



Advocates Discuss: transport accessibility

From June to October 2022, Disability Advocacy Network Australia ran the “*Advocates Discuss*” series of fortnightly hour-long discussions via Microsoft Teams - creating an opportunity for interested advocates to take a closer look at and speak about a number of key topics emerging in the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission or DRC) and its examination of abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect. Participants were encouraged to share their insights, observations, stories and case studies, and the discussion questions each week included opportunities to share perspectives on what recommendations advocates would like to see being made by the DRC, in relation to the topic in focus.

Identifying details have been removed from the edited transcript below. Participants in each session are identified as advocates from their state or territory, and are also numbered, where multiple advocates from that jurisdiction took part. Participants were informed that sessions would be recorded to capture their insights and observations. Care has been taken but errors may exist in the transcription.

DANA would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the various lands around Australia from which advocates participated in these virtual meetings and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, past, present, and emerging.

DANA would also like to acknowledge the time and generosity of participating advocates from a diverse range of advocacy organisations around Australia, and the funding of the Australian Government Department of Social Services for DANA to provide DRC systemic advocacy support. Visit www.dss.gov.au for more information.

Contents

Transcript from discussion – 13 September 2022	2
Comments In Chat.....	15



Transcript from discussion – 13 September 2022

Siobhan Clair:

Hello, everyone. We will formally start the meeting. First of all, today we acknowledge the traditional owners of the various lands we're meeting from. I'm joining from the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation here in Melbourne. I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and I pay respects to their past, present, and emerging, and any others that may be here today.

My name is Siobhan Clair, I'm the policy officer here at DANA and I will be leading the conversation today. The topic is transport accessibility or, rather, often inaccessibility and the progress that has been happening or not happening on that front. It's an area that hasn't so far received a lot of attention in the events and coverage of the Disability Royal Commission.

It may well come up in terms of harassment and abuse in public places in an upcoming hearing, but we thought we would sort of take the lead from an excellent event that was held by AFDO (Australian Federation of Disability Organisations) earlier in the year in collaboration with NITAN or National Inclusive Transport Advocacy Network, and it really put the focus on the institutional neglect of transport failure to make transport, public transport, private transport, accessible in Australia. Obviously, this is an area of ongoing reform. There has recently been some consultations and cause for input on the stage 2 reforms. I've posted a link to the infrastructure. We will be having an unstructured conversation today just asking people to share their stories, their insights, their observations in this space, both in relation to physical accessibility, the needs of people with sensory disability, and how do we make transport systems more inclusive for people with disability more useable, more meeting the needs of everyone.

I will throw it over to people if you want to raise your hand either with the hand raising function or just put your hand up or just start speaking. It's really a fairly informal discussion today, so I'd love to hear your thoughts on this topic. Is there anyone brave enough to go first and share your thoughts?

[NSW Advocate 1]:

Hello, I'm [NSW Advocate 1] from [NSW City]. I'm one of the intake advocates for that region. I think the biggest problem with transport in our area, specifically in regards to physical access, is once you get outside of the city itself there's very little in the way of accessible public transport. Buses tend to be privately owned and not all that accessible, especially heading north, which is interesting - you're heading towards one



of the prime tourist areas - and there's very little in the way of public transport that is accessible heading up that way.

Buses, really, for people using wheelchairs, are enter-at-your-own-risk, because there's no restraints to tie the chairs down. As soon as you get a bus driver who is hitting a corner at not the slowest pace, then you're liable to go flying out of your chair. Even without accessible bus stops and things like that, it is still a risky proposition at the best of times.

There's no real options for other private transport, especially if you're in a powered chair because, obviously, they don't fit in and out of private transport cars, and getting things like rental vehicles is prohibitively expensive, especially for most people on pensions and things like that, and the NDIA do not like funding things like that.

The options are very limited if you want to get outside of [NSW City] itself, and I see that in bigger city areas that that's a similar problem.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you. Thank you for letting us know where you're from. That's a great tip for everyone else talking to just let us know where in the country and what organisation you're from. Next we will go to [NSW Advocate 2].

[NSW Advocate 2]:

Thanks. Can I be heard?

