

Disability Services Queensland

delivering quality services and
building supportive communities

Submission

Review of the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*

August 2007



Queensland Government
Disability Services Queensland

1. Introduction

1.1 Queensland Government investment in disability services

Queensland Government expenditure on disability services has increased under the Commonwealth State/Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA) from \$239 million in 2002-2003 to an estimated \$589 million in the 2007-2008 State budget. In comparison, the Commonwealth Government contribution to Queensland increased over the same period from \$102 million to \$122 million.

There are challenges in providing services to Queenslanders with a disability. Queensland is Australia's second largest state by area measuring more than 1.72 million square kilometres. In 2003, an estimated 781,000 people self-identified as having a disability. Of these people 528,000 or approximately 68 percent live in South East Queensland, as do 68 percent of Queensland's total population. Covering approximately 22,500 square kilometres, South East Queensland is only a fraction of the total area of Queensland.

Queensland is the fastest growing state in terms of population, has the highest rate of disability per capita (with the exception of Tasmania), and has an ageing population. In addition, the cost of providing specialist disability services is increasing.

1.2 Disability Services Queensland

Disability Services Queensland is the Queensland Government Department responsible for providing leadership in disability policy, services and programs that support people with a disability and their families and carers.

Our vision for the Queensland disability sector is a society that values people with a disability, upholds their rights and supports their equitable participation in everyday life.

Our Objectives as described in our Strategic Plan 2007-11, are to:

- ensure a coordinated and strategic approach to disability issues across government
- raise the profile of disability issues
- provide leadership across the disability sector



- increase opportunities for people with a disability to access, participate in and contribute to their communities
- form partnerships with the disability sector.

The department funds and provides a range of programs and services for people with a disability across the State in the following 10 regions: Greater Brisbane; Gold Coast; Sunshine Coast; Moreton; Darling Downs/South West Queensland; Wide Bay/Burnett; Fitzroy/Central West Queensland; Mackay/Whitsunday; North Queensland; and Far North Queensland.

During 2005-06, more than 18 000 people with a disability received services funded by the department. These services included providing:

- assistance for people with a disability to obtain information and access services;
- community support for people with a disability and their families;
- respite services to provide temporary support to people with a disability, while allowing the families and carers of people with a disability to have a period of rest;
- community access to services to assist people with a disability to participate in everyday activities including learning and life skills, recreation and other activities;
- supported accommodation services for people with a disability; and
- advocacy and information services.

New legislation was passed by the Queensland Parliament in March 2006, establishing the *Disability Services Act 2006* (DSA). The Act provides the strongest foundation Queenslanders have ever had for promoting the rights of people with a disability, increasing their wellbeing and encouraging their participation in the life of the community. The legislation encourages all Queenslanders to promote inclusive principles within their own communities.

The DSA requires each State Government department to develop and implement a Disability Service Plan from 1 July 2007. In the development of Disability Service Plans, all government departments focussed on the services they deliver and how they might be improved. Disability Service Plans must be reported on annually and reviewed every three years. It is recognised that in specific circumstances transport can be the key to accessing government services.



Partnerships have been developed with the community through disability councils. The Disability Council of Queensland and Regional Disability Councils provide advice, and the views and opinions of Queensland's communities on disability issues, to the Minister.

In supporting this community partnership, Disability Services Queensland provides administrative support and works with the disability councils to identify and respond to disability issues at a regional and state-wide level. The councils are part of the State Government's commitment to ensure a stronger voice for Queenslanders with a disability.

Disability Services Queensland contributes to the Queensland Government's efforts to improve access to public transport for people with a disability by working on a strategic level with the Department of Transport.

1.3 The importance of transport within the disability sector

Equal access to services available to other members of the Queensland community is an important requirement for people with a disability. The ability to access public transport is crucial to people with a disability, their family and carers to access services and participate in community life.

In committing to public transport, the Queensland government recognises that accessible public transport is more than just increasing accessible buses or taxis. Accessibility is required across the travel pathway for a person with a disability. A good example of an accessible pathway in travel is a trip interstate. A person with a disability requires more than an accessible airline, they require an accessible: taxi; pathway to terminal; access within the terminal; access to the airline; airline assistance. All these processes need to be linked to ensure a smooth and accessible journey.

Using this example further to understand the implications of accessible transport is also useful. The trip interstate may be necessary for a person with a disability to undertake employment. Without accessible transport a person with a disability may be unable to participate in a particular field of employment and this in turn will impact upon their economic, as well as social participation, in society. The importance of accessible transport cannot be denied.

