

ACYP Submission to IPART Review of Rural and Regional Bus Fares 2021 - 2025

7 August 2020

Summary and Recommendations

For socially excluded children and young people in rural and regional areas, transport presents a series of considerable challenges. Children and young people based in rural and regional NSW face significant transport barriers and they are heavily reliant upon public transport. They often cannot afford public transport fares in areas where there are fewer concessions and travel options. This means that they have limited access to opportunities and are more likely to have negative interactions with law enforcement due to fare evasion.

Children and young people in rural and regional NSW as a cohort of customers that do not have the capacity to pay fares due to the distances they are required to travel, the cost of fares, and privately-run transport services. As such, the current fare system can be prohibitive in terms of cost and therefore changes to the current system are proposed to mitigate these issues.

Recommendations:

ACYP makes the following recommendations based upon consultations with children and young people in rural and regional NSW.

1. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that socially excluded children and young people have the means to travel safely.
2. Introduce travel vouchers that can be provided to those in need and make them available in shops or services with extended trading hours.
3. Ensure all public transport operates on an electronic ticket system to allow for innovation in providing mechanisms for vulnerable people to travel safely.
4. Ensure the pricing scheme allows for innovative local solutions such as after-hours youth buses.
5. Require key public transport personnel to have training/information on utilising fare and fare enforcement mechanisms to promote the best interests of socially excluded children and young people who may be vulnerable or at risk of harm.

About ACYP

The Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. ACYP advocates for and promotes the safety, welfare, well-being and voice of all children and young people aged 0-24 years, with a focus on the needs of those who are socially excluded.

Under the Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014, the functions of ACYP include:

- making recommendations to Parliament, and government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services that affect children and young people;
- promoting children and young people's participation in activities and decision-making about issues that affect their lives;
- conducting research into children's issues and monitoring children's well-being;
- holding inquiries into important issues relating to children and young people;
- providing information to help children and young people; and
- preparing, in consultation with the Minister responsible for youth, a three-year, whole-of-government Strategic Plan for Children and Young People (Plan). The inaugural Plan was launched in July 2016.

A key role of the Advocate for Children and Young People is to ensure that the views of children and young people are given serious consideration and taken into account in decisions that affect their lives, by workers and decision makers inside and outside of government.

Since its establishment, the Advocate for Children and Young People has consulted extensively with children and young people from a broad range of backgrounds and age groups throughout the State, and with the organisations that work with them. These consultations have allowed the ACYP to hear back from over 32,000 children and young people who have helped to inform the Advocate about the hopes and aspirations and recommendations of children and young people in NSW as well as the barriers that they face. In addition, it has helped the Advocate to forge strong working relationships with the many organisations in NSW that work with and for children and young people.

The Advocate for Children and Young People continues to meet with and hear from children and young people, and provides support to NSW Government departments and agencies in its work with children and young people

Further information about ACYP's work can be found at: www.acyp.nsw.gov.au.

Introduction

ACYP has heard from over 5200 children and young people in rural and regional areas, and over 4000 socially excluded children and young people from 2015-2019. During these consultations, issues around transport were raised as it was identified that socially excluded children and young people in regional areas face many transport barriers and are particularly reliant on public transport.

Drawing on what we have heard from children and young people, this submission focuses on the transport needs of socially excluded children and young people in regional NSW, sets out the transportation context and then gives recommendations on how fare structure can address these issues.

Transport Context of Socially Excluded Children and Young People in Regional and Rural Areas

For socially excluded children and young people in rural and regional areas, transport is a considerable challenge. In the 2018 ACYP Report on Consultations with Socially Excluded Children and Young People, 44% of respondents said that transport was not working well for socially excluded children and young people, and 27% said that the NSW Government should focus on improving transport to improve the lives of children and young people. The detailed findings of this data identified that 20% of respondents said that the government should focus on providing better transport in rural areas.

Obtaining a Driver's Licence is substantially more difficult for children and young people based in rural and regional areas and as such they are more heavily reliant upon public transport. This issue is compounded by the fact that they often cannot afford public transport fares in areas where there are fewer concessions and travel options. The result of this is that they have limited access to employment opportunities, educational programs and health and support services. Although concessions do exist for school students travelling to and from school, these young people have limited access to affordable transport to take them to activities, social gatherings, safe places, and other support services.

