



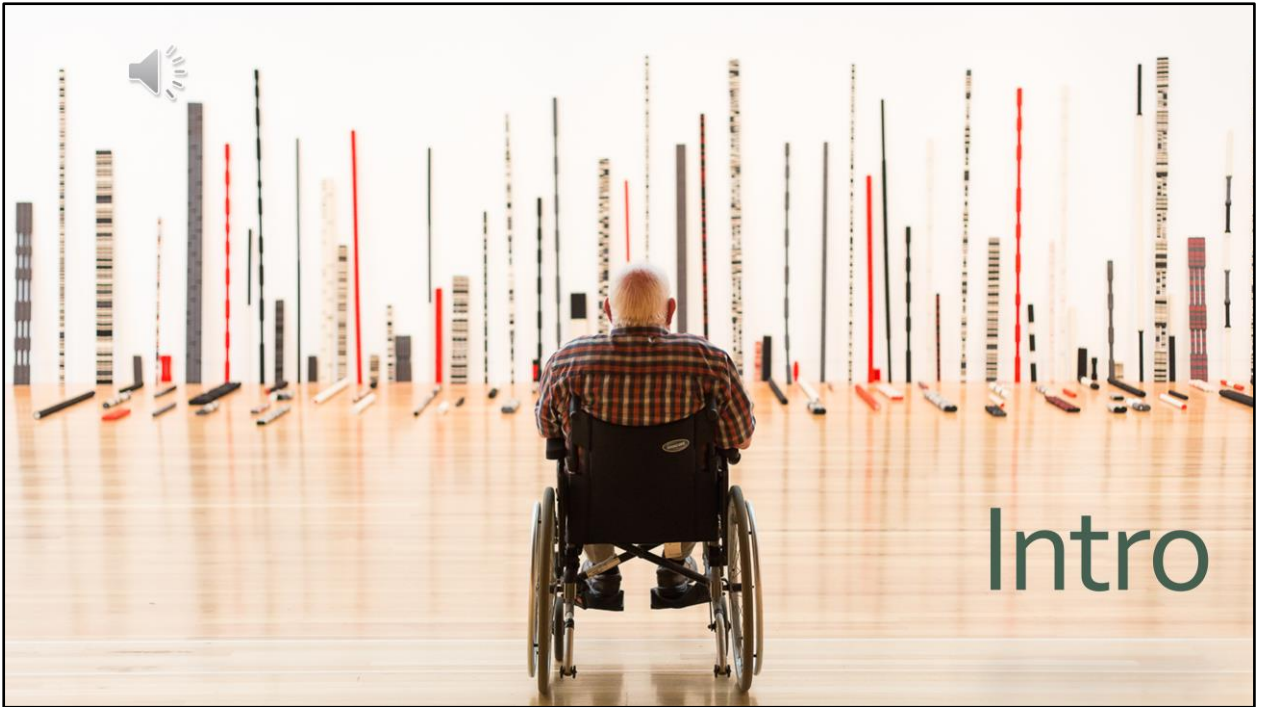
Mind the Gap

Accessibility in Transport

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Good afternoon.

The purpose of this presentation is to talk about accessibility in transport.

By accessibility I mean the way that transport fosters participation in everyday life.

There are three issues I want to discuss.

First, accessibility is an important but neglected objective in transport policy and practice.

Second, there are particular reasons why focusing on people who identify with disability is a useful approach for the transport industry.

