



Submission to the Service Experience and Planning Team  
Transport for NSW

## **Onboarding Mobility Devices**

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## Who is the Physical Disability Council of NSW?

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) is the peak body representing people with physical disabilities across New South Wales. This includes people with a range of physical disability issues, from young children and their representatives to aged people, who are from a wide range of socio-economic circumstances and live in metropolitan, rural and regional areas of NSW.

Our core function is to influence and advocate for the achievement of systemic change to ensure the rights of all people with a physical disability are improved and upheld.

The objectives of PDCN are:

- To educate, inform and assist people with physical disabilities in NSW about the range of services, structure and programs available that enable their full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.
- To develop the capacity of people with physical disability in NSW to identify their own goals, and the confidence to develop a pathway to achieving their goals (i.e. self-advocate).
- To educate and inform stakeholders (i.e.: about the needs of people with a physical disability) so that they are able to achieve and maintain full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.

## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Shorter timeframes for 100% compliance with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport for both transport infrastructure and vehicles.**

*Timeframes for compliance must be reviewed with the aim to reach compliance within reasonable timeframes of no more than 10 years for all public transport systems, and older non-compliant conveyances must be modified if still in use or replaced with compliant conveyances immediately. The Transport Access Program must see 100% compliance for train stations within 5 years, considering this was initially set for completion by 2022, and this must also include bus stops.*

### **Recommendation 2: All conveyances to be level entry or have capacity for independent boarding for users of mobility devices.**

*The capacity to independently board and alight a transport conveyance is integral to the inclusion of people with disability within the community. Ensuring all transport conveyances have the capacity for independent boarding using a mobility device takes the burden off of staff to assist and allows users more dignity in the use of public transport.*

### **Recommendation 3: Increased wheelchair accessible spaces on conveyances in line with population statistics for people with disability.**

*All transport conveyances should have at least 18% of seating accessible for people with mobility issues, in line with the percentage of people with disability in the Australian population.*

### **Recommendation 4: All train replacement vehicles must meet the minimum accessibility standards in line with the services they are replacing.**

*Current DSAPT requirements and processes outlined in the TfNSW Disability Inclusion Action Plan do not require all train replacement vehicles to meet accessibility standards in line with regular train and bus services. It is essential that all train replacement vehicles meet the same or a greater standard of accessibility as the services they are replacing. This must extend to the use of coaches as replacement for train services.*

### **Recommendation 5: Implement optional passive restraints for designated wheelchair spaces on conveyances.**

*Having regulated implementation of passive restraints will create a greater sense of security for people with disability using transport, and in turn allows for more independent travel without compromising on safety for those who use mobility devices.*

### **Recommendation 6: Introduce an independent body to monitor compliance, enforce timelines and regulatory requirements, and enforce mechanisms for achieving satisfactory levels of reduced discrimination**

*A review of the complaints-based model of enforceability must be conducted, and an independent body put in place to monitor compliance and properly enforce timelines and regulatory requirements, subject to penalties.*

### **Recommendation 7: All new conveyances must involve codesign with people with disability from the design stage and throughout service life.**

*The development of new conveyances must involve the disability community and people with lived experience to ensure designs are in line with standards of accessibility and user friendly. It is essential that end users are involved in development, user testing, and continued feedback to ensure accessibility is achieved to a satisfactory degree and minimises the need for future retrofitting where appropriate consultation was not conducted.*

## Introduction

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) appreciates the opportunity to provide insight on the lived experience of people with physical disability boarding and travelling on public transport with mobility devices. PDCN has a long-standing relationship with the Accessible Transport Advisory Committee (ATAC) and acknowledges the importance of the ATAC in working towards an inclusive transport system.

Accessible public transport is a vital component of public infrastructure for any inclusive community. Public transport connects people to community and facilitates an individual's engagement, both as a public citizen and community member. Public transport links people to services, business, education, recreation, employment – and each other. For many members of the physical disability community, public transport may be their primary, if not exclusive, mode of transport and is key to ensuring that people with physical disability can realise their fundamental rights as citizens. For an estimated 1,056,440 individuals with physical disability across New South Wales, accessible public transport is vital to achieving independence and social inclusion.

