

Wheelchair accessible taxis

Review of fares and subsidies 2012

Meeting with WAT users and representatives
Launceston, 23 February 2012

- There was overall support from attendees for Option 2 as outlined in the Discussion Paper (that is, abolishing the \$30 per trip cap).
 - ⇒ Attendees said that if nothing else is done in respect of fares, at the very least the per trip cap should be removed. If the cap was not able to be removed altogether, it should be significantly increased: \$50 was suggested as a minimum.
 - ⇒ An increase in subsidy above the current 60% would be welcome by WAT users due to the high cost of taxi travel and the necessity of using taxis for many users. An increase to 65% or 70% was suggested (as well as increasing the cap or removing it altogether).
- It was also suggested that all components of taxi fares should be the same for all taxi users – regardless of whether they are wheelchair-reliant or not. Rather than reducing income for WAT operators by dropping WAT fares to match standard fares, this could mean increasing the standard rate to the rate that wheelchair reliant users pay.
- It was noted that taxi fares in general are very expensive, even with the subsidy, and that the high cost can make it difficult for wheelchair-reliant people to get out of their homes.
 - ⇒ Attendees observed that this is especially true where people want to travel long distances, where there is incentive for the system to be misused in order to create cheaper fares.
 - ⇒ It was suggested that if the cap was removed there would be less reason to abuse the system (e.g. less incentive to take multiple \$50 trips instead of one long trip).
- It was noted that any option that reduced income for the driver would not be desirable, as this could potentially affect the level of service provided to customers.
 - ⇒ It was suggested that drivers are often not adequately compensated for the time taken to load a wheelchair-reliant person into a WAT, so any move to further reduce payment for this time would be resisted by the industry.
 - ⇒ It was also suggested that the trip subsidy that is paid to operators should be required to be shared with drivers to assist in addressing this issue.

- ⇒ It was suggested that fares should be dropped to the Tariff 1 and 2 rates, with the 60/40 subsidy for WAT users. It was argued that cheaper fares would result in people using taxis more often, so taxi operators would get more business and therefore would not actually lose any income as a result of the lower fares.
- Most users were generally satisfied with the service provided by WATs.
 - ⇒ Users said that most of the time they will pre-book a taxi.
 - ⇒ At least one person said they are generally able to get a taxi for “immediate” pickup within about 30 minutes most times they call.
 - ⇒ Users said that they prefer to deal directly with a person in the call centre, not the automatic phone service. Most users call the taxi company, but sometimes they will call a driver directly.
 - ⇒ One Launceston company was commended for its drivers all having been available on Christmas Day to drive WATs.
- One user told of bad experiences with a particular driver.
 - ⇒ DIER to follow this up with the operator.
 - ⇒ Users felt that the training for WAT drivers was generally inadequate. Users felt that driver training should be more ‘experiential’ – that is drivers should have to sit in a wheelchair and be loaded into a WAT and then driven around so they know what it’s like for a passenger in a wheelchair.
 - ⇒ It was also suggested that drivers would benefit from regular refresher training.
- It was suggested that DIER should be in regular contact with drivers – e.g. conduct a survey every 2 or 3 years and should also form a working group with drivers, operators and users to meet with DIER on a regular basis about their ideas, concerns and views on how the industry could be improved. It was suggested that ongoing evaluation of the scheme was paramount.
- The question was raised about how existing WATs would cope with changing wheelchair technology (e.g. “standing chairs”) and there was a discussion about whether scooter users should remain seated in their scooter when travelling in a WAT.
- There was a discussion about when the meter should be turned on – some users reported that some drivers will turn the meter on before the taxi starts to move.
 - ⇒ DIER explained the reasons for keeping the meter requirements the same for all taxis and advised that drivers are not supposed to turn the meter on while they are assisting passengers into the vehicle.

- It was noted that some WAT users have no choice but to use WATs – that is, they are not able to use accessible buses because of the nature of their disability, or there might be no bus travelling to where they want to go.
 - ⇒ With this reliance on taxis, it means that travelling anywhere is very expensive compared to a non-wheelchair reliant person, who will usually have more than one transport option, and whose transport is generally cheaper than taxis.
 - ⇒ This is especially noticeable when the person has to travel regularly (e.g. to work every day) or where the person lives a considerable distance from the activities that they want or need to attend (for example, people whose disabilities require them to live in residential care and who have little choice as to the location they live in). This has the result of excluding people from social activities, work etc, simply because their only transport option is prohibitively expensive.
 - ⇒ It was noted that some people cannot afford to work because they cannot afford the transport to get to work. Therefore, they rely on social security when they are capable of working – the barrier is the lack of transport, not the capability of the person.
 - ⇒ If a person has to rely on a taxi for transport, and is then faced with a dirty taxi, a bad driver and expensive fares, this is very frustrating for the user, because they have no choice other than not to travel at all.
- It was suggested that the very fact that the WAT fares (tariffs) are higher than standard taxi fares is discriminatory, even with the effect of the higher subsidy.
 - ⇒ DIER explained that the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner had confirmed that the effect of the subsidy is sufficient to remove any discrimination in respect of higher tariffs, other than in cases where the fare is very high (about \$300), where the subsidy is not enough to offset the difference between the WAT fare and the standard taxi fare.
 - ⇒ Not everyone agrees with this interpretation, and a strong counter-view was expressed that the higher fares for WAT users are discriminatory and that all users should pay the same fares.
- It was also noted that business modelling of the WAT scheme was not presented to the forum. It was suggested that this requires further investigation in order to ensure a fair and equitable transport scheme for wheelchair-reliant users.
- Issues attendees identified with Community Transport included:
 - ⇒ there are few if any accessible vehicles and those that are accessible are larger buses better suited to group travel;
 - ⇒ many services do not operate in the Launceston CBD;
 - ⇒ services have to be booked in advance;

- ⇒ volunteer drivers are not always available;
- ⇒ services do not operate on weekends;
- ⇒ these vehicles are not “taking” WAT drivers’ work because they aren’t doing wheelchair work;
- ⇒ the services generally can only transport their own clients, so are not available to transport other people.