

Contact Name: Rosie McGrath
Organisation: Active West Coast
activewestcoastnetwork@gmail.com
Phone: 03 768 1169
Postal Address: C/- P O Box 443 Greymouth 7805



West Coast Regional Council
P O Box 66
GREYMOOUTH 7840

re: Submission to the West Coast Regional Public Transport Plan.

Active West Coast (AWC) is a network of agencies and groups committed to improving the health and wellbeing of West Coasters through the promotion of healthy lifestyles and the creation of healthy social and physical environments.

While member organisations were involved in preparing this submission, the recommendations in their entirety do not necessarily reflect the views of each individual agency.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Draft West Coast Regional Public Transport Plan (the Plan).

We wish to make the following comments:

Accessibility to transport is an important determinant of health and wellbeing as how people travel and connect influences social, economic and health outcomes. Within the range of transport modes, public transport is an essential social enabler for residents, particularly the transport disadvantaged. It is also a mechanism to address climate change and sustainability issues by decreasing the number of kilometres travelled in private vehicles. The lack of access to an effective public transport system on the West Coast is often highlighted as a barrier to social and economic participation. This is particularly so with respect to people accessing education and employment opportunities, and engagement with health, sport, and social services. We believe there is sufficient evidence to indicate that investigation into developing a public transport system should be given high priority within the Regional Public Transport Plan.

We agree with Council's intention to seek feedback from the community regarding on-demand public transport services. While the Plan identifies *'population change, deprivation and affordability, fuel prices and geographical length of the region, as issues for public transport on the West Coast'*, we believe the action to *'explore the potential for undertaking investigation for on-demand services through the 2024-2034 Long-term Plan'* falls short of Council's obligations to meet its objectives within the Plan. Meeting this action could effectively mean that Council pushes out any *'exploration to investigate'* to 2033. We believe the information provided within this submission offers a compelling justification for a comprehensive investigation into the development of a public transport service that provides for the needs of the region's communities.

Population and deprivation information

The Plan states that official projections indicate a potential decline in population over the next two decades. However official projections also include the potential for the population to increase from 32,000 to 35,300 by 2043. It is disappointing that one of the primary decision makers on the West Coast lacks the confidence and/or vision in the region to not include this increase in the draft plan; especially when the Plan notes that anecdotal evidence suggests that more people are [already] moving to the region. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/subnational-population-projections-2018base2048-update/>. As stated in the Plan, approximately half of the population resides within the three main towns of Westport, Greymouth and Hokitika.

- The age and ability status of a population affects transport choice and demand. The median age in Te Tai o Poutini of 47.7 years is significantly older than the national average of 38.4 years. As a further break-down, Buller's median age is 53.6 years, Westland's 24.8 years, and Grey's 43.9 years. (StatsNZ Subnational population projections base). As of June 2023, almost 24% of the West Coast population was over 65; this is projected to increase to 30% by 2043 (using Statistics NZ medium projection of population change).
- The 2018 Census found a higher proportion of people in the West Coast were disabled compared to the national average. It is estimated that around 7,800 people on the West Coast live with at least one disability (2013 National Disability Survey). <https://www.wcdhb.health.nz/wp-content/uploads/wcdhb-annual-plan-2021-2022.pdf>. Creating environments that support people to be as independent as possible means an impairment does not become a disability, and people are able to participate fully in society.

The West Coast is an area of high deprivation that an appropriate public transport system could help address. According to the Community Compass Quarterly Report for June 2023, in the Buller District 75% of the population live in highly deprived communities (deprivation index 8-10), with Grey and Westland percentages at 38.5% and 35.5% respectively. In contrast 15.4% of the population in Grey District live in the top three socio-economically performing communities (deprivation index 1-3), compared with 0% in either Buller or Westland. (Community Compass Quarterly Report: Report 1.4; Pipeline V_1.9.5 June 2023).

- The median household income for the West Coast region is significantly below the rest of New Zealand. The Community Compass Report states that the median household income in Buller (adjusted for inflation) was almost half the national median in June 2023. For Grey and Westland, the median household income is 25.5% and 22.7% lower than the national median respectively.
- The cost of housing is a determinant of deprivation with anyone spending over 30% of their household income considered to be struggling. The Compass Report also shows that of the people renting in Buller, almost 35% of their annual household income goes on rent, with the highest percentages in Westport North (39.4%) and Westport South (36.4%). In Grey, almost 27% of the household income is spent on rent with the most unaffordable communities being Cobden (36.2%), Central Greymouth (33.2%), Blaketown (29.9%), and Runanga (23.3%). Communities in Westland with the highest rental to income percentage include Hokitika (26.1%), Hokitika Rural (23.3%) and Arahura- Kumara (25.8%). (Community Compass Report). These are all areas in which a public transport system could operate to benefit residents.

