

# A JUST NOW

## Equity and transport in a changing climate

A white paper

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# Introduction

We need to change the way we invest in transport if we are to create a more just society, on a survivable planet. This paper describes some ways to do that: different questions, different approaches, and new ways of thinking.

Its insights come from the author's background in transport research, policy, and cognitive psychology. It builds on MRCagney's work on equity in transport. Its main purpose is to give transport professionals a deeper understanding of why equity and climate are so important, while providing practical help for the transport sector to create A Just Now.

## What is equity in transport?

There has been a rapid increase recently in discussions about equity in transport. As transport policy transitions to lower carbon, less consumptive approaches, the role of equity is important. Equity is about meeting people's needs, with more effort for people with more needs. It is remarkable that in 2023 we do not measure the return on investment in transport by asking who is, and who is not, accessing what they need. However, we are beginning to understand that different people have different needs of transport. An equitable approach is about continuing to learn about who has what needs, and working to meet them.



## Definitions

A lack of equity, or inequity, manifests in two main ways: either people do not get the access they need, or they are hurt (physically or financially) by using transport.

People's needs for access are often defined in terms of the relative term, transport disadvantage. Some people are disadvantaged because they do not have as many transport choices as other people do. That happens when infrastructure and services are not available, and/or are not accessible to them because of cost, infrastructure barriers, or because using the infrastructure or services would require too much effort.

People experience a variety of harms from transport, because using transport infrastructure and services causes them discomfort, pain, or to suffer abuse or attack; because they are injured while using transport; or because of the effects of air pollution caused by transport.

When people spend more than they can afford on transport, usually on owning and operating a private car, they experience transport poverty.

# A Just Now

## Equity and a changing climate

Humans are consuming earth's limited resources faster than they can be replaced, and polluting faster than the earth can absorb. One of the symptoms of excess consumption and pollution is global warming, caused primarily by relatively wealthy humans, in relatively wealthy countries.

In transport, decades of car-centric planning have created highly consumptive habits: we rely on cars for a lot of our mobility, and on expensive, resource-intensive, pollution-heavy roads to drive them on. 20th Century transport planning responded to exponential growth in car ownership with car-centric planning, focused on road networks and parking.

A shift in approach promotes access above mobility. Instead of predicting car traffic and providing for it with road networks, a different approach asks how we can get (all) people what they need to thrive, within the constraints of the planet that we live on. In this framing, equity and climate are not mutually exclusive. We cannot successfully transition to a society that consumes less without promoting the needs of those currently missing out on access.

“ Providing for access begs the question at the heart of this paper: whose access needs to be improved? ”

Focus on A Just Now is particularly important because of the increasing frequency of storms and other weather events that suck large amounts of money from the transport budget. While a Just Transition can be delayed through political focus on Net Zero and obligations decades away, A Just Now places the priority right here.

In sum, equity is important in the context of a changing climate because it is at the heart of the shift in focus from mobility to access. Instead of providing for mobility, providing for access begs the question at the heart of this paper: whose access needs to be improved? In other words, in our role as transport professionals, how can we deliver A Just Now?

## How can we deliver a Just Now?

In A Just Now, all people have access to what they need to live well. To do that we need to change the way we approach equity, within a rapidly changing political and biophysical climate.

This paper sets out what policy makers, transport planners, engineers and others can do to deliver A Just Now, at the national, regional and local level, in four ways:

**Strong policy:** The words about what we value and how we will do it are central to elevating equity, with a vision of what we are investing for, and accountability for delivering towards that vision.

**Authentic engagement:** Access is about connection, so we need to work more effectively across government, and between government and community. We need more effective programmes across government departments. We need to work with people and communities not currently accessing what they need, from grassroots neighbourhood groups through to national level agencies.

**New ways of working:** Some ways of meeting people's needs for access, and prioritising within existing ways of working, are not as prominent as they could be. We need to increase the use of street and design audits, improve access to bike and car share, and to strengthen and grow volunteer-based community transport services.

**New ways to measure progress:** If we do not measure an outcome, we will not know whether we are getting any better, or where the next dollar should be spent. Measuring equity of participation is achievable and necessary. New and adapted tools can help us.

These actions can deliver A Just Now so that all people have every opportunity to live well.

