

PDAC Submission to the Wheelchair Accessible Taxis Review of Fares and Subsidies

Department of Infrastructure Energy and Resources

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The Premier's Disability Advisory Council (PDAC) was established in 2007 to monitor the Government's implementation of the *Disability Framework for Action* (DFA) and advise government on policies, programs and services that impact on the lives of people with disability. PDAC consists of 12 community members and is chaired by the Premier.

The *Tasmanian Disability Framework for Action* identifies the importance of accessible public transport services and the ability to travel independently to enable people with disability to be involved with their community.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Australia in 2008, provides

To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and to participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to people with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, ... and to other services and facilities open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to...transportation...
(Article 9).

The Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Act (the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998*) provides that it is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the basis of disability (s16(k)) including reliance on a wheelchair (S3).

For Tasmanians who are wheelchair-reliant, the availability of appropriate private and public transport options are extremely limited. Accessible bus options are almost non-existent outside of urban and peri-urban areas and even within metropolitan areas, limited options are available. Where accessible buses are available, they may not be appropriate for some users due to design limitations including a lack of tie down points.

For many Tasmanians who are wheelchair reliant, wheelchair accessible taxis (WATs) are their only source of transport. This transport is fundamental to opportunities to access employment, training, social and recreational opportunities. Tasmanians with disability have significantly lower labour force participation rates than Tasmanians with no reported disability¹. *A Social Inclusion Strategy for*

Tasmania refers to the lack of access to appropriate transport for people with disability *and* notesⁱⁱ:

Access to transport is vital for social inclusion. Lack of access to reliable and appropriate transport can lead to exclusion from work and study opportunities as well as impeding access to services and to social networks

A *Cost of Living Strategy for Tasmania* recently identified people with disability and their families and carers as among the groups most affected by poverty and most vulnerable to cost of living increasesⁱⁱⁱ. This report notes that people in receipt of the Disability Support Pension are among the highest users of emergency relief services in Tasmania.

Low income coupled with the high cost of disability aids and equipment, health and remedial treatment and medications means that many people who are wheelchair reliant are not able to afford the high cost of a modified vehicle and have limited disposable income available for other transport options.

PDAC welcome this review of fares and subsidies for wheelchair accessible taxis. Apart from the clear inequity that exists where a Transport Access Scheme (TAS) member using a wheelchair accessible taxi is paying more for a trip than a person using a standard taxi, there is the issue of the extraordinary costs that face people who are wheelchair reliant who need to travel beyond their immediate geographical vicinity. Fares of hundreds of dollars to travel to destinations within Tasmania makes such travel prohibitive for many people. In many cases there is no alternative transport as accessible buses are not available or do not meet the needs of potential consumers.

PDAC commend the work of staff of the Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources for the extensive work undertaken as part of this review including the provision of informative and transparent resources and consultation with people who are wheelchair reliant in the North and South of the State.

Of the three policy options presented as part of the Review, PDAC express support for Option 2, involving removal of the per trip cap applying to the subsidy for TAS members. Removal of the cap will not only remove the discrimination that exists for WAT users who travel over 144.2kms but significantly reduce the costs for long distance travel within Tasmania for WAT users who are also TAS members.

The \$30 cap on the TAS subsidy has not been indexed since its inception and thus the real value of the TAS subsidy has been reducing over time. Removal of the cap will enable the real value of the subsidy to keep pace with fare increases over time.

A further benefit of removal of the cap will be cessation of the current practice, consistently referred to by participants in consultations for this review, of drivers

breaking longer trips into a series of smaller trips to maximise the operation of the TAS subsidy. This practice results in considerable delay and frustration for users.

PDAC recognise that the availability of WAT services in Tasmania is linked to the financial viability of WAT services for operators. In PDAC's opinion, Option 2 provides significant benefits for consumers whilst not adversely impacting on the financial viability of operators.

PDAC note that even with the removal of the \$30 cap, and significant subsidies being provided for longer trips, WAT users will still be paying in the region of \$320 for a return fare between Hobart and Launceston and around \$560 between Burnie and Hobart. These remain extremely high travel costs for people with very limited, and in many cases, no transport alternatives. DIER is encouraged to continue to work to expand the range of accessible transport options available to people with disability and to improve the affordability of services that are fundamental to the well-being of many Tasmanians.

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, State Tables for Tasmania, Table 12

ⁱⁱ Adams, D, 2009, A Social Inclusion Strategy for Tasmania, Appendix 1 p71, Adams, D, 2009, A Social Inclusion Strategy for Tasmania, p32

ⁱⁱⁱ Adams, D, 2011, A Cost of Living Strategy for Tasmania p12, Adams D, 2011, A Cost of Living Strategy for Tasmania Companion Report 2, pp16-19