

Video transcript

Get to the Point Podcast - Community Transport

Marcus: Welcome to Get to the Point, a podcast series by the NSW Point to Point Transport Commissioner.

The Commissioner is the independent regulator for point to point transport in NSW, which includes taxi, hire vehicles and rideshare, as well as some community transport and tourist operations.

In this series, you'll hear from industry representatives and from subject matter experts as we explore topics relevant to point to point to transport, and work together to ensure a safer point to point industry.

Hi, I'm your host, Marcus Binet.

Today we are speaking about community transport, the role that point to point transport plays, and we will answer some frequently asked questions.

We'll also be talking through examples to help paint a clearer picture of when community transport may fit under Point to Point Transport law in NSW, and how community transport is an important participant in the industry.

Today I'm joined by Ben Jackson from Active Care Network. He's also a member of the Community Transport Organisation.

Ben: Thank you for having me.

Marcus It's good to have you here.

Nicole O'Neil, Director of Outer Metro and Community Transport at Transport for NSW. Thanks, Nicole.

And David Tooze from the Point to Point Transport Commission.

David and Nicole: Thank you.

Marcus: It's good to have you.

So, we'll start with you Nicole. Can you tell us, what does a typical community transport provider look like?

Nicole: Okay. I think the thing that's important is that there isn't actually one typical community transport provider. What's interesting in the community transport space, is that Transport provides funds to general community groups or councils who work on the services that are needed for their specific areas.

So each community transport group, basically, is responding to the needs of those communities. And so there are some things that are common to groups, but they're not necessarily all the same.

But if I break it down, in general, community transport groups provide services and they can either be using anything from cars, vans, buses and vehicles that have mobility access for people who have mobility issues and wheelchair needs.

So a broad range of groups actually provide community transport.

Marcus: And so when you say a community, that could be like a community of people with specific needs, but it could also be a regional area? Is that right?

Nicole: Indeed. Often community transport groups will provide services to regions. They are on a needs basis and the needs are based on eligibility.

So there are some broad groups that fall into the areas for community transport, predominantly frail aged and people with disabilities form a target group.

Community transport, also services, transport-disadvantaged groups. And from time-to-time there is some medical services that they can provide as well.

Marcus: Okay, so is that patient transport? Is that right?

Nicole: Not necessarily patient transport, but they can provide some medical assisted transport, but not normally for ongoing treatment such as dialysis. But they do assist basically in keeping people in their homes.

There is a funding stream that is available to community transport organisations through the state health department, which allows us to transport medically-disadvantaged people in our community.

So if you do have an ongoing condition like dialysis, if you have a shorter term chronic illness like cancer, or treatment for cancer, then there is some health funding available to do that for us.

But for the most part, community transport organisations deal with vulnerable parts of our community, whether it be aged or through disability.

Marcus: What I'm thinking is, people don't necessarily need to be transport-disadvantaged physically, it can be because of where they live, can't it?

Ben: Indeed. So, community transport responds to its areas and while the funding is the same for all projects and they come from the same funding stream, which is transport for

NSW in general, administers funding on behalf of the Commonwealth, and that is for the Commonwealth Home Support Program.

The Commonwealth Home Support Program provides about 90 per cent of community transport services, and that's the target group of frail age people with disabilities in attempting to keep people in their homes for longer periods of time.

Now, while that the needs of transport will change regionally, depending on the services that are required compared to, say, a city compared to more rural and remote areas, the funding is the same.

In Blacktown, which is one of the local government areas that Active Care Network services, there's a suburb called Wilmot, and public transport doesn't operate in Wilmot very early in the morning or very late at night (for safety reasons), but that provides a level of disadvantage to those people who might need to get to different places, (including the train station) at certain times of day, so community transport steps into that role to be able to provide access to transport for transport-disadvantaged.

It looks a bit different in the country because that's often about geography. More so about social issues that are going on at the time. And you may be required to travel further distances, because some of those services mightn't be in your local town. They might actually be in your neighbouring regional town, that you need to access the services required.

Marcus: Yeah. So what do you think then Nicole, that is one of the greatest misunderstandings around community transport? Is there one?

Nicole: I think one of the greatest misunderstandings around community transport is that they provide services for all members of the community. Where, in fact, in general, community transport is eligibility-based.

Some projects do offer services outside of the eligibility. But in general, as from Transport for NSW, the relationship that we have with Community Transport is in relation to eligibility-based services, primarily the Commonwealth Home Support Program where clients apply for the program through the aged care system.

Marcus: Okay.

Nicole: From a service provider perspective.

Marcus: Yeah. That was going to be my next question haha..

Yeah, what do you think about that Ben?

Ben: It often comes down to the differentiation between a taxi and a community transport provider. So a community transport provider (because of the way the funding works) wants to work with scale. We want to get as many people on the bus as possible to take them to where they need to go.

Marcus: Yeah.

