

SELECT COMMITTEE ON NSW TAXI INDUSTRY

Questions On Notice to the Disability Council of NSW

1. Your submission highlights several concerns relating to the Taxi Driver Incentive Scheme (pp 3-4). Do you feel that the Scheme has resulted in better and more reliable transport services for people with disability?

We do, although we cannot provide measurable data to support our belief that the driver incentive has resulted in a significant material improvement in the availability and response times of wheelchair accessible taxis.

In the course of our day to day business our staff members encounter people with disability and non-government organisation staff members with direct experience and / or knowledge of the wheelchair accessible taxi services available in NSW (mostly metropolitan services). The feedback we receive from service users and NGO representatives is that services have improved. It is clear that the measurable improvement (data held by the MoT and / or the Taxi Council) became more pronounced after the introduction of the driver incentive.

The incentive is not, however, the only driver of change / improvement.

- The Ministry of Transport has enacted a more rigorous enforcement regime following the deliberations of the Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Taskforce. This and other Government actions have contributed to improvements.
- Lime Taxis significantly increased the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles and may have stimulated competition in a previously moribund niche of the market. We make no comment here on this company or any other. We simply note that its business model resulted in a significant increase in the number of accessible vehicles. This supply-side enhancement undoubtedly gave greater confidence to customers' hopes that WAT would be more readily available at the point of need.
- The development of a broader range of vehicle types has given operator / drivers more choice. That may have lowered some resistance to the idea of WAT (when the vehicle type was limited to a large orange minibus or the early-model flash cab) attributable to perceptions of unfavourable judgements about such vehicles from the 'mainstream' passenger base. Having 'taken the plunge' with more user-friendly vehicles that are wheelchair accessible more drivers begin to take-up WAT work.

In short, we believe but cannot prove that the driver incentive has resulted in better services. The incentive is not, however, the only source of improvement. It would be a mistake to attribute all of the good outcomes of the last two years or so to that one factor.

2. Several submissions have noted that the value of the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme does not adequately cover the costs of taxi transport. Do you believe that a sufficient subsidy is provided by the scheme?

No.

We believe that a reasonable (probably strong) case can be made that the subsidy has not kept pace with rising costs and that there has been a reduction in its real terms value over the period of its operation. We further believe that the level at which the subsidy sits (50% of the metered fare) does not recognise that wheelchair accessible taxi journeys are often (perhaps usually) longer on average than the average length of taxi journeys generally. This is a consequence of the markedly different reasons people with disability may travel by taxi to those of the public in general whose members usually have another public transport option available to them.

For those reasons and in accordance with our own submission (relevant extract given below) we have suggested two enhancements;

- that the upper limit of the fare attracting a subsidy be increased to \$80; and
- the level of subsidy be increased to 75% of the applicable fare.

Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS)

We note that the NSW Scheme provides the most generous support of all TTSS operating in Australia. Its unlimited number of trips provides a real benefit to the scheme's users.

It is true, nevertheless, that wheelchair users dependent on WAT services still have higher transport costs that other members of the population do not face. A subsidised taxi fare is still more costly than other forms of public transport.

The upper limit of the fare that may be subsidised has remained at \$60 for 20 years. It has not kept pace with inflation. That means there has been a decline in the real value of the subsidy. We suggest that decline should be reversed and the upper fare limit should be increased over time to restore its real value.

As a first stage, it would be advantageous to increase the upper limit of the fare that may be subsidised to \$80. This would bring NSW up to the fare limit operating in South Australia. We note that the upper fare limit in other jurisdictions is \$50, \$52 or \$60.

According to Ministry of Transport / IPART figures, the average journey distance (and cost) of a WAT carrying a wheelchair using passenger is greater than that for non-wheelchair users. We believe this is because

WAT passengers generally use taxis for different purposes than the general population of taxi users (there is a lower proportion of comparatively short business and / or recreational trips and a higher proportion of longer journeys to medical, educational or other disability-related locations spread more widely across communities).

For this reason we suggest that the subsidy level be raised from 50% to 75%, in line with subsidy levels in the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Western Australia. We note that the subsidy level in Tasmania is 60% and 50% in other jurisdictions.

(Disability Council original submission)

3. Several submission authors have indicated that the existing paper-based voucher system for the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme is cumbersome for many people with disabilities. Do you think that the introduction of a card-based system would be a positive initiative?

We strongly support and highly recommend the introduction of a smart-card system for the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme with a direct interface / connection to the meters used in taxis. We believe that the time-limited trial in Wagga Wagga of a card-based system was both successful and popular.

We foresee the following benefits to a card-based scheme:

- easier use by customers;
- reduction in the potential for fraud by either drivers or customers acting independently or in consort;
- eradication of a costly, administratively cumbersome and time-consuming paper systems;
- more accurate and verifiable electronic transaction record-keeping; and
- maximisation of government funded support to passenger travel rather than administration and processing of claims.

Dougie Herd
Executive Officer
Disability Council of NSW

Tuesday, 30th March 2010