

Submission in response to Tasmania's Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources, Wheelchair Taxi Subsidy Review 2011-12.

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Introduction

Tasmania is the only jurisdiction across Australia which discriminates those taxi users who are wheelchair-reliant. Nowhere else in Australia, does a state/territory charge higher flagfall rates, higher waiting times, higher kilometer rates to wheelchair-reliant users and a different, much lower rate to non-wheelchair users, other than Tasmania. This submission argues that this is discrimination for those wheelchair-reliant users with profound/severe disability whereby transport options offer no choice but to use wheelchair adapted vehicles such as maxi taxis.

Most wheelchair taxi drivers in Tasmania are considerate, caring and compassionate. Commonly, response time for pick up is timely and largely professional. This is not a submission taking aim at maxi taxi operators, nor the maxi taxi drivers. They are worthy and appreciated.

Rather, this submission is reminding government policy makers as to why there is a wheelchair-taxi scheme and stating a preferred option to rectify the barriers to participation that is fair and equitable applicable to wheelchair accessible taxis pricing.

Fundamentally, at the core of any wheelchair accessible transport scheme, we need to consider why we have such a scheme. What is fair and equitable? How do we progress participation of people living with disability? Central to this submission is the right to equal access for all citizens, regardless of disability. The standard fare rate must apply to all citizens, regardless of whether they are wheelchair-reliant or not. Then the subsidy can apply because of severely limited or no-choice in transport options. If necessary, lift the standard fare to be equal of that to current higher flagfall and tariff charges imposed on wheelchair reliant taxi users.

This submission is based on personal lived experience with disability. As a wheelchair-reliant user, this submission informs the current review by DIER in the pricing schedule for wheelchair-reliant users. The views within this submission are informed by listening to other wheelchair access transport users, and having attended one of the two wheelchair access forums hosted by DIER. As a person who has family located across the state, work and volunteer commitments which requires travel as well as desire to visit our state, the limited choices and expense of transport is overwhelming. Flying to Sydney return is cheaper than travelling to Hobart from Launceston return trip as a wheelchair access scheme recipient.

This submission suggests that all flagfall rates upon entering a taxi are the same for all passengers, that a 60%-40% subsidy applies to all trips for wheelchair reliant users with no-transport choice, and the cap is banished.

Background

In March 2011, the author of this submission met with Hon Nick McKim, Minister for Transport in response to correspondence sent to him, highlighting the discrimination of unfair taxi pricing for wheelchair-reliant users. It was presented to the Minister that Tasmania, alone of all states/territories, charges two different prices for its citizens. That is, a standard rate for non-wheelchair users and a higher flagfall and tariff rate for wheelchair-reliant users.

The Minister responded to ensure a review was conducted surrounding Wheelchair-Access-Transport scheme for Tasmania to determine if discrimination exists. The review, by the Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources (DIER) has attempted to consult widely with wheelchair-reliant users. The forum attended by this author, had 7 participants. This submission intends to inform the review.

It must be noted, that in response to a media release published in the Examiner in March 2011 by this author - calling for action regarding higher flagfall rates for wheelchair reliant users - one of the newly established maxi taxi companies threatened not to provide ongoing taxi services. Fortunately, here in Launceston there is another company dedicated to wheelchair-reliant users. However, such bullying by maxi taxi companies should not be tolerated. It is indicative of the vulnerability wheelchair-reliant users have in accessing their community through limited transport options.

Disability emancipation (liberation) in Tasmania

Disability was once viewed in the medical model, in simple terms, meaning that disability was a 'fault' of the individual, it was seen as a tragedy, that all people living with disability were incapable of being productive citizens. Today, the social model and affirmative model of disability gains prominence and assists with the emancipation (liberation) of people living with disability. In other words, disability is not something that individuals have. Rather what individuals have are body functioning limitations. It's the racism in policy, which disables people with capacity and dependency focuses.

