

### Free fares don't fix a missing bus

Tasmania's decision to make public transport free until 1 July is a welcome cost-of-living gesture at a time of sharp fuel price increases. If you can catch a bus or the ferry, you'll feel the relief quickly — and it can do more than ease household budgets. For many older Tasmanians, affordable transport is also what keeps people socially and physically connected: getting to the GP, the shops, volunteering, visiting friends, and staying engaged with community life.

But there's a fairness problem baked into any "free fares" policy: it helps most the people who can already access public transport, and risks further entrenching disadvantage for those who can't.

#### **The blunt truth: in Tasmania, the biggest barrier has long been service availability**

ABS data (2012) on why people don't use public transport in Tasmania pointed to two dominant reasons:

- No service available at all (37.5%)
- No service at the right/convenient time (25.7%)
- Only 1.9% cited cost as the reason for not using public transport.

A lot has changed since 2012 — including safety concerns, commuting patterns and household budgets — but one thing hasn't: if there's no bus, no route, or it doesn't run when you need it, "free" doesn't help.

And it's reasonable to assume access has worsened in many areas, because there has been limited investment in maintaining services, let alone expanding them to meet the needs of a growing and ageing population. Free fares are only one part of the equation — we also need routes that exist, run often enough, and connect people to the places they actually need to go, especially in regional areas.

#### **We should make free travel permanent for seniors**

This announcement is a useful step, but older Tasmanians need more than short-term relief. COTA Tasmania again calls on the Government to establish free public transport for seniors in the longer term, as is done in other states. A permanent seniors' scheme is a practical, targeted way to reduce isolation, support participation, and help people stay active and independent as they age.

#### **Free fares can be regressive if the network isn't equitable**

Research (including from RMIT) has made the point plainly: public transport service quality is typically strongest in inner and middle suburbs, while outer and poorly serviced areas are more car-dependent — and often more economically vulnerable to fuel price rises.

In that context, making public transport free can disproportionately benefit people in better-served (often more affluent) areas, while doing little for people with poor or no service.

Tasmania's geography sharpens this problem. Many older Tasmanians live in communities where public transport is limited, infrequent, or simply not there — and where alternatives (taxis, rideshare) can be expensive or unavailable.

### **There can also be unintended consequences**

International experience suggests fare-free public transport doesn't automatically reduce car use. It can increase trips by existing users, and it can place pressure on service quality and capacity if frequency and fleet don't keep pace. That matters because service quality — reliability, frequency, accessibility — is what determines whether public transport is genuinely usable for older people.

### **What would be fairer — and more effective?**

If the policy goal is to help the people most exposed to fuel price increases and cost-of-living pressure, then free fares should be paired with (or even secondary to) targeted and service-focused measures, such as:

1. Target free travel to priority groups (ongoing)  
Make public transport free (or cheaper) for groups most likely to benefit and most likely to be under financial stress — for example, concession holders and older people — rather than blanket free fares that primarily benefit those already well served.
2. Put fare revenue (or equivalent funding) into service expansion  
Free fares are a headline; service coverage is the equity lever. Invest in:
  - more routes where there are gaps
  - more frequent services on existing routes
  - better evening and weekend timetables
  - better connections between towns and key services
3. Build real options beyond buses  
An effective public transport system is multi-modal. In Tasmania that can include ferries (where relevant), plus stronger integration with:
  - community transport
  - demand-responsive services in regional areas
  - safe, accessible walking links to stops (benches, lighting, footpaths)
4. Design for older people from the start  
Accessible stops, clear information, consistent timetables, and reliable connections are the difference between “a service” and “a usable service” for older Tasmanians.

So, there is clear evidence to show that free fares alone can unintentionally widen the gap between communities with good services and communities with little or none. If there's no bus, “free” is just a headline. The real fairness test is whether people — especially older Tasmanians and those in regional communities — have services that run where they live, at the times they need, with safe and accessible connections.

And that's the opportunity in front of us now. While we welcome the short-term fare relief, we encourage the government to commit to free public transport for seniors in the longer term, and invest in the routes and timetables that make the system genuinely usable for everyone.