

# Infrastructure for a better future

## More than a labour of love

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Please note: the transcript has been edited to make reading as easy as possible.

**Introduction:** Welcome to the Te Waihangā 'Infrastructure for a Better Future' podcast. A series where we talk to experts both from here and overseas about the infrastructure challenges we are facing.

**Jane Godfrey:** As discussed in Te Waihangā's New Zealand Infrastructure Strategy, we need our cities to be attractive and inclusive places to live. An important aspect of achieving this is ensuring our public spaces are accessible to everyone. To explore this further, in this podcast, we'd like to take a closer look at some of the work that's been done by two Auckland Transport advisory groups – the Public Transport Accessibility Group (PTAG) and the Capital Project Accessibility Group (CTAG).

A couple of examples of the many successes of the advisory groups have been the adoption and implementation of Auckland Transport's Accessibility Action Plan, the development of accessibility audit tools that can be used to assess the accessibility of existing infrastructure, and the development of the new train network with all stations now at a uniform height across

the network. Last year, the advisory groups helped staff to design and implement the new 'Plus One Bus Companion' concession, which will enable the support person of a total mobility card holder to travel at no charge when travelling with the total mobility card holder. This currently applies to buses and they're looking to expand this to also include rail and ferry.

We're joined today by Chris Orr and Alison McClellan, who between them have more than 50 years of combined service on a range of Auckland Transport's accessibility advisory groups. On the advisory groups, Chris represented Blind Low Vision New Zealand and Alison represented Headway, the Brain Injury Association Auckland. Alison and Chris, both retired from those advisory groups last year. Thanks to both of you for joining us.

Alison, could you talk a little bit about how you got involved in the Brain Injury Association and how that work led to you getting involved with transport issues?

**Alison McLellan:** Well, in 1976, my son suffered a very serious TBI [Traumatic Brain Injury], which left him severely disabled and having to live in residential care. I'm a founding member of the Sedentary Society that was formed in 1981. And that is now at the Brain Injury Association. I was the first treasurer and did the financials. And in 1999, the Stroke Foundation CEO suggested to my CEO that if we had a person that could go onto the advisory board at that time, which was elected. I was lucky enough to be voted on and my application accepted. At that time, I felt that we needed to help accessibility because at that time nobody in a wheelchair could travel by a bus.

**Jane Godfrey:** Right.

**Alison McLellan:** When travel was very difficult for the disabled and people in wheelchairs. So, that's what started me way back then and it just went on from there.

**Jane Godfrey:** Chris, you've worked on accessibility and transport issues at both regional and national level. Can you tell us how that work has changed over time? So, you talked about the need for both a structural and attitudinal shift. In particular, it would be great to hear about the work the advisory groups have been involved in with Waka Kotahi.

**Chris Orr:** Yeah, with Waka Kotahi – that's only been in recent years that we started working with them as a combined group with Waka Kotahi. Prior to that, different organisations had been advocating for their particular group. In my instance, it was on behalf of people who are blind or have low vision. So that was my focus. And I started working with somebody from CCS Disability Action and somebody with Deaf Aotearoa to try and get a combined approach, which suited both the local government teams we were working with and, of course, later the Ministry of Transport and Waka Kotahi. And that's where it really started was actually trying to get a combined approach rather than me, or somebody from CCS [Disability Action] or the Brain Injury Association, or whatever it happened to be. When you get that combined approach, it becomes very difficult to then not engage. I think that's really when we started to make headway was when we all combined.

We were all having successes at a local level, particularly in Auckland here it was, you may or may not be aware that it's only in recent years, we've become the supercity. Prior to that we had seven local authorities and all of them had different policies and practices. So, you had to

engage with all of those and then you had to engage with Hamilton City Council and Waikato Regional Council, and Dunedin City, all those different councils, all of whom had different rules.

So, that was when we started to really make traction was when we had combined advisory groups to advise and work with. I think that's quite important to emphasise – is that you're working with. So, it wasn't an adversarial type of approach. That did happen a little bit in the early days when you started to work together to achieve a better standard of transport, and then it's a two-way thing that we would go to say Waka Kotahi and Waka Kotahi would come to us. And that was when we really started to make big strides. But it took a long time. It was an incremental process, if you like. Small steps and another small step and another small step, and all of a sudden, you've gained metres. And I think that's one of the important things to recognise is that many, many people have caught the whole pieces of the jigsaw together. So that's a long answer to your question. But I think it's important to see where we've come from, to where we are today.

