

Accessible public transport



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Introduction

The social inclusion agenda and the recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹ makes this the right time to ensure that people who are Deaf, Deafblind, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear, are able to participate in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the community. Utilising public transport is an essential part of this.

Greater accessibility of public transport will also benefit older Australians with mobility constraints – which is increasingly important as our population ages. Please bear in mind that hearing loss is also closely related to ageing – not just mobility constraints need to be considered when thinking of ageing population.

Statistics

Currently, **one in six** Australians has some form of hearing impairment, and this is projected to increase to one in four by 2050².

The projected increase is largely associated with the ageing population. Three in every four people aged over 70 years have a hearing loss³. Accordingly, it is imperative that the needs of this large and growing sector of society are satisfactorily met.

It is important to highlight the changing demographics and in particular the ageing population. In Australia in 1998 2.3 million people were over the age of 65 years and it is estimated that more than 50% of the people over 65 had a disability. By 2051 these figures will have moved to 6 million people over 65 years as the baby boomers age and the longevity and health of the community improve (Reference ABS Population Statistics and 1998 ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers)

Consequently there could be as many as 3 million people over 65 with a disability in Australia. Furthermore, older people are one of the most frequent users of public transport although there has been some decline in recent years. This decline is in part due to increased affluence of retired people leading to higher car ownership and usage, and in part due to fears of real or perceived security issues on public transport. Senior's cards and special discounted fare structures may be significantly offsetting this decline.

People who are Deaf, Deafblind, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear have the same right to communication access as any citizen with hearing – yet in Australia such access is limited. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the nature of hearing impairment and the need for hearing augmentation and communication access in so many areas related to daily living.

Difficulty using public transport can be an isolating factor for people who are Deaf, Deafblind, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear. Studies have

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. See www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf

² Access Economics: *Listen Hear! The economic impact and cost of hearing loss in Australia*, February 2006, pp.42

³ Access Economics, *ibid*, p5



shown hearing impairment to be associated with multiple adverse effects on people – including depression, anxiety, anger, social isolation, and reduced cognitive functioning⁴.

About the Deafness Forum

Deafness Forum is the peak body for deafness in Australia. Established in early 1993 at the instigation of the Federal government, the Deafness Forum now represents all interests and viewpoints of the Deaf and hearing impaired communities of Australia (including those people who have a chronic disorder of the ear and those who are Deafblind).

The Deafness Forum exists to improve the quality of life for Australians who are Deaf, Deafblind, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear by:

- advocating for government policy change and development
- making input into policy and legislation
- generating public awareness
- providing a forum for information sharing and
- creating better understanding between all areas of deafness.

Our consultation process

Deafness Forum has consulted with members in all states of Australia to gather feedback on this topic. Our responses represent a number of comments received and our own deductions based on our continuing engagement with members and referral of complaints and questions.

Scope

Our comments relate solely to issues affecting people who are Deaf, Deafblind, have a hearing impairment or a chronic disorder of the ear.

Deaf relates to those people who use Auslan (Australian sign language) while people with hearing impairment may have any degree of hearing loss, but usually use English and may speak. .

Comments and Responses

Our recommendation is quite simple: wherever there is an announcement, auditory information, or use of a PA system, a corresponding visual announcement should also be present (eg, scrolling text, or real time captioning).

Enhancement Technology. There are a number of technologies, which improve the ability of most people with hearing impairment to hear. However the problem is that there is no mandated standard that would result in a single technology suiting all. Most regulations including Building Codes and the Draft Building Standards now require that access to public and commercial building will include technologies such as Audio Induction Loop, FM radio, or Infra-Red communications enhancers. Of these the loop has greatest applicability as an estimated 60% to 70% of hearing aids are fitted with a T-Coil, which can receive from an Audio Induction Loop. The highest percentage is in

⁴ Bess et al 1991; Herbst & Humphries, 1980; Jones et al, 1984



hearing aids supplied by the Federal Government to children and social security dependants; these represent an estimated 50% of all hearing aids. The percentage of people with equipment that can receive I-R or FM is inconsequential. There is a strong case for all hearing aids to be equipped with F-M receivers with multi channel options including a universal frequency for transport access and other public access points. This would be the next generation technology.

Visual Communication. Replacement and/or supplementation of audible communication, with communication by sight offers the greatest potential to satisfy the greatest number of people with hearing impairment, whilst also aiding the Deaf. An important factor of visual communication is the need for the majority of the community to cooperate with the great need and ability of most people who are Deaf or have a hearing impairment to lip-read. This cooperation requires some training for those with a public interface role, particularly in providing transport services. It also requires a greater degree of general public awareness of the issue. These 2 factors would significantly improve the access to information for the traveller who is Deaf or has a hearing impairment.

The main technological option is clear and timely visual displays. These need to be at any point where announcements are provided to travellers by loud speakers or other verbal means.

This should include information and ticket counters.

Inductive Loops are an ideal solution when personal interaction is required such as at sales counters with background noise (street or rail stations) but as they only aid a proportion of the people they should be regarded as a good medium term solution.

Visual Displays combined with Inductive Loops offers the best current solution. Visual displays can be interactive and offer a much more realistic opportunity to afford equal access than any other method. However far more visual displays are needed and in particular displays, which are concurrent in real time with audio announcements are essential to bring the H-I or Deaf person the same timely information as the fully hearing person enjoys.

