

CORRECTED

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

INQUIRY INTO DISABILITY SERVICES

At Sydney on Monday, 24 September 2001

The Committee met at 11 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. Jan Burnswoods (Chair)

The Hon. Dr A. Chesterfield-Evans

The Hon. Amanda Fazio

The Hon. D. F. Moppett

The Hon. I. W. West

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LYNNE READY, Manager, Office of Community Housing, Department of Housing, 2-10 Wentworth Street, Parramatta, and

PAUL VEVERS, Acting Executive Director of Policy and Strategy, Department of Housing, 1 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst 2021, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: You have had a summons from me?

Ms READY: Yes.

CHAIR: And obviously you are conversant with the terms of reference and so on?

Ms READY: Yes, I am.

CHAIR: And there is no submission?

Ms READY: No.

CHAIR: And you have also received a summons?

Mr VEVERS: I have received a summons and I am conversant with the terms of reference that you supplied.

CHAIR: We have confirmed that you got the questions that we drafted. Would either or both of you like to start off by making any kind of statement to us or shall we go straight through the questions?

Mr VEVERS: I think we are happy to go through your questions if that is acceptable.

CHAIR: I might just draw attention to the note that we put at the top of our questions. We often find ourselves talking about people with disability, but we are aware that perhaps in regard to housing, and also transport that we are hearing from later today, that there are very real differences in the needs and modifications or whatever that may be made depending on the nature of the disability. So you may need at different times to make those differences clear and you may also need to tease out a question from members of the Committee. What we have tended to do is talk more generally. We have used the phrase "people with disability", but we are conscious that we might often need to distinguish between different groups.

The first question is I guess as general as it could be. Could you briefly outline the department's role in the provision of accommodation for people with disability?

Mr VEVERS: Our general role I guess in relation to the whole population of New South Wales is to supply and secure the supply of decent and affordable housing for people on low income. So we do have a particular focus on people with disabilities with low incomes. We do have some initiatives in place, but our main focus is people with low incomes.

We have tried to achieve that objective in a number of ways. Firstly, the way I think which is most relevant to the terms of reference of this Committee is that we give priority housing, as we call it, to people who cannot meet their housing needs in the private market, and obviously many people, particularly people with a physical disability and people with an intellectual disability will not be able to meet their needs in the private market. So we give them what we call priority housing, and I can perhaps say a little bit more about what is involved there.

Secondly, for people whose main need is for low cost affordable accommodation that could actually meet their needs in the private market, we provide them, and a range of other people on our general wait turn list, with low cost housing, and that could include people whose disabilities do not have a housing component as such, not an immediate housing component. There might be somebody, for example, with a mild hearing impairment where suitable adaptation to privately rented accommodation might actually meet their needs, but their main need in that situation is affordability. And, thirdly, we assist people on low incomes into the private sector, usually by way of some financial assistance. But the main help that we give for people with disabilities is priority housing. Would it help for me to give some idea of scale of what -

CHAIR: Yes, I think it would, because later on our questions are more focused on waiting times and

housing stock.

Mr VEVERS: Priority housing applies to around about 5,000 households a year. Both those with disabilities and without disabilities would get priority housing. So that means that they do not wait in the wait queue, they go straight to the top of the list. People with disabilities go right to the top of the list. Elderly people come behind; elderly people without a disability would then come second behind. So people with disabilities are our number one priority, and around about 45 percent of the total of people who are given priority housing are people with disability. Around about 2,100 households per year are given priority housing.

I should perhaps put this in a broader context. Social housing accounts for around about six percent of the total housing stock in New South Wales, so we are relatively small compared to the private sector, which provides about 94 percent, but within what we provide people with disabilities are a significant group and a high proportion of that take priority.

CHAIR: And that 5,000 is in effect cumulative?

Mr VEVERS: No, that is the last financial year, the 5,000 people, so it is an annual figure.

CHAIR: But what I mean is once someone is placed, they then are counted as living in social housing?

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

CHAIR: But a new 5,000 is moving through?

Mr VEVERS: That is correct.

CHAIR: So what would be roughly the percentage of people with disability in social housing?

Mr VEVERS: In our total stock, I have not actually got the precise figure, so I am doing this from memory, but I believe it to be around a quarter. It would include elderly people and those who are not elderly with a disability. If I might just actually check that figure when I go back to the office, but I believe it to be around a quarter.

CHAIR: When you say "elderly", you are talking about people who essentially acquired a disability through the ageing process?

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

CHAIR: And that would be usually a disability of mobility?

Mr VEVERS: It would very often be a disability of mobility and very often our response would be to seek to adapt or modify the home that they are currently living in rather than seeking new accommodation.

CHAIR: We will get onto some of those questions later.

The Hon. IAN WEST: I wanted to clarify, firstly, the definition of "low income" and clarify further what the Chair was asking. I did not understand whether you meant 5,000 per year were coming in or at any one time there are 5,000 in total in the system.

Mr VEVERS: To take your latter point first, there are 5,000 priority households, that includes people with a disability and people not. 45 percent of those are people with a disability, so, if I narrow it down, 2,100 people with a disability per year are given priority coming into the system. They are what we call priority cases.

In terms of income limits, there are income limits to be eligible for social housing that vary according to the composition of the household. The top income limit for large households - anybody earning over \$36,000 a year would not be eligible for social housing. Then it goes down in tiers according to the size of household.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: To be absolutely clear, you have accorded priority to 2,100 people. Are they completed in terms of delivering accommodation?

Mr VEVERS: Yes, that is the figure that I am giving. These are people who are delivered accommodation, yes.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Per year?

Mr VEVERS: Per year.

The Hon. IAN WEST: But the total in the system, what is in the system?

Mr VEVERS: As I said before, I am doing this from memory rather than having brought this figure, but I believe it to be about 25 percent of our total tenants that have some form of disability. We have about 125,000 tenants in place.

The Hon. IAN WEST: So, at any one time, 25 percent of 125,000?

Mr VEVERS: Yes, so it is around 30,000-plus households which have somebody with some form of disability.

CHAIR: Lyn, in answering these sorts of questions, should we get you to tell us about the same sorts of statistics in relation to community housing or is it easier to deal with the community housing sector all in one go?

Ms READY: Probably all in one go, although I can add to that. We actually do an annual survey of housing providers as part of our Commonwealth-State housing agreement data-gathering for the Federal Government and we have only recently analysed our most recent survey and that actually showed us that 13 percent of tenants in community housing have a disability, and that excludes aged housing, so that figure probably is a more accurate reflection of the number of people that do have a disability that are in housing. Community housing operates on a similar system for intake, it is usually a point system or a priority system, so in fact that probably gives a cleaner figure without people ageing.

CHAIR: Our second question relates to how the department works with other agencies, and particularly DADHC, or I guess in the past ADD or DOCS, and related to that is the question of how people get on to your priority housing list; how they come to you; how responsive you are to those departments and vice versa?

Mr VEVERS: In general terms, we frequently accept referrals that are supported by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care. We actually do not track that as a separate number. We receive referrals from a wide number of agencies. Obviously what we then do is look at the circumstances of the individual client, but it would be fairly common for clients who are supported by DADHC to turn to social housing. The same would be true for the Centre for Mental Health and the same would be true for the Department of Community Services.

Across both public and community housing we have a number of initiatives in place, specifically with DADHC, to seek to improve the options for people with disabilities, and these are the subject of some questions later on the list but just briefly to mention what they are, there is something we are calling an assisted tenancies project which is for people who, on our spectrum, are probably reasonably high up the needs level, probably sort of medium needs from DADHC's point of view, but people who in the past might not have been considered eligible for social housing we think, with the right sort of support, could manage a tenancy in social housing, so we have a project there.

We also have identified a gap that I think is well-known to some of the organisations that work with homeless people in that the decline of the boarding house sector has left a gap for people perhaps with lower needs who are at risk of homelessness very often. Some of them would be living long-term in supported accommodation which is not, in our view, an appropriate accommodation for them. That is mainly crisis accommodation. On the other hand, the boarding house sector has a poor reputation in some areas and so what we are looking at is trying to create, together with that department, a new model that provides some of the features of boarding house accommodation but hopefully without some of the down-sides of that sector.

We are trying to promote, for those people who have some resources of their own, some more innovative responses from the private sector which we are proposing to do through an industry development forum, and again that is a joint product with the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, so we have a number of joint initiatives looking at the system, if you like.

CHAIR: Some of those are taken up in more specific terms in our later questions. Can I clarify something before moving on: You mentioned mental health in answering that question. To what extent do we need to draw very precise distinctions in the statistics you are giving? Are you excluding people with mental

illness when you talk of people with disability or when you are talking about people who are displaced from boarding houses, because we keep trying to draw those distinctions but we are also conscious that there are people with what is called a dual diagnosis.

Mr VEVERS: Yes, and that indeed is the distinction that we also try to make. If there is someone, I guess, at the very severe end of mental illness, it is a grey area as to whether one counts that as a disability or not. In the statistics that I was giving you earlier, those are people mainly with a physical or intellectual disability. Our definition of disability is fairly broad. I am happy to read it out to you, if that is helpful.

CHAIR: It might be worth putting it on the record.

Mr VEVERS: The definition to be eligible for priority assistance is that a person must be eligible for public housing, so that is income eligibility. They must be in urgent need of housing, unable to resolve that need themselves and unable to have their housing need met in the private rental market. That will apply to people with and without a disability. After satisfying those criteria, we will give priority to disabled clients, on this definition, that a person has a physical disability and their current accommodation does not cater for this, for example, a lack of wheelchair ramps, they need lower benches or there are too many stairs, or they cannot access support services which are required for them to live independently in their current location and cannot find suitable alternative accommodation, or they have a psychiatric, developmental or intellectual disability which makes it hard for them to rent in the private market. There will, for example, be some people who present in such a way that a real estate agent might feel that they present too much of a risk for them to take on as a tenant and we would give that person priority for social housing.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Would those people be counted in the 2,100 figure that you mentioned earlier?

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: In the event of DADHC or someone like that deciding they have a project to relocate people out of the particular circumstance they are in, an institution or perhaps smaller than a large institution but nevertheless seen as unsatisfactory, would they then overlay them on top of your priorities or negotiate with you or try to deal with them entirely separately in their own bailiwick?

Mr VEVERS: I think it would depend. The conversation that we have been having with DADHC is that they identify some people who are on the lower end of their spectrum of needs who they feel could actually live in the community, so not in a group home or residential home, and people in that situation would usually be on our high priority end and so would usually qualify for priority housing, so we would make an assessment of those people jointly with DADHC and, providing that we were convinced that they could actually manage a tenancy so that they could pay the rent, they could maintain the sort of basics of keeping the house in order, et cetera - usually that would be with support - then we would accept them as a priority housing case.

CHAIR: That support would be coming through the DADHC area?

Mr VEVERS: Very much, yes.

CHAIR: Not through the housing area.