The *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002* (the Transport Standards) are a measure for reducing disability discrimination, and ensuring that public transport throughout Australia is accessible. Disability Services Queensland recognises the significant improvement the Transport Standards have brought for people with a disability accessing public transport in Queensland. The Department also supports and acknowledges the many plans and initiatives that have been instituted to achieve greater accessibility to public transport.

Ensuring that public transport is accessible in regional, remote and major urban centres will however continue to be a challenge for local councils, transport operators, and the Queensland Government.

1.4 The submission

In this submission, Disability Services Queensland has not responded to the questions of interest in detail but has taken the opportunity to cover areas of interest in response to the review.

In development of the submission, Disability Service Queensland consulted the Regional Disability Councils and some of the examples gathered through these discussions have been included in this submission. While the comments are not a direct reflection of the Department's views they provide local detail or issues for consideration by the review.

2. Improving accessibility of public transport in Queensland

2.1 Investment in Transport Infrastructure

The Queensland Government is committed to making public transport accessible. This is evident through the significant funding (in excess of \$220 million) for:

- accessible buses;
- accessible taxis;
- accessible bus stops in the TransLink area;
- accessible bus stops in regional Queensland;
- the upgrade of Citytrain stations and rolling stock;
- modifications to the tilt train fleet;
- upgrades of Traveltrain stations.

2.2 Wheelchair Accessible Taxis for Regional Queenslanders

The Queensland Government has committed a one-off injection of \$4.8 million to provide wheelchair accessible taxis in small towns and communities by January 2008.

There are approximately 80 small communities in Queensland that do not have a wheelchair accessible taxi service. Queensland Transport is working to introduce wheelchair accessible taxis into these communities through the release of new wheelchair accessible taxi licences. Queensland now has the largest wheelchair accessible taxis fleet in the country with 14.15 per cent or 434 wheelchair accessible taxis out of 3 068 taxis across the State as at April 2007.

Disability Services Queensland recognises the significant benefits of this program to people with a disability, their families and carers in regional and rural communities across Queensland. Access to taxis in smaller and more isolated communities enhances the lives of people with a disability by allowing access to services and community similar to the rest of the population.

While there are more wheelchair accessible taxis available, an issue appears to remain in regards to arrival times for people with a disability. The Transport Standards require that the response times for accessible vehicles are to be the same as for other taxis. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that people who required wheelchair accessible taxis are often left unable to get home from a venue due to taxis not arriving, even when wheelchair accessible taxis are booked.

Feedback from the Regional Disability Councils of Queensland indicates that generally there has been some improvements in regards to the availability of accessible taxis. However, a number of issues remain, including that:

- availability across Queensland varies in regard to taxis and there has been no significant change in buses and trains;
- there has been no substantial improvement in taxi pick up times;
- bus stops, rail stations, ferry pontoons etc., are being steadily upgraded, however, taxi ranks are not;
- some taxi drivers avoid priority wheelchair work; and
- driver training is needed for taxi and bus drivers.

2.3 Regional bus stop

The Regional Queensland Public Bus Stop Project was commissioned by Queensland Transport to improve accessibility to bus stop infrastructure. The disability sector, through a consortium, undertook consultations and identified key challenges for Queensland Transport in relation to bus stop infrastructure.

The first key challenge identified the need for specialist skills to interpret the Transport Standards specific to location. The consortium also identified that many local government authorities were unfamiliar with the Commonwealth legislation and the attached implementation timeframes. The consortium have advised Disability Services Queensland that the consultation information provides valuable feedback about what disability sector really thinks regarding their interaction with public transport.

To address issues in regard to implementation of the Transport Standards, Queensland Transport has developed a manual on infrastructure and designs for bus stops and shelters. This will support uniformity of public transport infrastructure.

2.4 Air Travel

Accessible air travel for people with a disability is a significant issue for Queensland impacting on, for example, tourism, community and service dealings, and health (e.g., receipt of medical treatment). Concerns raised initially by Western Australia in mid-2006 highlighted Australia-wide difficulties with certain airlines. Some of the issues identified were airlines: refusing to carry wheelchairs of certain sizes; not guaranteeing that wheelchairs will be carried on the same flight as the person with a disability; charging excess baggage costs to carry a wheelchair; and refusing to provide a wheelchair to get from a car to the terminal.