# National response

The stories we tell at a national level about why we invest in transport are central to shaping the conversations through to local level. Some recommended actions at national level are:

## Strong policy for A Just Now: The Transport System Demonstrates Inclusion

A vision for equity in national level transport policy is important. I suggest A Just Now, with a vision that the transport system demonstrates inclusion. Equity and inclusion are included in the current draft Government Policy Statement on Land Transport, as are sustainability and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. But equity is not established as its own policy area. There is no vision to point to, and no established ways to measure progress. Strong policy matters, because if investment in equity is not made for good reason, it can be delayed, removed or watered-down for political reasons or when other objectives are introduced with stronger rationale.

## Authentic engagement

Strong policy focus on A Just Now lends itself to more effective cross-government collaboration. Transport does not exist for its own sake. It is a means for accessing activities. We need to establish programmes across health, education, employment, social development, conservation and other sectors where access to what people need to thrive, within planetary constraints, can be prioritised and delivered. In working across sectors we acknowledge that equity is important in every government department, and transport comes up in all of them as a barrier to access for people who are currently disadvantaged.

Authentic engagement means extra effort to promote Māori aspirations for access. While being clear that Māori have diverse aspirations and needs, there is a gap in promoting access to places that are culturally and socially significant for Māori, such as Marae, kura kaupapa, and access to te taiao, the natural world. There is currently no explicit funding mechanism for

interventions for Māori to access what they need. A Just Now framework delivered with authentic engagement would better highlight the access gaps so that investment can be assigned for good reason, and improvements in Māori access could be measured.

## New ways of working

To deliver equitable access, we need to provide for it in national-level funding rules so that their delivery can be paid for. One new way of working is combined budgets, so that the National Land Transport Fund has contributions from sectors other than transport. Investment advisors from different ministries and funding bodies could work together to establish funding criteria, allocate and prioritise funding, and evaluate its impact.

Specific examples of models that warrant more support are bike and car share, and volunteer-based community transport. Bike and car share models, and community transport already exist in Aotearoa. However, they are usually delivered bottom-up, by community non-profit groups, or by local private enterprise. Funding and supporting these initiatives at a national level would elevate them, leading to better evidence about where to invest the next dollar so that more people's needs for access are met in sustainable ways.

In the case of community transport, more national-level support would provide a strong link to health, education and social service sectors, because those connections are essential to understanding and describing its value. The return on investment would be apparent not only in a reduction in 'did not attend' specialist medical appointments, but also in improvements in a wide range of outcomes including for example youth driver licencing, support for shift workers' travel, and access to social services such as budgeting advice and emergency food access.

An important aspect of community transport relevant to climate change is its ability to respond in disasters. Community transport supports community resilience, which becomes rapidly apparent in an emergency situation. The better supported community transport is, the better equipped the transport sector as a whole is to fulfil its role in meeting people's needs for access – including in the most urgent of times.

## A Story: Community Transport

In a small rural community on the west coast of Te Ika a Maui, early childhood education is not accessible to everyone. One of the reasons is that vehicle ownership is low. For households with just one car, it's often away early for a trip to work. That leaves no way for the remaining parent to get children to preschool if it's further than a walk away.

One local early childhood centre owner drives around to collect children to take them to the centre. If they didn't pick them up, the children wouldn't come, and the centre wouldn't be viable. That would mean every child in the area misses out on early childhood education – and starts their primary school education on the back foot.

Local councils can support access to education by asking people what they need. Having equity as an objective in Regional Land Transport Plans, and as an outcome for local transport investment gives the mandate to go and talk to people who run early childhood centres, for example. In the case of rural communities, as well as for many people who live in cities, a community van (equipped with car seats for children, and funding towards operating costs) could go a long way to improving the wellbeing of children and their families.



## New ways to measure progress

At a national level, tools can be developed for professionals at every level to measure progress towards A Just Now. Just like we have national databases of road crashes and maps of road infrastructure (who is crashing, and where), we could collect and share national-level statistics about access: who is accessing what, and where.

Access data would be useful in two main ways. First, it could strengthen policy by being used to build understanding at a national level of patterns in access, and non-access. We would get better understanding of the factors that contribute towards transport disadvantage or transport poverty.

