

SUBMISSION ON FLEXIBLE AND ON DEMAND TRANSPORT



The Public Transport Association of Canberra (PTCBR) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to Transport Canberra's review of flexible and on demand transport.

PTCBR is the Canberra region's leading public transport advocacy group with members from all sectors of our community. We are focused on improving access to public transport and making the passenger experience better. We lobby government, business groups and stakeholders associated with public transport and planning, and play a key role in the consultation process on these matters.

From our discussions with Ms van de Graafe, we understand the review has a broad remit to consider all aspects of the current flexible bus service, and also considering flexible and on-demand transport for the broader community. With that in mind, PTCBR makes the following brief comments.

The objective of flexible transport should be to provide mobility those who cannot access the public transport network

The ACT Government's Integrated Transport Strategy proposes "to expand a variety of flexible and demand responsive services to meet the needs of those Canberrans who cannot easily access the public transport network."¹

PTCBR submits that the ACT Government should continue with this objective, rather than seeking to expand on demand transport to the wider community at this stage. As we explain further below, there are significant shortcomings in the current service, and it would be better to target resources where they are most needed.

Flexible transport can also allow the regular transport network to run more efficiently. Network 19 streamlined some bus routes, resulting in longer walks to get to bus stops. PTCBR supported these changes for the most part, but it does mean there needs to be a well resourced flexible service to support the minority of passengers who cannot walk those distances.

On demand transport can provide a solution to the "last mile" problem and difficulties with serving a dispersed population during times of low demand. However, it would be better for the ACT Government to consider this issue holistically, as part of a broader review of the entire public transport network, rather than as part of this review. Any such review should be informed by previous experiences with area buses (1980s), Flexibus (2005-06) and the 2015 CSIRO BusPlus proposal.² Finally, PTCBR is not aware of any cities of similar sizes to Canberra which have successfully implemented a sustainable and well-used on-demand "microtransit" service as part of its general public transport service offering. Any such service should take into account the drawbacks of microtransit, including inefficiency and difficulties in scaling up to serve a large population.³

¹ *Moving Canberra 2019-2045: Integrated Transport Strategy*, p26.

² <https://research.csiro.au/data61/busplus-public-transport-innovation/>

³ For example, see the following summary by transport consultant Jarrett Walker, who advised the ACT Government in reforming the bus network, and developed the principles which led to Network 19. <https://humantransit.org/2019/08/what-is-microtransit-for.html>.

The current service does not meet this objective

PTCBR members have reported the following shortcomings with the current flexible service:

- the requirement to book services 2 days in advance.
- the limited operating hours, and lack of afternoon, evening or weekend service, so return journeys are not feasible.
- being limited to destinations within their zone. Many would like to visit medical appointments in the City or Deakin, but cannot access them using the flexible service.

Improving each of these aspects would go a long way towards making it a service which allows people to go about their everyday life. The service should allow for not just essential medical and care appointments, but help passengers to attend to everyday social activities (eg trips to the movies). Instead, it currently appears to be a “last resort” service for high need users.

Demand for the flexible service will rise with the aging population

Community preferences and government policy both mean that more older Canberrans will be aging at home, rather than in aged care facilities. Further, there is a greater scrutiny on ensuring that older drivers are fit to hold their driver licence. Both of these developments, while positive, mean there will be more older Canberrans reliant on public transport. Planning and resourcing for the flexible service will need to take this into account.

The flexible service needs its own dedicated fleet

PTCBR understands the current flexible bus service shares the fleet with the special needs transport program for school students, and this is one of the reasons for the limited operating hours. An effective service which meets passengers’ needs will need to have its own dedicated fleet.

There is scope to integrate taxis and other on demand transport as part of the flexible service

The interview with Ms van de Graffe asked for PTCBR’s views on taxis taking passengers to interchanges, where they could then transfer onto trunk public transport services. PTCBR supports this approach, as it could give passengers access to many more transport options, at all times of the day.

However, this service would only be suitable for some passengers. Further, interchange points should not be limited to bus interchanges, but to whichever stop would get the passenger to their destination soonest.

The new public transport ticketing system should accommodate this process

The interview also sought our views on apps and other booking systems. While we support anything which makes the booking process easier:

- the review should explore how any system can be integrated with the replacement public transport ticketing and information system Transport Canberra is procuring.
- any booking system will need to be carefully designed and tested to ensure it meets accessibility standards.

- there will always be a need for a telephone booking system for passengers who might have difficulty with an app.

Other improvements could make it easier for some to access the regular public transport network

While it is outside the scope of this review, PTCBR members have reported they would be willing to use the regular network, but poor paths, trip hazards, lighting and security concerns make it difficult for them to do so. We have also received feedback about bumpy rides and erratic driving making public transport uncomfortable for passengers with injuries and disabilities. Sustained focus on addressing these issues would make it easier for Canberrans to get around town, and reduce demand on the flexible service.

This review should also be aware of the separate consultation about Stage 2 of the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport,⁴ and encourage the ACT Government to commit to meeting these revised standards in as short a timeframe as possible.

PTCBR is available to discuss any of the matters identified in this submission further if required.

Regards,



Ryan Hemsley
Chair, Public Transport Association of Canberra

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<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/stage-2-reform-disability-standards-accessible-public-transport-2002>