The feedback from the Regional Disability Councils of Queensland supports the need for the application of standards in plane travel, advising that problems are being experienced, especially for wheelchair users. Specific examples were provided by council members including from North Queensland where it was identified that most Qantas planes from Cairns do not have access for storing anything but the smallest wheelchairs.

In addressing the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference on 26 July 2006, the Minister for Disability Services, the Hon Warren Pitt, supported a recommendation to request clarification from the Federal Minister for Transport about the timetable for airlines to report against the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*. It was suggested that the issue of airline compliance with the Transport Standards could be further progressed by the Transport Ministers through the development of a code of practice to improve the accessibility of air travel for people with a disability. The code of practice would include an acknowledgement of: the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*; and of the standards and recommendations that have been developed in this area by the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

2.5 Carer Business Discount Card and Companion Card

In recognition of the significant role of carers, the Queensland Government introduced its *Carer Recognition Policy* in 2003. The subsequent *Carer Action Plan 2006-2010*, launched in December 2006, translates the policy into a series of actions to be implemented over the next four years. Two key initiatives to emerge from the *Carer Action Plan* have been the soon-to-be released Carer Business Discount Card and Companion Card.

Following extensive consultation with representatives from peak bodies and other key stakeholders across Queensland, the Carer Business Discount Card will provide eligible carers with discounts at participating businesses similar to the existing Seniors Business Discount Card and the Foster Carer Card. The Companion Card, in contrast, will allow eligible people with a disability to receive free admission for their chosen companion at participating venues and activities.

To be eligible for the Carer Business Discount Card a carer will:

- a) be a person of any age who, without being paid, cares for another person who needs ongoing support because of a long-term medical condition, a mental illness, a disability, frailty or the need for palliative care. The carer may or may not be a family member and may or may not live with the person. Volunteers under the auspices of a voluntary organisation however, are not included; and
- b) need to show that they:
 - are a resident of Queensland; and
 - receive the Centrelink Carer Payment and/or Carer Allowance.

To be eligible for the Companion Card a person with a disability must be:

- a resident of Queensland;
- have a significant disability;
- unable to participate in most community venues and activities without attendant care support due to the impact of their disability; and
- in need of this level of support life-long.

The Queensland Government has committed \$6M over four years for Disability Services Queensland and the Department of Communities to develop and administer these two cards. Both cards have the potential to generate higher economic activity for participating businesses in metropolitan, rural and regional areas, through the increased spending activity and social interaction of people with a disability and their carers, who are also locals and tourists. Importantly, card holders in rural and regional areas will gain some genuine financial and social benefits to enhance their quality of life through the promotion of these cards to rural and regional businesses and events.

The broad parameters for the cards (as outlined above) were determined in late 2006 allowing detailed planning and initial consultation to commence. It is anticipated that the cards will become operational in 2007-08.

The Companion Card in particular will assist in increasing accessibility to a range of transport systems for people with a disability who require a carer. The Companion Card will be recognised by participating businesses in Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania – providing significant advantages to holders of the Queensland Companion Card when travelling interstate. Participating businesses, including transport operators, will issue the holder of a Companion Card a second ticket for their companion at no extra charge.

3. Other Areas of Interest

3.1 Complaints based

Enforcement of the Standards is complaint-based through complaints being made to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). Therefore, as implementation of the Transport Standards is driven by a complaints system it is important that people with a disability have an equitable opportunity to make a

complaint in their preferred communication format/mode. People with a disability need to be aware of all avenues to communicate complaints and any complaints system needs to be easily understood and readily available.

Feedback from the Regional Disability Councils of Queensland suggests that the current arrangements for making complaints about accessibility are not well understood by the public and this results in people suffering in silence.

The Australian Standard Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaints handling in organisations (ISO: 10002 – 2004) a Complaints Management System (CMS) states the need for flexibility in the methods of making complaints - including that the process for submitting complaints should be flexible and include provision for oral complaints or complaints in other formats. It must be noted that the HREOC website appears to accept complaints only in writing.

In addition, it would be beneficial for transport operators to be made aware that, whilst compliance is the responsibility of operators and providers, a complaints system is an important aspect in providing better services to customers. It can help to gauge customer satisfaction and is a useful source of information and feedback for identifying areas of service that may require improvement.

3.2 Accessibility of information

Easy access to information on transport services is important in supporting broader access to services for people with a disability. Queensland Transport is working on improving accessibility of information for people with a disability. This includes:

- developing a website which is accessible and provides up-to-date information;
- the National Relay Services (TTY and modem) users can access public transport information;
- the development of a transport guide which will include information on accessibility for people with a disability;
- an information brochure on travel for seniors in larger print; and
- an information booklet for operators and providers on compliance with the Commonwealth Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002.

