



ASSOCIATION OF BLIND CITIZENS OF NEW ZEALAND INC

Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”

IS THIS THE RIGHT BUS?

Public Transport – Trials and Tribulations
of the Blind Traveller

Blind People Speaking for Ourselves

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Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”
Issue 2: Accessible Public Transport

IS THIS THE RIGHT BUS?

Public Transport – Trials and Tribulations of the Blind Traveller

Founded in 1945, the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc (Association) is New Zealand’s leading blindness consumer organisation and one of the country’s largest organisations of disabled consumers. The Association’s aim is to heighten awareness of the rights of blind and vision impaired people and to remove the barriers that impact upon our ability to live in an accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

In the context of this document, the word “blind” encompasses all those with a vision impairment who can identify with some or all of the issues described below.

INTRODUCTION

Blindness imposes limitations on our ability to travel independently and safely and to exercise freedom of choice as to the preferred mode of travel. Being ourselves unable to drive, we often find our need to use public transport unavoidable. It is important to note that the use of public transport may also comprise a “walking” component, an aspect which may sometimes act as a deterrent due to dangers we perceive in safely completing this part of the journey. Even so, access and orientation issues associated with the public transport system itself can make any such experience both frustrating and stressful.

Most of these issues could be addressed through changes to current legislation, regulations, policies, procedures or funding arrangements and through Public Transport Operators amending current practises.

The Land Transport Management Act 2003 specifies that Regional Land Transport Programmes must report on compliance with certain obligations including “improving access and mobility”. We are aware that these terms have different meanings for different people and that improving access and mobility to meet our specific needs is not usually what springs to mind.

What we need

- The NZ Transport Agency to explicitly extend their interpretation of “improving access and mobility” to include the provision of blind-friendly features to meet our needs.
- Regional Authorities to acknowledge us as part of the public transport-using community they must serve and, in so doing, allocate funding to those features that will improve our access and mobility alongside that of the rest of the community.

What follows is a summary of the issues faced by blind travellers when accessing the most frequently used forms of public transport, and the remedial action sought by this Association.

TAXIS

Because they provide a door-to-door service, taxis are the most commonly used form of public transport for the majority of blind people. This can be attributed mainly to the introduction of the Total Mobility (TM) Scheme which has made taxi travel more affordable through the provision of subsidised taxi fares.

Issues identified by blind taxi passengers include:

- Drivers with insufficient area knowledge. Blind passengers cannot always provide the route instructions sought, which commonly require either offering visual directions or indicating on a map. This experience can be compounded if the driver's command of English makes verbal communication problematic.
- Being unable to read the fare on the meter or even know whether it is running or not.
- Driver reluctance (or even refusal) to carry guide dogs despite being legally bound to do so. Some drivers may either fail to present themselves for the engagement or simply refuse to admit the guide dog. Lodging a complaint is made more difficult if the taxi cannot be visually identified.
- Being forced to use non-TM-registered taxi companies.
- Finding that a taxi is not equipped to handle TM Cards where these form part of an automated fare-processing system.

This Association commends the law change introduced in October 2008 making it mandatory for taxis to have a Braille sign affixed to their front doors denoting the name of the company, the taxi's unique fleet number and the company's phone number to call for complaints.

What we need

- A level of training that produces drivers:
 - qualified to a high standard of area knowledge;
 - well versed in their obligations towards vulnerable blind passengers;
 - familiar with the laws relating to guide dogs.
- Taxi meters that emit audible signals to denote a change in their on/off status;
- Wide adoption by taxi companies of the Total Mobility Scheme and any advanced technology for processing TM fares;
- Braille signs on the back as well as the front doors of taxis.

BUSES

Though representing the most commonly used form of public transport for blind commuters, the local bus service often presents us with barriers that inhibit independent travel. This is largely due to the solely visual nature of the information required to assist and alert the traveller.