Mr VEVERS: We absolutely do not see ourselves as responsible for providing support. The dollars that we are given by both Commonwealth and State Government are for the provision of low cost housing. Nor do we consider ourselves to be expert in the provision of support either. So our focus very much is on the accommodation side.

CHAIR: But if a need arises for support or something appears to be going wrong, presumably the Department of Housing people need to make the necessary contacts with the DADHC people to bring in support or get the problem addressed?

Mr VEVERS: Yes, and I think to some degree it is true to say that with the process of de-institutionalisation which has been going on within housing we are getting some clients referred with a higher level of need than we have typically been used to and that is really what has triggered us wanting to set up this assisted tenancies pilot, so that we and the client can be confident that support will be provided for the duration of the client's need because otherwise we would obviously all be concerned that those tenancies would fail and that would be inappropriate for the client, so security of support is very important to us.

The Hon. IAN WEST: That involves a follow-up need and changing needs?

Mr VEVERS: Yes. It may be basic physical support with cleaning a house, et cetera. This does not just apply to DADHC, it applies to the Centre for Mental Health where we are taking on clients with more extreme or more serious mental illnesses. We would be saying to the Centre for Mental Health that if there are nuisance and annoyance complaints, if you like, which tend to come through from neighbours to us, the sort of response that we make is a tenancy management response. Often that is going to be inappropriate for someone with mental health problems where you would certainly try reconciliation or some sort of conciliation between the various parties, but sometimes that will not actually work. Sometimes you do need a more expert mental health involvement and so we would want to make sure that that is actually going to be provided.

CHAIR: I guess that also raises the question of when you are actually placing the 2,100 people, for instance, that you talked about, to what extent is it fairly random in terms of houses or units or geographical area, or to what extent is the Government making a decision as to suitable risk? I mean obviously there are physical constraints like ramps and things like that, but what process does the Government go through as to where someone is placed?

Mr VEVERS: As you say, around about half of those 2,100 people will need ground floor premises, so that actually is a major issue. They also select themselves the location in which they want to live, so we work within a broad allocation zone. Within that it is true to say that we are currently looking at what we call our local allocation strategies. At the moment people go according strictly to priority, so that there is not discretion to front-line staff about who they offer properties to, providing a property is appropriate obviously, physically appropriate for a client's needs - that, of course, we would want to look at - but we actually require that our staff will give sort of first cab-off-the-rank, so to speak, to the person at the top of the waiting list. Providing it is an appropriate offer of accommodation, they then are allowed two offers of accommodation and they have to accept the second if they reject the first. They can appeal that if they think an offer is not an appropriate offer, it is not a fair offer, they can actually appeal that and we have a two-tier appeals mechanism. That is done for reasons of probity to make sure that there is no scope for our front-line staff to be able to offer preferential treatment to any individual client.

We do recognise that there are occasions, having implemented that strategy, where you can get an inappropriate mix of people that subsequently can cause some problems, particularly of nuisance and annoyance, and I think probably more particularly that actually arises where people have mental health problems, so we are now in the process of revisiting what we call local allocation strategies where we form an approval within the department, certain complexes might be determined complexes for elderly people, for example, where we would not then place younger people with a mental health problem, but that is something that is work in progress, as we speak.

The Hon. IAN WEST: So not only would you be looking at certain configurations of age and capabilities, you would also be looking at configuring the waiting list in such a way that people may not necessarily be at the top of the list but be able to enter into a specific or a particular area, a particular type of accommodation?

Mr VEVERS: Yes, although with the turnover that we have, people on the priority list do not wait very long and we turn over 15,000 properties a year across the State. That depends on the mix of people for priority housing. There are lots of people who are not priority as well, but people who are priority would get first call on all of those 15,000 properties. Yes, it would be the case that we could have someone at the top of the list and the first available property that comes up - for example, if this person is a young person with mental health problems and this property is in a complex where there are twelve elderly people, experience will tell us that that mix might not work very well.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Just a follow-up question to that. On the waiting list in terms of the criteria of geography and location, what is the success rate or are you able to give us an indication as to how many people find the second offer unacceptable and how many people go through an appeal process?

Mr VEVERS: I certainly can give you that figure but not off the top of my head. I would need to submit that.

CHAIR: That would be good. Thank you for that.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: What do you do with people who are on the priority list who have

unrealistic expectations of where they would like to be housed in terms of the lack of suitable accommodation? Would you ever acquire a property to meet their needs?

Mr VEVERS: Yes. I do not think that that would happen necessarily because of unrealistic expectations. We would be very clear to people that if we have existing available properties, they get two offers and they would be expected to take one of those two offers. It does happen, in some country towns for example, where somebody has particular needs to live in that town, that is usually because they have got some relatives living there, but we may either have no rental property or may have no property at all ourselves in that town, and we would seek to do one of two things for reasons of speed. We would seek to lease a property if we can. We have got a large leasing program. We lease over 1,000 properties a year, not just for people with disabilities. It would then be dependent on the landlord of that property allowing us to make modifications. Sometimes that happens and sometimes it does not. We have to make the modifications and restore the property to its original condition at the end of the lease. Obviously, that is the quickest solution that we can provide in those situations. If it is appropriate to purchase a property there, then we would also seek to do that. We clearly would have a much longer timeframe if we are doing that.

CHAIR: But in Sydney, there would be an expectation that someone in Sydney may not get the area that they would prefer to live in because they can live somewhere close enough?

Mr VEVERS: They would get what we call an allocation zone. They have to nominate an allocation zone, and those vary in size within Sydney. An allocation zone might have the area of three or four local government areas for example, so it needs to be large. That would be the limit of locational choice if you like.

Ms READY: Can I make an opening statement? Firstly, Community Housing operates somewhat differently to public housing in some areas, and while each of the housing associations that we fund has a waiting list process, the office also funds projects for specific groups. For example, we may have a group of people who apply, say Royal Ryde Rehab for example off the top of my head, and they might actually apply for us to provide funding for them to purchase or lease properties in a certain area where they will actually provide the support as well to the people. In fact, we do have some capacity to provide localities for specific projects through that program. That is the community housing funding program.

CHAIR: Would those properties then be managed by the local community housing association or would they be managed more directly by your office?

Ms READY: No, our office does not manage any properties at the moment. We actually do manage some crisis accommodation property. They would be managed by community housing providers and they would have partnership agreements with support providers for the support within those houses, and in some places, for example, Royal Ryde Rehab actually has had six properties for some years that they have managed themselves. They have got to the stage simply where they see benefits in having a separate housing manager to actually manage the properties on their behalf, and they are currently entering into a partnership with Canterbury Bankstown Housing Association for property management.

We have a mixture of arrangements, but more and more as we go along, the new projects that are funded are actually funded through housing associations in partnership with support organisations.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: You have raised this issue of stock of properties in country areas. I know how dangerous simplistic solutions are, but there is always a perspective out there in a lot of the country towns that they have almost spare capacity, that the real estate market is relatively slack, even in some parts of quite large regional centres, and that the capital investment required to actually find suitable, nice homes is therefore much less, and it would be seen as a great injection into the economy of that town. Of course, against that is the fact that the people who are applying to you do not necessarily live in that town and do not necessarily want to go and live there.

Is that sort of equation taken into your consideration at all, the fact that when you get out from the metropolitan area in particular, and I guess certain hotspots in the metropolitan area, suddenly the capital cost of housing is so much lower and that would provide the opportunity for dollars to go a lot further if demand could be linked to that alternate supply?

Mr VEVERS: Our plan tends to be linked to demand rather than linked to those other factors. So we would be seeking to put major investments where we have got major demand, but that is subject to individual cases requiring priority needs but again that is actually dictated by demand of individual clients rather than requirements of services. So to answer your question, no, we do not take that into account.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: I can understand that.

CHAIR: You were wanting to send everyone to Dubbo.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: In Broken Hill, the place has really got a doubtful future, you could buy any sort of reasonable house for \$80,000 and they desperately need the people, but I know we are not, as Australians, in the business of trucking people out to wherever.

Mr VEVERS: The other issue that we try to take into account, we do see ourselves as being a good social landlord, but bearing that in mind, we also think that sustainable communities are important, or supporting sustainable communities is an important part of our role, and a large proportion of our tenants are unemployed. Seeking to lift employment levels is an important issue for us and we have to be careful that we do not encourage them to go to areas of low employment where their benefits may be cut as a result of them moving out of areas of high employment and that we make those communities unsustainable by actually moving people.

CHAIR: I am not sure which question to go to next. I was going to go to number five, because you have mentioned assisted tenancies a couple of times, but without spelling out exactly how the scheme will operate and the proposed criteria. We have covered a little bit of three and four about waiting lists and the need to adapt houses and so on. What do you think? Which question should we go to next? I think we have covered a little bit of every one of our questions in one way or another. While we are on these questions, perhaps we should just tidy up the questions about the proportion of current housing stock that is suitable to meet the adapted needs and is new stock being built, because some of that is related to Doug's question on supply and demand.

Mr VEVERS: We basically classify the adaptations that we make to stock into some minor adaptations and those which are of a much more serious nature. Adaptations that are of a serious nature, such as properties in our existing stock which have been adapted, a bathroom, a ramp or a kitchen has been adapted, 9.5 percent of our existing stock has been modified in that way. That is around about 10,900 properties. In addition to that, we have got another 32,000 properties which have more minor adaptations, such as a grab rail or something in the bathroom, so it is safer getting out of the bath, but there are more like 10,000 properties which have had serious adaptations.

So how does that 9.5 percent relate to demand for this type of property? In the last year 145 people who we gave priority to on grounds of disability needed premises which had been adapted for wheelchairs and a further 338 needed other modifications. In total that is around about 10 percent of the number of people who came to us for priority housing. So there is a broad balance. I do not say it matches precisely to every individual, indeed it does not, but in terms of do we think our stock is way out of line with the demand, the answer is no, we do not. We think it broadly already matches demand.

However, standards go up as time goes on and some of our properties are getting older. Of our new stock, a disproportionately high amount of that stock is adapted or adaptable for people with a disability. So 45 percent of our new stock meets and satisfies the standards, and usually we would then carry out some further modification to that property if we need to for an individual client. State-wide we think that the supply and demand are broadly reasonably matched.

If you then look at the wait times -

CHAIR: Just to finish off on that one, presumably the program of building new stock in that adaptable fashion has been in existence for a little while?

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

CHAIR: Does that figure have to be added on top of the 9.5 percent figure you gave us? Was the 9.5 percent older properties that have been modified and to that we add the new buildings which have been built in more recent years or does the 9.5 percent cover both?

Mr VEVERS: The 9.5 percent covers properties up to the end of June this year, so anything that was adapted in the previous year would be added in, to which we must then add the properties that we are adding this year, around about another 400 will be added to that number and so on each year.

The Hon. IAN WEST: New stock, 400?

Mr VEVERS: About 400. Actually 391 will be commenced this financial year.