Integrated FM Radio. FM radio and some Infra Red devices are used by a number H-I people in indoor situations. The transmitter is built into or carried to the location and the hand held or stethoscope receiver is carried by the H-I person to that location and used with or without a Hearing Aid. A more modern solution, not widely available in Australia is to build a multi channel FM radio into the Hearing Aid. This allows the provision of direct communication to the H-I person from a public address system such as is used for announcements in many public places including transport interchanges and other main nodes. Separate frequency channels for separate purposes such as these nodes and private communication would be required.

Contacting Public Transport and other Transport Information Sources This problem has been addressed to some degree in Australia. All Telstra payphones introduced after 1986 have hearing aid couplers. Phone Card Payphones also have volume-control facility to aid people with hearing-impairment. Payphone TTYs allow people who are Deaf or hearing impaired and speech-impaired people to call other TTY equipped business and home phones. TTYs use a keyboard and a display screen which can be attached to a Phone Card Express Payphone or normal office or home phone. Some TTYs can be direct connected via appropriate plug compatibility to any standard



telephone line connected to the PSTN. Any TTY can communicate directly with any other TTY using Baudot Code and/or Turbo Code TM. Any TTY can communicate with any other TTY, computer or hearing person or voice machine via the National Relay Service(NRS) operated by the Australian Communication Exchange (ACE), which translates/interprets voice to TTY Baudot or ASCII telecommunication protocols or in reverse.

Whilst people who are Deaf or hearing impaired may be provided with TTYs at their homes and or place of work by their Telecommunications Service Provider or employer, the majority of people who are Deaf or hearing impaired and almost all elderly people who are hearing impaired are inadequately equipped. There is a need for large figure amplified and volume controlled phones to be available to all with a hearing problem. Many central information services of the major transport providers are equipped with TTYs but few if any local railway stations or bus companies are equipped.

Arriving at a local or suburban Transport Access Point. The communications available to inform all travellers in most minor nodes or transport access points are no worse for a deaf or H-I person than a hearing person. Road intersections, bus stops, train station entry points and similar access points generally are inadequately signed. However the problem is exacerbated for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired due to their inability to effectively communicate with passers by or other travellers to obtain information at an unattended location. The situation at medium and larger access points is discussed in the next few paragraphs.

Purchasing a ticket, Seeking information. All ticket and information counters should be equipped with Audio Loops together with a sign to advise the people who are Deaf or hearing impaired that there is a loop and where to stand whilst speaking to the customer service clerk. In addition the provision of real time voice recognition technology to operate a visual display should be considered when this technology is available in suitable form. This could be used to translate the verbal information being provided into a visual display in real time to assist the people who are Deaf or hearing impaired to communicate with the clerk. It is also important that the training of ticket and information clerks includes an understanding of the need for clear speech including positive lip movement to assist lip reading clients.

Timetable and Station Schedule Information. Existing static signs are appropriate for the general community and for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired, provided they are clear and require no inquiry to clarify their meaning. The updating of existing visual displays in a timely manner is very important. The present situation in which some train station information is updated verbally but not on the station and platform displays until after the event leaves people who are Deaf or hearing impaired without appropriate updates and can lead to their getting on the wrong destination vehicle. Electronic interlocks between the announcement and the static visual display would be an advantage. In addition the use of voice recognition technology to provide continuous display of the announcement in real time would ensure the people who are Deaf or hearing impaired were well informed.

On-Board Information and Announcements. Next stop or station information, arrival times and other general information are communicated by verbal announcements on trains, buses and light rail. These general announcements include reasons for delays, security and safety information, appropriate stops for events, hospitals, schools, cultural

and many other venues. They should be supplemented with real time moving visual displays, which should be of sufficient content and dwell to ensure that the elderly and the intellectually impaired have time to read them and comprehend. Loops installed in part of the seating and connected to the PA system would also enhance access to information for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired.

4. measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure

Trains in Sydney:

- loudspeaker reports should be captioned.
- stations should be announced on a captioned screen in each carriage
- more trains and more on time
- so expensive - two stops from Nth Sydney to city is approx 3.40, which is ridiculous.

Buses in Sydney:

- online timetables and timetables at stops are not the same
- buses are never on time
- many major roads have no bus lanes so busing is no quicker than walking some days
- LED screens which can broadcast a captioned message when the bus stops or conks out, or to let passengers know its the end of the line - often i will be left sitting on a bus while everyone else gets off, because the bus driver has yelled something down the back of the bus, and I didn't hear it.

5. the role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport

- transport too expensive - no incentive not to drive - its cheaper to drive but perhaps not as environmentally friendly
- transport never on time, not reliable enough
- timetables unreliable, often incorrect
- not enough disability access

6. best practice international examples of public passenger transport services and infrastructure.

- on buses in Europe and trains, all the carriages have those LED signs that indicate which stop you are at, or caption the loudspeaker messages so you can read them.
- at train and bus stops they have electronic timetables that tell you how far away the trains/buses are, and they update constantly so you know if you will be late etc.

Conclusion

The recommendations above will facilitate communication access on public transport.



Generally speaking, provision of loops in all buses and coaches, metro trains and country trains, trams, etc.

Without these changes, access for people with a hearing impairment will be severely compromised.

Contact

If you have any questions about the information contained in this submission, please contact

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