



Myriad Consultancy

'the Market Research people'

Research Report

Client: *Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources
Passenger Transport Policy Branch*

Project: *Market Research – WAT Review
Advocacy Group Consultation*

Date: *October 2005*

1. Background.

The review of wheelchair accessible taxi services comprised three key components – informal workshops with disability advocacy groups, a statewide survey of wheelchair dependent members of the Transport Access Scheme (TAS) and interviews with members of the taxi industry – operators and drivers.

This report covers the first stage, viz workshops and interviews with advocacy groups.

2. Research Aim and Methodology.

The sessions with advocacy groups were designed for the consultants to gain an understanding of the main issues involved in the availability of transport for people reliant on wheelchairs, in particular, the provision of wheelchair accessible taxi (WAT) services in Tasmania.

The sessions were conducted by the consultants (SGS and/or Myriad) at the respondents' premises. Organisations were provided with a letter from DIER explaining the purpose of the sessions and with an agenda for discussion – refer to *Appendices A and B*.

Specifically the sessions covered the organisations' experience with wheelchair accessible transport for its members, what changes have been noticed over recent years, any regional differences, and an assessment of key components of the service delivery.

The sessions comprised two forums and a series of in-depth interviews with the following groups –

Organisation	Session format	Number attending	Date
Paraquad	forum	6	11 Oct
Tasmanians with Disabilities	forum	5	18 Oct
ACROD*	interview	1	13 Oct
Disability Services Ministerial Advisory Committee	interview	1	14 Oct
MS Society	interview	1	12 Oct
Headway	interview	1	12 Oct
Tasmanian Pensioners Union	interview	2	14 Oct
Aurora Disability Services	interview	1	
Cosmos	interview	2	13 Oct
Cay-lee Home (Anglicare)	interview	1	14 Oct

* *in order to gain additional response from advocacy groups and service providers, ACROD distributed a survey questionnaire to its members statewide (refer to Appendix C). A total of 8 responses were received from the following organisations – Optia Inc, Northern Residential Support Group, Star Tasmania Inc, Kalista Ltd, Supported Housing inc, Paraquad Tas, Cosmos Inc and Multicap (Burnie Division). Responses are provided in summary form – refer to Appendix D.*

The forums were conducted with Executive staff of the relevant organisations, together with a number of their members. The interviews were conducted with senior personnel involved in transport issues for members.

3. *Research Findings.*

Feedback from the advocacy groups has been collated with reference to the discussion guide (*Appendix B*).

3.1 Current situation and context

- around 200 members with approx 40 wheelchair dependent. Large motorised wheelchairs – because of nature of disability
- approx 500 members with around 20% wheelchair dependent, at least some of the time. Some of their disability is physical, some cognitive, sometimes a combination and requiring complex motorised wheelchairs to get around
- 16 residents, all but 2 wheelchair dependent. Have own Transit van, use WAT for overflow, particularly for medical and therapy appointments
- very large organisation with approx 200 wheelchair disabled – temporary or permanent
- organisation has only small number of wheelchair reliant clients – limits use of WATs cf standard taxis (as does a perception that there are access difficulties re booking in advance and waiting times)
- approx 200 clients, with 20% wheelchair dependent

3.2 Comparison of current service compared with previous

- much better in last 12 months. Response times have reduced dramatically – still need to book a day ahead (but could not do that pre WAT)
- overwhelmingly positive from member organisation feedback
- have noticed a significant increase in availability, especially for appointment at peak times – can call up and get a WAT same day!
- the SPC days are a welcome thing of the past – the Hi Ace vans were positively dangerous and should **never have been allowed on the road – old and crappy**. This combined with abusive radio rooms and difficulty of booking. **THE WHOLE SITUATION WAS INSULTING TO DISABLED PEOPLE**. The introduction of WATs has been a **quantum leap forward for disabled transport**
- the WATs have ‘changed our lives’. Just getting out and about is so much easier than it was, with no problems re availability, response times, driver courtesy and comfort – **SUCH A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE!**

3.3 Key elements of service delivery

a. Driver courtesy/attitude/training

- majority of drivers very good. The need is for greater understanding and ability to deal with the medical state of the client, eg. must have a first aid certificate. **DRIVER EMPATHY/EXPERTISE NEEDS TO GO TO THE NEXT LEVEL**.
- WAT drivers now much more *aware* of client needs – ‘it’s the little things’
- **CANNOT BE FAULTED** ... and take the initiative by discussing problem clients with us, eg. where driver is asked to assist with shopping, carrying up stairs, even toileting!