Real-time scheduling (GPS) technology with audible announcements, already installed by some Councils and bus operators, will ultimately reduce the need for intervention on the part of bus drivers by providing information at the boarding bus stop about bus movements and on the bus itself about its current location.

The most commonly identified issues cited by blind bus users are:

- Locating and verifying the correct boarding bus stop;
- identifying the right bus to catch;
- knowing when the desired destination stop has been reached or is being approached;
- negotiating permanent obstacles such as erratically-placed poles, rubbish bins, seating and bus shelters which obstruct passage on and off the bus;
- inconsistent placement of bus shelters and bus stop, timetable and real time scheduling poles, making it difficult to know where to wait;
- unreliability of audible announcements (where these exist) due to inconsistent application or breakdown;
- dangers posed by access-ways that intrude into bus stops;
- inability to access key information available to the sighted public at bus stops.

What we need

- Mandatory policies requiring drivers to:
 - identify their bus number or destination when they see a blind person waiting at a bus stop;
 - display extra vigilance is required where the bus is unable to pull up at the front of a multi-route zone;

- announce all major stops and any specific stop requested by a blind passenger;
- verbally indicate seating that can be quickly and efficiently located by a blind passenger, including identifying seats which are most convenient and comfortable for the accommodation of a guide dog and its handler;
- remain stationary until the blind passenger is seated or has alighted from the bus;
- facilitate ease of passage by pulling in close to and parallel with the curb at bus stops.
- Visibility enhancements that provide:
 - large print colour-contrasted timetables at bus stops;
 - eye-level signage on the exterior of buses, displayed in large characters and with effective colour contrast;
 - adequate lighting at bus stops and in the interior of buses.
- The development of national standards that address:
 - the positioning and layout of bus stops so as to ensure unobstructed access on and off the bus;
 - the positioning of real-time scheduling poles in close proximity to the front of the stop;
 - the provision at bus stops of bus stop identification and contact information (already available to the sighted public) in Braille, large print and audible form.
 - A wider and more effective use of real-time scheduling (GPS) technology with audible announcements.

TRAINS

Difficulties associated with retrieving information and with orientation are common experiences for blind bus and rail users alike. In addition, gaps between trains and platform edges, which are clearly identified for the sighted public as being potentially dangerous, are an added hazard for those without sight.

What we need

Regional Councils and transport operators to provide:

- Large print and up-to-date timetables at stations and all rail booking outlets;
 - ticket vending machines that include Braille, large print and audio operating instructions and which despatch large print tickets and audible booking confirmation;
 - audible real-time scheduling announcements of train movements at all stations;
 - early and regularly repeated announcements of changes to timetables and platform allocations to enable blind travellers sufficient time to make the necessary accommodations;
 - consistently located, tactile-indicated areas for passengers who require assistance to board or find suitable seating;
 - platform edges and train steps that are clearly marked in a contrasting colour and with tactile markings;
 - on-board announcements of station stops and the correct side of the train from which to alight;
 - audible announcements that clearly describe any abnormality when disembarking;
 - Braille, large print and audible identification of the station name and contact information (already available to the sighted public) at each station.

ACCESSING TRAVEL INFORMATION

Printed timetables provide information that enables those who can read them to plan their journeys and make the best use of their time. For those who can visually operate the technology, automated ticket handling and check-in facilities speed up the process of passenger throughput by reducing the need for human intervention.

Destined for wider implementation, an integrated ticketing system enables passengers to use a single ticket regardless of the transport service being used. This usually takes the form of a smart card which stores money to be used for fares. Blind people are unable however to independently identify the level of funds available on their smart card when using the on-board card reader.

What we need

- Timetables and other travel information in a form that blind travellers can access, such as large print, Braille, on line access or via the telephone;
- Booking systems that support on line or telephone bookings;
- Automated ticketing and check-in facilities that are independently accessible to blind people;
- Card readers that “speak” all data shown on the screen.