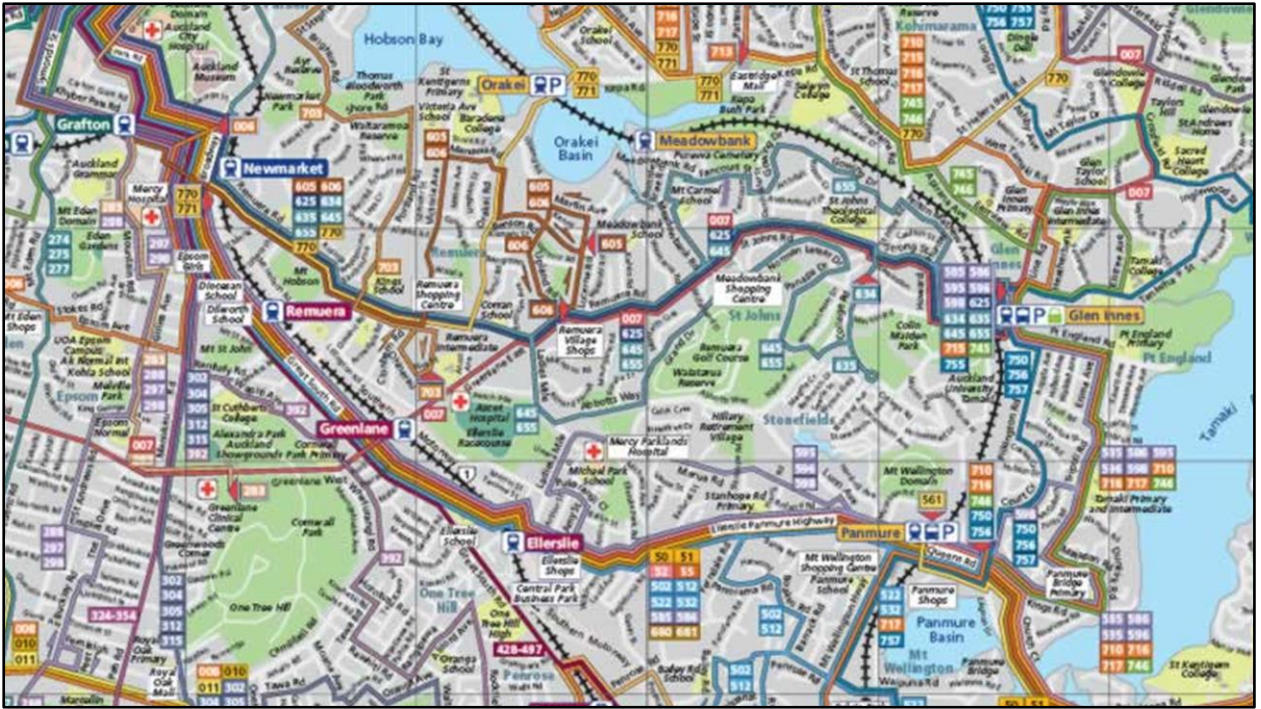
Third, I will discuss what Transportation Group members think about accessibility and whether or not we need to up our game



So first, what is accessibility and why is it important? I think sometimes we forget the reason our jobs exist. Transport is an enabler. It is a means for participating in everyday life. At its core, transport supports the useful movement of goods and people. The word useful is there because we don't provide networks for their own sake.



I was in a meeting in Hamilton a few months ago where a senior transport manager said that providing walking and cycling access to the Hamilton Gardens is a bonus of completing a walking and cycling network. I would argue the exact opposite. A network is only useful if it helps people to access useful activities. Access to the Hamilton Gardens by walking is surely a huge benefit to wellbeing.



So, we do well to remember that we aren't here to provide a beautiful free-flowing network for its own sake. Your next door neighbour doesn't care what you call the level of service, they just want to walk to the park with their grandchildren safely. We transport professionals are paid to support healthy, fulfilling lives. Accessibility – the ability to participate – is an important transport objective.




In this work I tend to focus on policy and planning for walking. Walking is a part of most journeys. Roads are universally designed for all vehicles that use them – we might not have a completely safe system, but anyone with a motor vehicle can look at any NZ road map and know that they can probably drive down any street without too much trouble. But walking is not so clear.



