



Transport: getting it right for older people

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Abstract:

Transport issues consistently emerge as a major concern of older people in NSW, and possibly the most significant concern for those not living in inner areas of big cities. Progress towards improvement can be achieved at the strategic level by top-down restructuring of the frameworks which govern the direction of funding, and also at the tactical level by bottom-up local experimentation in different ways of doing things. The NSW Ageing and Disability department has been working at the conceptual level for several years, but is also addressing the practical end of the spectrum via a demonstration program of specific local initiatives to improve transport for older people specifically, and usually for all other sectors of the community as well. The program seeks to identify developments that work in practice, can become self-sustaining and offer useful models for others to emulate or modify. Some twenty schemes are in operation in 1998, in outer metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas of NSW. This paper describes the evolution of the program, the range of projects and the process of evaluation. The full evaluation of the program will be completed towards the end of 1999.

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Introduction

The subject of this paper is a current (1997-99) program of innovative local public transport demonstration projects in New South Wales (NSW). This NSW Government program is funded and managed through the Ageing and Disability Department (ADD). Older people and people with disabilities will benefit significantly from the projects, but all projects also aim to assist other community members with limited transport access.

The innovation of the projects lies partly in what they are achieving, and partly, and perhaps more significantly, in how the demonstrations have been developed and implemented.

This paper starts with the context for the demonstration program - its genesis and policy relevance. It then describes the selection, development and initiation of the demonstration projects themselves. While it is premature to offer conclusions from the program, some important lessons from early experience are indicated.

The views in this paper are solely those of the authors. Terry Lee-Williams and David Kilsby are the program manager and evaluator respectively. This paper updates an earlier version presented to the Eighth International Conference on Mobility and Transport for the Elderly and Disabled (Kilsby & Lee-Williams, 1998)

Why Transport Demonstration Projects ?

Transport is critical in progressing towards meeting ADD's charter, which is to improve support services, community participation and integration for older people and people with disabilities. ADD is a NSW State Government department. For the Transport Demonstration Projects it worked closely with the NSW State Department of Transport which has general legislative and regulatory responsibility for public transport operators.

Consultation exercises have left ADD in no doubt that transport issues are one of the biggest concerns facing older people in NSW, and particularly in non-metropolitan areas. This is despite NSW having Australia's most generous transport concessions and subsidies for older people. This situation and some reasons for it have been described elsewhere (e.g. Kilsby & Flynn, 1995; Cox 1996). Access to public transport is a priority for older members of the community and those with a mobility disability. It is the key to facilitating social participation and active lifestyles, which in turn promote independence and better health.

Problems identified during consultations include inadequate, inappropriate or unaffordable service provision. These issues led to the development of a social policy framework for reform of budget sector expenditure on transport provision for older people.

Very broadly, the framework was designed to achieve greater effectiveness (for all social policy objectives) by:

- reducing the sums devoted to support on the basis of political preference (that is, to particular groups - including older people, but also families with schoolchildren, white-collar commuters and others - without any significant assessment of need) ;
- diverting it to more justifiable sectors - those where disadvantage required redressing, and those where cross-sectoral benefits can be gained by spending on public transport (eg reduced health care costs, improved air quality) ; and
- recognising that some types of concession schemes were in the transport operators' commercial interest to provide and that these should not be supported from public funds at all.

This framework has been discussed elsewhere (eg Kilsby 1996, 1997). One product of this largely theoretical exercise was the demonstration program concept. While "experts" may debate frameworks, assessment criteria and program justification methodology, it is clear that there is an immediate social need to do some things differently on the ground.

Ideas to improve appropriateness and access of transport services did not, in the main, involve high-cost items, and it was by no means obvious which changes might be successful and which might not. Hence the idea took root that, while a rigorous and structured approach is still needed in the longer term, a "suck it and see" exercise could be a useful and practical short-term complement.

This short-term exercise has several inter-related objectives, of which the first is to demonstrate that improving transport opportunities for older people and people with disabilities in the community is commercially viable and sustainable if innovative planning and coordination practices are adopted.

In very broad terms, the program calls for a period of preparation (now completed), a year of funded demonstration of projects (all under way at the time of writing) and a period of post-evaluation. There were initially some 20 projects in the program, and the timing of the funded demonstration period varied considerably from project to project. All will be completed by February 1999.

The NSW Government allocated a budget of a million dollars to this exercise over three years, which has to cover the sponsor's and demonstrators' project administration costs, the operational funding of the demonstrations themselves and the evaluation exercise.