Siobhan Clair:

Yes.

[NSW Advocate 2]:

Excellent. I mean, in 2022, I live in [NSW City], just talking about physical accessibility on trains, you really only have a select number of railway stations.

There are quite a number of railway stations where essentially if you're a user of a wheelchair, you're stuffed basically, you cannot get out at that particular station. I mean, there has been some progress over the decades. There has been considerable renovation to my local station, which is [Suburb] in [NSW City], which is a major railway station. For a long time, it didn't have any lifts. Then they put in a lift. Then after more refurbishments, it had another lift. This was completely inadequate in terms of what they did to the station. It has more space and everything like that, which is helpful, but in terms of getting down and up from the platforms, yes, you are sort of fairly limited there.



Also, in terms of sensory issues as well, I wonder how people in some disability groups feel about the massive amount of noise from compulsory Sky News viewing that's been installed in places like [Station name] as well on top of announcements and everything else that goes on in that railway station and other railway stations. So, yeah, despite the fact there's been some improvements, I mean, I myself don't use a wheelchair, I can get about at most railway stations and get on and off of buses and so on, yet I think there is so much more to be done. So, yeah, that's just my initial observations.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you. Agreed, progress is slow. Does anyone else want to chat to that? There's a lot of excuses and that things are very hard to upgrade and trying to meet commitments that have been made in the past, there doesn't seem to be a lot of attention on that from government. Anyone else want to comment on that front?

[Vic Advocate 1]:

This is [Vic Advocate 1] from the [metropolitan advocacy organisation]. I'm three weeks into the role in this sector so very new and fresh, but a colleague was giving me an example today of a [regional town], saying that if someone was required to come to [City], particularly if they're in a wheelchair, for a hospital appointment, often there are no trains and buses are replacing trains.

They're having to use the only accessible taxi in [regional town] itself. There's only one accessible taxi in the town. While that person is going to [city] via Vic Rail, there are no other accessible taxis in the town. I was just astounded by the lack of neglect of government at all levels.

Siobhan Clair:

I will just note that Disability Resources Centre has done some excellent work on transport, posting two campaigns, and taking it to the streets I notice at the moment. It's really fantastic to get that attention on the gaps that aren't serving people even in the centre of Melbourne, let alone in those regional and more remote places where people are relying on one cab driver being available when they need to get around. Another issue that was raised earlier was the NDIS and their reluctance to fund transport in plans. That seems to be a hot topic and issue for some years. Does anyone want to talk to that?

[QLD Advocate 1]:

Hello, everyone. Just on that with the really rigid level 1, 2 and 3 transport funding within NDIS, people with disabilities do have a lot of specialist and medical



appointments that can be quite a far distance away from their properties, especially now with SILs, more moving into the regional areas.

So I've worked with a lot of clients that are struggling with funding that transport and having to pay for some of it with their pension, which has been really difficult, and I guess as well working with people with disabilities that can't reach NDIS access, and are trying to fill out paperwork for things like the taxi subsidy scheme, and the patient transport subsidy scheme, and it is not a straightforward process, which is really frustrating for people that do need that extra support to fill out that paperwork as well.

Siobhan Clair:

Is anyone else wanting to comment on those issues? [Vic Advocate 2].

[Vic Advocate 2]:

Hello. I'm from the [Advocacy organisation] in [city]. I'm sure most are aware of my court case from back in 2016 regarding reasonable and necessary and transport funding for my son.

That case was the way the transport was worked out, was once again, one of the three levels of funding, which we said contradicts the reasonable and necessary part of the legislation. It went to Federal Court where they agreed that when a support is deemed reasonable and necessary, it will be fully funded, not partially, which is what the three levels of funding in my opinion is doing.

I've also pushed the NDIS for several years on changing that guideline and policy, and they keep promising me that it's happening soon, it's happening soon, and we're now in 2022, so, yeah, I can't see it happening at all, but in [son's name] plan the way we asked for the funding was a lot more specific than just saying we need a higher level than level 3.

So, what we did, was we calculated what he needed in the way of his ten trips to and from his day programs five days a week and said, this is how much it's going to cost him in the taxi, and with the support worker two afternoons a week, so this is how much we needed in his transport funding.

