

Submission to Environment Canterbury

Regional Public Transport Plan 2025-35

24 October 2024



Introduction

The Timaru District Council (the Council) thanks Environment Canterbury for the opportunity to submit on the Regional Public Transport Plan 2025-35 (the Plan or RPTP).

This submission is made by the Timaru District Council, 2 King George Place, Timaru. The contact person for Council is Nigel Bowen, Mayor of the Timaru District, who can be contacted at Timaru District Council, phone (03) 687 7200 or PO Box 522, Timaru 7940.

We endorse the submissions made by the Geraldine, Pleasant Point and Temuka community boards.

We do not wish to speak to this submission, if there is the opportunity to do so.

Public transport in Timaru District

The Timaru District Council is a local authority in the South Island serving over 48,000 people in South Canterbury. The main settlement is Timaru, with other smaller settlements of Geraldine, Pleasant Point and Temuka. A third of the population lives outside of Timaru and is quite geographically dispersed, meaning that they often need to travel significant distances to access basic services.

Public transport provision in the district currently consists of:

- MyWay on demand within the Timaru township
- A bus service between Temuka and Timaru, twice each weekday
- Three community vehicle trusts in Temuka, Pleasant Point and Geraldine; the latter is Total Mobility accredited
- 18 school bus routes carrying approximately 800 students per day; funded by the Ministry of Education and run by Aoraki School Transport Network

Data from Council's Road Users Survey 2023/24 indicates that in the 2023-24 financial year, 11% of respondents "normally" use a bus (including MyWay) for transport. This figure has increased steadily; for example, 1% of respondents used the bus normally in 2019/20, and has nearly trebled over a three year period (4% in 2020/21). Refer to the Appendix of this submission for further information.

The community trust vehicle usage for the past year is summarised below.

Trust	Km travelled	Trips	Passengers carried	Volunteer hours
Geraldine	80,859	7,624	5,052	Not available
Pleasant Point	20,804	Not available	586	6931
Temuka	19,000	900	494	28802

Source: Information provided by the respective Trusts; Environment Canterbury data

General comments

Council welcomes Environment Canterbury’s continued focus on improving public transport within the region, and appreciates its ongoing financial commitment to the same. Further, Council supports the vision³ and five stated priorities⁴ of the draft Plan.

However, we believe that the draft Plan does not apply these priorities equally or adequately across the entirety of the region, particularly in relation to the priorities of accessibility and affordability.

Whilst it may initially seem understandable that the majority of the focus of the draft Plan is on the Greater Christchurch area given its significant current and projected future population, we are concerned that provincial and rural areas are not getting their “fair share”. Funding for, and subsidising of, provincial and rural services appears to be declining in real terms compared to urban public transport, likely leading to either diminished local services or higher user fees.

Investment in provincial and rural services is, we contend, good value for money. Relatively small financial outlays (proportional to the wider region’s public transport budget) can create a significant increase in the level of service in these areas, in a way that is not possible in, for instance, Greater Christchurch where public transport is more established. Moreover, survey data and the ongoing MyWay trial indicate that there is a growing demand within our district for additional public transport options.

We encourage Environment Canterbury to, through this Plan, take the opportunity to increase investment in public transport, in real terms, in our district. Most specifically, we request this through to the adoption of MyWay as our permanent public transport offering, inflation-adjusted grants for community trust vehicles and assistance to reduce the number of volunteer hours required, and the funding of a dedicated Pleasant Point-Timaru school bus.

¹ Does not include committee/ administrative time.

² Includes driver time and administrative/ phone answering time; each comprises approximately 50% of the volunteer hours.

³ *Public transport is the mode of choice for more people and provides a safe, frequent, seamless, low emission transport option* (p 18 of the Draft RPTP)

⁴ As stated on p 9 of the Draft RPTP, including growing patronage, accessibility and affordability.