- outing organised for members by taxi company at minimal cost – JUST BRILLIANT HELP
- drivers very polite but sometimes over do it – *‘do you understand what I’m telling you?’*
- (with vision impaired customers) need to take the time to orientate passenger re the different layout – just a few quick tips if they were expecting a standard cab
- WAT drivers are excellent – aware of the little things that make a difference (compared with regular cab drivers)
- just AAA+ - you can feel their attitude of courtesy, communication and empathy. Compare this with standard cab service – may often be impatient, even rude when having to deal with the ‘hassle’ of a wheelchair dependent customer
- **DIER should set up a working group with taxi operators plus advocacy groups (and members) – with a simple focus to specify optimum ride comfort design features for new WATs – so that new vehicles coming on line match the target market needs.**
- WAT driver training – disabled input is from one representative only – who may not represent the wider disabled community view/needs
- **use disabled people in the training of WAT drivers ... and role play with drivers in the wheelchair to really see what it’s like!**

b. Convenience – including ease of entry/exit

- big chairs can be a problem manoeuvring with some vehicles
- hoist preferred compared to ramp in terms of convenience and safety
- clients much prefer ramp compared to hoist
- no problems – hoist preferred
- problems with uneven terrain from front door to vehicle if no carer/family member on hand to assist – and drivers can’t
- preference is the hoist (lifting ramp) – quick, easy, dignified and safe. The higher ramp, eg. Big Red, is dangerous. The lower ramps (Renault, Voyager) are OK because of the smaller slope.
- still problems with driver loading/unloading if not parked in a designated car space
- steep entry ramps are a concern – feel unsafe and insecure. A mix of preference – either low slope ramp or hoist (positive is that chair is on the level the whole time)

c. Availability and response times

- excellent – still need to book a day ahead (but could not do that pre WAT)
- some problems have been experienced late at night (young people) and on Christmas Day. SHOULD BE A CONDITION OF LICENCE THAT WAT IS AVAILABLE OUT OF HOURS TO MATCH DEMAND – MAYBE A ROSTER
- definite increase in WAT availability and quicker response times for Hobart
- Associated Taxis excellent, Taxi Combined mostly reliable, City Cabs either late/don’t show/can’t do/handball to other companies
- much better than SPC days
- access to WATs difficult at peak times, eg. 9am, 3 pm, especially given that bookings likely to be ad hoc. Perception that a permanent peak time booking, eg. 8.30 am would be problematic and that ringing for a WAT was ‘potluck’. Because of this, organisation uses WATs less frequently than previous use of SPCs. As a result, have a fleet of their

own with three wheelchair access vehicles. When WATs are used (City Cabs) drivers are ‘often stretched’ with booking numbers and level of service sometimes suffers

d. Cost/value

- most WATs can only take one w/c passenger at a time which is a real problem for group travel from group homes
- increased fare cost due to greater distances between accommodation and destination ... because of de-institutionalisation combined with a spread of service locations.
SOLUTION? A COMMUNITY OF INTEREST (OR HUB) WHERE SERVICES AND ACCOMMODATION ARE IN THE SAME GEOGRAPHIC VICINITY
- need to clarify when the meter starts and stops re loading and unloading time
- DIER need to make a ruling about when the meter starts and finishes – the passenger can’t see the meter once they’ve exited
- some drivers put meter on when they arrive and off when they get to destination – fair enough (swings and slides), but should not be left on at both ends for load/unload
- the 60% voucher rebate is welcome but still a major expense where members live out of town
- vouchers are good but 40% of the fare can still add up to a significant \$ amount, and because of their transport needs their weekly spend is well above able bodied people ... other things have to be cut out. THE COST IS SIGNIFICANT ESPECIALLY IF WORKING, ATTENDING A TRAINING COURSE OR IF MULTIPLE APPOINTMENTS, EG. MEDICAL, THERAPY – wouldn’t mind if could catch a bus – or fare was equivalent. **The extra cost of disability.**
- 60% voucher system for wheelchair reliant members discriminates against others (who may be just as difficult to transport)
- a disability pension even with the mobility allowance is not sufficient to cover taxi transport costs, even with the voucher rebate