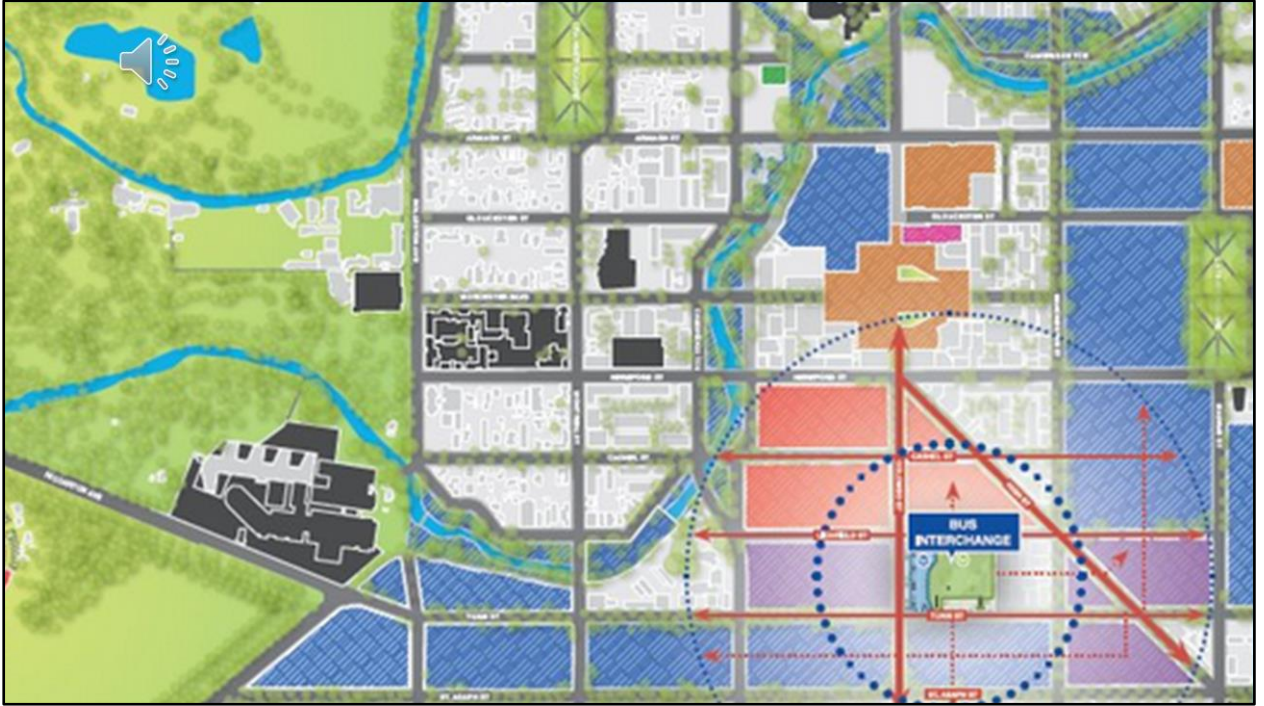
Some of our footpaths and road crossings cater to a lot of people, but I contend that there's more diversity in humans and the way they physically move on footpaths in terms of their capacity for speed and acceleration and their need for space than there is in motor vehicles and the nature of tyre on pavement. If the road network were as diverse as the pedestrian network we would have unsealed roads every few hundred metres, potholes everywhere, different colours of seal and pavement markings – some traffic lanes would be too narrow for your car, and your street could be closed without warning or detour.



For someone who is blind, a bicycle on a shared footpath is like a mini driver sharing their road with a taxiing aeroplane. In short, I focus on the pedestrian network because it has so much room for improvement.

A photograph showing a railway track with gravel and rails. Below the rails, a concrete or asphalt surface has a white rectangular sign with the text "MIND THE GAP" in black capital letters. Below the sign are two horizontal yellow stripes on a grey pavement surface.

Accessibility is an
important
objective in
transport



If we want to improve accessibility, we had better start working on links between transport and participation. There are all sorts of ways to predict how people will probably use transport networks to participate. Walkability indicators, for example, take components of a route like the smoothness of the footpath, crossing type, lighting, extent and nature of planting, and from that data you can build very pretty models of neighbourhood potential for access. But I'd argue that that defining accessibility from ground-up is more pretty than practical, and more expensive than effective.



Why don't we just cut to the chase – if we want to know whether people can get to the shops, count people at the shops. But we don't want to just know how many there are – what kind of people are walking to the shops?