Summary of requests or changes sought

- We request continued support for MyWay to eventually transition to a permanent public transport offering.
- We request that Environment Canterbury investigate options to tag the value of the community vehicle trust grants to CPI.
- We request that Environment Canterbury investigate options and opportunities to gain efficiencies within the community vehicle trust operating model and reduce the call on volunteers' time, for instance via MyWay potentially assisting with phone answering.
- We request that Environment Canterbury consider setting up a fund where Vehicle Trusts could apply for financial assistance to upgrade vehicles to lower operational cost and lower emission options.
- We request that, if the Pleasant Point-Timaru bus service were to be withdrawn, that Environment Canterbury fund this route, as per policy 1.4 Specialist Services in the draft Plan.

MyWay by Metro

Council acknowledges and appreciates Environment Canterbury's ongoing support for the MyWay trial in Timaru township. The shift from fixed to demand responsive services has, from our perspective, been highly successful.

The MyWay model represents the future of public transport for provincial and rural areas. Comparable local authorities have been watching the trial and lessons learnt with interest, in the hope that they will be apply a similar approach themselves. Therefore, the trial has indirect benefits that likely extend far beyond our district.

We recognise that MyWay does present an additional and ongoing cost to our community, compared to fixed route scheduled bus services. We believe the benefits of the service outweigh this, however, and consider that on-demand public transport is far better suited to the needs of our community. Like many other parts of regional New Zealand, our District will face future challenges with an ageing population and increasing living costs, meaning it is as important as ever that we look to innovation and examples of success to support transport outcomes for our community. MyWay is one such success.

We request continued support for MyWay to eventually transition to a permanent public transport offering via sustained funding, affordable fares, and collaboration to address any future challenges posed by the funding model.

Community trust vehicles

As stated in our submission on the 2018 RPTP, community trust vehicles, *"are a vital link to for rural areas to essential services in urban areas and allow people to remain in these rural*

areas⁵". The importance and popularity of these has only grown in the intervening six years. Further, recent Strategic Plans developed by our community boards identified transport as a key issue for local residents.

The three trusts are very grateful for the funding currently received by Environment Canterbury, and believe that the community receives very good value for this investment; \$18,000 for the Geraldine trust, and \$10,000 each for the Pleasant Point and Temuka trusts.

Unfortunately, the nominal amount of the grants has remained static for many years, and this has reduced its value in real terms. This is especially significant given the high inflationary environment of the past several years. Further, we note that the grant funding amounts are, in part, sourced from targeted rates within the trust's catchment areas and matched by NZTA; both factors complicate the adjusting of them.

We request that Environment Canterbury investigate options to tag the value of the grants to CPI to help reduce the burden on trusts to have to seek ever-further additional funding. Such a measure will allow them to enhance their focus on delivering an important service to the community.

Significantly, we note that the financial viability of the trusts is based on the "donation" of time by volunteers. For instance, in the last year the Temuka trust gave 2,880 volunteer hours (including administrative time), and the Pleasant Point trust gave 693 volunteer hours of driving time. At a \$30 per hour rate, this comprises \$86,400 and \$20,790 of "donations" from the local community to supporting the service, each year. Environment Canterbury data indicates that the total volunteer contribution for all trusts for the five year period 2018/19 to 2023/24 exceeds \$2.5 million, if each hour was paid the minimum wage.

Whilst Council is not asking or expecting Environment Canterbury to pay volunteers for their hours, it does highlight the significant "sacrifice" that provincial and rural communities make to ensure the sustainability of their public transport networks. This contribution that does not occur in urban contexts – where we understand up to 90% of each trip is subsidised – , and highlights the urban-rural disparities in the current funding model. We argue, on equity grounds, that provincial and urban public transport is worthy of additional support.

Additional support would not necessarily have to come at a significant cost, especially if there are opportunities to create efficiencies within the operating models. One potential opportunity relates to the trusts' phone-answering services. The Temuka trust estimates that half of their volunteer time relates to driving, and the other to phone-answering. We wonder whether there is the opportunity to utilise the current MyWay customer service/ phone-answering service to assist trusts.

