

An age-friendly transport system is good for us all

As people age, they can become more acutely aware of the importance of an accessible transport system, but it's not only older people that will benefit from a whole-journey approach to accessible transport.

An accessible transport system is important for everyone at some point in their lives. Based on 2013 Census data, 14.3 percent of the population was over 65, and this is rising rapidly.¹ The latest New Zealand Disability Survey estimates that over 1 million people living in New Zealand are disabled.² While the rates of disability are much higher among those aged over 65 (over 50 percent of those aged over 65 are disabled), a significant proportion of those in younger age groups are disabled (21 percent of adults aged under 65, and 11 percent of children aged under 15).³ Children can also benefit from an accessible transport system, especially those under four who may rely on pushchairs for much of their outdoor mobility. Overall, this means that roughly 35 percent of the present population (and almost everyone at some point in their lives) are likely to have mobility needs that are not well catered for by our current transport system. Given this, it might seem strange that consideration of mobility and accessibility needs is often peripheral to the design of the transport system.

Transport systems are generally designed to meet the needs of urban commuters, travelling directly into and out of core urban centres at peak times, even though most travel is not commuting. This means that the needs of older adults, who are less likely to be commuting, may not be considered when designing transport systems, resulting in accessibility difficulties. Furthermore, local neighbourhood travel is often given less consideration than travel into and out of main centres, meaning that short local trips, by walking, cycling or public transport, can become difficult.

Most people understand accessible transport to be public transport (ie, buses and trains) or specially designed "mobility transport" services that have been designed with consideration to the diverse mobility needs of the population. This typically includes features such as low floor access, announcement of upcoming stops, wheelchair spaces, and drivers waiting for passengers to sit down before moving. These are important design features that can make travelling easier, or possible in the first place, for an ageing population.

However, an accessible transport system starts at the front door. Considering only the design of public transport and operation of vehicles means that whole-journey accessibility is not considered. Older adults in particular may face difficulties accessing important places and destinations unless a whole-journey approach is taken. This means first considering the design of homes and neighbourhoods and the local pedestrian environment as the first stage of every journey.

Walking is an ideal form of transport, for everyone, but can become especially important for older people who live more local lives and as ability to drive can decline with age. Those aged over 76 rely on walking for a greater proportion of their overall travel than other adults,⁴ but the walking environment is often not well designed to meet their needs. In a recent survey of older adults,⁵ 44 percent reported a fear of falling over. Fear of falling was associated with walking less and poorer perceptions of the quality of footpaths.

An increasing range of modes need to be considered when designing an age-friendly transport system. Slow or low-powered modes such as wheelchairs and mobility-scooters, which are expected to increase with an ageing population, in addition to bicycles and e-scooters have rarely been considered in the design of street environments. As a result, users can come into conflict with

pedestrians when they use the footpath in an attempt to find a safe space away from motorised traffic. Sharing pedestrian space can be particularly challenging for older adults, who may be unsteady on their feet or have reduced vision or hearing. Ensuring that streets are designed for all modes is therefore important in ensuring older adults are not deterred from walking due to fear of conflict.

Beyond the accessibility of the transport system, it is also important that people have places to go to. One of the reasons for high levels of car use in New Zealand is that low-density urban development can make it difficult to get around without a car. Older people who lose their driver licence have an increased risk of social isolation and loneliness. Part of an accessible transport system is therefore ensuring that places can be reached without a car. This means the location of housing in relation to jobs, health care, shopping facilities and a whole range of other places needs to be considered. This requires greater integration between the transport and land-use systems.

Improving the ability to get around and reach important destinations without a car is a key consideration for an age-friendly transport system, but will bring much wider benefits for the whole population too. If car reliance is reduced through more walkable, bikeable streets and a well-connected public transport system, there are health and environmental benefits for everybody.

¹ <http://archive.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/quickstats-about-national-highlights/age-and-sex.aspx>

² <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/populations/maori-health/tatau-kahukura-maori-health-statistics/nga-mana-hauora-tutohu-health-status-indicators/disability>

³ http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/health/disabilities/DisabilitySurvey_HOTP2013.aspx

⁴ <https://www.transport.govt.nz/mot-resources/household-travel-survey/new-results/>

⁵ This was based on a convenience sample of adults aged over 50. More work is needed using nationally representative population surveys. Further results available here: https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10092/16839/Results_summary_JUL19.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y