



Physical Disability Council of NSW Inc

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The Hon. Carl Scully
Minister for Transport
Level 34, Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Farrer Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Scully

The Physical Disability Council of NSW applauds the NSW Government's decision to make 400 of the 500 new taxi licenses Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WAT). While we applaud the increase in the number WATs, we wonder why the 500 were not all made accessible.

We have heard conflicting rumours about the nature of the new taxi licenses so we would appreciate it if you could let us know the breakdown of types of vehicles and the conditions under which the plates will be licensed.

To the extent that final decisions have not been made, we would like to take this opportunity to call upon you to ensure that no more than 50 of the new licenses be of the maxi-taxi van type which apparently is favoured by Taxis Combined and other operators.

Historically maxi-taxis have been poorly accepted by the general community because they have been identified as disabled taxis, and they are disliked by many people who use wheelchairs for the same reason. The maxi-taxis do not provide the same level of service delivery to wheelchair users as it does to the general public which expects a comfortable ride in a sedan-style passenger vehicle, air-conditioning and heating, safety, and a clear vision on all sides. The maxi-taxis:

- ▶ are uncomfortable for wheelchair passengers because the suspension is designed as a commercial vehicle rather than a passenger vehicle
- ▶ cause significant discomfort for many people with spinal cord injury who may develop poclithermia due to the lack of heating in the rear of the vehicle
- ▶ are unsafe insofar as the seat-belt configuration does not provide torso support to people who need such support more than others – the lapsash not conforming to the AS2942 standards, and not being properly adjustable over the shoulder
- ▶ do not provide clear vision on all sides with resultant headache, tiredness, and dizziness to passengers who are sitting in a wheelchair

- ▶ isolate wheelchair users from the driver and other passengers and
- ▶ continue to re-enforce a negative stigmatising stereotype of people with disabilities as different, needy, and unfortunate.

While not perfect, we believe that the Chrysler Voyager Activan is at this point in time the preferred vehicle type suitable for the WAT fleet.

We recognise the importance of increasing the supply of WATs as a necessary first step to providing equal service to wheelchair users, but we believe that further steps need to be taken to decrease waiting times. Without changes in management techniques and the imposition of restrictive conditions on WAT licenses, we do not expect any significant improvement in service delivery - particularly if drivers find it more profitable to use the maxi-taxis as “multiple-hire” and “tourist” taxis rather than WATs.

Taxi Design

None of the taxis currently servicing Sydney provide satisfactory safety and comfort. Thus:

- ▶ Flashcabs present excess risk from a rear collision and are extremely uncomfortable because of the slope at the rear, the placement of the disability seat, and the poor air circulation; and securing the seat involves undignified and inappropriate contact between driver and passenger, and indignity and difficulty in the way drivers must secure the wheelchair.
- ▶ Metrocabs are uncomfortable because of the convex floor, the need to face the back of the vehicle, the low headroom, and a size which does not meet the wheelchair footprint of 1300 x 800; are dangerous because of the lack of air conditioning and absorptive heating qualities; and are incapable of taking more than one wheelchair user at a time.
- ▶ Vans are uncomfortable, unsafe, and segregationist for the reasons outline above on the previous page.

We have noted above our concerns with the maxi-taxi vans and would like to take this opportunity to call on you to **liaise with other State Transport Ministers and the Federal Transport Minister to jointly fund a research project with a major automotive manufacturer to design and develop a multi-function universal taxi able to transport all persons wishing to hire a taxi and providing equal standards of comfort and safety for all passengers.**

Such a vehicle should as a minimum:

- ▶ provide sedan-style passenger comfort and safety to all passengers
- ▶ accommodate up to two wheelchairs
- ▶ provide ramp access rather than rear access
- ▶ provide clear vision for people sitting in wheelchairs
- ▶ allow wheelchair users to sit in the middle of the vehicle rather than in the luggage compartment.