CHAIR: Would much of that new stock be what is colloquially called pensioner units? They are being built that way because of the overlap between aged people and people who may have an inherent disability?

Mr VEVERS: Yes, that is correct, it is built to that standard. A lot of it would be pensioner units which we would quite often tend to use interchangeably for younger people with a disability.

CHAIR: And then waiting lists. You have told us something about the priority.

Mr VEVERS: Yes, the mean waiting time across the State for people with a disability who are a priority is two months. That is the mean waiting time to get into a property. Do we think that is reasonable? Broadly, yes, because in many cases we will actually have to carry out some further modifications to a property before letting it to someone. In individual cases it certainly can be longer than that and in a sense the more precise a person's requirement is for a particular location then it is sometimes the case that the waiting time goes up above that.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Can you be a bit more specific than that? You said the mean average waiting time for priority cases is two months.

Mr VEVERS: Yes, that is correct.

The Hon. IAN WEST: What is the average waiting time for all?

Mr VEVERS: For all people who are a priority?

The Hon. IAN WEST: When you say "all people who are a priority", what is the definition of "priority"? Does that mean all the people we are talking about or 10 percent of the people we are talking about?

Mr VEVERS: No, I am saying that the mean waiting time for the 2,100 people with disabilities that we house is two months. That is the average, if you like.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Priority means 2,100.

Mr VEVERS: People with disabilities, yes.

CHAIR: Because people with disability are the number one category on the priority list.

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

CHAIR: Are you asking whether there are other people with disability who have not made it to that priority category?

The Hon. IAN WEST: I suppose so.

Mr VEVERS: Yes, there are, but those people, in our assessment, are not in urgent need or their need can actually be met within the private sector and their principal need in those situations is for affordable accommodation, in which case they would be on the general wait term for public housing or community housing.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: And what is the average wait list for non-priority?

Mr VEVERS: It would be impossible for me to answer that. We have several hundred wait lists across the State for the general wait term because those apply by area, they then apply by household size and in some cases by household type, so everybody gets put on to a waiting list and I simply could not even begin to give you a figure for that because it would vary enormously. It is certainly true, as a general rule, that you wait a lot less if you are outside of high demand areas like Sydney, Wollongong and the central coast, but it varies enormously. If you were in Wagga Wagga, for example, you would not be waiting very long at all.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: I guess we are just trying to get a hold on what it is like to be on the priority list and then, as a subset of that, what it is like to be on the top of the priority list.

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: You have indicated that it is satisfactory, two months, given that some get in almost immediately and some have modifications, but it was just trying to get some sort of yardstick as to how they compare with normal access to public housing generally.

Mr VEVERS: I could certainly say that if you were waiting for high demand areas in Sydney on the normal wait term list you would be waiting a number of years before you got housed.

CHAIR: The last bit of the question about waiting lists, about the proportion of people who require adaptable or accessible housing, you have already answered, I guess, in terms of your statement that there is a rough balance between the availability and the demand.

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

CHAIR: It would vary from area to area.

Mr VEVERS: Yes.

CHAIR: I suppose implicit in that question is, given the priority list, presumably someone with a disability that does require housing to be adapted, the priority means that those funds will be available to carry it out. Is that the case?

Mr VEVERS: We have a program of modifications. I am certainly not aware of lack of money being an issue in terms of adapting those properties and once you have a property already adaptable, as they call it, it is actually not very expensive, in most cases, to go the next step and put whatever sort of tailored bits need to be put in place for someone. I mean to give you a rough figure, we adapt around 450 existing properties, so that is not new properties, a year and that costs us around \$4 million a year to do. I am certainly not aware of any major problem in that area.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: Are we talking about the same thing? We had some evidence while we were in the country about a person with an acquired disability who wanted to live in their own home - there was no question of providing a home, it was just the home modification scheme - and they talked about going through the various channels, one of which was the Department of Housing, and I think they were dissatisfied because they were given priority, but when it came to the crunch of getting the work done the allocation for the year was over and it was proposed that they should wait another six or nine months, or something like that, which they found unacceptable. Are we talking about the same thing when you say that you feel it is moderately well-catered for?

Mr VEVERS: We certainly try and spend all that money, there is no doubt about that. There will be circumstances in certain locations where we might get towards the end of the financial year and we may ask someone to wait until the next financial year, but if you are asking do I think that is a widespread problem, I do not have any information to suggest that it is.

Ms READY: Could I clarify that? The Department of Housing does not modify people's private homes. It was some years ago a DOH program, but probably four or five years ago it actually moved across to ageing and disability or DADHC or whatever we call it now, so in fact funding for modification of people's private homes comes from that source, not from the Department of Housing.

Mr VEVERS: Sorry, I had assumed you were talking about a public housing tenant in that situation.

Ms READY: It could be, if it was an old example, say it was four or five years ago, that that person may have had to have some dealings with DOH because we actually did look after that program for a while, but it has not been for some years now.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: I just understood that in some way Housing was involved, maybe as a contractor, as a person who was able to do it for DADHC.

CHAIR: I remember that. They fell into the period between the Department of Housing responsibility I think--

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: They certainly dealt with the Department of Housing in Orange.

CHAIR: And then there was another issue of the funds for that year being exhausted, but the difference was that it was their private property and an acquired brain injury, which meant that the house, if they were going to go on living in the house, had to be substantially adapted.

Mr VEVERS: The budget issues in that case certainly would not be our budget issues.

CHAIR: Do you want to give us some detail about the assisted tenancies program? You have said a little bit about it, but we wanted to know how it is going to operate and, I guess, the extent to which it is a pilot or an ongoing program and the criteria for entry and so on.

Mr VEVERS: It is a pilot program. It is a small pilot, we are talking about 40 tenancies, in our jargon, or 40 households. This has arisen as a result of discussions with the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and the Centre for Mental Health, both saying that they do have clients who, in their assessment, could manage living genuinely in the community in their own independent accommodation, probably would never get a look-in in the private sector because the private sector would consider them to be too high risk and so have approached us, and we are saying that, providing that proper support is provided, we will accept a joint assessment of these applicants and offer them tenancies.

What is different about this is that we are saying, from our perspective, that we are looking for a written agreement about the nature of support to be provided. We want to have an input into the nature of support that we think needs to be provided to make a tenancy sustainable and we want a written agreement all ways around, between ourselves, the tenant obviously needs to agree to accept the support and the agency, be it DADHC or the Centre for Mental Health, needs to assure us that that support will be provided, so at the outset we have what hopefully would be a successful tenancy.

That requires some specialist input from us. We have to make sure that we ourselves can sustain that specialist input and that is why we are doing this on a trial basis. These are largely people who, I guess even a few years ago, probably would not have necessarily been considered eligible for independent tenancies in social housing. That is being run with community housing, public housing and those other agencies, so we are just at the point now of having discussions with the organisations that DADHC will contract with to provide the support and I am hoping that in the next couple of months at least we will start to identify individual clients to go into the scheme.

CHAIR: Apart from the mental health group, will they be people primarily with an intellectual disability?

Mr VEVERS: Primarily, yes, almost exclusively. I mean for many years, as you would know, a physical disability has not necessarily been an issue in relation to whether someone can manage a tenancy or not, it probably more is in the case of an intellectual disability.

CHAIR: When you talk about the written agreements and so on, I guess in a lot of the discussion we have had with witnesses in the duration of this inquiry words like certainty and guarantee have come up and often what families are seeking is, in effect, a lifetime guarantee. How are you coping with that sort of issue in relation to the agreement for ongoing support as well as ongoing housing?

Mr VEVERS: Well, I would say in a sense we have not crossed that bridge yet because we have not got individual clients yet in this program, but certainly from our perspective support provided for the duration of the individual's need is likely to be essential to the success of the tenancy. I do not know what DADHC's ability is to sign-off on that longer term framework, but certainly that is what we would be looking for in the case of those individual clients.

CHAIR: So you would essentially be looking for a guarantee that, as long as you have that client, that support would be, in effect, guaranteed?

Mr VEVERS: I think more like for as long as there was a need for it. I think it probably would be the case that a number of clients would need fairly intense support to start with and then may well be able to demonstrate that they can exist with less support and we then work on the basis, well, we are regularly in contact with all of our tenants anyway, we visit them all once a year and our clients with high needs we visit rather more frequently, so we might then work on the basis that we can make a referral back to DADHC, so if there is no need to provide regular support, there is no need to do so, but some arrangement in which we could have confidence that they would return if there were problems we would feel was important.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Would you be familiar with any actuarial assessments of the projected demand and accumulated needs into the year, say, 2010 or 2020?

Mr VEVERS: I am afraid the simple answer to that is no. The provision of support is something that we very much look to other agencies to provide. We would make our own kind of actuarial assessments, if you like, in relation to the maintenance of the property, et cetera, but not in relation to the support.

CHAIR: The assisted tenancies program is new in the sense that you are expecting to take in new clients, clients you would not in the past have had, or is it also new in the sense that clients that you may have already had, perhaps lacking in support, that this program might lead to them getting the kind of support that they need?

Mr VEVERS: We would certainly look into that, in the medium term certainly. We would be first saying that the assessments that we carry out are very housing oriented assessments. Our front line staff do that. It does happen sometimes that we miss something that does assist people with disability because we do not think to ask about that and we are probably not well tuned to some of those things. So when that happens, that we get some people who are in public housing who have a higher level of need than we had anticipated, then in time we move to include support for them, and so we would see this particular scheme as applying to clients who have actually got complex needs that are already in the system.

CHAIR: I guess related but different I think is the single room occupancy, which is another pilot.

Mr VEVERS: Yes, it is indeed. This is again a part of community housing, community housing organisations. It has actually been announced by the Minister, a \$1.1 million pilot. It was really born out of our experience, I guess, during the Olympics when we ran a centralised system for working with homeless people to secure continuity of service to homeless people, and we became aware that there are a number of people who spend a long time in crisis accommodation or sometimes who are actually sleeping rough, because in some cases these people virtually have had no tenancy in the past. They simply have not managed some of the basics, like cooking, cleaning, ensuring a supply of hot water and so on, and a number of the organisations, the non-Government charitable organisations, said to us that they felt there was a role for boarding house style accommodation for people who are in this community who are probably on the lower level end of need. It is disappearing, that sort of accommodation.

We think there is a place for a well run, single room occupancy type of accommodation and we are proposing for example two small pilots, one in Sydney and one in Newcastle, and we will seek to deliver it for those who have disability and need home care support and we will provide the accommodation.

CHAIR: So, Lynne, this is in the community housing area, is it?

Ms READY: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you want to tell us any more about it?

Ms READY: I will just give a summary of that, but also just to mention that community housing and DADHC have actually been working on that quality boarding house relocation project together, which is boarding houses that have closed down through an inspection program or volunteer closure by the owners. DADHC and staff from the Office of Community Housing work together on the relocation of those clients. We actually purchase the property with DADHC. That project has been going for about two years now between the Office of Community Housing and DADHC.

