

Effective public transport is essential for our city to thrive, and appropriate pricing structures play a key role in the promotion of public transport usage.

Public transport patronage in Newcastle is low. Census data shows that our use of public transport to travel to work was more than 75% less than the state's average (2016 census) and patronage is still well below what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unlike Sydney, there are very few public transport services in Newcastle that have capacity issues (the few that do have issues are typically school trips). There are a lot of buses travelling around Newcastle each day that are essentially transporting air. We also have some of the highest rates of single occupant car use for short trips which could have otherwise been made by walking, cycling or on public transport.

All levels of government need to do more to encourage a modal shift to active and public transport. Modal shift has proven health, social, environmental, and economic benefits, while also freeing up road capacity and parking for those who need to drive.

Also unlike Sydney, people in Newcastle travel further distances to access key employment, education and service hubs. For instance, the trip by bus from the Newcastle CBD to The University of Newcastle, the John Hunter Hospital, or to Charlestown Square is over 8km, which is the maximum fare band under the current Opal structure (8+km). This means trips to access basic services often cost the maximum bus fare for Newcastle passengers.

Further, Newcastle has a lower level of service for public transport than Sydney, due to a lower historical investment in public transport infrastructure and service improvements in Newcastle (and the Hunter more broadly), dispersed settlement patterns, and past and continuing prioritisation for cars on the road network.

I note the NSW Government recently introduced a weekly toll cap to provide cost of living relief to motorists in Western Sydney, where public transport options are fewer. The same principle for cost of living relief should also be extended to public transport passengers in determining maximum Opal fares, noting that current public transport commuters in Newcastle (except those that take the train) have a lower salary than those that drive or use active transport. Reducing fare rates would directly support lower income earners in Newcastle.

Existing public transport prices (and price structure) in Newcastle are already discouraging people from using public transport, noting that there is often no financial incentive for people to swap from cars to public transport. Newcastle has very limited paid parking across the city, often available at a daily cost below a return trip on public transport. This limits people's perception of the cost of travel. It is important for community members to see the benefits of a variety of travel options, including public transport, without a disparity in perceived direct costs to the consumer.

For these many and varied reasons, Newcastle and the Hunter should be viewed separately to Sydney in decisions regarding public transport pricing, noting that:

- Newcastle and the Hunter is a great hub to trial new fare systems, being a distinct area where travel within a particular zone becomes all part of the system.
- Newcastle has previously had different fare structures to the rest of the network, including timed-based fares which operated between 1997 and 2016, and a CBD fare free zone between 2004 and 2019.
- Most public transport services in Newcastle have extra capacity which could benefit from attracting new passengers by setting a more affordable fee.

I support the consideration of a specific area-based pricing structure for public transport in Newcastle and the Hunter under the current Opal fare review. This pricing structure should be considerate of the identified strategic goals to increase public transport usage, through the allocation of a fare pricing point that shows savings for the commuter in comparison with single vehicle travel.

Until there are significant improvements to bus services in the Newcastle and Hunter, there should not be any increase in public transport fares, as this will hurt people on lower incomes the most.

Regards,

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