In pavement design we use heavy vehicles as a design trigger because pavement specs are based on the number of heavy vehicles. To identify deficiencies in pedestrian networks, we should find out whether the people who find walking most difficult are using them.



If someone who really needs a smooth, accessible, clear walking route has made it to the shops, then it must be working. If these people are not arriving at the library down the road in similar proportions, then maybe the footpaths need work. Working with CCS Disability Action, we have counted people in all sorts of real-world situations, including the number using visible mobility aids.



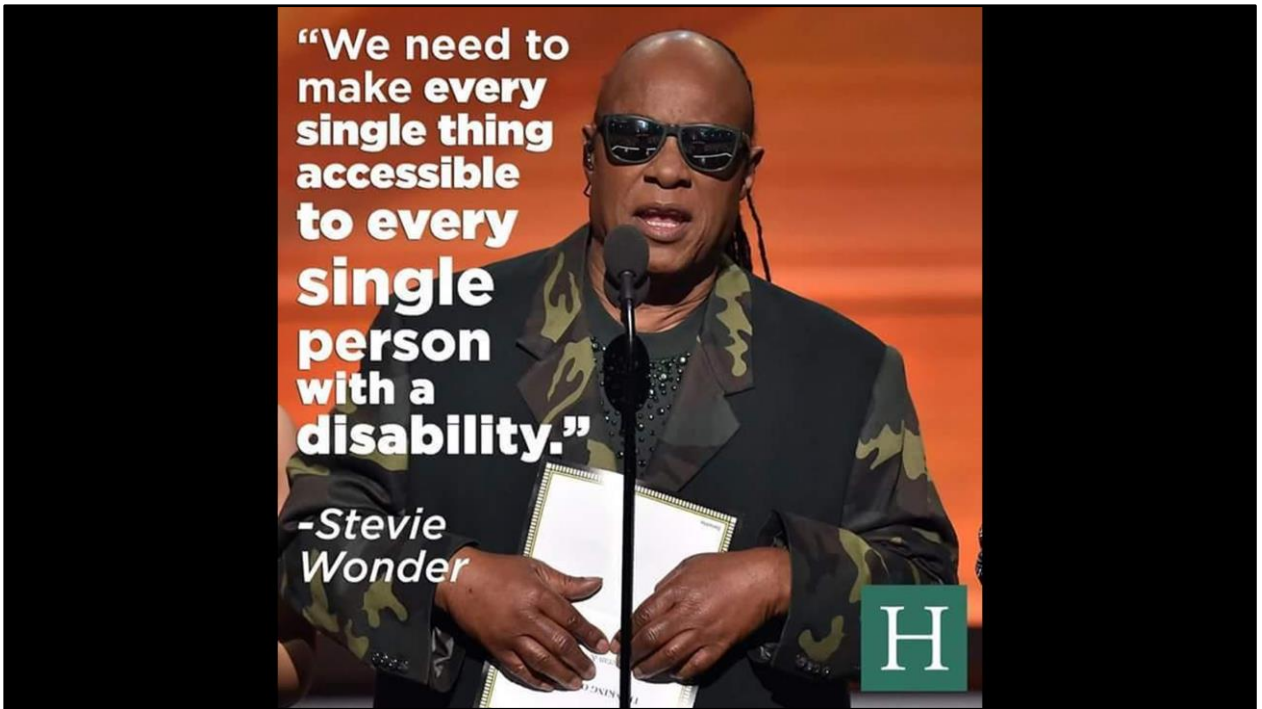
Almost by definition, people who use a mobility aid are going to report that travel by walking, for example, is more difficult for them than it might be for a more actively mobile person. Mobility aids are objectively observable – they are the only visible indicator we can think of that has strong correlation with difficulty in everyday life.



To confirm our suspicions that mobility aids are a useful thing to count, we did a survey of nearly 3,000 New Zealanders. We sent it to the general public – that is, my friends and family on facebook – and we also emailed the link to the database of mobility parking permit holders. We ended up with around 2000 respondents who use a mobility aid, most of whom also identify as having a disability of some kind.