As far as the single room occupancy project, we actually already have some small model projects operating in community housing. One or two actually have larger group type houses where they manage that and provide some support for people. So this is our attempt to actually formalise some arrangements for the projects with the community housing associations.

You will find that community housing generally has operated - I think public housing, with the waiting list and with the stock that it has, actually have to have a much more regular framework in which it offers housing, et cetera. Community housing has done some of the more innovative partnership type models. Paul's assisted tenancy model that he was talking about is public housing taking on some of the things that community housing have been doing for quite a while. Each yearly allocation that we get for new funding, 15 percent of that funding goes towards what we call supported projects, so they are projects that actually have to have a partnership in place before the Department of Housing provides some support for that, and we are getting an

increasing number of applications under that funding for those sort of projects. We are actually funding quite a range of projects already, of which around about 10 percent are disability specific. So a lot of the projects, as Paul was saying, they are tagged as long-term support housing for women, but a number of those women would have disability components in their need for support.

Roughly - I am using figures here not very well - let me say 10 percent of our supported housing projects are disability specific. There are arrangements between housing associations and disability support organisations. Of our general supported housing arrangements, 45 percent cater for people with disabilities. So in fact you will find this goes across what are labelled women's projects or young people's projects in place. Quite a percentage of those people have a disability in the projects.

CHAIR: If there is some written material that gives some examples and some statistics perhaps, it might be helpful if the Committee could get those from you later, because that would enable us, I guess, to get to the specifics. When you say women's projects, we do not know exactly what that means in relation to our terms of reference.

Ms READY: Yes.

Mr VEVERS: We could provide some information on examples across the State of a range of public housing and boarding house projects.

CHAIR: Do these programs involve partnerships with the non-Government sector as well, I mean the traditional, charitable and so on non-Government sector, as distinct from the local community housing associations?

Ms READY: Yes, it does. We have a wide range of major partners in a number of our support projects. Some area mental health services are direct partners in community housing associations and community housing operates in the Campbelltown area as a partnership with South Western Sydney Area Health Service for support services for young people with mental health disabilities. So it is a cross-section, but mainly there are partnerships between the housing sector and non-Government support agencies.

CHAIR: The non-Government agencies would get presumably funding from the Office of Community Housing for the housing component but also would presumably be getting funding from DADHC or someone for the support services?

Ms READY: What we would actually do, and we have got two ways of achieving it, we either fund a fresh property, that is called a capital property. The Land and Housing Corporation owns that property. We then lease it, we have a head lease with the community housing provider, who then wherever possible, and this is what we encourage, actually enters into a direct tenant association with the person that lives in the house. So the person with a disability has a normal type tenancy arrangement, and then there is a separate agreement about the support required for the person in the household.

We also have a leasing program, and this is a much larger program than any public housing. Of the about 10,500 households that are funded through community housing at the moment, 10,522, 4,400 of those are on the leasing program. That is where we actually provide a subsidy to lease properties on the private rental market. This actually gives us more flexibility to lease in locations where people need to be for service provisions, but we might actually lease a property, for example, at Hornsby, whereas to buy in that locality is very expensive. We may be able to buy five properties with the funding we have got, but we actually can have 20 leases operating for many years to provide support to people. So we actually run a large leasing program.

That is not always suitable for people with disabilities, perhaps a person with an intellectual disability who needs to be assured of long-term living in one location in terms of learning how to access all their local shops, all the support services, and the leasing program is not suitable to everybody, we acknowledge that, but it actually gives us quite a degree of flexibility in where to house people.

CHAIR: We were very interested, we actually saw the advertisement for the industry development forum. You mentioned it before, Paul, as another initiative that is under way at the moment. Can you tell us something about that?

Mr VEVERS: Yes, indeed. We are aware from feedback that we are getting across the industry that there is a growing market of people who may be quite rich in terms of the assets that they have but relatively poor in terms of their regular income. In particular, we are probably talking about elderly people who actually

own their property. As they grow older they may well have a need to modify their home to basically maintain their existing property but they have not got funds to do it, so they would not be eligible for either community housing or public housing.

We have looked abroad and there are growing numbers of financial vehicles that people in that situation can turn to, things called, for example, reverse mortgage, in which a financial institution, or in one case we looked at abroad it was actually largely a Government organisation put in funds to adapt the property and then get repaid, usually on the death of the person living in the property or if it is sold for some other reason, and they work out the actuarial risk that is involved in that to them, they obviously work out their risk, by the time they get paid back the accumulated total value of the property and they work through that. They actually take that risk, so it is the private or non-Government sector actually taking that risk.

We are not aware of that existing in any significant way in New South Wales or anywhere else in Australia. We think there is certainly some room for the private sector to come in, and we think there are a number of other issues which arise here. For example, the elderly parents of older children with intellectual disabilities who may be wanting to bequeath to them not just the property, children with an intellectual disability can manage without the protection of the Office of the Protective Commissioner, but who would want to make sure that there is a proper maintenance arrangement for them as well, and again that could lead to the finance. So we are wanting really to try and stimulate the private sector to look in this area at some possible partnerships, it could be Government enterprises, et cetera, but very much we are looking at those partnerships in which Government does not underwrite all the risk, which is what sometimes happens in those partnerships. So the person's forum really is to look at what is around, what is possible and to try to stimulate the private sector.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Has the Department of Housing thought of reverse mortgage arrangements in trying to increase its stock?

Mr VEVERS: At this stage, no. It is something that we should think of, yes.

CHAIR: You are suggesting I think that this industry development forum, which is in November is it, October?

Mr VEVERS: It was due to be in November. We are now thinking that we may have to put it into February. Some of the organisations that we wanted to bring into play are not going to be able to come at the time we had hoped for and if they can come it will be in December or January.

CHAIR: This is not because of not being able to get on Ansett planes?

Mr VEVERS: No.

CHAIR: Or all sorts of other things which seem to be putting everything off. From what you have said, it sounds as if at this stage it is very open. The department is not putting specific proposals forward. It is a sort of an open ended round table, is it, or are there pilots proposed or anything in particular, or on the other hand I guess, has the private sector come up with any ideas which you want to ventilate?

Mr VEVERS: Private and non-Government sectors, yes. We are trying to basically dig out at the moment what is there in the community housing sector, the non-Government sector that might give an example that we can expand upon. There are some small projects around. There are some private housing and support providers, some mixes between private housing and support funded things like that out there. So we are wanting to build as far as we can on what is there, as well as to introduce some new ideas perhaps from abroad and other parts of Australia.

CHAIR: What other measures does the department currently have in place to assist people with disabilities who are waiting for suitably accessible social housing?

Mr VEVERS: Lyn has covered some of the supported housing initiatives that we have in both community housing and public housing. I suppose there is one other thing that we do which is that where we cannot provide a suitable home for someone who is eligible under our priority scheme we will actually fund them to rent in the private sector while we look for a priority place for them. So we will pay a subsidy, a special assistance subsidy, which brings down their cost of housing to what it would have been if they had got quickly into the public sector so that, in a sense, they are not penalised - financially at least - by the lack of available accommodation and in some cases people having done that actually opt to stay in that private sector accommodation and we tend to be reasonably flexible about how long we will continue paying that subsidy for.

CHAIR: Lyn, we have only heard a few bits from you. Is there anything we have missed?

Ms READY: Perhaps I will just touch on a couple of issues that you might be interested in hearing about. We also have some other models where there is a bit more scope for housing people on a range of incomes. One of those models is the co-operative housing model which works whereby 65 percent of people have to be on a low income, but the other 35 percent can actually be on a range of incomes. This model is one that we have in place at the moment for a co-operative which is made up of people with disabilities who self-manage their own housing. Co-ops are where a group of people come together and they do a training program around housing management, how to manage housing, how to set up tenancies, et cetera, and then they apply in the funding rounds to the office to fund their particular housing needs.

We have a co-op at the moment in Minto called the Care and Co Co-op, which is a co-op set up by a group of people with physical disabilities. It has six households, some of whom are single member households and some of whom are people in wheelchairs living with their families, but in each household is a person in a wheelchair, so there six families/households got together and said we would actually like to have housing, we need to be housed, we would like to be housed together, and we purpose-built a cluster housing effect for this particular group of people. That was about four years ago and they now manage the housing themselves. They actually sort out what the rent should be using a policy provided by the office, collect rents, manage their own maintenance, do all those things. It works very successfully, so it is a model that we would like to see more groups of people with physical disabilities look at. It involves our one-off, I suppose, allocation of capital funds to purchase or build, but in fact after that all housing management costs are basically met by the people themselves.

CHAIR: Out of the rents?

Ms READY: That is right. So that is one model.

CHAIR: What happens in that sort of model if someone, for whatever reason, moves on and there is a vacancy?

Ms READY: Most of those co-ops have a waiting list, so they would have other people who they, I guess, accepted. They have a process of getting to know people and saying, yes, we would like to accept you into our co-op if we have a vacancy. I happen to know that that co-op has had no vacancy since it started, but they work on a waiting list.

CHAIR: If they have a vacancy, are they constrained to take someone with a low income to make sure that the percentage--

Ms READY: That is right. They have to, every time they have a vacancy, move towards achieving that break-up of incomes again, so if in fact some people have got employed and therefore they move, maybe fifty-fifty, fifty on higher incomes, fifty on lower, their next person that comes in has to be on a lower income to bring that percentage up again to 65 and 35. That is a model I think that could offer a lot to people with physical disabilities who have the capability of managing their own tenancies, of course.

I would have to say also that I think the number of people with intellectual disabilities, if you look across our data, is quite small and I think that is probably an area where we have not seen many proposals for partnerships. We are not seeing a lot of people with that particular disability being able to get into our social housing system. I cannot speak on behalf of DOH generally, but I think that is probably the case in DOH, that more of the people with disabilities that we are serving are people with physical or mental health problems, and in a particular gap I think are people with acquired brain injuries who sometimes get a payment, particularly if it was an accident or a work-related accident, but it is often not enough to get themselves housed with all the modifications that they require and pay for ongoing support, so there probably is some work around models that could be done for that group as well, looking at, say, co-op models or partnership arrangements, and we actually have a project or a section of our office that works specifically on trying to work up innovative projects with organisations that have some funds to contribute and specifically they work with a lot of large church organisations, which often have agencies that provide support and a range of services but also have quite a lot of resources locked up in land, housing, et cetera, that they own.