Second, national level evidence could be used to justify investment in new or expanded funding activity classes. We have no current rationale for programmes that promote equity and A Just Now.

To provide this evidence we can map access to activities at both proximity-level (how far away are homes, from the places people need to get to?) and street-level (who can move around their streets, by what modes, and who cannot?). Asking people in national travel surveys about what they cannot access is important to create these maps. The most useful question is “Is there a trip in the last week/month that you have not made because of a transport problem?”

The question can be made specific to local, regional or national trips, to measure inequities at different spatial scales.

We should also build understanding of relational equity: how different groups of people move around, and what the gaps are in their needs for access. For example, we have very little data about the different travel experiences of Māori, women, disabled people, rainbow communities, children and older people. More information at street-level about who does and does not have choices about moving around their own community would help fill the gaps for A Just Now.

As well as showing what people need to access on maps, evidence about trips that people do not make provides the most direct feedback for policy to know whether it is successful. That is, we can monitor how many people are not accessing health, education, employment, recreation, and social services, and we can work out the role of transport in meeting their access needs.

# Regional response

Regional land transport and public transport planning is crucial to connect national-level vision to local action, through leadership and governance across local investment programmes. At a regional level, equity in transport looks like:

## Strong policy

Regional Land Transport Plans and Public Transport Plans include aspects of equity but it is not typically explicit. By building on the vision of Just Now, regionally relevant objectives can be set and monitored, just like we do for road safety and Vision Zero.

## Authentic engagement

Regional partnerships are already strong within transport, with different sectors working together. The regional council structure makes for effective working relationships across transport and environment, but could be strengthened with links to health, education and employment sectors. Working at a regional level with employers who attract employees, customers and other visitors from across the region (such as large hospitals, universities, large churches, sports and events centres) is important, to define who is not accessing these activities.

“By building on the vision of Just Now, regionally relevant objectives can be set and monitored, just like we do for road safety and Vision Zero.”

## New ways of working

Working across different sectors in response to strong policy suggests new ways of working, particularly in terms of regional transport connections. Combining targeted rates across transport and environment makes sense for regional councils, who have governance already in both of those areas. Using that funding to promote access to nature provides an important feedback loop, by connecting people to the whenua, awa and moana. Health of the natural world is central to A Just Now.

Again, the community transport sector is key to improving equity for people traveling within a region. At a regional level, council staff can get to know community transport providers and support them with networking forums, as well as coordinating funding from transport, health and other sectors. Regional governance of community transport makes sense because often these services often provide trips that are regional rather than local, to hospitals and tūrangawaewae, for example.

## New ways to measure progress

Measuring transport's role in trips made, and not made, is an important measure within regional focus on transport equity. New measures such as regional travel surveys, and end of trip travel surveys such as at hospitals and universities can help to identify where people are and are not going. The climate transition will require significant investment in bus and train services. Targeting those services to people who need them most can only happen if we ask people about where they need to go.

An important aspect of regional measurement for A Just Now is regular evaluation of new ways of working. For example, some regional councils provide public transport concessions for low income and/or disabled people. The level of concession, rules about eligibility and any remaining challenges for people accessing public transport can be brought to light with robust evaluation, including talking with customers and transport providers about their concession experiences.

## Local response

Local access is perhaps most important in a climate change context. That is because the most resource-efficient way for people to access what they need is for them to do so close to where they live.

Interventions include:

### Strong policy

Policies that centre on meeting all people's needs for local access are a climate and equity response, promoting non-car travel by making walking, cycling, and access to public transport as welcoming as possible.

At the local level, differences within and between communities can be used to prioritise transport investment in an access paradigm. Some people might value access to a local beach or park, as well as to a particular medical centre. Affordable food options vary widely in local contexts, as do education and employment opportunities. Strong policy is therefore crucial at local level so that national vision for inclusion translates into real action on the ground.

### Authentic engagement

Local authentic engagement is where A Just Now links most strongly to resilient communities in the face of climate change challenges. To reduce consumption and pollution that cause global warming and other challenges, and to adapt to changing weather, communities need to come together to define for themselves what sustainable local life means.

Working towards a vision of A Just Now relies on effective collaboration across different teams within City and District Councils, as well as broader to the community. Local councils can work with local community groups, advocacy groups including from the disability sector, and local schools, Te Whatu Ora, employment centres and business groups, to define what is important to them.

