



NZTA research summary

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The characteristics of subsidised mobility services for disabled people

Subsidised mobility exists to help disabled people participate fully in society.

Disabled people can find it difficult to access and use public transport. To overcome this, many countries operate subsidised mobility schemes. These schemes provide disabled people with a personalised transport service that usually costs them less than a private taxi. Often referred to as 'paratransit', these schemes aspire to give disabled people better access to affordable transport, to take them where they need and want to go, which enables them to participate more fully in society.

Researching subsidised mobility overseas could help the review of Aotearoa New Zealand's Total Mobility scheme.

Total Mobility is a discounted taxi service that is available to eligible disabled passengers in some towns and cities. As Total Mobility is being reviewed in 2023 and 2024, the researchers of this study looked at subsidised mobility schemes in other countries, to see what we could learn from them, and what lessons might be relevant to Total Mobility.

The research involved reviewing international literature on subsidised mobility in other countries, and interviewing researchers who are studying subsidised mobility in three different locations and settings:

- A community-run scheme in rural areas of Northern Ireland.
- A government-operated scheme in the city of Barcelona.
- A government-funded scheme run by different local authorities throughout Switzerland.

Enabling more disabled people to use public transport more often can help authorities manage demand for subsidised mobility services.

The researchers find that subsidised mobility schemes face these main challenges:

- They do not have sufficient funding to meet the demand for services.
- It is difficult to schedule vehicles so that services run efficiently.

These challenges mean that not all eligible passengers find subsidised mobility is available to them. They may have to wait a long time for their transport to arrive, or book it well in advance. To combat these problems, and achieve a more inclusive transport system, some authorities are trying to make it easier for subsidised mobility passengers to use public transport. This would not only reduce demand for the service, but also enable disabled people to take more spontaneous journeys.

The most common approach to this is travel training. This involves assigning a disabled person with a trainer, who travels with them on public-transport routes, until they are comfortable to travel independently. Another approach is making physical changes to the public-transport system that make it easier for disabled people to use it. Practical examples include installing new footpaths, bus shelters and bus stops; or constructing flat concrete pads from which people can board a bus from a wheelchair.

Paratransit will still be needed for people who cannot use public transport.

Even if authorities successfully enable some subsidised mobility passengers to travel on public-transport, researchers overseas believe that public transport will never be accessible to everyone, for every trip. However, making scheduled public-transport services more inclusive would reduce overall demand for paratransit. This would mean that paratransit becomes more available to people who need it most.

Different models of subsidised mobility exist, but no model is perfect.

Some subsidised mobility services are government-run, others are operated by transport companies contracted by governments, while other community-transport schemes are led and operated by community organisations. Services vary in terms of their operating hours, booking system, eligibility criteria, and the types of vehicles and drivers they use. Each service has strengths and weaknesses that affect the number of people they reach, how affordable they are, and how easy they are to access. The research finds that no model can account for every aspect of a customer's needs and trip characteristics, and still provide a quality service. The best system is one that meets as many customer preferences as possible, for the most people.

Paratransit changes lives, but nobody is measuring its value

The research finds a major gap in how subsidised mobility is monitored. Monitoring tends to focus on the number of trips people take, rather than unmet demand – the trips that people would have taken if services were available to them.

Subsidised mobility services are highly valued by people who use them; they enable them to participate in everyday life in a safe, comfortable and affordable way. However, due to the high demand for services, disabled people participate less fully in society, because transport is too difficult or expensive to use.

Having no quantifiable measures of the benefit that disabled people gain from subsidised mobility makes it impossible for governments to measure the return on their investment in the schemes. Without this, funding levels are likely to remain ad hoc.

Technology is useful for subsidised mobility schemes, but not essential.

Recent technological advances have had an impact on subsidised mobility. Some schemes now use apps for booking and software for scheduling rides. However, some others, especially community-transport schemes that use volunteer drivers, operate without any technology. Scheduling software can help operators, but only within constraints set by the number of vehicles they have, and the times in which they operate. The research highlights the biggest benefit that may be gained from technology is automated data collection. This would help operators measure disabled people's paratransit trips and understand their true value.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research is limited by the narrow scope of the literature; there are few studies of the costs and benefits of paratransit, and very few that give the perspectives of disabled people themselves. Further research into these services could inform how Aotearoa New Zealand approaches subsidised mobility, in terms of who receives subsidies, and for what reasons.

Important next steps would therefore be to measure both the impacts that community transport, paratransit and mainstream public transport have on disabled people and the return on investment in subsidised mobility, so that any changes in investment can be appropriately targeted.



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