Contemporary disability rights politics has aided in the emancipation of people living with disability – to exercise their self-determination and responsibility. People living with disability want to work, want to take control over their own lives, be accounted as the natural authorities of their lives.

The disabling barriers to participation in meaningful ways as productive citizens, is found in the lack of instruments (such as legislation and policy) that enables authentic social inclusion. Therefore, this review of WAT fares is timely to be brought into contemporary disability policy.

In the mid 2000's Tasmanian government established the Disability Framework for Action, which is policy framework to guide all government agencies to progress disability rights based social policy towards equality and fairness in policy and program development for all Tasmanians. DIER can be guided by this framework.

Governments have a responsibility for future economic and social participation of people living with disability. For it is in the best interests of all, to promote workforce participation to promote healthy economies.

Where the state of play is at for wheelchair access taxis

Wheelchair accessible transport in Tasmania has moved forward since the beginning of the century. Until 2004, there were no wheelchair accessible taxis licenses. Wheelchair reliant users depended on special purpose cabs or relied on others to transport. Largely wheelchair reliant users didn't leave their homes because not all vehicles could carry wheelchairs or some users could not physically transfer into a standard car. Today, wheelchair-reliant users are still shut-in their homes and shut-out of participating equally as citizens because of the unfair and discriminatory pricing of Tasmania's maxi taxi pricing.

Currently there are wheelchair taxi licenses in Hobart and Launceston. In our experience, there are no maxi taxis operating fully on the North West coast. For wheelchair taxi or maxi taxi licenses, the cost is free of charge, in contrast to standard taxi licenses at \$140,000 according to the DIER review paper. It was revealed during the DIER consultation forums, that every time a maxi taxi picks up a wheelchair-reliant passenger, a fee of \$12 (Launceston), \$9 (Hobart) and \$15 (North West coast) is paid to the owner – not the driver – of the taxi license. The reason for these incentives, according to DIER, 'is to encourage taxi drivers to pick up wheelchair-reliant users as fares, and to cover the costs of modified vehicles.'. The lack of business modeling, and true costs of modified vehicles to accommodate wheelchair-reliant users was not provided, however, it is thought that not paying the \$140,000 license fee would be incentive enough to purchase and/or cover the costs of modifying vehicles to WAT standard. Further, having to 'encourage drivers to pick up wheelchair-reliant fares' is indicative of the negative community attitudes towards wheelchair-reliant users.

Currently, permanent wheelchair-reliant taxi subsidy users qualify for a subsidy rate of 60-40% with a \$30 cap on all trips. Across each state and territory, taxi subsidies for wheelchair-reliant users range from 75-25% to 50-50%. From a personal perspective, a return trip to Swansea from Launceston is in the vicinity of \$500, Hobart up to \$880 (quoted by one company but usually negotiate a rate of \$600), Burnie is \$500 return trip.

Table 1: Current pricing structure clearly demonstrates discrimination

Fare Component	Non-wheelchair uses pay	Wheelchair Reliant Users pay
Flagfall	\$3.40	\$5.00
Distance (per km) – T1/T3 (Mon-Frid)	\$1.84	\$2.04
Distance (per km) – T2/T4 (out of hours service)	\$2.20	\$2.45
Waiting Time (per minute)	\$0.60	\$0.69

(adapted DIER Presentation to Hobart Users March 2012).

According to DIER, the higher flagfall and tariff's applied to wheelchair-reliant passengers is to cover the 'slower travelling time and loading and unloading of wheelchairs'. This is unquantifiable, thus unjustifiable.

Tasmania is the only jurisdiction within Australia, who imposes a higher flagfall rate, higher kilometer charge, higher waiting time, to wheelchair-reliant users. Justifying that the 60-40% is to alleviate these charges (by DIER in the review paper) is not the essence of a wheelchair taxi scheme nor is it beneficial to wheelchair-reliant users over long distances.

Why we have a wheelchair taxi scheme

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an international human rights instrument of the United Nations intended to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Parties to the Convention are required to promote, protect, and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights by persons with disabilities and ensure that they enjoy **full equality under the law.**' Australia ratified the UNCRPD in 2008.