**Jane Godfrey:** So, what's the time frame that we're talking about that we're going back? How many years here?

**Chris Orr:** When I first started working with a couple of local councils, that would have been the early 1990s. Just going back a bit, I'd started doing a lot of advocacy work, when I worked at the Blind Low Vision Guide Dog Centre, where I was working in communications and fundraising. And people started to recognise the access issues around guide dogs going into public places, and then my role changed and it just so that would be the early 1990s.

**Jane Godfrey:** But as you moved into the supercity and Auckland Transport, was it easier to engage with one group versus the different local councils?

**Alison McLellan:** I found that at the beginning, when I was first on, that the leaders of the councils coming on – because of new elections every three years they changed. So, you never got a rapport with them. Then we started, like Chris said, and got good leaders that had a real commitment to the availability to safe and secure travel for all – not only disabled but for all.

**Chris Orr:** Yeah, I agree. I think that the big difference when AT came, and before that I was on the Auckland Regional Council Land Transport as an appointed member, and that represented the whole area, but where it changed was

Auckland Transport and the establishment of PTAG [Public Transport Advisory Group] and CTAG [Capital Project Advisory Group] was we were inside the tent and that made a difference. And we were part of the AT set-up and that makes a big difference, rather than outside looking in, we were inside.

**Alison McLellan:** And don't you think that they started to see that we were there in our role to make sure – not to interfere – but to make sure that their money was spent well as well?

**Chris Orr:** Yeah, I think that that was part of it, and I think you're dead right that it was money well spent. Because people always see public transport as being an expensive exercise. But it's a necessity in a modern world. But I think that when we had that quantum leap was when it was set up that project by project, people would come to both PTAG and CTAG meetings to develop them before they made the design, the standard, or whatever there was input from our groups. So that instead of, 'Oh, we've developed this plan, we've developed the standard, what do you think?' It was, 'We're developing this standard and here's what we think, now help us to get to the end product.' It's a holistic approach.

**Alison McLellan:** Yep.

**Chris Orr:** And rather than when I was talking about when I started working with CCS Disability Action and Deaf Aotearoa we were taking a much more holistic approach to the whole process and saying all of us needed to be there. And that was, the word you mentioned before was the 'attitudinal change' started to happen then. In that the attitudes changed towards 'they're different people out there' with 'they're the disabled and we've got to do the right thing by them' so 'here's a good thing to do', as opposed to, 'this is the right thing to do'. There's a difference between the right thing to do and the good thing to do. They weren't doing us a favour. Right?

And that was what the attitude was: 'You poor – this is going back 40 years or so now – 'you poor blind people' or 'you poor disabled people'. Because the world is hugely different. I lost my sight in 1974. And it's been amazing watching the world change around me as attitudes have changed. The way people work together has changed. It is a totally different world now than what it was when I lost my sight.

**Alison McLellan:** Yeah, we've gone ahead and leaps and bounds really.

**Chris Orr:** And we're not there yet.

**Alison McLellan:** No, we certainly are not. There's a lot of things that the new advisory group needs to look into, especially with the new terminals and things that are being built with the motorways.

**Chris Orr:** Well, I think we will all learn from each other. And Jane, I think that might be important to emphasise that all of the people in those groups we've learned from each other. It's not just about blindness or brain injury or physical impairment, because sometimes the needs of deaf are different than the needs of blind people, or people with wheelchairs as opposed to a walker or whatever. And that's the one of the big things is that as I was saying before, the holistic approach is what has made it very successful.

**Alison McLellan:** Oh, exactly. Yes. Yes. And I must say, Chris that the leadership of the last recent years it's made it all worthwhile. And I felt coming away from those meetings feeling 'Ah, at last we're getting somewhere'.

**Jane Godfrey:** Coming back to your comment earlier around everyone learning from each other: If you were to give advice to local and central government agencies wanting to set up advisory groups, or build relationships with advisory groups, what advice would you give them?

**Chris Orr:** The big thing is recruiting the right people. Because sometimes you can get people in areas and who are doing fantastic work, but they often come at it from their own personal perspective. Right? Rather than taking the holistic approach to working with and alongside – we use Waka Kotahi, as an example, in that now they're selecting the right people – with advice – the right people, to give them the right information, so that they can get things right before or add to something to make it better.