In some ways it's a bit counterproductive to even speak of disability. My favourite definition of disability is a disadvantage brought about by an individual's aspirations not being supported by their environment. So I am disabled because I can't fly. I am disabled if an employer assumes that I will go on maternity leave soon. I am disabled because I don't have a car. I am disabled when the bus breaks down. Disability is not something people 'own'.



“We need to make every single thing accessible to every single person with a disability.”

-Stevie Wonder



To say ‘we need to make the footpaths accessible for disabled people’ makes no sense.

We want footpaths to be usable by all people! Then there won’t be disability built in to transport planning. But to work towards transport that just works for all people, to meet their aspirations for participation, we need to know where it’s not working.

New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings

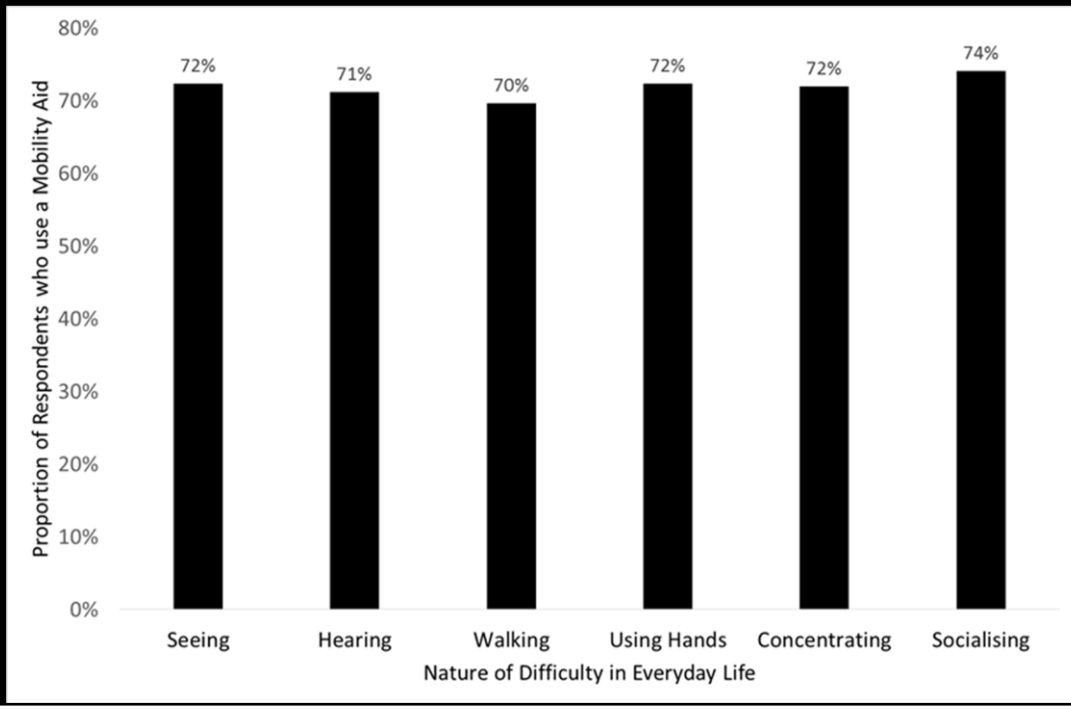


For
Māori / English
forms call
0800 236 787

*Filling in census forms is required by law. Census
planning vital public services such as education,
It is also used to help understand how our society,
The information you provide must be kept confidential
Zealand and is protected by the Statistics Act 1975
only be used for statistical purposes.
The Public Records Act 2005 requires census*

- 16** Mark as many spaces as you need to answer this question.
Does a health problem or a condition you have (lasting 6 months
or more) cause you difficulty with, or stop you from:
- seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses
 - hearing, even when using a hearing aid
 - walking, lifting or bending
 - using your hands to hold, grasp or use objects
 - learning, concentrating or remembering
 - communicating, mixing with others or socialising
- or no difficulty with any of these

The NZ Census doesn't ask about 'types of disability' as such, but asks people whether they experience certain difficulties. Our survey results show that people who use mobility aids are a fairly good representation of all manner of difficulty in everyday life.



