

Summary

North Sydney Council has funded the delivery of a Community Transport service for over thirty years via contracted services. The current contract is due for renewal from 1 July 2025. North Sydney's current community transport arrangement is unique amongst similarly sized and located Councils. Overall, the tendered contract arrangement excels in providing Council with the ability to guarantee high quality delivery of transport service in North Sydney LGA while keeping administration costs and resource burden low.

The current contract has performed well in supporting existing community groups and organisations and is well regarded by those that use it. Future tender proposals must maintain the existing strengths in supporting transport disadvantaged community groups, while addressing challenges such as under-utilization of contracted services and poor connectivity to Council services.

Background

North Sydney Council has maintained a long-standing commitment to ensuring the continuation of high-quality community transport services in the LGA. As part of this commitment, Council has contracted services to Lower North Shore Community Transport (LNSCT) for over 30 years. This contract, which includes the use of three Council owned buses- secures several free or heavily subsidised transport services to community members, community services and Council staff. This long-standing partnership has been an asset to Council, allowing it to support individuals and services through the provision of door-to-door transport - particularly the transport disadvantaged who would otherwise not be able to access or afford local transport.

Broadly, the services include:

- Day trips for community services, childcare centres and other community programs
- After school transport
- Transport for Council staff and volunteers (e.g. Planning Panellist site inspections or Bushcare volunteers)
- Flexi-Cab service (door to door individual trips- subsidised to \$2.50 per trip- available weekly on Thursdays)
- Easy Rider shopping service (door to door shopping service- subsidised to \$2.50 one way or \$5.00 return- available weekly on Fridays)

Overview of Community Transport Funding

Community Transport organisations across NSW generally share similar funding profiles and broadly provide similar services. Analysis of the financial reports of over 20 separate community transport providers indicates that Federal and State Government funding

generally accounts for 70%-80% of all income for community transport providers. This funding is provided through the following means:

- Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP)
 - o Provides funding for older eligible individuals in staying independent in their own home for longer. Providers utilise this funding to provide free/heavily subsidised transport to older Australians.
- Community Transport Program (CTP)- Funded by TfNSW
 - o CTP assists individuals who are transport disadvantaged owing to physical, social, cultural and/or geographic factors. Once again, providers utilise this funding to provide free/heavily subsidised transport to transport disadvantaged Australians.
- NSW Health's Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Grants Program
 - o NSW Health provides various grants to support the provision of non-emergency health related transport.

The remaining 20%-30% of income is split between client contributions, NDIS funding, community donations, local government grants and investments.

Value for Community and Council

The service delivered support to the most vulnerable and isolated members of the community. The below figures outlined in the Trip Summary table, contain data for all trips in Q2 and Q3 of FY 2023-2024.

Most notably, services such as the Crows Nest Community Centre outings, Chinese Christian Church, Greenway, Library Loader, Easy Rider and Flexi-Cab provided transport to isolated, frail and vulnerable seniors, as well as other vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities to attend medical appointments, complete shopping trips and engage in social outings. Vacation and after school care services also provide support to young families and alleviate the burden on parents to change working arrangements for school pick up. These services are also among the best utilised services amid existing contracted services and represent the core value to the community being generated through Council's contract.

Trip Summary for Q2&Q3 Trips in FY 2023-2024

NSC Funded Bus & Driver Services for Q4 FY23 & Q1 FY24

NSC Services	Passenger Trips – Q4 FY23	Passenger Trips – Q1 FY24	Notes
Schedule 1 (A)			
Day Care (CNC Friday Lunches)	289	390	
Kellys Place	0	0	0 Trips taken during quarter
North Sydney Community Services (CNC Outings)	89	28	1 Outings this quarter
North Sydney Family Day Care	0	7	7 Trips this quarter
Chinese Church	0	50	1 Trips taken during quarter
Greenway	90	30	1 Trips taken this quarter
Vacation Care	102	116	2 day programs run
	570	621	
Schedule 1 (B)			
NSC Planners	6	6	3 Planners trips and 3 Design Panel Trip
NSC Bushcare	2	10	10 Trips (Not passengers)
Crows Next Centre Movie Outings	61	62	3 Outings
Easy Rider Wednesdays (7pm)	126	97	Extended to 7pm if required
NSC Sustainability Tour	0	0	Trips organised by Sustainability Officer
Library Loader Shuttle	16	19	Shuttle Trips
HVIS inspections	0	0	NSC Mechanic shortage
After school shuttle	221	249	Shuttle Trips
Local Probus Groups	32	20	Passenger Trips
	464	463	
Schedule 2			
Flexi-Cab Thursdays (7pm)	248	248	Extended to 7pm if required
Easy Rider Fridays	246	254	
	494	502	

Strengths and Challenges of the Current Contract

Strengths

1. Supporting our network of community services

Council's current contract is a significant boon to the community services that are included in the terms of the contract e.g. Crows Nest Centre or Greenway. For community groups with little financial resourcing, the support of Council's contract enables them to provide more frequent and comprehensive programming and engagement for their clients without the financial and administrative burden of providing transport. A strong example of the benefits of comprehensive and frequent programming is the Crows Nest Centre. With LNSCT physically based in the Crows Nest Centre, and having designated regular trips incorporated in Council's

contract, the Centre has been able to provide a cohesive and comprehensive service offering for Centre attendees.