So, I think we've got to be clever with the way we ask for transport funding. We don't just say we've got a lot of appointments three hours away. Sit down and work out that your client goes and sees their specialist this many occasions in the 12 months, it's going to cost them this much to get there and back, and ask for something more specific in the way of a bucket of money for the transport.



I don't know if that's helping everyone or if I'm just telling you what you already know, but it's not just a matter of saying I think he needs about 15 grand. It's shown that that's what he has used in the past 12 months because he's been doing A, B and C.

So, yeah, that's all I've got to say.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you so much.

NSW Advocate 3:

I'm [NSW Advocate 3] from the Disability Royal Commission team and I work with [NSW Advocate 2] here. I wanted to point out a couple of things.

We were in [regional town] last week and we noticed that they have a transport on demand. So whilst getting to many places, it was two buses a day, that was the limit, but they had that transport on demand pilot that they are piloting, which we thought is a good idea for people with disability because it is very difficult transport in the regional areas.

The other thing is that from my experience when advocating for accessible transport, there are two things. Basically, it's a continuous path of travel which everyone in the party really needs to understand and have the willingness to understand, and often when there's upgrades around a train station, which there has been a lot of good ones, but sometimes it's a bit of a hit-and-miss process depending on who is involved, whether they genuinely consult all the relevant target groups, including people with disability.

There was the ongoing upgrade at [station name] which affected many people with disability and older people, and there's a real lack of consultation of their perspective.

Siobhan Clair:

Yes. It is so important as both in improving and upgrading existing transport systems and in rolling out new ones, whether it was the light rail in Canberra that I got to observe a little bit of that, but there needs to be proper consultation that's not an afterthought or is actually working with people to meet their needs, and it was great.

I note it's such a technical area, though, isn't it? There is a lot of specialist knowledge needed... even to figure out what the regulations require is a very specialist niche area that needs a lot of figuring out and learning. Sorry, [Vic Advocate 3], you also had your hand up before I rabbit on about that.



[Vic Advocate 3]:

Thank you. I'm [Vic Advocate 3], from [Advocacy organisation]. I'm the Executive Officer there. We're based in [regional city]. It is timely that this issue comes up. Recently we [had a client] who had been planning to go to see a specialist in Melbourne, and these appointments are made months and months in advance, and there was no access, there was no train, we had no access to a V-line bus, and there was no taxi available.

Months of planning goes into attending these appointments. They have to organise workers around alternative shifts and maybe stay overnight, and so this participant ended up having to cancel everything, and is now in the process of going back and starting again.

But in regards to the train itself, we've been lobbying quite a bit down this way for accessible trains and I've been involved with, through the department, I worked in the department for many years, and there was lobbying going on from clients and participants back then because so many of them, depending on their equipment, whether it's a wheelchair or even a pram or a walker, a lot of our clients were designated to the luggage car in order to be transported to Melbourne, and that has been happening on and off right up until now.

I just wanted to touch base on that and just say that that is still happening, and just in the sense of another area, we worked closely with a participant who lobbied and battled the NDIS in regard to transport. He was unable to access public transport for a plethora of reasons, and it was ground-breaking. It went to a directions hearing and he was successful in purchasing a vehicle through the NDIS. That was ground-breaking for this area.

It isn't impossible, that's what I'm saying, they say it's not reasonable and necessary and doesn't fit within their guidelines, but rules can be altered, broken, bent.

As far as I'm concerned, there's options out there and it's not ideal and we shouldn't have to be battling and fighting, but in this case, it was a successful story.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you. It's great to hear some of the good outcomes achieved. Does anyone else want to talk about - I'm just reflecting on that there has been some commentary on Uber and similar ride share systems kind of increasingly replacing a lot of the taxi industry in terms of some people, but has anyone got some comments on that front or on other issues? Anyone else?



Does anyone else want to talk about, often transport accessibility you think of as a more of a technical space and maybe less it's more about inconvenience, but as [Vic Advocate 2] just illustrated, and I think really hit home during one of the self-advocates talking during this forum earlier this year, like, it is really devastating sometimes the emotional impacts of both, not being able to get around or having very frustrating experiences of being stranded on a station or being placed in uncomfortable or unsafe situations because of transport systems not being inclusive or accessible. Does anyone want to talk further to that aspect of this topic? [NSW Advocate 2]?