The Demonstration Projects

In land use terms, NSW is predominantly rural, but about 72% of the State's 6 million population live in the Greater Sydney metropolitan area. The eastern and inner-western portion of the metropolitan area has inherited a good public transport legacy and was

excluded from the scope of the ADD program. The projects therefore arise in outer metropolitan and regional areas.

The projects were developed by local communities themselves, following a public advertisement for submissions. A "Resources Kit" was distributed to respondents, giving guidelines for preparing applications and supplementary information (ADD 1997). Proposals from inner Sydney, proposals that were not expected to be financially independent after at most 18 months, proposals that clearly involved strong conflict between operators, and proposals that involved capital funding were all excluded from the scope of the program.

Substantial flexibility in the format of the submissions was allowed, provided that they identified the problem, outlined the project and its funding requirements, demonstrated local support and community involvement (including a Local Steering Committee), and identified the impacts - if any - on existing transport providers.

The response from communities around NSW was very encouraging. Many proposals were received. Some were led by local government, some by community transport organisations and quite a few by private public transport operators.

Some were well defined, though most required further development. An intensive round of discussions strengthened some proposals and caused others to be withdrawn. An Advisory Committee with representatives from several community bodies, transport industry representatives and Government agencies made the final selection of projects and an independent evaluator for the program was appointed.

Of those that passed this evolving process, the big surprise was the scale of the projects. In general they were smaller and more local than had been expected. The original expectation had been that the program budget would extend to supporting four or five substantial demonstrations in NSW. In the event, the relatively modest claims led to a wider range of twenty demonstrations being supported.

The projects can be described in two groups - metropolitan (largely Western Sydney) and regional. **Table 1** summarises the metropolitan projects and **Table 2** the non-metropolitan.

Table 1 ADD Demonstration Projects - Metropolitan

Location	Nature of Project
Blacktown	New frequent Hail-and-Ride local route with wheelchair accessible ultra-low-floor buses
Liverpool	Operation of all local off-peak services as Hail-and-Ride
Liverpool	Re-routing of a local bus service more appropriately through an

Location	Nature of Project
	area with a high proportion of older people, and also through an area with a concentration of medical facilities
Fairfield	Extension of a bus route to bring passengers closer to town centre (eliminating the necessity to climb over a railway footbridge)
Fairfield	Weekend route diversion to enable access to a Buddhist Temple and cultural centre.
Holroyd	Auxiliary Dial-a-Ride service to supplement gaps in regular timetable. Area based with no pre-specified route or single origin/destination.
Wollongong	Use of technology to improve information access on a broad range of local transport services
Liverpool	Development and distribution of guidelines for production of timetable information for Non-English-Speaking Background communities
Shellharbour	Use of community transport resources to test demand for a potential commercial weekend bus route.

Table 2 ADD Demonstration Projects - Regional

Location	Nature of Project
Northern Rivers	Research into community consultation models and effect of change agents in the form of local development workers.
Kyogle	Supply/demand matching system drawing on commercial, community and private transport resources.
Casino	Low cost, fixed-price and pre-booked taxis with share-riding.
Murwillumbah	Cut rate fixed-fare zonal taxi service
Byron Bay	Increased frequency of town bus services
Maclean/Yamba	Regular Hail-and-Ride inter-town bus connecting communities remote from main road
Nelson Bay	Twice a week dial-a-ride accessible service

Location	Nature of Project
Port Macquarie	Needs analysis with a range of transport options
Wellington	Regular service operated by Council and Aboriginal community offering mobility in town and to outlying community.
Batemans Bay	Needs analysis by bus operator, with operational response to be determined from findings.
Kiama	Accessible taxi providing pre-booked bus-type service

Progress

It is premature to make definitive assessments of the projects while the demonstrations are still in progress. Success is mixed, as would be expected. However it seems that the successful models outnumber the unsuccessful and offer great promise for NSW were these demonstrations to be replicated more widely in the State.

- One project was brought to an early close (the Murwillumbah taxi scheme) when the lack of local interest became apparent. The reasons for this are being investigated
- Some projects have required investigation and/or redesign after the initial launch, either to encourage patronage or to increase viability.
- Some projects are displaying slow but steady growth in patronage, and require more time to assess their potential.
- Some projects have encouraged further experimentation outside the conditions of the ADD program. One such is the Dial-A-Ride service in Holroyd. The operator (Baxters) has subsequently identified further opportunities for serving local transport needs (eg youth centres, child care centres) which it is pursuing as commercial opportunities with no assistance from ADD.
- Some projects have been commercially successful from the outset - for instance the Byron Bay bus service augmentation. The increased frequency of the town services generated further patronage more than sufficient to pay for the service enhancement.
- Finally, the adjustments in the program and its funding arrangements associated with the above have allowed ADD to initiate further projects additional to the original 20 within the program budget

Some of the projects are funded for a fixed period, and for others the funding related to activities connected with launching the project rather than its operation. In either case, the issue of if and how the project should continue after its support is terminated, or its agreed period of operation expires, will eventually arise for each project.