e. Comfort and safety

- overall comfort is very good now – was a problem in the past, eg. Ford Transit van (SPC) – sitting too high, looking at the roof!
- way ahead of the old SPC mini vans – no view, distant from driver, too high up. The new WATs give a safe and secure feel and chair is at normal height.
- plenty of space compared with SPCs which makes it easier to secure the chair
- side loading has been a concern – chair not properly stabilised with four point tie down. Drivers have been known to leave chair (with passenger!) side on which means travel discomfort and increase chance of injury if collision. The standard Voyager has passenger leaning back in chair – not comfortable.
- some WATs give a very rough ride, with the chair sitting over the back axle (and Tasmanian roads have many bumps). Some drivers, eg. Jurgen, reduce the problem by inserting rubber pads and driving slowly – but **SHOULDN’T HAVE TO – THE CAB SHOULD BE ENGINEERED FOR A COMFORTABLE RIDE.** Particularly a problem with passengers who lack muscle tonal control. There is a great range of comfort from the Big Red (lowest score) to the Renault and new Grand Voyager. Note – the old stretch cab was very comfortable – passenger sat close to driver and easy side load ramp.
- much better than SPC days

f. Communication with driver/company

- most clients have mobile number of driver so direct access which is great
- direct contact – mobile number – empowering
- (in the cab) usually sitting way back – difficult to converse with driver and feel lonely!
SOLUTION – INTERCOM!
- **do not usually get the WAT they order!**

3.4 Regional differences

- lower service expectations in North and NW but members have adapted to lower availability, eg. understand the need to prebook
- some lack of driver support in North/NW re assistance with chair and passenger luggage

3.5 Other issues

- Federal Govt ‘Back to Workplace’ push will increase demand on WATs
- still a proportion of members who won’t access WATs – fear of driver not understanding their situation
- member mobility fluctuates – DIER have been very understanding with voucher qualification
- one barrier to use – members want to appear ‘normal’ by catching a standard cab.
NEED TO EDUCATE TO BREAKDOWN THIS BARRIER.
- why does a disabled person suddenly become a Federal not State responsibility after age 65?
- closing down of regional business (Tahune pottery) – disabled workforce now unemployed – prohibitive cost of travel to Hobart for work
- DIER SHOULD ESTABLISH AN ADVISORY COMMITTEE INVOLVING DISABLED TO CONTINUALLY ASSESS TRANSPORT DISADVANTAGED AND PRIORITIES – **involve the target group directly** rather than rely on bureaucratic assumptions
- instead of a DIER disabled advisory committee, there should be an Office of Disability across whole of government – to cover all areas not just transport
- the introduction of WATs needs to be ongoing so that in time *all* taxis (and Metro buses) are wheelchair friendly – like has happened in Canada, Germany and Sweden. But DIER needs to make it easier on taxi companies, eg. a moratorium on licence fees for say 5 years
- keen demand for a WAB (wheelchair accessible bus!) available for outings – group transport – would have a potential wide market, eg. tourists with disabilities, school for seniors. Should cover town and country areas
- down the track *all* taxi transport should be accessible to *all*
- organisation unhappy that the TAS scheme was individual not group based
- organisation reported that vouchers received on behalf of clients are *all* wheelchair issue (*despite only 20% of clients being wheelchair dependent!*)

Note: PROJECT REPORT – PLEASE COULD THE SUMMARY REPORT BE IN BOTH HARD COPY AND ELECTRONIC (SO VISION IMPAIRED CAN ACCESS VIA COMPUTER)