## Challenges

### Stops

Transport stops often mark the beginning of a journey for people with physical disability, and the accessibility of stops is integral to accessing transport conveyances. Throughout consultations and discussions with our membership and people with lived experience of disability, the accessibility of transport stops has been a recurrent issue.

Issues with transport stops relate to the positioning and infrastructure of the stop itself, and the stop in relation to its use with boarding devices such as access ramps on buses. It has been noted that bus stops are often on uneven ground, grass, or awkwardly positioned. This creates difficulties for people who use mobility devices, with some stops completely inaccessible, and some creating difficulties when boarding using a ramp. This has been identified by our members as a particular issue in regional and outer metropolitan areas such as the Central Coast.

In the interim between building accessible infrastructure, there is a need for alternative accessibility options for those who rely on bus services. From our member experiences, this has not always been the case despite the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002) explicitly stating '*an access path that allows unhindered passage must be provided along a walkway, ramp or landing.*'<sup>i</sup>

*"I just think there needs to be more safeguards around discrimination. Because I just think because there's so many different types of trains and buses, and the biggest problem that I find is that they're building bus stops where I am, but you've got to get off the street before, because they're the nearest ones. And then you have a concrete walk and there's no access point for a wheelchair to get on."*

*PDCN member & power wheelchair user*

Additionally, there is an overall shortage of accessible on-street loading zones for people with disabilities, which means that passengers often board or exit Wheelchair Accessible Taxis and other small conveyance vehicles while having to navigate kerbs and traffic. This is both extremely unsafe and a major barrier to spontaneous travel.

**Recommendation 1:**

**Shorter timeframes for 100% compliance with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport for both transport infrastructure and vehicles.**

*Timeframes for compliance must be reviewed with the aim to reach compliance within reasonable timeframes of no more than 10 years for all public transport systems, and older non-compliant conveyances must be modified if still in use or replaced with compliant conveyances immediately. The Transport Access Program must see 100% compliance for train stations by 2028, considering this was initially set for completion by 2022, and this must also include bus stops.*

**Reliance on Staff Assistance**

Currently there is a reliance on staff assistance for boarding and alighting public transport vehicles for those with accessibility issues. This involves bus driver use of ramps, and general assistance required while using public transport conveyances.

While staff assistance is vital and should be available for those who need assistance, there is an over reliance on staff caused by the inaccessibility of existing public transport infrastructure. This has greatly diminished the capacity for independence, as current transport infrastructure remains inaccessible, and people who use mobility devices must proactively notify staff in order to enter and disembark a transport vehicle. This requires people with physical disability to plan ahead extensively for journeys using public transport, and often results in a stressful situation when unplanned disruptions occur.

**Use of Access Ramps**

Access ramps are an important aspect of using public transport for people who use mobility devices, with older vehicles often requiring the use of deployable ramps for people to enter or exit. While this equipment is vital to the use of public transport, it is not preferred by people with disability as it is reliant on staff and the proper and adequate training of this staff in its use. Other environmental and infrastructural factors impact the use of access ramps, with our members who use ramps on public transport describing the use of ramps especially on buses as “hit or miss”, depending on training of drivers and the accessibility of the infrastructure of the stop.

It has been noted by our members through consultations and surveys conducted in late 2022 and 2023, that staff assistance with using ramps and general equal access assistance has often been uncomfortable. This has often related to the use of buses, with people with physical disability choosing to avoid use of buses due to poor customer service experiences, especially in relation to the deployment of the ramp and lack of understanding from drivers of the needs and differences in ability for people with physical disability.

*“Training bus drivers to not slam a ramp in my face, would be awesome. ... It’s a bit harder in terms of getting on and stuff. I always feel like I’m a burden on the bus and I don’t tend to catch the bus often purely because of that.”*

*PDCN member & wheelchair user*

Staff training around the use of ramps for boarding and exiting vehicles is a common issue. While people with physical disability are reliant on the deployment of ramps by staff, it is often noted by members that there is a level of anxiety that comes with using this infrastructure. When buses are not lowered adequately or ramps are not deployed appropriately, people with physical disability have stated feeling uncomfortable asking drivers or staff to adjust the ramp or lower the bus, especially when the bus is busy.