Such initiatives will ensure that people with a disability receive information about public transport in a format that will enable them to access that information as effortlessly as other people in the community can.

From consultation with the Regional Disability Councils of Queensland it was identified that there have been some changes to accessibility of information. For example:

- particular railway platforms have more tactile surface indicators
- new talking ticket machines on railway platforms have enabled some vision impaired people to attempt journeys they would otherwise not have tried.

However, information was also provided where the changes are less evident, particularly in regional communities with local transport services.

3.3 Raising awareness of rights

Given the complaints basis of the Transport Standards, accessibility of information around the standards is important for people with a disability. Removing barriers to accessing information through awareness campaigns will assist people with a disability to exercise their rights. Feedback from the Regional Disability Councils of Queensland suggests that consumers are vaguely aware that they have a right to public transport but they have no idea as to the extent of these rights, nor the confidence to enforce them. While the HREOC website has a great deal of useful information it may not be accessible to all and use of the general media is also required to ensure people with a disability are informed.

Awareness amongst providers is also essential to enhancing services for people with a disability. Disability Services Queensland supports the need for an intensive education campaign for both providers and people with a disability, in order that both groups understand the obligations of providers and role of people with a disability in highlighting areas of concern.

Under the Queensland Tourism Strategy, the Department of Tourism, Fair Trading and Wine Industry Development is working with Disability Services Queensland to encourage industry to develop specific facilities for the travel needs of people with a disability by providing clear information to industry outlining their legislative obligations regarding accessibility. This particular activity could be modelled as a means of providing information to transport operators.

3.4 Information to support compliance

The Transport Standards incorporate and operate in conjunction with a number of other standards such as the Australian Standards (AS) and Australian/New Zealand Standards (AS/NZS). However, while the Transport Standards are freely available on the internet the AS & AS/NZS Standards are not. In order for operators and providers to comply with the mandatory requirements in the Transport Standards, and for people to have knowledge of the requirements, the mandatory AS & AS/NZS Standards need to be freely available to the public.

The barriers to the free flow of information, such as accessibility to the AS & AS/NZS Standards, reduce both public awareness of the Transport Standards, and the potential for some smaller operators to comply.

3.5 Consistency

Consistency and a willingness by operators to comply with the Transport Standards will enable greater accessibility to public transport by people with a disability. It will also increase confidence in the use of public transport, and, in time, produce a higher uptake in demand for public transport by people with a disability in our community.

The Transport Standards establish minimum accessibility requirements to be met by providers and operators of public transport conveyances, infrastructure and premises, in accordance with the compliance timetable. However, operators and providers are free to exceed the Transport Standards in their services, premises, infrastructure and conveyances. Operators and providers are also encouraged to adopt new technologies that give improved access to public transport.

The administration of the implementation of the Transport Standards is the responsibility of the state and territory governments. However, there is an invaluable role that can be played by national committees in relation to information sharing to assist consistency in application and promote good practice.

The Accessible Public Transport National Advisory Committee (APTNAC) aims to provide a consultative framework to progress specific national accessible transport issues associated with the implementation of the Transport Standards. The committee has produced two documents that would inform the application of the

Transport Standards, namely *Hearing Augmentation* and *Safer Travel for Passengers using Mobility Aids on Public Transport*.

The expansion of this work alongside the work being achieved by the Accessible Public Transport Jurisdictional Committee, with its representation from the Department of Transport and Regional Services and each state and territory transport department, could focus on a national communication strategy. Such a strategy, following the review, would assist operators to consistently apply the Transport Standards and could promote compliance generally and provide information on operators who have exceeded minimum requirements as an incentive to others.

3.6 Community based

Public transport is not sufficient to meet all transport needs; transport sits within a greater context. Community transport has a significant role as part of the transport system, to enhance the quality of life of people with a disability who do not have access to suitable and affordable alternatives to the private motor vehicle and mainstream public transport. Substantial work is continuing in Queensland and across Australia on community transport with a resulting requirement for a coordinated national approach to share information, experiences and research.

This commitment by community groups and the three tiers of Government could be developed to support pooling of transport resources to respond to local need. This would ensure that community transport is flexible and accessible. However, there may also be a need to consider a standards approach to ensure community transport does not have lower levels of service than a public system and so that people with a disability can have confidence in the quality of the system.

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