

**Queensland Government
Commission of Inquiry**

New Generation Rolling Stock Train

**Submission by
Guide Dogs Queensland**

**Prepared by Dr John Vance OAM,
Board Member, Guide Dogs Queensland**

Introduction

This submission has been prepared with the knowledge and approval of the CEO and Board of Guide Dogs Queensland (GDQ).

The author, Dr John Vance OAM, practised as an academic paediatrician with a particular interest in disabilities in children. He retired due to decreasing vision in 1996 and became a client of GDQ.

Dr Vance has used a white cane for 15 years and a Guide Dog for the past seven years. He is a frequent train traveller from the Gold Coast to Brisbane city and beyond. He has been a Board Member of GDQ since 2008.

Dr Vance has also been a member of Queensland Rail Accessibility Reference Group (QRARG) since its inception in 2003 and has been a regular attendee at its meetings.

Submission focus

This submission focuses only on the position of the guard's cabin on the New Generation Rolling Stock Train and the effect that a change in this position has had on the disabled and vision impaired communities.

Background

One of the key challenges that people with low or no vision face in daily life is the confidence to travel safely and independently, when and to where they want.

As part of being trained to use a white cane or Guide Dog to help restore independence, people who are blind or vision impaired are shown how to safely access railway stations and trains. This training also includes finding the disability boarding area in the centre of a train station's platform. This area was strategically positioned so any person with a disability requiring assistance would have easy access to the personal help of the guard, to both ensure their safety and to find a suitable seat on the train, particularly when the train was crowded.

The feeling of safety provided by the guard for many passengers with a disability often extended beyond assistance in entering and exiting a train, but also to the passenger's personal safety on the train. It is widely acknowledged that people with disabilities like vision loss are often more vulnerable targets for thieves. The presence of the guard and even the guard's ability to recommend seating that is least likely to expose the passenger with a disability to potential theft or abuse, has made the use of the train network a far more desirable mode of transport.

For many years, the assistance of the train guard has been greatly valued by the disabled community. This system was superior to those who have experienced urban train travel in other capital cities and has ensured a growing confidence and regularity in the use of train travel in Queensland by people who are blind or vision impaired.

The issue

Members of QRARG were invited to attend and review “mock ups” of the New Generation Rolling Stock Trains on at least two occasions – 5 August 2014 and 31 March 2015. On both of these occasions, the design of the interior of the cabin and toileting arrangements were demonstrated.

At the end of the second session it was mentioned – almost as an unimportant aside – that the guard’s cabin would now be positioned at the end of the train.

The magnitude of this change for disabled passengers became immediately apparent, providing potentially serious personal and safety issues, especially for those with wheelchairs or with vision impairment.

The question raised was, “Who will assist the disabled to board if the guard is 50+ metres away?”

A letter was written to QRARG by Dr Vance on 1 April 2015 and he understands that a copy of this letter has been forwarded to this inquiry.

This new arrangement of carriages has quickly become a human rights and discrimination issue, as we have seen a perfectly adequate system involving human contact with the guard being replaced by impersonal contact, located 50+ metres away at the rear of the train.

The involvement of the QRARG in the discussion of this matter at the early design stage would have eliminated the problems now being faced.

The Government’s response

QRARG holds meetings every three months and the matter of the guard positioning in the New Generation Rolling Stock Trains has been discussed at nearly every meeting. These meetings have been attended by design engineers on a regular basis.

This experience for the QRARG members has been exhausting and unrewarding, as no changes have been made, regardless of the feedback. It has also been noted that there is no intended change to the disability boarding area in the centre of the platform. As a consequence, discussions therefore largely revolved around how to change the guard position.

At various times it was felt that:

- members of QRARG were not being acknowledged;
- their concerns were being ignored;
- their concerns were considered trivial and need not be addressed;
- it was too late and too hard to change the guard position, either economically or politically;
- while Cabinet did agree to many changes in the design of the train, it did not accept the proposed guard changes.

It was also quickly established that the suggested electronic booking system substituted for the changed guard position was discriminatory. The requirement for a person with a disability to phone ahead or use their iPad app to book assistance at a station failed to recognise that:

- it removed the freedom for people with a disability to use this public transport from wherever they chose, whenever they wished to travel;
- some people with a disability do not use or cannot use electronic devices;
- a greater proportion of people with a disability use public transport when compared to the general population as a whole.

Recommendations

1. **Repositioning the guard carriage:** The ultimate solution for this ongoing safety issue is to reposition the guard carriage back to the centre of the train so guards can once again enable people with a disability to safely enter and exit the train, as well as find them a suitable seat on the train. It is hard to believe that a roll-out of extra staff on 153 stations within the network is economically sustainable in the long-term when placing a guard centrally would alleviate many of these issues.
2. **Further training for staff:** While the current station assistance provided under the new system has been reasonably satisfactory so far, continuous training of staff will need to take place. There are issues which a competent guard intuitively recognises because he is travelling on the train – for example, finding a seat for a vision impaired person on a crowded train. This would not be noted from the platform.
3. **Greater consultation with the community:** It has been noted already that the involvement of QRARG in the discussion of this matter at the early design stage would have eliminated the problems now being faced. It is also important that this consultation amounts to more than just tokenism and that the consultation produces results that are adopted in the final design.

Conclusion

The lack of progress in resolving this issue over a number of years has been hugely disappointing to the vision impaired community.

There is an identified need in projects for early and effective community engagement and consultation to ensure issues are identified at a stage where feedback can be incorporated into the planning and design. There is also a need for a renewed commitment from the government that feedback will be taken seriously and be well considered in project planning.

Guide Dogs Queensland is grateful to have the opportunity to make this submission and is passionate about supporting its clients who continue to be disadvantaged and disenfranchised by this continuing problem.



Dr John Vance OAM