TRAINING

When delivering services to blind people, transport operators need to understand the unique needs that blindness imposes and how to interact with us in a way that is both acceptable and helpful. It is essential that transport operators know how to treat us with respect and dignity in what is usually a very public situation.

What we need

All transport operators who come in contact with the public to be required to undergo compulsory blindness awareness and competency training as part of their contracted responsibilities so that they can interact with us in an assured and relaxed manner. This training should at least cover TM Scheme taxi drivers, contracted bus service drivers, timetable and service information providers, train and station managers, and check-in and ticket selling staff.

TRANSPORT FACILITIES

Under the provisions of the Building Act 2004 and NZS 4121, any new or renovated transport exchange, bus and ferry terminal, train station or airport would be required to incorporate essential accessibility features, including those that would enhance the independence of blind travellers. Unfortunately, owners and operators are not bound to upgrade or build new premises just to include such features.

What we need

This exemption to be waved for public transport facilities and in particular that all:

- signage be displayed in large print and Braille;
- automated check-in and ticketing facilities be independently usable by blind travellers.

PEDESTRIAN TRAVEL

Part of what is generally known as “the accessible journey” may also involve walking from home to the pick-up point and walking from the drop-off point to the destination. Even if the blind person is a confident White Cane user or Guide Dog Handler, being a blind pedestrian can still present situations that are at worst hazardous and at best stressful. Crossing roads is never entirely safe for a blind pedestrian. Crossings controlled by traffic signals may not exist at the most advantageous points on the route, necessitating a longer walk in order to enjoy the safety they afford.

“RTS 14 – Guidelines for Facilities for Blind and Vision Impaired Pedestrians” is a standard that most Councils have embraced although it is not yet mandatory. The two features described to assist blind people on their walking journey are:

- Tactile Ground Surface Indicators to provide pedestrians with visual and sensory information; and
- Audible Tactile Traffic Signals, the audible features of which help blind people locate signals and inform them of the status of the crossing phase while the tactile features help with their orientation.

Hazards are not confined to road crossings however. Footpaths can be equally hazardous when the blind pedestrian encounters:

- illegally parked vehicles;
- temporary obstacles such as discarded bicycles and wheelie bins;
- overhanging tree branches and encroaching vegetation;
- shop wares displayed outside the shop door;
- tables and chairs outside cafes, bars and restaurants;
- inconsistent placement of sandwich boards in contravention of the local bylaws;
- non-compliance with the correct placement of audible traffic signals and tactile markings;
- poorly maintained footpaths;
- inadequate safeguards around construction sites and street maintenance work;
- shared use of the footpath, either official or unofficial, with cyclists, skateboarders, etc.

What we need

- RTS 14 enshrined in law.
- Local councils and authorities required to:
 - ensure that alternative use of footpath space does not compromise the safety of blind pedestrians and, where applicable, enforce their bylaws; and
 - respond promptly to any complaints regarding safety issues for blind pedestrians.

CONSULTATION

As blind travellers, we are the best judges of what is needed in order for us to travel independently and safely. An accessible travelling environment is the first step towards greater social inclusion for all those with a disability. A consultative approach is therefore essential to enable the mobility needs of blind people and others with a disability to be consistently and effectively addressed.

What we need

To be consulted in relation to public transport issues and to be represented on any working group set up for this purpose. Along with the development of national standards, laws and policies, we would also seek to be consulted and involved in the optimum design of any features, electronic or otherwise, to aid our accessibility, and in those developed for use by the general public which may need adaptation to meet our needs.

REFERENCE SOURCES

Land Transport Management Act 2003

New Zealand Disability Strategy: Objectives 6 and 8

NZS 4121

Requirements for Urban Buses in New Zealand, NZ Transport Agency, December 2008

RTS 14 – Guidelines for Facilities for Blind and Vision Impaired Pedestrians

The Accessible Journey: Report of the Inquiry into Accessible Public Land Transport, Human Rights Commission, September 2005

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UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Articles 9, 20 and 30. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, ratified by New Zealand, October 2008

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