[NSW Advocate 2]:

Yes, just in terms of that, just speaking of somebody who can walk around easily, what that means is if there's some problem, for instance, at the local railway station, I can very quickly turn around and look for alternatives.

I can, perhaps, go across to the nearest bus stop, I can sort of walk fairly quickly to a roadway and catch a taxi, so there's a great deal of flexibility when you can do that. If you have a mobility problem, you do not have that flexibility and you are stuck, and sometimes discovering that there is a problem where you either wanted to sort of catch a bus or whether you wanted to take a train, whatever, that might mean the difference between you keeping your job or losing it or losing income for a day, and a whole bunch of things like that.

So, some sort of small inconvenience for a lot of people, but a serious issue that impacts on people's ability to earn money.

So, one wonders if authorities sort of really understand that and, indeed, I think they should be made to understand it because, yeah, there must be quite a number of people who have had serious sort of problems when they found their transport option was just gone on that particular day.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you, [NSW Advocate 2]. Would anyone else like to add to that? I used to work in the ACT where I got the chance to work at [local advocacy and representative organisations], but a little bit with [colleague], who was blind, so seeing it from that perspective, and the importance of safety and tactile guides on the ground, and then also with [local disability leader] and some of the transport issues. In terms of buses and the light rail was built at least with some good minimum accessibility standards and good entry to the trams and whatnot, but it's a very important area and I think there's international examples of where they may be doing better or have prioritised it more. Does anyone want to talk about any of those examples of what we should be



striving for or, perhaps, about issues affecting people with intellectual disability in terms of navigating transport systems and their inclusion in terms of this discussion?

[NSW Advocate 3]:

I'm [NSW Advocate 3], at [Disability Advocacy Organisation]. One thing I remember talking a lot about was informational accessibility, so being able to read timetables, being able to understand symbols.

One example here in [City name] is the rail or state transport changed all the icons on the different modes of transportation, like a picture of a train or a ferry. They replaced them all with a letter. Not exactly the most accessible for people who maybe can't read or wouldn't necessarily realise a 'T' means a train. They might think a 'T' means a toilet, or something else. So that's one area that people have a hard time.

Also, a lot of people with intellectual disability might have some mobility issues as well, particularly around balance and things like that. So, some of the mobility, things that are helpful for mobility are also for people with an intellectual disability.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you. Would anyone else like to share stories or comment more?

[Vic Advocate 1]:

[Vic Advocate 1] from [Disability Advocacy Organisation] I've just come from a different sector. I've come from the Neighbourhood House sector where there's more than a thousand neighbourhood houses around Australia, actually more than there are McDonald's in this country. We had state and national peak bodies that were really active in engaging with state and Federal Government around issues, and so it was a united voice.

What happened recently in Victoria... we had a 20 million dollar uplift in our funding just because of a letter writing campaign from the 430 houses across the state of Victoria.

Has there ever been work around, - and tell me if it's a dumb idea, but has there ever been work around us as an advocacy sector on transport, or whatever issue, speaking as one united voice?

Siobhan Clair:

I think there's potential for more of that coordinated at the national level. I think that NITAN has been set up to be this, and does have a number of advocacy organisations



[as working group members] but it has, perhaps - it would be great if that was actually funded properly to represent these issues and drive them forward.

I feel like it has often - because it is also such a technical area, that it does require a bit of learning and despite a lot of - we hear from a lot of advocates that this is a big issue for a lot of people and we think there is a fair amount of work that is done at least in some way related to transport, but I think again it comes back to that there are also a lot of other issues that organisations - some of the networks through which that would happen and probably a bit over stretched, so let me know if anyone else wants to sort of chime in on that point of - the potential for more good collaboration on whether through the structure set up with NITAN, I will share a link to that group.