2. Supporting our most vulnerable and isolated community members

With a rapidly aging population in North Sydney, there are increasing numbers of frail and isolated elderly people and other vulnerable populations (e.g. people with disability) who are struggling to maintain independence in their homes and form social connections in their communities. Services such as the Library Loader, Easy Rider and Flexi-Cab services not only support these individuals to independently attend medical appointments and do their shopping, but they also represent additional opportunities to connect with drivers, fellow passengers and potentially the community services mentioned above.

3. Filling gaps in State and Federal Government Funding

State and Federal Government funding initiatives such as CHSP facilitate transport services for older people, but do not address the needs of all transport disadvantaged groups. Other community groups such as children, young parents, people with disability and older people who are not accessing CHSP are able to have their transport needs met through Council's contract.

4. Benefits to Council staff

Council's contract facilitates existing programs and activities being conducted by Council, including Planners (Planning Panel and Design Excellence Panel), Bushcare volunteers, Family Day Care and other ad hoc trips. These services are highly valued by the Council staff that utilise them.

Challenges

1. Contracted services are currently under-utilised

As indicated by the quarterly reporting data, the services provided through Council's contract are currently under-utilized. This is particularly apparent in the dwindling numbers of trips being conducted by day care providers in post-pandemic years. When compared with trip numbers from 2020, and the number of trips that could be accessed through Council's contract, the figures from Q2 and Q3 are well below pre-pandemic levels. This under-utilisation of services does not mean that the desire and/or need for transport is not present in the community, rather that Council's contract is not adequately capturing necessary groups both due to the lack of flexibility in the contract's terms and the program's lack of visibility to community groups and individuals.

2. Flexibility in contracted service delivery

Council's current contract specifies weekly, monthly, or yearly trip numbers for individual providers based on assessed need at the time of Council entering into a contract with LNSCT. Due to the impacts of COVID and the contract being extended without revision on multiple occasions, demand for services from named community organisations declined. Concurrently,

the rigid terms of the contract prevented emerging community transport needs from being adequately met. Future community transport arrangements could allow greater flexibility to meet community demand when necessary.

3. Missed opportunities for connection with Council facilities and events

While contracted services perform strongly in connecting individuals with community services, there are missed opportunities to facilitate similar connections with existing and future Council facilities such as the Coal Loader, Stanton Library, and North Sydney Olympic Pool. Additionally, there are currently no community transport services provided to Council run events (e.g. North Sydney Festival, Arts Prize, etc.). Future arrangements could utilise community transport to ensure transport disadvantaged groups are able to engage with Council run initiatives.

4. Competition with Federal and State funding sources for service provision

While services such as Easy Rider and Flexi Cab do provide services to all transport disadvantaged groups, not just older people, consultation with LNSCT indicates that most of these passengers are older people. Given similar services are operated by LNSCT on days that Council's contract does not cover through CHSP funding, it is highly likely that these services would continue to operate through CHSP funding if Council were to discontinue funding for these services in the future. It is likely that with CHSP funding fulfilling the same purpose, Council funding could be directed to service other transport gaps with only a slight impact to existing community services.

Options for Future Arrangements

1. Enhancing existing service provision to community groups and individuals

Council's future community bus arrangements should be preceded by consultation and engagement with community groups to understand existing transport needs in the community. Priority should be given to community groups providing services to transport disadvantaged groups such as older people, people with disability and young families.

2. Balancing strong fixed services with flexible options to meet shifting demand

To continue the well utilised existing services and to encourage additional services with community support and high likelihood of engagement, some level of fixed services should be identified and guaranteed through consultation with community groups. Additionally, a flexible schedule of funding should be allocated to support shifting demand for services from emerging groups.

3. Prioritising connection with existing and future Council facilities and events

Contracted services should be optimised to connect with services being provided through Council's community facilities. For example, connecting seniors, youth or disability groups with demographically targeted services and/or events at North Sydney Olympic Pool, Stanton

Library or the Coal Loader would provide a cohesive, wrap-around service offering to the community and promote engagement with these high-quality facilities and spaces.

4. Maintain existing transport services to Council staff and volunteers

Current transport services provided to Council staff and volunteers is well utilised and highly valued. In particular, the trips conducted for Bushcare volunteers enables highly regarded community Bushcare programs such as Bridge to Boorowa and facilitates training and education opportunities for volunteers, boosting both engagement and efficacy in these programs.

Conclusion

North Sydney Council's commitment to providing strong community transport offerings has resulted in a long-standing partnership and contract with LNSCT that delivers high quality transport solutions to the most vulnerable and isolated members of the community. Continuing to meet community needs in the most efficient and cost-effective manner will characterise Council's efforts to review the existing arrangements with LNSCT when the contractual relationship with that organisation ceases in July 2025.