So we are actually trying to target areas where we see some scope for increasing stock, but that is a small program at the moment. I think sometimes some of the more innovative approaches are the ones that will reach quite a range of people with disabilities and I think, as Paul said, particularly ageing people with children

who are adults with intellectual disabilities, there is one group at the moment where we are trying to work out how can we fit those people into one of our programs because they have come to us: How can you work with us on a project for our young adult children basically. I think some of the answers will be innovative when they come, so hopefully we can work up more of those types of projects.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

STEPHEN ALCHIN, Executive Director, Transport Masterplanning & Infrastructure, New South Wales Department of Transport,

MARGARET STACK, Contractor, Project Manager, Disability Access, State Rail Authority,

KIRSTEN BERG, Acting Manager, Model Integration, New South Wales Department of Transport,

JAMES HOLGATE, General Manager, Taxi and Hire Car Bureau, New South Wales Department of Transport,

PETER MURRAY, Acting Director, Rural and Regional Strategy, New South Wales Department of Transport,

LYALL KENNEDY, Director, Business Development, State Transit Authority, and

PAUL HAYES, Acting Director, Executive Services, New South Wales Department of Transport, affirmed and examined, and

JOHN ROBINSON, Acting Manager, Funding Contracts & Compliance, New South Wales Department of Transport, and

RAY FURFARO, Manager, Station Projects, State Rail Authority, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: We are aware that one of the reasons why we have so many witnesses is that we did ask you such a range of questions about very disparate areas in the State rail, in regard to buses, in regard to taxis and so on. I hope you have all seen the questions that you were sent so you are familiar with those that relate to your area.

Before we start, could I also acknowledge the presence with us of Shirley Kennedy, the wife of a former National Party member of the Legislative Council and former Mayor of Taree, who unfortunately died earlier this year. We are very glad to have you with us and we are also very glad to have Mr Kennedy here too.

Do any of you want to open up with any sort of statement or shall we go into our first question, which was the very broad request that somebody outline for us the main programs being undertaken by the Department of Transport to assist people with disability?

Mr ALCHIN: Yes, I might start. The Department does not have any formal statement that it wishes to submit to the Committee. What I might do is answer in a general way what I understand to be your first question about the broad outline of programs that we administer through the portfolio.

I suppose I could start by saying that, in general, the program of services and other matters that are administered through the Department of Transport, the State Rail Authority and the State Transit Authority in this area falls into two main categories. There are infrastructure services and programs and there are service development and operational matters that are offered through the Department.

In general, in the infrastructure area there are programs such as the Easy Access program for the development of accessible stations on the railway network. Related to that, there are exercises through the Department of Transport for the development of interchanges which are in the main to facilitate an easier integration of modes and transfer between modes at places such as, this year, Rockdale and Mt Druitt and so on. Finally, on the infrastructure side, there are programs we are developing through State Transit Authority on kneeling buses.

On the service side, the Department of Transport administers the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme. It also oversees expenditure of approximately \$14 million for community transport schemes which are funded through several sources. So in general terms, a picture of infrastructure development on the one hand and service development on the other.

CHAIR: Can you give us an idea of how long that range of programs has been going? Evidence that has been put to us suggests that some organisations have been quite slow to realise the needs, and the rights indeed, of people with disability. Others have been more advanced in that respect.

Mr ALCHIN: I will defer to some of my colleagues in some cases. I understand the Easy Access program has been under way for approximately ten years and has probably strengthened and grown in scale over

the last five or six years. In the case of kneeling buses, I would have to defer to Lyall Kennedy from State Transit. The taxi transport subsidy scheme and community transport I would defer to James.

CHAIR: Maybe we could deal with that when we come to their sections, given that we have tended to divide our questions up into the different functional areas.

Mr ALCHIN: That would be fine.

CHAIR: Are you going to deal with the second question about the way in which the department mixes in with other agencies to assist people?

Mr ALCHIN: No, I would defer to my colleague here on my right, Kirsten Berg.

Ms BERG: At the moment, under the New South Wales disability policy framework, which was what DADHC has developed, the department is the co-ordination agency for the transport portfolios in terms of developing a disability action plan. What we are working on at the moment is essentially a 12 month timeframe, where we would prepare a draft portfolio plan which would bring in all members of the transport portfolio, including the private sector operators, actually picking up rail companies, the private bus operators and the taxi council. This plan will basically set out the access initiatives that will be implemented across all modes, and throughout that process we will liaise heavily with DADHC in terms of the Government's requirements for action plans. I am also told that there are monthly meetings that have been established recently between our contracts and compliance section and DADHC to discuss issues surrounding community transport on a regular basis.

CHAIR: In our next question we get into the specifics. We are talking about an overview of initiatives to assist people with disability and we particularly ask about progress of the introduction of wheelchair accessible buses and progress with that Easy Access program and modification of stations.

Mr ALCHIN: We can deal with those in two parts, first the buses and terminal stations.

Mr KENNEDY: In State Transit, in 1995 we took the decision that all new vehicles that we would purchase from that date would be wheelchair accessible, and since then we have purchased 400 wheelchair accessible buses, which is 20 percent of our fleet of 1900 buses. We also have 70 bus routes which we have nominated that have timetable accessible services on them. That is our commitment - I am probably going to question four now.

CHAIR: Yes, it may make sense to do them together for buses.

Mr KENNEDY: We currently have 70 bus routes that are wheelchair accessible, that have timetables with accessible trips on them, and as our fleet of wheelchair buses expands we will expand the number of services for our timetable. Our proposed timetable for completion of the program is 2015. That target has come out of documentation which was prepared back in 1994, target 2015, which was a vision for the future of access to transport in Australia for all Australians. We have taken that on board. We have applied the draft standards for accessibility to public transport and we believe that by 2015 all of our vehicles will be wheelchair accessible.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Have you trained the drivers on those 70 accessible routes to know how to assist people with wheelchairs in terms of access on buses?

Mr KENNEDY: Our training program at the moment is that all our new employees are given competency based training which is accredited, which is how to deal with people with disabilities, and that includes understanding, doing pre-departure checks on the wheelchair ramps, how to drive with wheelchairs on the bus, how to secure wheelchairs, but also customer service for people with disabilities, not just mobility issues, but mental illness as well. All of our new employees have been given that training, and in February of next year we will be doing a pilot program for existing employees. In fact, we will then be providing that competency based training through the rest of our drivers, so another 2500 drivers.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Can I ask how many people in wheelchairs travel on this program and at what cost? It has been put to me that you would be better off to have services for them and not muck around with the existing buses. I do not know if that is true or not, it may be an ideological unsound view, but is it a more practical view in financial terms? If you are spending squillions on buses and no one is using them, that would be silly, would it not?

Mr KENNEDY: That is true, but the situation is that, although low floor buses are more expensive than

those with steps, it has now become an industry standard basically. You would be very hard-pressed in the world to buy a bus that was not of the low floor configuration and they provide access not just for people in wheelchairs but, if you have arthritis or a stroller, it makes access to the network much easier, and the usage of wheelchairs is very low. We do not have a high take-up of people in wheelchairs using the service at the moment, but the level of service is not that wonderful either. There might be an hourly service on some routes, so it is not as accessible as it is for the rest of the community.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: So you would say that the reason it is not being used may be because the service is so infrequent people are not accustomed to using it?

Mr KENNEDY: Well, I think that over time we will get a greater take-up of people in wheelchairs using the services.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do you have any surveys or anything to back this view or is it a hope?

Mr KENNEDY: No.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Are you getting any surveys of this; are you studying the utilisation rates and things?

Mr KENNEDY: Not for wheelchair access.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You are spending a lot of money and you are not studying what happens with it?

Mr KENNEDY: No, under the legislation, we are required not to discriminate against anybody because of their disability, so if we started doing surveys purely based on that--

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: But you might like to know - I mean it must have implications for sticking to timetables and things like that.

Mr KENNEDY: There is no big impact there, but what we are doing is working with different disability groups - the Australian Quadriplegic Association - and they actually come and help train our drivers in how to use wheelchairs, so we are in touch with those groups as to how we are progressing and providing accessibility.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: How long have the 70 accessible routes been publicised; how long have they been in existence?

Mr KENNEDY: It is something we have been developing over time. We have a brochure that we put out, "Getting Around", which publicises all the routes that have accessible timetabled services on them. Each time we extend the network we produce timetables which show the accessible trips. It is advertised on our web page and also through the info line on 131 500. You can ring up and find out which buses are accessible and what trips. In each timetable every accessible trip is marked with an "A", so it identifies which trips will have a wheelchair accessible bus.

CHAIR: Does the choice of the 70 routes reflect which depots have which buses or does it reflect the desire to get a geographical spread so that wherever you live you have some access?

Mr KENNEDY: A bit of both applies to that. Our objective is initially to identify the major corridors, pick a service that has a high frequency and does all the stops, and we allocate wheelchair services to those. However, we are somewhat constrained by which depots have wheelchair accessible buses. The other thing we have done with our bus fleet is that we are now only purchasing compressed natural gas vehicles. Our constraint there is that we can only garage those at depots that have a gas fuelling facility. At this stage that is at three locations and we are about to expand into Leichhardt and Waverley depots so, as that program expands, that will introduce more accessible buses.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: So they are all gas and they are all low access level?

Mr KENNEDY: By 2015.

CHAIR: You did not specifically address the budgetary question. Is that because you are saying the

decision was made on non-discriminatory grounds, et cetera, so in one sense the budgetary allocation is built in--

Mr KENNEDY: That is right, we are self-funding the purchase of these vehicles at the moment and to accelerate that under our current financial constraints would be rather difficult for us, but if it was possible to have some acceleration that would be good because it would then reduce our average fleet age, which is currently around 12 years. Our oldest buses are 20 years old, which is not bad for the economic life of a vehicle, but if we accelerated that program we may be able to reduce the average fleet age and our oldest buses.

The Hon. IAN WEST: What incentive is there in private bus services?

Mr KENNEDY: I am probably not the best one to answer that.

Mr ALCHIN: That is a question that the Department might take on notice.

CHAIR: There is a whole question about private providers further down. Shall we deal with it as a whole when we get to it?

Mr ALCHIN: Sure.

CHAIR: We wanted to deal with questions 3 and 4 about the modifications to CityRail stations.

Mr ALCHIN: I was just wondering whether, after the answer from CityRail, we might take the question on rural on regional matters.

CHAIR: Yes, I was thinking of that because Peter has to go. I am not sure, Peter, but obviously number 10 is very specifically related to country areas, but you may also want to make a comment about number 6 and maybe on number 7, which have some relevance. We know you have to go, so maybe after we deal with CityRail we will look at the regional and rural issues.

Mr FURFARO: The easy access program took on a degree of formality in CityRail in 1991. The first stations did not actually start rolling off the production line, so to speak, until early 1993, but there was a lot of planning and implementation of the strategies during that early period. The easy access program with CityRail is still going, and going fairly strong now, and we anticipate it will continue for some years yet.

Where we are at the moment is that, of a base of 305 stations that CityRail runs, as of today, 46 of those stations - and that represents 15 percent - are fully accessible as a facility. By the end of this financial year we anticipate that that number will increase by a further nine, bringing us to a total of 54 stations of our 305, being about 18 percent of the network by the end of the current financial year.