Article 9 of the UNCRPD states:

1. To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, **on an equal basis with others**, to the physical environment, **to transportation**, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services 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, ...Buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing, medical facilities and workplaces... (reference <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>) (emphasis added)

No-choice in transport for participation

"Largely, people living with disability encounter barriers to participation in social and economic life such as transport, employment, education, support and community attitudes" (Disability Investment Group 2009)

Not all wheelchair-reliant users have choices for transport options in Tasmania. Some may not be able to afford to buy a wheelchair adapted vehicle; are unable to drive. Accessible bus transport is not always suitable for some wheelchair users either. For example, metro bus services are introducing wheelchair access buses, however these are largely unsafe for many those wheelchair-reliant users who have severe limited body functioning - because of no tie-down points for the wheelchair to remain immobilized whilst in transit. Secondly, intrastate accessible bus transport is provided by private holders, and not all routes have wheelchair accessible buses. Thirdly, there are some wheelchair-reliant users with severe medical impairments which simply bus transport is not an option.

Wheelchair transport plays a significant role in the participation of wheelchair-reliant users, to access their community, their jobs, their families, their homes and their leisure. However, there is a need for a wheelchair accessible taxi scheme that continues to evolve and emerge as contemporary disability politics aims to strengthen participation of people living with disability.

From a personal perspective, as a person living with severe disability, there is no choice other than wheelchair accessible taxis for transport.

Financial barriers to participation

The impacts of the unbalanced and capped subsidy costs of WATS include; participation in the workforce, accessing medical support centralized in Hobart, maintaining friendships and family relationships who live across the state, touring across the state. For example, a return trip to Swansea from Launceston is in the vicinity of \$500, Hobart up to \$880 (quoted by one company but usually negotiate a rate of \$600), Burnie is \$500 return trip.

Many wheelchair reliant users face considerable barriers to workforce participation. For example, approximately 45% of people living with disability in Australia live in or near poverty, more than double the OECD average of 22% and only 43% of people living with disability are employed compared to 77% non-disabled people employed (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2011).

Preferred option

The Tasmanian Government must rid the discrimination of its unfair taxi pricing for wheelchair-reliant users. Therefore, we advocate that the Tasmanian state government, in the interests of encouraging workforce participation, social inclusion and anti-discrimination adopt the following option (not included in the DIER review):

- **Option 4**
 - **Maintain the 60-40% subsidy for those wheelchair-reliant users dependent on maxi taxis as the only option for transport within Tasmania.**
 - **Develop one standard flagfall, tariff rates applicable for ALL taxi users**
 - **Banish the cap rate of \$30 per trip.**

This submission acknowledges that most maxi taxi drivers are mindful, considerate and caring about their jobs and the people whom they transport. Therefore, if incentives are an issue in Tasmania for maxi-taxi drivers, then it is advocated that the government subsidy for loading and unloading wheelchair-reliant users, is passed onto drivers each fare they do – instead of the owners. The fact that owners are supplied maxi taxi license plates free of charge, compared to standard taxi operators who have to pay \$140,000 (as indicated in DIER's review paper), allows maxi taxi operators to purchase modified vehicles to carry wheelchair-reliant users.

Future reviews

The review conducted by DIER is short of providing detailed business modeling to support the case of the current taxi pricing. There is a need for further research and development in order for the government to be contemporary and knowledgeable about a fair and equal taxi scheme for those individuals living with severe/profound impairment as wheelchair-reliant users.

Until such time the DIER can implement such research and development, the government must act now in line with the UNCRPD, the National Disability Strategy and the Disability Framework for Action (Tasmania Government) to drop the two flagfall and tariff charges for taxi users.

Bibliography

- Group, D. I. (2009). *The Way Forward: A New Disability Policy Framework for Australia*.
- PriceWaterhouseCoopers. (2011). *Disability expectations: Investing in a better life, a stronger Australia*. ACT.