Early Lessons Emerging

The program which is the subject of this paper is still incomplete, so this section must necessarily remain somewhat tentative. Nevertheless, some substantive comments can be made.

Facilitation. Perhaps the greatest identified need to improve transport access for older people and people with disabilities is as simple as facilitation, or micro-coordination. There needs to be a person with ideas and the ability to bring local people together to discuss a transport problem; investigate options for service development; who understands the regulatory and business environment; who knows the for-profit and non-profit sectors prime concerns; and who can pull it all together. Nearly a third of the project grants are going to local coordinators, locally facilitating up to six projects, to assist the operators in setting up services and consulting with the potential and actual passengers. Several operators are receiving no direct funding, but are relying on facilitators to develop their business ideas. The independence of these facilitators leads to cooperation.

Cooperation. The response of local communities in many areas has been very encouraging, particularly where different members of the transport sector (bus operators, taxi networks, community transport) are prepared to redistribute or re-organise work between themselves in the interests of better service to the public and resource rationalisation. The fact that they perceive commercial benefits in so doing is a help.

The most extraordinary aspect is the almost total misinformation and misunderstanding by each sector of the other sector's motives, financial capacity, funding and social commitment.

In almost all cases initial layers of mutual suspicion had to be peeled away before cooperation was possible. The reality that came to be realised by all players was the common goal - to carry more customers. The motivation might be different between profit and non-profit operators, but to achieve consistently higher patronage they both have to offer the appropriate service at an affordable price in an efficient manner. For-profits are trying to increase their income, non-profits are trying to stretch grants further. Both have critical lessons to learn from each other.

Commitment/Knowledge. Many private transport services applicants were far more committed to servicing older people in particular than popular opinion would suggest.

However, with some notable exceptions, the majority of for-profit operators entering into the submission process had little understanding of how to attract older customers, what their needs were or indeed, how to find such information. This lack of ability sometimes translated into cynicism about the sincerity of older peoples' expressed transport needs. Many operators had tried and failed to meet those needs, but often their efforts were unknowingly inappropriate.

Competition. The regulatory and funding regimes in NSW differ for buses, taxis and community transport (and for trains). Where known disputes with operators over

commercial rights threatened the implementation of proposed demonstration projects, they were dropped from the program. If the demonstration projects evolve into a future model for wider application, such attitudes may inhibit progress in some areas. However, the lessons learned and the evaluated financial outcomes may convince operators to think more laterally.

Given the fairly marginal commercial propositions for transport operators in regional areas, a reformed social policy framework for direction of budget-sector expenditure into transport may be necessary for large scale innovation by rural operators.

Unintended consequences are an inevitable by-product of action research. In two areas where taxis are providing more affordable and accessible services as part of the projects, bus operators have responded by increasing service levels and standards. In one case the taxi project was terminated early because of lack of usage. While the reaction of the bus operators may have limited or eliminated the success of the taxi services, it has resulted in improved access for the target group at even more affordable levels with no subsidy. This will be monitored to determine if the increased bus levels are viable, sustainable and profitable, and if so, why there was a need for the stimulus.

Need for Change Agent Public transport regulatory reforms were introduced in NSW in the early 1990's, and led to a general improvement in service delivery. However the situation is now relatively stable, and both operators and transport authorities are more concerned with delivering service and administering the system than seeking further innovation. (Nevertheless innovations do occur through "mainstream" processes, for instance in the replacement of big buses with smaller and more user-friendly vehicles in some areas). The incentive for change resulting from an external intervention (the ADD program) has led to regulation-compatible innovation occurring that probably would never have happened without such an impetus, including innovation outside the ADD program. An example is the operator of the ADD-funded project in Holroyd also taking on the non-ADD-funded activity of delivering child-care transport services and workers club services with the project infrastructure in addition to the "official" demonstration aimed specifically at the transport disadvantaged.