The program, as I said, is expected to continue for some years yet and we are thinking at present to as far as 2007-08. By that period in time we are planning to have in the order of 120 of the CityRail stations completed. There are a number of factors that come into that, so that is an approximate number of 120 by 2007-08, the number of factors being the continued funding of our non-commercial capital program in CityRail and a number of other more practical factors in terms of implementation speed and matters such as that, but at present, from about 1993 when we first started rolling until the present, 46; 54 in the next seven to eight months and our total program of about 120 is where we are looking forward to at the moment. We have not cast ourselves beyond that sort of period. When we reach 120, in the order of 87 percent of our passengers would be covered. Obviously the 120 are selected on a number of criteria, one of those being the amount of patronage that each of the stations have. There is a whole barrage of criteria, but that is probably one of the most important. Other criteria is possible passenger growth in the area and facilities around the area, integration with STA, integration with the Department of Transport facilities, and they are the types of criteria that have been used and that still will be used to finalise the locations.

The program from CityRail's perspective has gone fairly well over the years and we are quite pleased that before the Olympics we had every prime Olympic station completed and were operating and operated very successfully during the Olympics and the Paralympic period as well.

Each of the stations we have at present, and the proposed ones leading up to the 120 that I spoke of, has a number of minimum facilities that we provide at those locations, one being that, from an appropriate point on the street boundary, there is an ability for a wheelchaired person - and, as has already been mentioned by some, that is used by many others as well, but using that as criteria, there is an ability for a wheelchaired person to come from a point in a street away from our own station and wheel themselves independently to the edge of

the platform where assistance then is available from our staff to be able to assist the wheelchair users to get on to a train. People can ask for that assistance as they walk through, and it is given on every occasion, or they can prebook that by using the communication systems that are in place and that is using ramps then to be able to get themselves from the platform on to a train.

Other facilities which exist at these stations are accessible toilet facilities as well as booking office windows where wheelchair users can come up close and they are the right ergonomic height for those users. As I said, it is not only for the wheelchair users that we provide and we certainly do get a lot of benefits with strollers, luggage and shopping and elderly persons as well at these particular locations. That is where we are at the moment with our program.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: I live at Summer Hill and I was just wondering if there was a preference with State Rail for stations like that, where the existing access across the railway line is by way of subway, to phase those out and put in overhead bridges or just work out a design on a case by case basis?

Mr FURFARO: Probably the answer is a bit of both. I do not mean to be elusive. Subways typically have proven to be a security issue at some locations, and I am not speaking specifically of Summer Hill, but keeping in mind the security issues, and there have also been issues in terms of drainage aspects that are more difficult to deal with underground, once you keep those in mind then you try to come up with the best solution for the particular location. There is not a program for eliminating subways, as such, but there is a program of planning the best result for each individual location, keeping in mind the constraints and the security aspects at particular sites.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: You talked about people asking for assistance to get on to a train if they had a wheelchair. I have always wondered how do you let them know at the other end that you want to get off?

Mr FURFARO: It is our role. Once we get them on - we need to know where they are going to, of course - it is the station staff's responsibility to phone ahead and arrange assistance to unboard at the other end.

We have had some complaints where that communication system has failed, but by far the majority of it has worked, and I think we have learned a lot during the Olympic period where usage by people in wheelchairs - I cannot quote you a figure - skyrocketed. I happened to work on a lot of stations personally during that period and it worked very well then and I think some of the benefits of the learning have stayed with us since then until today and hopefully it will be part of our system now better than it has been.

CHAIR: Will we always need ramps? We cannot have trains uniformly matching the height of a platform and overcome the gap between the platform and the train?

Mr FURFARO: I believe for a long time hence we will need to have those ramps. It is not something that can be solved easily. There are a number of engineering reasons, particularly if anyone is familiar with Parramatta station, it is on a very sharp curve at Parramatta, and those engineering or geometry reasons probably that would prevent a train from getting very close to a platform.

Mr ALCHIN: Perhaps I could just add a few words to that. I recently joined the Department of Transport and before that I worked with the Rail Infrastructure Corporation. Whilst it was not my area of responsibility, I was conscious that the Rail Infrastructure Corporation, previously the Rail Access Corporation, and the State Rail Authority, had a program aimed at reducing platform gaps. It was a fairly involved exercise of actually in some cases putting coping on the sides of platforms and in other cases moving the track right in. The solution varied from case to case, but my recollection is, and Ray may be able to help, that there was a program on reducing platform gaps to a point where it would be of benefit to wheelchair users, people with prams and strollers and the general public. I think from recollection that plan is still in place.

Mr FURFARO: That is still in place and it is going very strong. The question though related around can we get wheelchair users to wheel themselves onto a train, and that program that you have spoken of certainly brings things closer together, but I do not believe it will get to the stage of allowing wheelchair users to wheel themselves onto a train. The gap obviously has been reduced significantly. It will not be enough, it will not reduce enough as there is the height difference that comes into it and a number of other geometric issues, but yes, that program is still going very strong and very well and there are some very measurable benefits in that program and the reduction of falls we actually have is quite measurable now. It is very significant how many people have not now fallen between our trains and the platform.

Mr ALCHIN: The only other comment I would add - you asked a question about budgetary issues. My understanding is that the allocation this financial year for the Easy Access program is \$31 million.

Mr FURFARO: That is correct.

CHAIR: What is the approximate or average cost per station then, or is it too diverse for that to make much difference?

Mr ALCHIN: I think frankly it does vary greatly from station to station, but to do a rough rule of thumb, \$31 million divided by the nine busiest stations gives you \$3.5 million per station.

Mr FURFARO: We put those figures out just before I came here today and the first four to six averaged about \$4.6 million. The remainder of the program as we move into the smaller stations, it will be around \$3.3 million to finish the program off. That is on an average basis.

CHAIR: So that is the way the project has been done basically, starting off with the biggest and busiest stations?

Mr FURFARO: With some exceptions, but that is the general rule that is applied. There are exceptions to that though.

CHAIR: Can we also add the same question we asked Mr Kennedy about training of staff, and that probably applies not only to dealing with people with a physical disability but also people with intellectual and other disabilities as well. How do you go about or what have you done to train the relevant staff, both on the trains I guess and the people at the station?

Mr FURFARO: I cannot fully respond to your question as that is not my area of expertise, but from being in the system, being in the organisation, I am aware that training does occur to all of our station staff to enable them to communicate, communication skills with the particular type of people who will be using the system or using this type of facility, as well as the physical needs of moving people around. Beyond that, I cannot actually advise you on frequencies, or how often, or degrees of training that is occurring. If we need to answer that, we would have to come back on notice.

CHAIR: That would be fine, if you can give us that later. We should go on to our rural and regional questions. That is really number 10, is it not, predominantly? It has been put to us that people in more distant areas do have particular needs that people in Sydney for instance do not have. Can you tell us what initiatives there are in the department, or it may also be, as I flagged before, that transport out of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong is more a matter of private provision, but tell us what is happening?

Mr MURRAY: Yes, if I can just give a broad overview and then perhaps invite my colleagues here, who all have responsibility in their areas. State-wide responsibility is primarily State Transit's. Basically, I have been appointed to act in a new role in the Department of Transport, it is only in the last three months, looking at specific rural and regional issues. The department in its new corporate plan has taken a focus to better co-ordinate within our own department and across the transport portfolio agencies in a whole range of rural and regional transport initiatives and certainly including accessibility issues.

There are a number of initiatives happening and most of the program areas that we have spoken about here this afternoon will relate to State-wide programs, and certainly from a taxi perspective there are taxi services in rural and regional communities with wheelchair accessible taxis, and James can allude to those.

The community transport program, funded primarily by DADHC and the Department of Transport, is an incredibly important program in rural and regional communities to assist people with accessibility and mobility difficulties, and you are correct that primarily the bus system runs in rural and regional centres are contracted to the private bus industry.

There is the school student transport bus scheme, which transports students in rural and regional communities. The Department of Education also funds specific access for students with disabilities. The department also funds a non-urban infrastructure program to put in some funding and a grant scheme to try and improve infrastructure facilities in rural and regional communities.

Most of the programs which we will talk about today, people can speak specifically about those areas. I would just like to bring to the attention of the Committee a particular program. The Department of Transport, again only over the last few months, has been funded by the Premier's Department's Regional Program to look at specific transport issues in rural and regional communities and the project is focussing on Dubbo and

surrounding towns, and Broken Hill to a lesser extent, and long distance surrounding towns.

Basically, a couple of the initiatives: we are looking at what basically what transport is provided there; what are some of the issues coming out. That is in a broad context in relation to accessibility. One of the things that is becoming clear to me in rural and regional communities is the lack of a forum to put transport issues on the table, to have them discussed and have them debated and resolutions made. What we have done in this project, based on a model on the north coast, is set up a transport working group under the auspice of the local council in Dubbo. We have included representatives from the council's accessibility committee and community representatives, and basically that committee is looking at a whole range of transport issues, including accessibility issues. That is one thing we have done.

Another initiative, and this again is in very early stages, but things will be coming out, with a community transport provider with use of volunteers and some wheelchair accessible vehicles but not all, especially the volunteers, we have brokered a negotiation between that provider and a taxi industry, which has actually two wheelchair accessible taxis in the town, to get them to work more co-operatively. We are looking at some subcontracting arrangement. So really, transport plays its role where it can, but where it is sensible to have the taxi industry with the specialist vehicles best utilised, or better utilised perhaps, than utilising volunteers.

Very on the ground sort of projects, but very important to those sort of people, which hopefully will create a better service for them. They are just some of the sorts of things. So the department is certainly trying to have a better focus on rural and regional and there is a whole raft of challenging issues and perhaps we can go through some in detail.

Ms STACK: The country coach service has been a constraint I guess for access to people with disabilities in the past. In State Rail we can get passengers on accessible trains at a certain stop and then when they change to buses they find that the buses are not accessible. Our manager at State Rail is currently working on ensuring that when the contracts are renewed later this year that accessibility is built into those contracts with private bus operators in rural and regional areas. Obviously it will be a fairly long process to achieve that outcome, but certainly State Rail is very aware of the need to provide those sorts of services in those areas and is currently working towards providing that and working with the private bus operators to gain co-operation in providing a range of services, perhaps not all services, but the best we can do given the constraints that there are not many wheelchair accessible buses in rural and regional areas.

CHAIR: Does that effectively mean they have to start buying new buses?

Ms STACK: Or the facility to provide access to the buses with ramps or an actual mechanism that provides the access if they change the buses.

CHAIR: Is there a problem with the kneeling buses, or whatever we officially call them, in their suitability for non-urban roads? Are there any special difficulties there?

Ms STACK: I cannot answer that one. Perhaps somebody from the STA would be able to comment on that.

CHAIR: They do seem incredibly low.

Mr KENNEDY: We have problems with them in the city. Some of the streets you cannot get the bus across them. They are very much an urban vehicle, but there are other solutions for country buses. There is a hoist that will get them into the vehicle at the right level.

CHAIR: Did you want to ask some specific questions about places near Dubbo?