⁵ https://www.timaru.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/296030/Submission-to-Environment-Canterbury-draft-Regional-Public-Transport-Plan.pdf

We request that Environment Canterbury investigate this possibility and any other opportunities to gain efficiencies and reduce the call on volunteers' time. Notwithstanding any such potential changes, we wish to retain the core principle at the heart of the trusts – local people taking local people places.

Finally, we note that the work of the trusts impacts on Canterbury's wider emissions profile. Over time, the transition to greener, lower-emitting vehicles offers an opportunity to support one of the key priorities of the RPTP, as well as reduce operating costs by improving fuel efficiency. However, vehicle change is an expensive undertaking, particularly for small trusts.

To support this transition, we request that Environment Canterbury consider setting up a fund where Vehicle Trusts could apply for financial assistance to upgrade vehicles to lower operational cost and lower emission options.

School transport

Quality school transport links are important to provide educational choices to our relatively dispersed population. Potential changes to existing levels of service generate a high level of community interest, as evidenced by the recent signal from the Ministry of Education to discontinue the Pleasant Point – Timaru service.

We understand that this service is to continue, for now. We request that, if this service were to be withdrawn, that Environment Canterbury fund this route, as per policy 1.4 Specialist Services in the draft Plan. Whilst the request is contrary to the intention to, "focus on ensuring access is provided to local schools, rather than those in different areas" (p 62), we argue that the circumstances met the inferred exemption relating to cost-effectiveness.

Insufficient alternative public transport options exist to service this demand. The affected students and their schools would not be considered "well serviced" by the existing public transport network as per the three criteria on p 62. Further, it is highly unlikely that this service would be underperforming when considered against the two criteria stated on p 63.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit on the RPTP. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or wish to discuss aspects further.

Ngā mihi

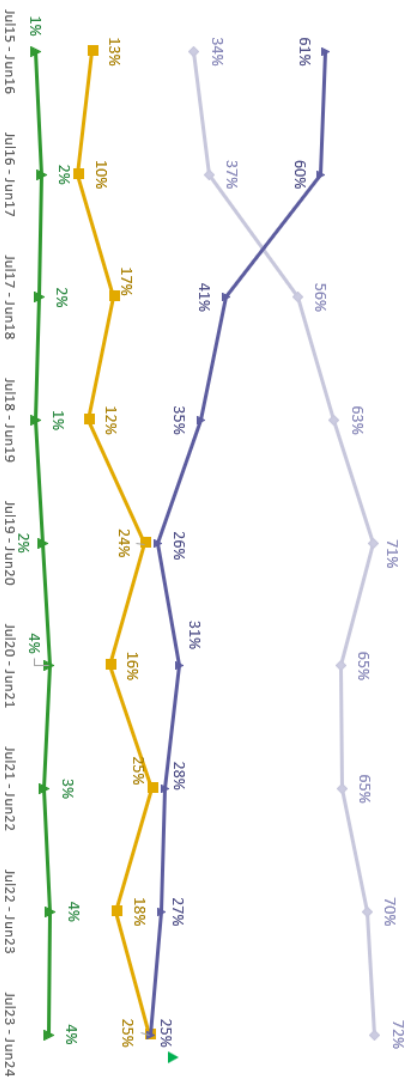


Nigel Bowen
Mayor

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Activities in the Last Week

The proportion of residents who have chosen to *Walk for more than ten minutes instead of driving* in the last week has slightly increased by 2% points (72% from 70%).



- Walked more than 10 mins rather than driving
- Ridden a bike
- Used the local bus service
- None of these

Transport Modelling and Research Unit
 Connecting Our Community
KEY RESEARCH
 Transport Modelling and Research Unit
 Notes:
 1. ATPI 1. In the last week have you done one or more of the following? Multiple response

Year-on-year
 Significantly higher
 Significantly lower
Between demographics
 Significantly higher
 Significantly lower
 33

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Normal Road and Footpath Usage

The proportion of residents who *Ride a bicycle* has significantly increased since the last reporting period, rising from 29% to 39%.