It has also been noted that the use of ramps on any form of transport during busy times and peak commuting hours is difficult. With high congestion of people, and scheduled services there is a concern that waiting for a ramp to be deployed may hold up the service or not be safely used.

*"Bus drivers can be impatient. It underlines the importance of driver education, better accessible design so it's simpler to get into the accessible seating area and perhaps wishful thinking but more buses so they're not so full and / or pressured to meet timeframes leading to impatience. That being said, I've come across the occasional helpful driver, but they are unfortunately the exception in my experience."*

*Person with lived experience of Blindness/Vision Impairment*

*"I have been in multiple occasions where I'm sort of, like, [...] when is a point where the person has forgotten a ramp and I'm like, "Well, how soon are they gonna take off without having me in there?"*

*Power wheelchair user & PDCN member*

### **Recommendation 2:**

#### **All conveyances to be level entry or have capacity for independent boarding for users of mobility devices.**

*The capacity to independently board and alight a transport conveyance is integral to the inclusion of people with disability within the community. Ensuring all transport conveyances have the capacity for independent boarding using a mobility device takes the burden off of staff to assist and allows users more dignity in the use of public transport.*

### **Limited Wheelchair Spaces**

The lack of wheelchair accessible spaces on transport vehicles has often been noted by our membership. There has also been comment on the size of older conveyances, with older buses being smaller than newer designs and difficult to fit a power wheelchair in the designated space, with people experiencing difficulties manoeuvring in and out of these vehicles. In accordance with DSAPT regulations, a transport vehicle must have a minimum of two (2) allocated spaces<sup>ii</sup>, this is not enough considering 18% of the Australian population consists of people with disability<sup>iii</sup>.

Current guidelines in the DSAPT state:

*"Existing public transport will progressively become accessible over a 20-year period with substantial access within 10 to 15 years (30 years for trains and trams)-."*<sup>iv</sup>



This has meant that older vehicles that are non-compliant with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002) continue to run services across the network, with many of these services not having adequate space for mobility devices. It has been noted in regional areas in particular, that bus services are often inaccessible for wheelchair users. This becomes a larger issue in conjunction with limited availability of taxi services in regional areas, and buses being a main form of public transport.

**Recommendation 3:**

**Increased wheelchair accessible spaces on conveyances in line with population statistics for people with disability.**

*All transport conveyances should have at least 18% of seating accessible for people with mobility issues, in line with the percentage of people with disability in the Australian population.*

**Locking Mechanisms**

There is also a need for buses to have locking mechanisms to secure wheelchairs and other mobility devices, as currently information on the use of passive restraints on public transport is vague and mostly unregulated. Securing mobility aids is a matter of basic transport safety. Mobility aids can be extremely heavy and pose a risk to other passengers if they become displaced during starts, stops, and turns. They can also become damaged through sliding or tipping out of allocated spaces. Our members tell us that allocated spaces are not plentiful enough, and they are forced to stay in awkward and unsafe spaces for travel, often unrestrained.

*"Things [that make buses] more accessible for me, being a wheelchair user and people that I've worked with in the past would be some kind of locking mechanism on the bus. I pretty much go flying on the bus [...] They kind of force you to sit backwards. Facing the back of the bus, I think. And I just refuse to do that, I sit sideways! Which probably adds to that awkward encounter in the beginning. But some sort of locking mechanism, especially for people that don't have hand function, or low hand function, or left and right can or can't hold on to the pole."*

*Wheelchair User & PDCN member*

**Recommendation 4:**

**Implement optional passive restraints for designated wheelchair spaces on conveyances.**

*Having regulated implementation of passive restraints will create a greater sense of security for people with disability using transport, and in turn allows for more independent travel without compromising on safety for those who use mobility devices.*

**Disruptions and Train Replacement Services**

Experiences for our members when disruptions to transport occur are often negative. It has been noted that train replacement buses are often not adequate to transport people with physical disabilities who require assistive technology such as wheelchairs. It has been noted that often the available replacement transport is a coach, which is not accessible for a wheelchair user, or buses

do not have adequate space to carry luggage which can include wheelchairs or other essential equipment.