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: I think the difficulty is that the aim might be there, but there are older buses which have got problems. When you get away from the bus routes within, say, a place like Dubbo and you start talking about coach lines that they probably depend on, because that is the cheapest way of getting around the State rather than airfares, you are certainly looking at older bus services that are in many places contracting because of the economic circumstances. So I am not exactly sure whether you have a more pro-active way of encouraging them or helping them to invest in the capital needed to provide these services.

My observations would suggest that most people are just simply saying, "We need alternatives. Rather than look at the buses, let us try and have community transport", taxis or cars or something to get them around, and if you are going to get them onto a coach service, it is just whatever it takes to do it.

Ms STACK: Certainly, from State Rail's point of view we would be looking to work with the Department of Transport through the transport portfolio action plan to explore some of the areas of commonality and where we can work together to make that transition. There are ways we can pool our resources to do that, and we are certainly being pro-active together, rather than State Rail trying to fix the problem and community transport trying to fix the problem. We are hoping to achieve that.

The Hon. DOUG MOPPETT: The airline services have the provision to lift the wheelchair up to the level of cabin access, which is sometimes quite high, and then they fold the wheelchair up and stow it once the person is seated in the cabin. It is one thing to do that out on the tarmac at Dubbo where there is not all that much congestion, but it is difficult to do that on a street corner in Dubbo. You are obviously not going to have a lifting device. It still remains in my view a very unmet need.

The Hon. IAN WEST: What is the cost of transforming a bus to have access for people with disability? There is talk in this pro-active program of making allowances in the contracts for private bus companies to be able to, through financial assistance in the contract system, provide the appropriate facilities.

Mr ALCHIN: I think other than providing the schedule of the cost of retrofitting the buses, that may be a matter that we might just have to take on notice.

CHAIR: Peter, you will be just about needing to go?

Mr MURRAY: Yes, if I can excuse myself in a few moments. I have a specialist medical appointment. As I said, in rural areas I think a lot of work could be done, and we certainly will be starting that work, to get the transport providers out there working more co-operatively.

I was surprised when I started this Dubbo project with community transport and the taxis, there was a logical answer there to improve the travel for people in wheelchairs in that area. It is not a hard thing. The cost and a few issues need to be worked through, but there is a lot of scope I think. It is a difficult process and it is a quite painstaking one - there are a lot of towns out there to deal with - but we are certainly committed to starting that process. We have already started in a small way, and then we will try and promote that across rural New South Wales.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do you have any comments relating to the NCOSS paper on the subject?

Mr MURRAY: Only to say that we have spoken with NCOSS about some of their ideas and are certainly taking those on board. I think the Health Department funded that recent work and we are certainly working with the Health Department to give them advice. It is the same message I think, to get the best. Every situation seems to be so different in a lot of these country areas and you have to look at the unique situation and a lot of it is about working together.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: They would seem to be concerned that there is so much fragmentation. I think they identified six departments of which only two actually gave submissions to their inquiry, from memory.

Mr MURRAY: I do not know the details of the report.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You are familiar with the survey that they recently released, probably a month or six weeks ago?

Mr MURRAY: Yes.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You would have a joint working party with Health on that?

Mr MURRAY: Yes, Health has established a working party and the Department of Transport is represented. I am not personally represented, but it is represented and I understand the Health Department is finalising a consultancy which will come out with some recommendations on the best way forward to deal with those sorts of issues.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: And that would be joint funded by you and Health

presumably, and I think the other groups involved were HAC and DADHC. There was some Commonwealth involvement as well I think.

Mr MURRAY: I do not know the details of all the funding.

CHAIR: We will be talking to Health probably in late October. Returning to where we were before we dealt with rural and regional issues, we have pointed out that witnesses have, when they have come before us, asked for acceleration of the programs that we are talking about with both CityRail and the buses. Are there any barriers to that? I suppose we have talked about budgetary issues. Are there any other barriers to the acceleration of those programs?

Mr ALCHIN: I think in some cases the sheer logistics, I suppose, of commissioning these projects through the tendering process and getting development approvals through councils and the like can be a constraint, but the main issue is prioritisation of projects within available budgets.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Can people in wheelchairs use government ferries?

Mr KENNEDY: Yes.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Who looks after that? You do.

Mr KENNEDY: All our ferries are wheelchair accessible and 18 of the 38 wharves are wheelchair accessible at the moment. In Newcastle, Waterways is making the Stockton wharf accessible. There are issues with the Queen Street wharf. It is owned by Newcastle City Council and there are some issues about how that gets funded. That is the current situation. In some cases we have issues about making wharves accessible. We had a plan for Kirribilli and the DA was rejected by the council because the ramping was very intrusive, so we have not been able to address that.

With regard to accelerating the programs, under the Disability Discrimination Act there was a requirement for the agencies to be compliant with the standards. We had to achieve compliance twenty years after the standards were gazetted. The standards are yet to be gazetted, so there is a little bit of a grey area there as to what are the standards. State Transit has taken the initiative in applying standards which we believe to be appropriate, but I think there are some other agencies that feel that they would like to see them gazetted before they invest heavily in upgrading their fleets.

CHAIR: Shall we move on to the question about responsibilities of private providers of public transport, what responsibilities they have and how they are making transport accessible?

Ms BERG: Like all other transport agencies, government agencies, they have to operate under the Disability Discrimination Act. I spoke to the executive director of the Bus and Coach Association of New South Wales this morning and he advised me that the majority of private bus operators in New South Wales are now purchasing accessible buses as part of their fleet replacement program. The executive director was confident that the majority of private bus operators in New South Wales are now ahead of the timetable for compliance set out in the draft disability standards, but the issues are the same as what Lyall was saying for STA. There is a grey area at the moment in terms of exactly when the standards will be ratified.

The other issue to note is that the Bus and Coach Association is an active member of the Bus and Coach Modal Subcommittee which the Department of Transport chairs and what that subcommittee is responsible for doing is identifying and putting in place the means to fix some technical issues that surround the draft standards as they currently are drafted.

CHAIR: Whose responsibility are the standards?

Ms BERG: The Commonwealth Government.

CHAIR: Presumably organisations like yours would have an input into those?

Ms BERG: Yes.

CHAIR: So when you talk about the draft standards, have they been prepared by the transport organisations rather than by the Commonwealth?

Ms BERG: It is a Commonwealth led initiative, it is part of the Disability Discrimination Act. There is a Commonwealth group of which the department is a member and so are the other States and out of that large committee there are several subcommittees that are working on specific modal issues. The department chairs the bus and coach subcommittee, SRA is a member of the rail subcommittee, just to identify I guess in practical terms what it means to translate the standards into operation, and that is an ongoing process.

CHAIR: So private bus operators, for instance, accept those draft standards as reflecting what, an aspiration or something that might eventually get set in concrete or--

Ms BERG: Because they do operate under the Disability Discrimination Act they are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of a disability, but they are proceeding to purchase in a similar manner as STA.

The Hon. IAN WEST: What was the 20 years that was talked about?

Ms BERG: The standards set out a compliance timeframe for different aspects of the standard, so bus fleet accessibility is staged over a 20 year period with I think 10 percent in the first five years and 35 percent within ten years. It is staggered until you get 100 percent compliance.

The Hon. IAN WEST: And that is 10 percent, 20 percent, 100 percent of what, of your State?

Ms BERG: Of each operator's total fleet.

CHAIR: But since they are not gazetted, that is all--

Ms BERG: Yes, but I think there are a couple of things that are positive. One is that the operators are actually purchasing accessible buses anyway and, secondly, as part of the portfolio plan, one of the things that we will be reporting against is that compliance timeframe across the portfolio.

Mr HOLGATE: If I might add a comment, a similar situation applies in respect of taxis. We have advice from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that the standards, even though they are a draft, reflect the taxi providers' existing obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act. For that reason we require compliance with the draft standards for wheelchair accessible taxis, so we are calling the standards up, even though a draft, and saying that for ramp widths and door heights and for things like that taxis have to comply with the draft standards.

CHAIR: So does the standard for taxis envisage that at one time in the future 100 percent of taxis will be accessible or does it set a lower level because those vehicles can be directed?

Mr HOLGATE: Well, the key issue is that the responsiveness of the service is the same whether you are disabled or not and that is something that HREOC is looking at now in terms of a percentage of the fleet. One benchmark being suggested is 10 percent. There has been some work in relation to developing a universal taxi design that all taxis would be wheelchair accessible. The department's approach - we are working with the taxi industry to develop some network performance standards which will require certain levels of service, certain responsiveness for able-bodied passengers and for wheelchair-bound passengers. By us setting those standards we will leave it to the industry to meet that in whatever way it can most effectively, whether it would involve universal wheelchair access or a certain number managed in an appropriate way.

CHAIR: If these standards that we are talking about were to be gazetted, you would expect them, because presumably you have some involvement in the committee, of course, to enable that choice?

Mr HOLGATE: Well, the technical standards really relate to the design of the taxi and issues like that which we already require and do not expect it to change.

CHAIR: But they do not pin down, for instance, whether or not to have 10 percent of the fleet?

Mr HOLGATE: No, it is really looking at equality of responsiveness and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has an inquiry currently in train which is looking specifically at the issue of whether there should be a percentage or whether it is a questioning of managing.

CHAIR: I just wonder whether New South Wales is ahead or behind other States in implementing the draft standards. Do we have an answer to that?

Ms BERG: There was actually a Commonwealth report produced a short time ago. I do not think we are out in front, but we are not behind either. In terms of government buses we are certainly well advanced than any other State in Australia. I would not be able to answer on taxis and rail, but I am happy to provide some information.

Ms STACK: Just on that point I think it is difficult to compare State to State necessarily on that. For instance, I know Western Australian has no problems complying with the draft standards, but you have to remember that its rail network is about 10 years old, 10 to 20 years old, all the stock is new and there was planning at a time when awareness of disability access issues was very high. To compare directly to statistics in New South Wales where our system is 100 years old, our rolling stock is old and we have certain infrastructure issues that other States would not have, those sorts of things, is difficult.

CHAIR: Do you want to tell us more about issues relating to taxis? The only specific question we have is about the subsidy scheme, but you have raised issues about taxis.

Mr HOLGATE: Just following on from some of the regional issues, we do not provide the service, I guess our role is to facilitate the taxi industry providing an accessible service for disabled passengers, and the key for them is having, particularly in regional areas, a sufficient critical mass of passengers and fare revenue to be able to have a viable service. Certainly some of the work referred to Mr Murray is aimed at creating that critical mass.

The other thing we are doing is lowering the economic barriers for taxi providers in terms of providing wheelchair accessible taxis. In the country a licence for a wheelchair accessible taxi is free. We provide interest free loans for the conversion of vehicles from non-wheelchair to one that can take a wheelchair. We subsidise driver training for wheelchair accessible taxis Statewide and make that training compulsory for any driver who is driving a wheelchair taxi, so there are a number of initiatives in train to make it easier for a taxi service to provide a wheelchair taxi and to ensure that the service is provided.

I can talk about the transport subsidy scheme perhaps later when we get to that.