I think one of the things as an example is the Aotearoa Pedestrian Network Design Guide. It's a mouthful, isn't it? Somebody will make up an acronym about at some stage.

**Jane Godfrey:** Always an acronym.

**Chris Orr:** But that's about footpaths and getting footpaths designed properly. And how to design a good intersection – roads, pedestrian crossings, all that sort of stuff is all in that guide. It's fairly comprehensive. So, Waka Kotahi have chosen good people or approached good people or an organisation to get the right



person appointed because they realise with that assistance, that advice, they're going to get a better product.

For me, one of the highlights has been the change in the buses, and trains, and ferries in terms of their physical access.

**Alison McLellan:** Oh, yeah.

**Jane Godfrey:** You talked about kneeling buses and things before.

**Chris Orr:** Kneeling buses. That for me, as a regular train traveller, I travel on the train for 40 years going in and out of Auckland. And for going back from the old 1940s carriages to the ones we've got today. What a privilege it was for me to work on developing the rail network to a 21st century network with electric trains, and doors that open automatically, all the ramps being the same height, accessible ticketing machines. And one of the really interesting things – remember I talked about ramps before? When they first put ramps on trains, the train guard would have to run around, see somebody on a platform with a wheelchair, run around and get the ramp, and get it to the door closest to where the person was waiting, and put the ramp down. The person would then get on the train and set somewhere handy, because there was no designated space that a wheelchair could park themselves easily. The train manager would then pick up the ramp, take it away back and stow it away and tie it up. So that would take quite some time. But now with the new trains here in Auckland, the trains pull up, there's a designated spot on the platform, which has the international symbol of access. It also has a tactile design on it, so a person with a cane can pick it up. It's got high visibility yellow and when the train stops, it stops immediately opposite that. And before the doors open, a ramp is automatically deployed, and it senses the edge of the platform. So that it's almost flat access, getting into the train. That was so much fun doing that. It was just so much fun. It was like having your own train set, but it was big.

**Jane Godfrey:** Better than the old system.

**Chris Orr:** Yeah. That's a real highlight that getting and getting access to the ferries and the buses. Because the one of the big things for us as a blind community will be that over the next little while every bus stop in Auckland will have audio announcements, both in Te Reo and in English. So that's 7000 bus stops, every bus in the Auckland network will have their – and that was huge for us as blind people – knowing where to get off.

**Alison McLellan:** I think it's huge for anybody. Even those people with a brain injury, to be able to have the audible because of their inability to read what's written on the timetable. So that is a great advantage I think for everybody.

**Jane Godfrey:** You've definitely been busy over the last couple of – what did we say – the last 50 years between you.

**Chris Orr:** Well, it's been a labour of love for me. Because it's benefitted me don't forget – I've been bloody selfish.

**Jane Godfrey:** Well, the rest of us too.

**Chris Orr:** Oh, absolutely.

**Alison McLellan:** I think you're being very modest, Chris. You've really worked hard on that. And I sort of feel that I achieved a lot for my brain injured as well, to be able to travel more secure and safe. And to be able to access Auckland far easier than ever before. We can bow out sort of knowing that we've done the groundwork and I know they will keep it up.

**Chris Orr:** They will. You know, because the big word in the end Jane is 'independence'. That's what having a good public transport, infrastructure network, bridges, and roads, intersections, footpaths, all that sort of stuff. What it does is gives people independence, so they can travel on their own as opposed to relying upon somebody else. There's always a little bit of reliance, but sighted people and people who are perfectly able still need a little bit of assistance every now and then.

**Alison McLellan:** Exactly.

**Jane Godfrey:** Thank you very much, both of you for speaking with us. I just want to note, late last year you both retired from the advisory groups now, but Auckland Transport publicly recognised the incredible difference the advisory groups have made so not just for Auckland, but for wider New Zealand. And that goes back to your point, Chris, that it's not just for you, it's not just for members of the advisory groups, but I think we all benefit when it's easier to get around. So, thank you.

**Narrator:** Thanks for listening to Infrastructure for a Better Future. To find out more about the infrastructure challenges we are facing visit [www.tewaihangā.govt.nz](http://www.tewaihangā.govt.nz).