

Connecting With Buses Update - Discussion Paper

The problem of the '360m gap'.

Recommendation

The NSW T & I commission an independent study to research the issue, to examine the extent and significance of the issue and make recommendations about possible solutions.

Background

Current metropolitan bus planning guidelines aim to ensure that a bus goes within 400m of every residence in peak times and 800m in off-peak times. The aim is to meet this guideline in 90% of cases.

Community transport provides a service for frail-aged and disability customers who are able to manage themselves on to and off the bus which comes to their residence. This is a very specialised service with limited frequency, usually once a week, at a considerably higher price to the customer than the route bus, usually \$5 - \$10 for a return trip.

The '360m gap' (which actually often turns out to be a much bigger gap) refers to the difference in access to the services provided by the route bus system and the community transport system. It is the difference in access for people who do not qualify for community transport (HACC eligible) or do not find community transport services adequate for their needs, but find the distance to the nearest bus stop too difficult and are left without access to a service able to meet their needs. The people most commonly found in this gap are active, well, older people and people with mobility difficulties or restrictions. The local topography and the urban layout can also effect the importance of the gap.

There may also be an aspect of the problem where 'the gap' is bigger than 800m in areas where it has been deemed uneconomic to run buses; for instance on the city fringe. The people effected in these circumstances may be different types of people but it may be that the solutions to bridging the gap are the same or similar. For instance young people on the city fringe in areas such as Camden, Penrith, Wollondilly and Hawkesbury can find getting home after socializing on weekend nights very difficult.

As the Bus Reform process has progressed, putting an emphasis on faster, more direct bus services which do not circulate through the suburban side-streets as much as they did previously, there has been an outcry from many older people who are feeling the effects of this as social exclusion because their bus routes have changed and they can no longer access the services they once enjoyed. They resent having a service taken away and often

feel neglected by the Government and services providers - as if they 'don't count' anymore.

This also raises the question of how many people have experienced this exclusion even before the bus reform process and continue to experience it now. In 2006 (prior to most of the Bus Reform process) a WSCF report estimated that 700,000 people in Western Sydney experience social exclusion related to transport disadvantage.

Of course private cars and taxis already operate in this gap and provide a demand responsive, door-to-door service. Our experience at WSCF is that taxis are not considered a reasonable alternative to buses by the people we are thinking about and private vehicles are not available to people who do not have licenses, the capability to drive or cannot afford to own a car.

The most obvious impediment to the increased use of taxis to solve this problem is cost, but there may also be some other social, psychological and cultural reasons why taxis are not considered a solution to this problem at this time.

The Questions

- Is there really a gap?
- How many people are experiencing social exclusion because of these circumstances and how significant is this effect?
- Is this effect because of the bus review or was it there before?
- If this is a significant social exclusion issue, how should a solution be developed?
- What are the psychological and cultural issues that are operating - why are people so attracted to using buses and would they use other solutions if created?
- What are the potential solutions to this issue?
- What are the economics of providing these solutions?
- Whose responsibility is it to ensure the solutions are found and implemented?

Some ideas on the principles for a solution

1. It should be preferred that any solution has an organic component to it so that services can change, expand and contract as demand changes. The worst thing that could happen is that solutions are totally reliant on a new funding stream which creates new categories of excluded people and is not responsive to the development of Greater Sydney and the changes to demographics and the demand for the services.
2. Solutions must integrate with and compliment the other systems that are available.
3. It is very important that we are not 'mode focused'. It is important that we think in terms of what is the best way to solve the problem/s. We may have to acknowledge that there are different components to the problem and that there may be a range of actions to provide solutions to cover the gap. For instance, the issues may be different on the fringe of the city compared to suburbs in higher density areas or different for different age groups.
4. A systemic approach should be taken so that services are available everywhere they are needed and that maximum efficiencies in service provision can be achieved.

5. Attention must be paid to the psychological and cultural aspects of the issues if solutions are proposed that are different from what people expect: ie, people are accustomed to using route buses for local transport. There are issues of independence, dignity and stigma to be considered when solutions are being developed.

Solutions that are commonly suggested

- More locally-focused bus routes to cover other suburban streets
- Other types of local bus routes like 'shopper hoppers'
- More community transport provided to people using wider eligibility criteria
- Other demand responsive types of community transport such as Smartlink
- Other types of service provision such as shared taxi, shared hire-car or charter services
- Other community-based responses
- Other small-business responses
- Other responses by local councils
- Various forms of community, commercial or individual car-share schemes

The results sought

- All people in the metropolitan area can access the public transport system
- An increase in social inclusion
- A reduction in private car use
- A more productive community
- A more livable city

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