- We are aware that increasing costs of housing, food and fuel are already impacting on the residents of the West Coast. It is predicted that the price of petrol will be \$3.50 per litre by Christmas 2023 <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/petrol-prices-91-octane-expected-to-rise-to-350-a-litre-by-christmas-in-new-zealand/JRVV6EYEIFB35ICE46SLSNTXF4/>. A rise in fuel prices has ongoing implications for basic living costs; this will further exacerbate the situation for those already experiencing transport barriers and will increase the numbers of people who are transport disadvantaged. It could also encourage people to take advantage of a public transport service if one existed.

People who live outside of the larger towns are further disadvantaged as they do not have access to taxi services or the Total Mobility Scheme. Improved access to public transport is therefore a means to improve equity for residents on the West Coast.

What we know about transport on the West Coast:

Transport issues have been identified as a priority in a number of consultations and research studies carried out across the West Coast over a number of years. Recent consultation for the Takiwā Poutini; People, Place and Wellbeing Report, further reiterated that life choices are impaired by transport barriers including the lack of public transport. This information can be found at <https://www.takiwapoutini.nz/>.

The Plan states that *‘Council does not hold a lot of information about demand for services required by the transport disadvantaged’*, and that *‘more information is required to enable action should funding or opportunities become available.’* We would argue that the potential for a public transport service has previously been given limited consideration by West Coast Regional Council, and that using the consultation process on the Public Transport Plan (previously done in conjunction with consultation on the much larger and more complex Regional Land Transport Plan) has been an ineffective tool in determining demand.

Transport Disadvantaged

The Plan essentially confines itself to providing services to people who meet the Total Mobility criteria despite our population and deprivation statistics, and other community consultation across a number of years, indicating much of our population is transport disadvantaged.

We agree that the transport disadvantaged are those who *‘face transport barriers due to limited affordability, and/or a lack of available transport options they are able to use. This includes people who live in rural areas with no vehicle, low income households, elderly people, and people with disabilities.’* However, transport disadvantage also includes people who have limited options to participate in everyday activities because of a lack of transport choices, and people who overcome lack of transport choice by paying more than they can reasonably afford for mobility. This includes people who are ‘forced car owners’, and those who use a taxi service because a cheaper public transport service is unavailable. <https://environment.govt.nz/publications/aotearoa-new-zealands-first-emissions-reduction-plan/transport/>.

The lack of public transport is also a reason why older people are reluctant to give up driving and why some people buy and run cheap cars, many of which are unlicensed, unwarranted and therefore uninsured. People who live outside of the larger towns are further disadvantaged as they do not have access to taxi services or the Total Mobility Scheme. We are also aware that

while hotels offer transport home we are aware that wait times can deter people from using the transport. Improved access to public transport is therefore a tool to improve safety and equity for residents on the West Coast.

Total Mobility and Taxi Services.

AWC supports the policies to provide and expand a transport service to people who meet the Total Mobility eligibility criteria. This service is essential for people who would otherwise be reliant on family, friends or community organisations for travel and social participation. However, we are aware that the number of people who can access and benefit from these services is limited either because they don't yet meet the required criteria or because of geographical location.

We support the extra subsidy to enable services to carry wheelchair users. However, our enquiries show Westport Taxis is the only service that operates an on-demand service for people in wheelchairs. Hokitika offers this service although the passenger needs to book a day in advance to allow the operator to prepare the vehicle. Taxis in Greymouth are not wheelchair capable.

We note the Total Mobility Scheme is currently being reviewed by Waka Kotahi. We trust the Council is strongly advocating for continued investment in this Scheme to enable West Coast residents continued access to this service when required.

The Plan acknowledges that various communities provide transport options through community van services, but it also says that '*Council has no direct involvement in these services*', although it maintains a schedule of these services. We believe this provides an opportunity for Council to formally link with communities to gauge how it can offer support in the operation of the vans. This community facility may also be an opportunity to expand the Total Mobility Scheme into communities outside the three main towns.

We understand any public transport service would need to be bespoke, sustainable and would require significant engagement to ensure the system meets the needs of communities. However, we are aware that the MyWay Trial in Timaru shows a public transport system is capable of being viable in a provincial area (<https://environment.govt.nz/publications/aotearoa-new-zealands-first-emissions-reduction-plan/transport/>).

We wish to speak to this submission. Active West Coast also offers our support to Council in any investigation into an on-demand public transport service for our region.

Rosie McGrath
Coordinator
Active West Coast