Members have been forced to rely on Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WATs) when disruptions have occurred or where buses are not accessible, which has come at great cost. This system is also unreliable as WATs are already in short supply and high demand, especially in regional areas where there are often only one or two WATs available. Booking WATs has been a constant issue for our membership, a survey conducted by PDCN in December 2022 found that 30% of those surveyed had experienced booking a WAT that never turned up, and nearly one quarter of participants had waited more than 2 hours for a booked taxi to arrive.

*Jerry\* was travelling from Sydney Central Station to Bathurst via train. Train replacement coaches were in use for this trip which were inaccessible for Jerry, who is a power wheelchair user. The only solution for Jerry to reach his destination in Bathurst was to take a Wheelchair Accessible Taxi, which was paid for by Transport for NSW but cost around \$300.*

Train replacement services are often provided by coaches. Coaches do not provide an adequate level of accessibility for users of mobility devices. Under current DSAPT (2002) regulations, coaches and operators of these vehicles are *not* required to provide an allocated space under the pretence that passengers use fixed seats within the vehicle<sup>v</sup>. When these vehicles are in operation as replacement for train services, there is an expectation of the same level of accessibility as the regular scheduled train service would provide. As it currently stands, the use of coaches as a temporary replacement vehicle for train disruptions is exclusionary to people who have limited mobility or use mobility devices and limits the capacity for independent movement and use of public transport.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

**All train replacement vehicles must meet the minimum accessibility standards in line with the services they are replacing.**

*Current DSAPT requirements and processes outlined in the TfNSW Disability Inclusion Action Plan do not require all train replacement vehicles to meet accessibility standards in line with regular train and bus services. It is essential that all train replacement vehicles meet the same or a greater standard of accessibility as the services they are replacing. This must extend to the use of coaches as replacement for train services.*

#### **Mechanisms for Enforcement**

While these issues around onboarding exist, there is a need for changes to mechanisms for enforcement and handling of the complaints-based system. It is our understanding, that current complaints can be made to Transport for NSW through calling their 131 500 number, with an option for disability related complaints specifically through an in-call option. However, this information is not explicitly stated or made easily available to the public and is not explicitly clear on the official website, with options to call 131 500 to give feedback but no direction as to where to take disability specific feedback, or alternatively, the direction to a written feedback form<sup>vi</sup>. It is integral that systems for making complaints are clear and accessible to ensure issues are adequately addressed.

*"There should be a separate complaints line that handles disability issues. Because I just think the operators don't have an understanding of what people with disability go through. So, they don't take their complaints seriously enough. You're merely a number in the line. And I just think there needs a whole new mechanism where they can handle the complaints as a separate matter."*

*PDCN member & Power Wheelchair User*

It has been suggested by members that a separate mechanism for disability related complaints be set up that is easily accessible. While we believe a disability specific complaints mechanism is important to implement, we do not believe that this should be the mechanism for enforcement of the standards for accessibility.

**Recommendation 6:**

**Introduce an independent body to monitor compliance, enforce timelines and regulatory requirements, and enforce mechanisms for achieving satisfactory levels of reduced discrimination**

*A review of the complaints-based model of enforceability must be conducted, and an independent body put in place to monitor compliance and properly enforce timelines and regulatory requirements, subject to penalties.*

## Examples of Best Practice

### Sydney Metro and Light Rail

Modes of public transport that are built with accessibility in mind are highly regarded by our membership, with mention of this increased independence with boarding giving confidence to users.