Geoff Trappett is often the one in the public face of that network and seems to know a lot about the standards and some of those technical issues, but, yeah, as we've heard today, a lot of people have expertise in this area in terms of how they've helped local people and clients and a lot of direct lived experience of the problems created by this area not really keeping up with the pace of reform that's needed and in the face of upgrades and a stronger voice and more collaboration is definitely a good idea and trying to harness all of those who have interest in this space to sort of speak as one voice would definitely be something that DANA could help facilitate.

Does anyone have ideas about how we could drive reforms in this area? [NSW Advocate 3]?

[NSW Advocate 3]:

I keep on going back to inclusive attitudes, you know, we're talking about transport accessibility and it's all about physical access, but beyond that, improving the quality of life and people with disability and carers.

So, I guess if we give the example of that consultation process, for example, of upgrading a train station, that people with disability and their advocates and their family members don't necessarily have to have the technical expertise, but their viewpoints and lived experiences are being respected, and they're being listened to instead of someone coming in, swooping in, consulting, and it's like a tokenistic consultation because we know what a top-down information approach looks like versus a genuine consultation.

Also recognising that different disabilities, representing different things in this meeting, there could be some differences in needs and sometimes could even be clashing - the point is coming together, respecting each other's differences and each other's needs and being genuinely listened to, yeah.



Siobhan Clair:

Thanks. That's excellent. [Vic Advocate 4] from [Advocacy organisation].

[Vic Advocate 4]:

Thank you. I wonder about - I think [Vic Advocate 1] was talking about doing a little bit of organising, and I do think that like [Vic Advocate 1] I came in from outside the sector, although I've been here three years now. I do find that sometimes there will be a push to do a demonstration about something, but then it will tail off. I think that there's a great opportunity, certainly in Victoria and New South Wales where we both have State elections coming up, to really start talking about this and do that in a way that should be easy for a loose collaboration of disability organisations to work together.

I know that [VIC organisation] has a campaign running and so there's an obvious Coalition point around that in Victoria. I'm not sure what that would be in New South Wales, but something fairly simple like each organisation perhaps targeting a particular party spokesperson to come and travel for a day with me.

Get someone with a disability who uses public transport, get that person to travel with them for the day so they can experience it, because we know nothing will convince someone to do something more than actually having experienced the issue for themselves.

There's not much point in just talking about it. We actually have to say "Well, walk in my shoes for a day", or whatever the appropriate phrase is. If we could do something like that, I'd certainly be happy to join a group that was organising - I could go to, perhaps, one of our service users and say, 'What are your challenges around transport, are you happy to contact your MP and ask them to come with you for the day?'. Most will say no, but enough will say yes and then, perhaps, and you can actually start to have that dialogue, because once that politician or candidate, political want to be, has walked that journey, then there's more likelihood that they're going to take that on as an issue during and post the election.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you. Back to [NSW Advocate 1].

[NSW Advocate 1]:

I think the problem is politicians and government in general are not going to take this as seriously as they could until the community perception changes, in that, safe and accessible transport for people with disabilities is not seen as a basic human right. Most people are grateful there is any [transport] at all. Until they have to travel with us,



and get stranded in the middle of a car park, at the racecourse in the middle of the night, because there's no accessible taxis available and they haven't bothered to tell you that there wouldn't be any...you know, until there is stuff like that, they don't understand that not having accessible transport available all the time puts us at risk because it does leave us in hairy situations. And that's not even including buses and trains, but just general taxis.

Siobhan Clair:

I think that's a great point. Tying it back to the Disability Royal Commission, I know that one of the research reports that they commissioned and published earlier this year is around how we change attitudes, which is a lot across all the different areas of the DRC, a lot of it comes back to changing attitudes to being more disability rights informed rather than ableist or outdated or [a] charitable model. I know they had key points and a lot of it is around... I forgot exactly what they discovered talking to both advocates and people with disability and other perspectives...but we do need representation, funding for representation and strong networks. People with disability who are leaders and visible...and I'm paraphrasing, or maybe getting the points or emphasis wrong, but I mean I think those lessons are probably relevant across all the different topics of the DRC and because so much of it goes back to, as you say, [NSW Advocate 1], you know, regarding this as a human right, changing your attitude.