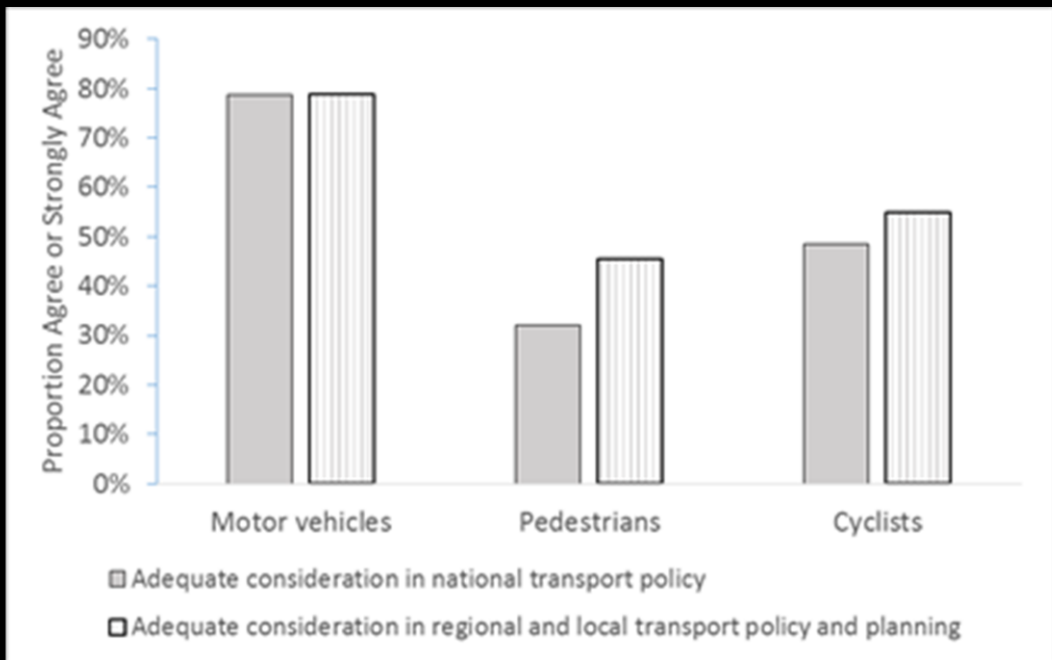
This chart is very interesting – why should three quarters of people with cognitive impairment use a mobility aid? We don't know – a high proportion of these people also reported mobility difficulty, which isn't surprising – and we had a high proportion of older people, who often report more than one difficulty. But anyway. If we see different proportions of people using mobility aids out on the street, we can look at where they are NOT, and think about whether transport supports accessibility in that location.



Mobility aids: the
only visible
indicator of
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So we have established that accessibility is an important transport objective. Maybe we all know that and everything we do in transport already reflects a good understanding of the need to be accessible. Maybe as transport professionals we use good standards and have thorough consultation so that progressively, the world is getting more accessible. This is probably true. But perhaps we can do better.