A universal taxi is the only guarantee that wheelchair users are not segregated into a demeaning inferior taxi service. We have copious amounts of anecdotal experiences where the average member of the public refuses to travel in WATs except under duress. This not only has a stigmatising effect on people with disabilities, but the unpopularity of the vans to the general public affects driver morale and thereby on how drivers service people with disabilities. Nor do we believe that a television advertising campaign will change attitudes to make the maxi taxis acceptable.

A major research project to design a universal taxi could lead to dividends not only to wheelchair users in Australia, but could with careful planning and management lead to export dividends as well.

Quality of Service

We would also like to take this opportunity to express our view that the increase in the supply of taxis needs to be complemented by an improvement in the quality of the service. While we understand that complaints are widespread throughout the community, we believe that the quality of service is substantially worse for wheelchair users than for the population at large.

The waiting times that are experienced, the higher metered charges to WAT users, and the variability and uncertainty of service all need to be addressed if wheelchair users are to feel sufficient confidence in the system to increase their patronage. Without an improvement in the quality, the wheelchair accessible taxis will be underutilised.

We believe that improving the quality of service, decreasing the uncertainty of service, decreasing the waiting times and redressing of the extra metered charges faced by people wheelchair users would not involve radical change but a will to:

- ▶ impose priority quotas for each WAT and ensure that there are 5 people in wheelchairs picked up per day instead of the current average 1-person per day
- ▶ utilise management protocols relating to guarantee of effective service delivery
- ▶ establish, monitor and account for performance criteria
- ▶ upgrade existing technologies and management procedures for improved direction of drivers and passengers from the Central Booking Service
- ▶ waive the booking fee for people with physical disabilities
- ▶ implement a WAT passenger complaints policy and procedure which is widely publicised, accessible, transparent, accountable, and consultative
- ▶ impose locality restrictions on plates so that wheelchair users in the outlying parts of Sydney are well serviced
- ▶ impose round-the-clock 7-day service by WATs.

We call on you to **institute these reforms** as soon as possible. As some of these reforms may need to be undertaken at the co-operative level rather than at the individual taxi level, the PDCN calls on the Department of Transport to consider **amending the conditions of operation for taxi co-operatives** so that each co-op has a percentage of their fleet wheelchair accessible and so that each co-op's conditions are consistent with the Disability Discrimination Act Transport Standards.

Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme

We would also like to bring to your attention that:

- ▶ the limit on the subsidy to the TTSS has stayed at \$25 since 1984 during which the Consumer Price Increase has increased by 70 %
- ▶ the subsidy has stayed at a 50% rate even though in Western Australia and South Australia the subsidy is 75%

We call on the NSW Government to increase the **maximum subsidy in line with CPI increases to \$ 42.50 and to increase the subsidy rate to 75%** as wheelchair users are forced to pay exorbitant costs for transport due to the lack of alternatives to taxis. The extra costs include a booking fee, telephone costs (often from mobiles) to keep abreast of the status of a delayed job, the cost involved in securing a wheelchair and to assist with seat belts, and the increase in flag fall which has not been accompanied by any increase in service to TTSS users.

Failure to increase the subsidy rate to wheelchair users continues to impose a burden on our cost of living such that we pay more than four times as much on regular transport as our socio-demographic peers, and it continues to limit our opportunities to participate fully as citizens in the community.

We also call on you, together with the Federal Transport Minister and the other State Transport Ministers to implement a **national subsidy scheme** to enable wheelchair users to access taxi travel at the subsidised rate in all Australian States and Territories.

It is our understanding that the budget for the TTS scheme has been increased in the last few years, so we **seek information on levels of expenditure and budget allocations** for the TTS scheme over the past five years. It is our belief that government needs to provide transparency in the expenditures of public monies.

If the Physical Disability Council of NSW can be of assistance in consulting further on some of these issues, please feel free to call the Council on 9299-2822.

Yours sincerely

John Moxon
(President)