If you're not someone who thinks about these things, and often decision makers in government are not particularly well informed about the realities, you can maybe just dismiss it and say it's too expensive to upgrade all the buses or get rid of the buses before they completely die, and say there's not enough money, whereas if they see it as something that is an entitlement and is a real problem, it [would] shift that perspective, and how we reach that point to get change really happening. Would anyone else like to offer some final thoughts as we kind of approach the last section of time?

Do we have any Queensland advocates with us today? I know that there was some missteps in terms of decisions being made to purchase trains there that were not accessible, which is really just not acceptable. It is kind of... that it really wasn't thought about in terms of new infrastructure, not just failing to upgrade old stock.

[QLD Advocate 2]:

It's [QLD Advocate 2] from [Regional city name]. I'm, obviously from Queensland. I didn't know a lot about what you've just talked about. I'd have to look into that some more. Just locally, I guess, it's just reflecting on, and in support of the other advocates, and what they've said previously about the availability of accessible transport.



Yeah, we can certainly concur that that's what's happening in [Regional city name] as well and in [Regional city name]. Often we've got those that are looking to access the transport, they've got to compete against schools and a range of others in terms of their transport needs, which is really unfair in the sense that they shouldn't have to be waiting around until after school is finished before they can access a taxi or something like that, or to schedule their day around other competing sort of vested interests within the community and so there's a great deal of work that needs to be done, at least here in [Regional city name] and it sounds [like] from where the other advocates have shared as well.

Yeah, and there's other accessibility issues. I know we were talking about transport, but just recently I know that it was a feature in the council around accessible toilets and things like that. So these are issues that are very broad, aren't they? I know that a taxi driver was sharing how hard it is to find an accessible toilet when he's transporting people that are needing an accessible toilet, and, yeah, which adds to a person's cost and indignity, in terms of not being able to find a toilet and things like that when they're accessing public transport like a taxi or those other areas as well, which is a huge issue, isn't it, really? But, no, look, thank you for the opportunity to share.

Siobhan Clair:

Thank you, [QLD Advocate 2]. Yeah, I think that's incredibly relevant that, you know, it's all the things that go around getting out in the community and being able to have a day out or to get around, go to places, see things. If there aren't amenities, that makes it extremely difficult.

There are nine minutes left. If anyone who hasn't talked yet that wants to share or anyone else wants to add to what they've already talked about.

If no-one else is wanting to talk, we might wind this one up early. Thank you, all, for joining. I think we've all enjoyed hearing perspectives. Unfortunately, it's all a little depressing, but there are some sort of good ideas and strategies in there from our conversation and that's really valuable. I think the Royal Commission - I think this is a really important issue that maybe has not been terribly well covered so far by the Royal Commission.

I'll be interested to see if the hearing on abuse and harassment in public places covers transport contexts, but that doesn't really sort of go to the broader institutional neglect as AFDO described it, that, you know, the lack of access and progress in making transport systems accessible and inclusive causes for people with disability. so thank you all for joining today and see you next fortnight for the next discussion. Thanks.



ADVOCATES DISCUSS



[VIC Advocate 2]:
Thanks, everyone.

[NSW Advocate 1]:
Thanks. Have a nice week, everyone.

END OF SESSION



Comments In Chat

Siobhan Clair:

There was recently a consultation held by the Department of Infrastructure on "Stage 2 Reforms of the Transport Standards [Transport accessibility | Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts](#)

Disability Resource Centre has done some excellent systemic work on [transport for all campaign – Disability Resources Centre \(drc.org.au\)](#)

[VIC Advocate 5]:

If the taxi breaks down, it takes 2 hours for one to come from [regional town] to [local town].

Siobhan Clair:

<https://www.afdo.org.au/nitan/>

[VIC Advocate 4]:

"travel with me for a day" challenge?

[NSW Advocate 1]:

a week would be better

[NSW Advocate 5]:

Have a lovely week everyone.

[NSW Advocate 4]:

Thanks for this! Look forward to learning more with everyone 😊

[NSW Advocate 3]:

Thanks everyone for sharing and thanks Siobhan for facilitating!

[NSW Advocate 1]:

This is one of those issues that once you really get started talking about it you don't stop. An hour just isn't long enough for this conversation

[NSW Advocate 3]:

I agree