*"I find the light rail awesome. So easy to get on to. I don't to have wait for anybody, I can get on and off, and plenty of room in there most of the time, unless it's peak hour."*

*PDCN member & wheelchair user*

*"I really, really, really love the Metro. The Metro has given me so much more confidence and more independence to be able to get on without having to go and find somebody and sort of organise that from that end."*

*PDCN member & wheelchair user*

There is a consensus among our members that the Sydney Metro and the Light Rail are inclusive in their design. This is based around the capacity for independent use of these vehicles for those who use mobility devices.

### Mariyung Fleet

PDCN recognises the design and development of the Mariyung Fleet as best practice in codesign with people with disability. It is integral that transport vehicles are made in codesign with people with disability at every stage, this has been seen in the process of developing the Mariyung Fleet.

The Mariyung Fleet went through extensive customer engagement and user testing in 2018 to ensure train design was inclusive and accessible to the community, with strong input from people with disability and disability advocacy groups<sup>vii</sup>. This fleet is designed to comply with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002). This should be standard practice throughout all transport conveyances, and user testing and feedback is integral to understanding how these standards work in practice and benefit the community.

PDCN would like to see this level of codesign in all future transport projects from the initial design phase and throughout the life of the service. We also understand that this fleet is not yet in service and will only operate between Sydney and the Central Coast/Newcastle, the Blue Mountains, and the South Coast<sup>viii</sup>. It is essential in the pursuit of an inclusive public transport system that these conveyances, or conveyances of an equivalent or higher standard of accessibility be rolled out across the whole NSW transport network.

**Recommendation 7:**

**All new conveyances must involve codesign with people with disability from the design stage and throughout service life.**

*The development of new conveyances must involve the disability community and people with lived experience to ensure designs are in line with standards of accessibility and user friendly. It is essential that end users are involved in development, user testing, and continued feedback to ensure accessibility is achieved to a satisfactory degree and minimises the need for future retrofitting where appropriate consultation was not conducted.*

## Concluding comments

The onboarding process is an essential step in an individual's capacity to use public transport. For people with physical disability, and users of mobility devices in particular, this process dictates their ability for independent travel and dignity while using public transport.

There are widespread issues reported from the physical disability community surrounding onboarding processes for users of mobility devices. These issues include inaccessible transport stop infrastructure, reliance on transport staff assistance, the use of access ramps, inadequate wheelchair accessible spaces on vehicles, adequate restraints on vehicles, inaccessibility of train replacement vehicles, and mechanisms of enforcement for compliance.

Examples of best practice can be seen through newer services that have been developed in line with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002). Services such as the Sydney Metro and Light Rail allow for greater independence of travel with level entry for independent boarding and adequate seating and space for users of mobility devices. The development of the Mariyung Fleet acts as an example of best practice consultation with the disability community, which PDCN encourages the continuation of for future transport developments.

PDCN appreciates the opportunity to provide insight into the experiences of users of mobility devices with onboarding public transport vehicles, however, strongly urges the proactive consultation and inclusion of people with lived experience of disability on this issue.

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- <sup>i</sup> Australian Government (2002), *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011 <<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2005B01059>>
- <sup>ii</sup> Australian Government (2002), *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*, 2nd May 2011
- <sup>iii</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022), *People with Disability in Australia*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2022, accessed 28<sup>th</sup> July 2023 <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability/prevalence-of-disability>>
- <sup>iv</sup> Australian Government (2002), *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011 <[Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 \(legislation.gov.au\)](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2005B01059)>
- <sup>v</sup> Australian Government (2002), *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*, 2nd May 2011
- <sup>vi</sup> Transport for NSW (2023), *Feedback, Questions and Complaints*, NSW Government, accessed 12 May 2023 <<https://transportnsw.info/contact-us/feedback/train-feedback>>
- <sup>vii</sup> Transport for NSW (2023), *Mariyung Fleet*, 27 June 2023, accessed 27 July 2023 <<https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/projects/current-projects/mariyung-fleet>>
- <sup>viii</sup> Transport for NSW (2023), *Mariyung Fleet*, 27 June 2023, accessed 27 July 2023 <<https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/projects/current-projects/mariyung-fleet>>