CHAIR: We have got those two questions left and then community transport. Why don't we stick to taxis for the moment.

Mr HOLGATE: Okay, I will talk about the transport subsidy scheme. I have got a brochure here that we give participants, and I have made that available for the Committee, which describes the general background on how it works.

Just broadly, it is a scheme that has been in place since 1981. It is designed at providing financial assistance for those people who have a disability to the extent that they cannot easily use other forms of public transport. It is assessed strictly on medical criteria. If the applicant meets those criteria to prove that they meet that disability level, they are provided with a book of vouchers. That then provides them with a fixed subsidy on their taxi fare up to a subsidy of \$30 per fare. There is no limit on the number of vouchers they can use and it is available for them to use on any trip. The total fund is approximately \$12.5 million. That provides subsidies for about one million trips per year.

CHAIR: Do we know how many people are using this scheme?

Mr HOLGATE: I can get back to you on the exact numbers. We have got about 7,000 active users. There are quite a number who are on the scheme, but they do not use it very often.

CHAIR: When you say the medical criteria, is that a measurement of the degree?

Mr HOLGATE: For example, how far can they walk with or without an aid and with mobility.

CHAIR: In relation to our terms of reference, it would not help, for instance, people whose age or infirmity makes them eligible, rather than people with a defined disability?

Mr HOLGATE: That is right. It looks at the actual measurement of their mobility. If they do not meet the mobility criteria, then they are not eligible.

CHAIR: Amanda has moved that we accept the document that you have tabled.

Document tabled.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do you have any unmet demand, how many of the 12 million and the one million trips compared to how many people want the service? Are there complaints that it is not met? If there are 80 percent that are empty, what do you do?

Mr HOLGATE: I am not sure that I could tell you, but yes, there are two areas of unmet demand. One is that people do not know about the scheme and if they knew about it they would apply and some would be eligible, and there is probably some evidence in rural areas that we should do more to raise awareness of the scheme; and also there are people who do not meet the criteria and believe they should, and there is some unmet demand there.

I think if we were to relax the criteria, the cost of the scheme could blow out considerably. We are really looking at the tail of quite extremes of disability. If we start moving the criteria back to make slightly less disabled people eligible, then the number of people who are eligible would probably increase dramatically.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do you have any data on that? I suppose you say if you made this the criteria, it would cost you this much, and you would have this many more trips. Then you could ask where you should do these things. Is it all quantifiable?

Mr HOLGATE: It is probably quantifiable. We have not gone through the exercise of quantifying it.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Do the disability groups urge that you should do that?

Mr HOLGATE: I am not aware of anything recently, but it is certainly something we could look at in the future.

CHAIR: It has been put to us that the subsidy limits should be increased from 50 percent to 75 percent. Arthur has asked about one kind of demand, and that is to broaden the net, but what about the pressure or the arguments for increasing the amount of subsidy for those who are eligible?

Mr HOLGATE: It is really a budget decision. You can either make more people eligible or even increase the subsidy for those who are eligible. Either way it becomes a budgetary decision. There is no administrative or technical reason why the subsidy should not be 75 or 50 or anything else.

CHAIR: Has anyone done a study of needs that removes it from the budgetary content?

Mr HOLGATE: No, not that I am aware of, no.

CHAIR: Certainly some of the advocacy groups have said to us that the scheme should be extended. That actually finishes our specific questions. No, except for community transport, which we have touched on a couple of times. Who is going to tell us about community transport?

Mr ALCHIN: As of 2001, we have 136 organisations supporting community transport schemes. About 24,000 people are using that per annum; about 88,000 trips per month. The budget this year is about \$14 million made up of three separate components. John can elaborate. To go to the last dot point, presently community transport operators are not required to ensure that a quarter of their routes are wheelchair accessible.

CHAIR: Can I just clarify one thing before we hand over, the 24,000, is that total people or is that people with disability? You said 136 organisations and 24,000 people.

Mr ROBINSON: There are no figures actually to determine the proportion of the 24,000 that are disabled. We do not have that information available.

CHAIR: So we are talking about 24,000 people across New South Wales?

Mr ROBINSON: That is right, that make use of the transport available.

CHAIR: Do you want to enlarge on some of those outline points? And our dot points were the things we thought of. There may be significant things that we did not think of.

Mr ROBINSON: Would you like me to outline how the scheme works?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr ROBINSON: Basically community transport in New South Wales, as has probably been mentioned before, there are three programs that support community transport in New South Wales. There is a home and community care, community transport sub-program, which is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and New South Wales State Governments. There are two other programs, New South Wales community transport program and the area assistance scheme. They are both State funded programs.

The Department of Transport actually administers the funding which is provided for the various projects to provide transport services to the people that meet the criteria for the three programs. Funding is approved by way of an expression of interest process, which is conducted by DADHC. The Department of Transport has a member sit on the panel which actually reviews the final expressions of interest that are deemed to be deserving of the funding and funding is approved. The funding is then transferred to the Department of Transport, and as I said before, we administer the funding to ensure that it is expended in the manner and for the purpose for which it was intended.

The three schemes cover a broad range of clients. The home and community care program, basically its target group is frail or aged people with moderate to severe disabilities, younger persons with moderate to severe disabilities and their carers. The objective is to assist those people to be more independent and continue to live at home as much as possible.

The community transport program is a bit different. It sort of targets transport disadvantaged people generally, and really where their access to mainstream transport services is limited by their physical, social or geographical factors.

The area assistance scheme is initially administered by the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, and after an initial two year period the funding is picked up by the Department of Transport, and it actually provides funding for a variety of people and has various objectives, although the Department of Transport is only really involved with the transport issues. It targets Aboriginal people, families under stress, people with disabilities, physically isolated, a whole range of people, and the aim of the program is to redress inequalities in the distribution of human services in regions such as the Central Coast, Hunter, Illawarra, North Coast and Western Sydney.

They are the three programs in New South Wales, and as I said, the Department of Transport administers the funding.

CHAIR: So the Department of Transport does not have much role in deciding what area might end up with a good community transport scheme or one of the three?

Mr ROBINSON: No, not in that sense. As I said, DADHC actually asks for expressions of interest, usually from existing programs or existing projects or new projects for funding, and the funding is transferred to DOT and then we actually administer the funds to the actual project itself to make sure that the funding is expended for the purposes for which it was intended, but no, not in that sense. We do not actually approve any funding, not the Department of Transport anyway.

CHAIR: And you do not have a role in a planning sense in saying, well, this area, for instance, has a conspicuous need that has not been picked up in any of the other areas?

Mr ROBINSON: Certainly not as far as DADHC is concerned. As I said, we do sit on an evaluation committee, but I cannot really answer that from the point of New South Wales community transport program.

Mr ALCHIN: If I may, I will take that part of the question on notice.

CHAIR: Peter before seemed to suggest a more active role in the Dubbo area.

Mr ALCHIN: Certainly, in rural and regional New South Wales, that is part of Peter's brief, to work with the other agencies to look at what we are doing totally, not only with community transport but also the transport programs of other agencies through all sorts of areas, education and health and justice and the like, to see what outcomes we can collectively deliver that are greater than the sum of the parts, and in that area there certainly is greater attention to a planning framework for, I suppose, transport generally. I would not say at the moment it

specifically meets community transport, but if I may I will come back to you with a more complete response.

CHAIR: For instance, with the recent allocation of the buses that were here for the Olympics and the Paralympics, that was a decision made by Faye Lo Po' on advice from DADHC.

Mr ROBINSON: We had no input into that whatsoever.

CHAIR: If we wanted to talk about the distribution and availability of those networks, we would really need to talk to DADHC?

Mr ROBINSON: Yes.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: When you said you had no input into those Olympic buses whatsoever, that is an interesting comment from a transport person. Do you think you should have had input, and, if so, what input?

Mr ROBINSON: I am not sure I would know how to comment on that. I really became involved in the community transport program probably in the last couple of months. I am acting in the position of manager of the service funding or the funding area. No, I do not think I would be able to comment on that.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: You said the Department of Transport did not have any input.

Mr ROBINSON: That was what I was informed anyway. This was driven entirely by DADHC, the allocation of the Olympic buses. It was done by way of, again, an expression of interest process. The groups were invited to submit expressions of interest why they should be issued or why they should be allocated an ex-Olympic bus, and I guess the decisions were made on the groups that they could see were most in need.

Mr ALCHIN: The other point I would make is that there were specific and special transport arrangements in place for the Olympics which perhaps are not generic in their application, so I would not necessarily draw any system-wide conclusions from what may have been in place for the Olympics. However, if you wish, I can come back to the Committee specifically on that issue.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: I would have thought that you would have had data to allow for planning. I suppose there are always two things in planning where you have a department which does what it thinks best or a tender process which may be responsive to demand, but the squeakiest wheel might get most of the oil, so you wonder, from a governmental point of view, which of the alternatives is the best way to go.

Mr ALCHIN: I think between the various agencies, Health in particular and Transport, there is a data driven model for allocation of resources bearing in mind the distribution of people with disabilities throughout New South Wales. The precise role that the Department plays I would have to take on notice because I do not know what the position is myself, but I would be surprised if there was not some sort of data driven approach to allocation of resources.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: I am always interested in the data that drives it, where it is kept and who can access it. You say that you would be surprised if there were not some data?

Mr ALCHIN: Yes, the Department of Ageing and Disability clearly has information and data about people with various disabilities, information about their client base, as it were.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: And the Department of Transport does not?

Mr ALCHIN: That is the point that I need to come back to you on, just how that information that is held by Ageing and Disability is shared with the Department of Transport and used by the Department of Transport.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: I would be interested in that because that always seems to be--

Mr ALCHIN: --a critical question.

The Hon. Dr ARTHUR CHESTERFIELD-EVANS: Yes.

Mr ALCHIN: I will come back to the Committee on that point.

CHAIR: One question that we did not include relates to the transportation of children with disability to school, but is that simply a matter of the transport being provided? I think that is probably why we did not include that question.

Mr ALCHIN: The School Student Transport Scheme is a State wide program. Peter made mention of a specific program that is delivered through the Education Department. Again I am afraid - I apologise for this - the details of it I am not familiar with, but I will certainly come back to the Committee as soon as possible.

Mr ROBINSON: My understanding is that the transport provided by the Department of Education is for disabled children or handicapped children who are not able to access normal public transport and therefore they provide a transport service for children.

CHAIR: Mostly through taxis?

Mr ROBINSON: Yes, and I understood there were also certain people that were able to tender to take groups of these children to schools, whereas the Department of Transport is dealing with kids who are able to access public transport.

CHAIR: So any issues about that that come to us we really should address to the Department of Education.

Mr ROBINSON: I think so.

The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO: Mr Kennedy, are people allowed to take companion animals on trains and buses, apart from guide dogs?

Mr KENNEDY: No, only guide dogs.

Mr HOLGATE: Taxis can take companion animals and companion animals in training.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 3.20 p.m.)