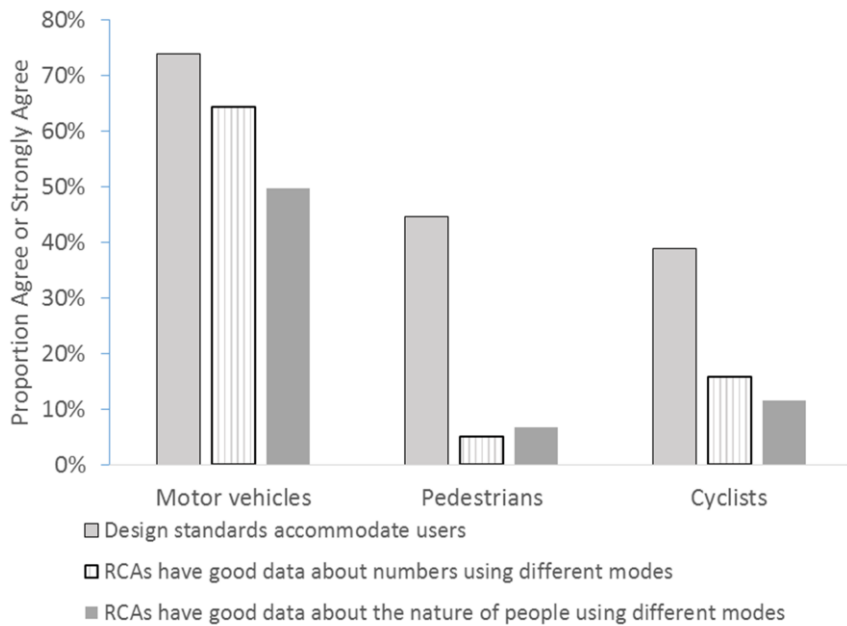


I sent a survey to the Transportation Group to find out what engineers, planners and managers in transport think about the way we approach accessibility. I asked questions about equity by comparing our consideration of people across different modes.

My first main finding was that transport professionals do not think that there is adequate provision in national transport policy for pedestrians. I think that this will always be the case, because roads are much more easily contained within a national transport portfolio than footpaths are. We hand over all responsibility for pedestrian networks to local authorities, so it becomes a local issue. That would be fine if life were equitable and transparent – but I think that the national focus on roads filters down into regional transport committees, and local council meetings. Districts and cities get no NZTA funding subsidy for footpaths. The term ‘pedestrian network’ is not even a thing.



So it's not surprising that when annual and long-term funding decisions are made by councillors, they think of transport as road networks, and footpaths are given maintenance and that's about it.




Just over half of respondents agreed that our design standards for pedestrians accommodate all people. That’s not a great figure – we need to constantly and carefully improve our design standards.

But I don’t think standards are actually the problem; in fact I think as engineers we are too quick to blame standards, or hope that a new best practice planning and design guide will somehow descend from heaven to save us. In my survey I asked transport professionals whether they consider the needs of all people in their work – some verbatim comments were “We rely on national standards to consider these issues”, and “Questions not relevant to my situation”.



Remember that standards are only applied to new infrastructure, and the details are subject to the same political, physical and financial constraints that affect all transport decision-making. standards don't help you to decide where to invest, or how much, and they certainly don't help educate politicians about the complex nature of policy and planning for people who make journeys.

Here's an example video of why standards don't cut it. This is a very fancy bus somewhere in not-New Zealand. You will see that it has a ramp that the bus driver can deploy without leaving the drivers' seat. Does this policy directive mean we have an accessible bus? Does the fancy ramp mean that we have more participation by a wider range of people? Let's watch...

 Melody Powell



This video showed a woman's perspective as she waited to board a bus using her wheelchair. The driver deployed an automatic ramp. But the door ended up next to a lamp post so the woman couldn't get to the ramp.

Another passenger asked the driver to move forward a bit.

The driver moved forward.. . And then drove off. The passenger was left behind.



....no, standards are not enough. And before we blame the driver, let's remember that our own government prioritises efficiency above access, and so do most NZ public transport operations contracts. We don't ask bus companies how many journeys they facilitated. We ask them how many trips they made on time.



What we need to help this conversation is more and better information. Everyone agrees that we don't have good data about pedestrians. I assume most of you think about this as pedestrian volume data, and it's true, compared to road traffic our data about peds is negligible. But we also need access to the science behind why people are or are not present on our streets. We need stronger links between active transport and health, and stronger tools to use that evidence to convince ministries that footpath maintenance is a health issue.



My main conclusions from this research are first, accessibility is an important objective in transport and second, we can do better. Everyone in transport is genuinely doing their best with the tools they have available. These tools, including funding structures, political processes, hard data and background science should be constantly challenged. Let's not blame design standards for poor outcomes. It's our responsibility to make transportation a professional industry that responds to challenge, learns from it and moves forward.



BB's Postcard from Paris



Anna to read BB's email from Paris

Thank You



Concluding remarks about accessibility and transport