Not what, but how. A small number of the projects have been initiated not with a specific transport demonstration but with an exploration of local need prior to determining an appropriate transport initiative. A theme that has emerged from these projects is that of appropriateness. The local concerns are not with lack of services but with the nature of the services which are already operated. These concerns may relate to the type of vehicle which is used (eg difficult to board) or the lack of understanding of operating staff of the needs of customers. These are relatively easy to address, in the short to medium term. It may be that the measures to overcome these concerns could be formalised in future as part of the contract conditions required by the Department of Transport before renewing or reallocating a local monopoly franchise for bus services.

Evaluation

The evaluation process must assess whether each project in itself meets its aims. It must also assess the continuing sustainability of the activity when the funding period is terminated. It must provide the basis for recommendations on changing the policy base from which transport operates. Finally it must present the results of the successful schemes in a way that offers models for others to emulate.

There are early signs that this last effect is happening already - for instance a taxi scheme similar to the demonstration project in Casino has recently commenced in Wagga Wagga, quite independently of the ADD program. The sustainability aspect achieved an early win when the operator of the Byron Bay scheme reported that ADD funding of a feared shortfall during the demonstration period would not after all be necessary, as the project had proved commercially viable virtually from the outset. The Wollongong computer-based information project has attracted offers from commercial enterprises to buy licences.

The principles of the evaluation plan are the same for all projects, although its implementation differs in detail from project to project. It is a three-stage exercise, relating to the situation before the demonstration, the demonstration itself and (a stage which at the time of writing no project has reached) what happened when the project demonstration funding ceased and whether the eventual outcome is sustainable. The evaluation is addressing three main issues :

- **demand** : how much patronage was generated and was this true generation or diversion from other services ?
- **supply** : what did the demonstrations cost (money and resources) to mount and operate, and were the costs of other parties affected by the demonstration ?
- **attitudes** : did the demonstration generate any significant attitudinal change - among users, providers or authorities ?

Data is being collected on a regular basis for projects as they progress. This has been and will continue to be supplemented by more in-depth interviews. These may vary according to the aims of each project but will include talking with users of the services, with service providers and with regulators.

Evaluation data of this type collected prior to the commencement of projects has produced some interesting insights. Two examples illustrate this.

In non-metropolitan areas, public transport use is not high. Not surprisingly, a telephone survey of 198 residents in the Northern Rivers region did not identify a large number of public transport users. However over 70 percent confirmed that they were aware that their areas were served by public transport (other than taxis and community transport) and of those, 67 percent considered that they knew enough to use the services if they wanted to.

While the proportion of bus and taxi users in this survey sample was not high, the responses seemed to indicate that their market profiles are quite different. Looking only at those who used buses or taxis at least once a month, the survey found that of 29 taxi users, 22 hardly ever or never used buses ; and of 16 bus users, 12 hardly ever or never used taxis. Respondents reporting taxi use were spread fairly evenly by age and sex through the survey sample, whereas those reporting bus use were dominated by older people and by women.

In Blacktown, Western Sydney, the bus operator (Busways) conducted on-board interviews with passengers before the demonstration project started. Given that the demonstration involved a super-low-floor vehicle, Busways explored "difficulty in boarding and alighting" existing services as part of the survey. Their analysis included the findings that :

- Older age groups (60 to 75) reported eight times the level of difficulty when compared to younger adults (25 to 59).
- Difficulties were more evenly spread when associated with bus journeys carrying something. This highlights that low floor vehicles do not just benefit older people or people with disabilities but also many others, for instance shoppers, parents with children in strollers.
- There was no apparent link between difficulty in using the bus and frequency of usage. Respondents who reported difficulties in using the bus had higher rates of daily use than the average for their age groups. This suggests that socio-economic or demographic factors may be more important than physical ability in influencing frequency of use.

These and other findings will be fully documented in the Evaluation Report for the Demonstration Program in due course.

Conclusions

Outside inner metropolitan areas, there is a huge and urgent need to widen and improve the provision of public transport services to meet the needs of the whole community, and especially the fast-growing older population.

The things that need to be done are rarely big-ticket items. Application of detailed local knowledge of need and/or coordination of locally available transport resources combined with facilitation to bring about information sharing can work wonders for little cost.

The transport sector has an intrinsic inertia and an external impetus (such as that given by the ADD program) is an effective agent of change

The mixing of for-profit and non-profit organisations has generally been successful, and the overcoming of misconceptions of each sector about the others motives and capability has been a major achievement of the program.

The demonstration program will run into early 1997 and full evaluation, which must take into account what happens when the ADD funding is terminated, will not be possible until later in the year.

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