Ben: Whereas a taxi is a very individual service. So sometimes, initially when people start with community transport, they go, 'oh, hang on a second. Why am I sharing a vehicle?' But in reality, the whole purpose of community transport is to be able to provide a group service or a community service rather than an individual service.

Marcus: Because then that comes under the Point to Point Transport law. So where does that fit in with that David?

David: So there's a lot of community transport providers that are currently registered with the Point to Point Transport Commission.

They're authorised under Point to Point Transport law, and they're providing services outside the contract with Transport for NSW.

Now, if those services are in vehicles of 12 seats or less (including the driver), they may very well be point to point services. They would look to be authorised under Point to Point Transport law and provide additional services, which some would consider more closely to a taxi service or a hire vehicle service, than a community transport service because they're picking up and dropping off, as directed by the customer at times, convenient to the customer.

Marcus: Yeah, which is that individual kind of thing.

David: Correct.

Marcus: It's 'I want to go from A to B'. Whereas what you were saying before, Ben, is it might be a whole group of people who are going, which is more like a community transport.

Ben: It can be a group but it can also be, 'we have to drive past Betty's place and Bob's Place and Elsie's place, to make sure that everyone gets to Westmead Hospital,' for example.

Marcus: Yeah.

Ben: So it enables some level of scale to be able to provide a cheaper service or subsidised service.

And it may not be uncommon for a community transport passenger to also be in the vehicle at the same time as a passenger service, which is a point to point transport service.

So there could be two types of passengers within the vehicle at the same time.

Marcus: Yeah, do you see that a lot Ben, or just sometimes?

Ben: As a provider, yeah. You do.

And it depends on how you structure, as Nicole was saying, community transport providers are really horses for courses.

A lot of them will do point to point type transport. Others choose not to because of their business model. But as a rule, if you do multiple types of transport, then you try and put as many as you can on the same vehicle, because there's a scale savings in that.

And that's what we try and do as a not-for-profit, is try and make it cheap.

Marcus: Yeah, so there's no compromise. Coming back to what you're saying David, I'm driving a van, there's no compromise in me having someone I'm providing a community transport with my vehicle, but also a point to point at the same time.

David: Correct. It's just better utilisation of the resource in this particular case, the vehicle.

Marcus: Yeah. Yeah. and I know that's something you're quite passionate about, isn't it, Ben?

Ben: Efficiencies. Yes.

Marcus: Yeah, and sorry, cause I want to come back to that. So does that cause any sort of conflict from your perspective Nicole?

Nicole: Not from my perspective in Transport because the projects that I am in contract with, have an agreement with Transport for NSW and those contracts actually exempt them from the requirements of Point to Point.

It becomes more interesting when transport groups are transporting people who are under agreement with Transport for NSW. They are your Commonwealth Home Support program customers. They are exempt from the requirements of Point to Point. However, if there are other passengers in the vehicle at the same time, they may attract interest of Point to Point.

There are also some community transport groups who also operate services outside those that they're contracted with Transport, and they would be services that Point to Point would also be interested in.

Marcus: Yeah, because to be a community transport provider, it has to be part of a contract with Transport for NSW. That's correct, isn't it?

Nicole: Yes. And that has to do with the funding arrangement. As I said earlier Transport administers funds on behalf of the Commonwealth, and it is through that process that we have a funding arrangement with community transport.

Marcus: You've touched on something there, which I know it causes some confusion, around the passenger service levy. And so when does the passenger service levy apply David?

David: So the passenger service levy applies for every booking that you take for a passenger service in the hire vehicle space. What the law classes community transport vehicles as, are 'hire vehicles' when they're doing point to point transport work.

So any booking for a passenger service in a hire vehicle where that booking is actually completed, will be an additional dollar for the Passenger Service Levy.

Marcus: Yes. And so when we were talking before about having some community transport and point to point passengers in the vehicle. However many point to point passengers, they're the ones who [attract the levy].

David: That's exactly right. Yeah. However many bookings you have for point to point passengers, that's where you'll attract the dollar levy.

Bearing in mind that this is in vehicles for 12 seats or less, and if we're talking of 13 seats or more, they may also fall under bus operator accreditation, which is dealt with through Transport.

Marcus: So what sort of vehicles then, do most of these people have? These community transport providers?

Is it mainly just, thinking what David's saying, is that mainly 12 or more, are they mainly mini buses? What are they? Yeah

Ben: I'm going to go back to Nicole's initial statement and that is, it really is a horses for courses kind of deal.

So, if you are a rural setting and you're taking very small numbers of people in a vehicle, then typically it's cars.

The Active Care Network does the Blacktown, Penrith and Blue Mountains local government areas. The Blue Mountains looks quite different to Penrith and Blacktown.

And we have about an even split of cars to vans, which can seat, depending on whether they've got disability access or not, up to 12 or can seat as few as eight. And then we've got the medium size buses after that. They can seat 19 to 24 people.

Marcus: Okay, so it's all sizes then?

Ben: Yes. And as a community transport organisation, you need all of the different sizes, because what you want to be able to do, is generate a social setting for transport.