Children and young people experiencing homelessness in regional NSW spoke about being kicked out of home late at night without any money and having to hitchhike, walk long distances, beg, or put themselves in other unsafe situations in order to reach a safe place or other support services.

With limited or no income, children and young people sometimes have to travel without tickets and therefore receive fines which build up as they have no means to pay them. Children in Juvenile Justice Centres revealed that they were receiving fines when using public transport due to an inability to afford the fares;

If you don't have the money you end up jumping a train, get in trouble, get arrested, end up in here [custody].

As they have no means to pay the fines, the fines accumulate.

[I had] three grand worth of fines, coz I haven't been able to pay em, so they just went basically up and up and up.

This creates additional difficulties for socially excluded children and young people in regional and rural NSW and highlights the interrelation which can exist between transport affordability and broader justice issues.

A Pricing Scheme that Acknowledges Disadvantage

ACYP recommends that the above outlined issues are best addressed in the structure of the pricing scheme by offering targeted solutions, as outlined below, rather by adjusting overall fares. Instead of reducing all fares, these targeted mechanisms may be made available to those who are incapable of paying while prices remain the same for those with the capacity to pay the fares. It is unknown the extent to which any reduction of this nature would affect overall revenue, however ACYP consultation information anecdotally suggests that on many occasions when fares are unaffordable, they result in a total absence of payment, as opposed to a contribution in line with affordability. If concessions are introduced which result in affordable fares for socially excluded children and young people, fare evasion is likely to reduce and proportional contributions to cost recovery efforts likely to increase.

Recommendation: Targeted mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that socially excluded children and young people have the means to travel safely.

In order to prevent and divert young people from transport-related conflict with the law, children and young people suggested that travel vouchers could be provided to those in need are made available in shops or services with extended trading hours such as 7-Eleven, Woolworths or Police Stations (as well as being available through electronic payment systems as outlined below). The entitlement to these travel vouchers could be provided to children and young people based on their involvement with community services such as Specialist Homeless Services or Out of Home Care.

Recommendation: Introduce travel vouchers that can be provided to those in need and made available in shops or services with extended trading hours.

Innovation to Address Disadvantage

IPART has expressed an interest in exploring new innovative ideas. Advances in the ways that fares are charged and in the ways public transport are provided can help address disadvantage. For example, provision of travel vouchers proposed above could be facilitated by ensuring all public transport operates on an electronic ticket system. Electronic payment systems could be remotely topped up by homelessness services or caseworkers. In addition, warnings and cautions may potentially be issued through this system too, which will hold children and young people accountable for fare evasion without debilitating them with fines.

Recommendation: Ensure all public transport operates on an electronic ticket system to allow for innovation in providing mechanisms for vulnerable people to travel safely.

The pricing scheme should also allow for local innovative solutions to issues in particular areas. For example, creating a 24-hour or after-hours bus or van service that is on call to pick up children and young people in the local area and take them to safe drop-in areas or other services. This could provide a safe and directed way to address isolation with a free service to children and young people in rural areas using decommissioned fleet busses which are still in safe working order but have been superseded by newer models.

Recommendation: Ensure the pricing scheme allows for innovative local solutions such as after-hours youth busses.

Ensuring that the mechanisms are used in practice will be facilitated if key personnel such as Transit Officers and Bus Drivers receive training or information on how to promote the best interests of socially excluded children and young people who may be vulnerable or at risk of harm. They should be encouraged to use these mechanisms as well as warnings and cautions as an alternative to transport fines and criminal charges. Further, enhancement of options for socially excluded children and young people to pay their fines with community service or volunteering hours may be beneficial.

Recommendation: Require key public transport personnel to have training/information on utilising fare and fare enforcement mechanisms to promote the best interests of children and young people who may be vulnerable or at risk of harm.

Conclusion

ACYP appreciates and thanks IPART for the opportunity to give feedback. ACYP's role is to advocate for and promote the safety, welfare, well-being and voice of children and young people, particularly those who are socially excluded. This submission was written to present the existing evidence on issues relating to transport faced by socially excluded children and young people in rural and regional NSW. The recommendations are designed to ensure that this vulnerable group of children and young people are adequately supported. ACYP thanks IPART for considering this submission. If any further information is required, please contact ACYP on [REDACTED] at ACYP@acyp.nsw.gov.au.