While it is important to have reference groups for equity in transport, such as disability advisory groups, best progress will be made when those people are part of a comprehensive, vision-led approach where engagement is authentic and return on investment is quantified.



## New ways of working

Local councils spend a lot of money on maintaining streets. Billions of dollars is invested every year in Aotearoa in fixing drains, footpaths, roads, crossings and other important infrastructure. Asset management priorities do not usually consider who benefits from higher quality infrastructure, and how investment in one community might enable a trip that would otherwise not be made. For example, more people who use wheelchairs live in poorer communities than in wealthier, and those people are less likely to have a car. So, fixing paths and road crossings in poorer communities would probably improve participation more, than an equivalent investment in a wealthier community. Again, measuring participation would help the transport sector to understand these connections better.

Local councils can also use audit streets to identify barriers to disabled people's travel. The Healthy Streets tool provides an overview of how transport and health can be promoted, while a more focused accessibility audit can identify where people can and cannot go, depending on their abilities. Councils can then use inclusive access audits of design plans to promote inclusive streets by-design.

“Fixing paths and road crossings in poorer communities would probably improve participation more, than an equivalent investment in a wealthier community.”

As well as audit tools to identify improvements, a focus on A Just Now lends itself to new approaches to asset management. Local councils use sophisticated tools already to identify asset deficiencies, and target investment to optimise the overall quality of infrastructure assets. But infrastructure exists to serve people, some of whom rely on its quality more than others. There may be a role for mapping disabled people's access to footpath networks as an input into asset management prioritisation. People who are blind or who use a wheelchair have different needs of footpaths and road crossings, for example, than most non-disabled people do. If we prioritise maintenance of walking infrastructure for people who most rely on quality walking infrastructure, we will be closer to A Just Now in transport investment.

Beyond transport infrastructure design and delivery, local community partnerships can be the basis for assigning budgets to community co-design of access. This approach could meet local needs very precisely, with community groups delivering what they know is needed for their people to thrive. Community transport is likely part of local response, in urban and rural areas, but community response is not limited to volunteer driver groups. Local responses could range from bicycle confidence education, to car share, to cargo bike delivery of locally grown food – the options are limited only by the local communities' ambition for what “living well” means for them.

## New ways to measure progress

Asking people where they are and are not going at a local level is important too. Mapping access at local level can be very specific, so that road crossings and other street improvements can be prioritised for access. Counting people using streets, and identifying the subset of people whose access is worst – such as low-income and disabled people – can identify where the gaps are. The more that this local ‘equity of participation’ data is collected, the better local councils will be able to use it to justify and prioritise infrastructure investment. Just as we use crash data to prioritise investment in road safety, access data can be used to prioritise investment in equity.



## Summary of recommendations

Equity in transport will be achieved when we know that everyone has access to what they need to thrive. Delivering A Just Now in transport is hugely important to improve equity of participation, and as a way to ensure a truly just transition to a lower consumption future. Recommendations are centred on a strong policy vision of A Just Now, with equity of participation made an explicit goal of investment. Following from the policy are several actions at national, regional and local level.

Recognising that equity needs to be centred in policy is essential if we are to see improvement. In rapidly changing financial and political contexts, promoting the needs of people with most to gain from investment, while working to promote low-carbon means of access, will result in the most tangible change. A Just Now is within our reach, if we challenge ourselves to want it.



## About



### Bridget Doran

Bridget Doran is recognised as a leading thinker in inclusiveness and human-centred planning in transport. Her PhD research was an investigation into attention during everyday driving, which applies to road safety as well as understanding how all people think and behave. Bridget has presented her research and practice internationally on topics of road safety, inclusive access, and the psychology of how people use transport. She has extensive trusted relationships throughout the New Zealand disability sector.

Bridget's recent work includes strategic policy and research projects, road safety and inclusive access audits of transport design, new and improved infrastructure design guidance, school road safety assessments, and organisational travel plans. She also regularly designs, disseminates and analyses surveys, and facilitates industry and community engagement workshops. Bridget is passionate about research, policy, and practice that results in safe, sustainable, and accessible transport choices for everyone.

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