Future

Australia requires a safe, secure, efficient, reliable and integrated national transport system that supports and enhances our nation's economic development and social and environmental well-being.

Transport Policy Objectives

To achieve this vision, Australia's Transport Ministers commit to the following policy objectives:

SOCIAL

To promote social inclusion by connecting remote and disadvantaged communities and increasing accessibility to the transport network for all Australians

...

...

INTEGRATION

Promote effective and efficient integration and linkage of Australia's transport system with urban and regional planning at every level of government and with international transport systems

Transport Policy Principles

Australia's transport policy framework is underpinned by the following guiding principles:

...

CUSTOMER

Customer – focussed. Equitable access for all users

Appendix D –

Extract from the National Transport Policy Framework, February 2008

3. NATIONAL TRANSPORT POLICY FRAMEWORK AND GOVERNANCE

...

In committing to operating within this framework, governments recognise that the Commonwealth, States and Territories are each sovereign governments with specific authority and responsibility for transport policy and planning in the respective jurisdictions.

It is also recognised that each government manages a component of the national transport system and that an appropriate level of integration and national consistency is vital to the delivery of outcomes required from that system.

3.2 Redefining the National Model

Central to this is the need to clearly define what is meant by 'national' in relation to transport. Currently, governments determine that an issue is 'national' if it crosses a border, or interfaces with the Commonwealth's constitutional responsibilities. An alternative view, and one that reflects industry and community opinion, is that national is something that is important to a significant proportion of Australians (be it directly, e.g. urban congestion or indirectly, e.g. productivity of economically important supply chains), irrespective of the level of government formally responsible. Addressing a national challenge in this sense would require a united approach by all levels of government.

A national transport matter is one that materially impacts on the national economy or society. It is not defined by state borders or Constitutional responsibilities.