So, often when Betty and Elsie get on the bus, wherever they're going, it matters just as much as who they're going with.

So we want to be able to create a setting that enables them to be able to do that.

Marcus: Okay. How well do community transport providers understand all of this stuff that we are just talking about?

Ben: Quite well, hahaha

Nicole: I'd like to think that most of them understand it quite well. I think the thing that's interesting is though, is that from time to time, the people who are involved in community transport may change, and there's always an opportunity for a refresh.

Marcus: Yeah. Cause I'm just thinking about all of what we were just talking about and whether someone might be just a community transport provider and they think all they can do is community transport, which is obviously not what we're talking about.

So, what's your experience been of that? Do you find people try to do both, Ben?

Ben: Community transport organisations, and Nicole, I'm going to keep coming back to Nicole and keep saying that, for community transport organisation, it's quite different from organisation to organisation.

For our organisation because we have some urban transport and we have some regional transport, we're required to provide both. And so, we need to be accredited to do both. But there are other examples, for instance, Live Better across the other side of the mountain. They've taken on a point to point accreditation because they want a government contract doing transport outside of community transport. They want to run more public transport services.

There's the NDIS work that you need to be accredited for.

Part of the confusion that sits within community transport is around the difference between a CHSP client, which is a Commonwealth Home Support Program client and an age care package client. They're both part of the age care system, requesting an individual service that they attract the point to point levy.

Whereas because Transport for NSW funds us to deliver CHSP, we become exempt. So there are lots of things that a community transport organisation needs to look at and make decisions on.

Up until recently, the aged care package scenario, provides an opportunity for certainly the more urban community transports, to provide lots of those services and create an income stream from that, but also have to obviously follow the regulation that's required.

Marcus: Yeah, so if someone wants to get authorised, what's involved David?

David; Oh, look it's a reasonably simple process. Authorisation is really just the authority to do an activity. So if you're planning on doing an activity in point to point space as in providing services, you need to be authorised before you start that activity.

And it's a simple process of applying online, providing documentation such as, your 100 points of ID and a National Police Check, because there are disqualifying offenses for service providers, and we will check to ensure that there's nobody with disqualifying offences. And then it's simply, lodge the application online, and it's generally processed within a few days.

Marcus: So it's not an onerous thing?

David: No. The one thing to remember though, is that you really need to have your framework set up before applying. You want to make sure that you've got your Safety Management Systems in place and you understand what the services are that you're wanting to provide and then look towards finalising your authorisation, because once you're authorised, you can start trading as a point to point service anytime you're on.

Marcus: Yeah. Yeah. And if anyone wants any information they can go to, of course, the point to point website.

David: They most certainly can. Don't ask me the phone number hahaha

Ben: So the bonus that community transport providers have with the point to point system is that it actually provides some background structure to be able to implement safety for drivers.

So if a driver, their licence, for example, they're losing points or they're not driving safely, then that comes up in the background framework.

So the point to point system, even if you're not actually paying the levy or whatever, it still provides a system where you can maintain a safety level amongst your drivers.

Marcus: Yeah. And that would be the kind of thing, when you're saying you already need a predetermined framework, that's the kind of thing... ?

David: Yeah, exactly. And there's a lot of material on our website in relation to helping understand what that framework actually is.

Marcus: Okay. And so if you had one takeaway that you wanted people to learn, Nicole, what would that be?

Nicole: I think, if in doubt, contact the Point to Point Commission and they will be able to assist you, because it does get a little bit complex. I think it is a little bit complex between the different schemes and the different services that can be provided. So if in doubt, ask.

Marcus: Yes, because it is quite involved with what we're talking about.

Nicole: Yeah. Yeah.

Marcus: Ben, what would your takeaway be?

Ben: From a governance perspective in a community transport organisation, it's about understanding what kind of service you want to deliver. And what fits your business model.

If you have a look at the point to point opportunities that are available to your organisation, then you do a business case on it. You understand that it works, get involved in it.

There are some community organisations that are going to be too small. Or too specialised to want to be able to do that. So as an organisation, take it back to a governance level, understand what the risks and what the opportunities are, and then proceed.

Marcus: Yeah. And it comes back to your point at the beginning, Nicole, it's horses for courses. Some people will be happy to do just community transport. Some will want to do the point to point stuff.

And David, what would your take away be?

David: I think the outtake really is that Point to Point Transport Law is flexible enough to allow you to innovate and provide different types of services, so it's worth considering what services you might want to provide.

Marcus: Yeah. Thank you again, Ben, Nicole, and David for joining us and sharing your thoughts and knowledge.

I hope the session has been informative for our listeners. Education resources and a copy of the transcript from today's podcast are available on our website, pointtopoint.nsw.gov.au.

A video of this podcast is also available on our website and can be shared as an educational tool.

For more information, we have a community transport fact sheet on the Point to Point Transport Commissioner website.

And if you have found this information useful, please share the recording.

Thanks for joining us.