



## **Taxi Troubles**

The experiences of people with disability and taxis in NSW

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Physical Disability Council of NSW  
3/184 Glebe Point Road, Glebe NSW 2037

02 9552 1606  
[www.pdcnsw.org.au](http://www.pdcnsw.org.au)

[alice.batchelor@pdcnsw.org.au](mailto:alice.batchelor@pdcnsw.org.au)





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## Who is the Physical Disability Council of NSW?

The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) is the peak body representing people with physical disabilities across New South Wales. This includes people with a range of physical disability issues, from young children and their representatives to aged people, who are from a wide range of socio-economic circumstances and live in metropolitan, rural and regional areas of NSW.

Our core function is to influence and advocate for the achievement of systemic change to ensure the rights of all people with a physical disability are improved and upheld.

The objectives of PDCN are:

- To educate, inform and assist people with physical disabilities in NSW about the range of services, structure, and programs available that enable their full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.
- To develop the capacity of people with physical disability in NSW to identify their own goals, and the confidence to develop a pathway to achieving their goals (i.e. self-advocate).
- To educate and inform stakeholders (i.e.: about the needs of people with a physical disability) so that they can be able to achieve and maintain full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.



## Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1:**

*Transfer to the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) smartcard system across the whole NSW taxi fleet must be achieved, and an independent, provider neutral system put in place for payment processing.*

### **Recommendation 2:**

*The NSW Government must provide additional incentives for drivers to take on wheelchair accessible taxis (WATs) to increase the WAT fleet, particularly in limited markets.*

### **Recommendation 3:**

*Create and enforce a single streamlined central booking system across the whole state.*

### **Recommendation 4:**

*Nationalise the interstate booking system.*

***Transfer to the TTSS Smartcard (The Smartcard) system across the whole NSW taxi fleet must be achieved, and an independent, provider neutral system put in place for payment processing.***

The Smartcard system must be implemented in full across NSW. This entails a complete phase out of paper dockets, with the Smartcard being the streamlined and centralised system used for the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme.

Many survey participants reported issues across the use of the Smartcard, including drivers refusing to accept the cards and asking for paper dockets instead. PDCN supports the use of the Smartcard in preference to paper dockets as they are easier for many people with disabilities to use and are less likely to be damaged, destroyed or fraudulently used. Fully phasing out paper dockets for replacement with the Smartcard will ensure the full transition to the Smartcard as a matter of necessity.

In conjunction with the phasing out of the dockets, all taxi vehicles must be fitted with compatible payment terminals for processing the Smartcard. We understand that the current infrastructure under Cabcharge is expensive to install and maintain. The Government should investigate the barriers that have prevented drivers from taking up the infrastructure, and work towards a cost-effective and provider neutral system so that independent taxi providers can afford and justify the installation and use of the system.

***Provide additional incentives for drivers to take on WATs to increase available WAT fleet, particularly in limited markets.***

We are concerned that many drivers ceased operating their own WATs during the pandemic, and have either switched to standard taxis, as a more lucrative business opportunity, or left the industry all together.

With reports that some regional areas only have one or two WATs in operation or have lost all WATs in their region as well as growing competition from NDIS funded transport services

during the day across some regional areas, we need the NSW Government to review of the adequacy of current incentives with a view to rebuilding the NSW WAT fleet.

It may also be appropriate across large scale taxi companies for the Government to mandate that a set proportion of the company's fleet must consist of WATs.

***Create and enforce a single streamlined central booking system across the whole state.***

The confusion between the two existing booking services (Wheelchair Book & Ride, and Zero200) for WATs has been a constant cause for complaint since the contract for the central booking service was provided to Spinal Cord Injuries Australia and has resulted in poor customer service experiences for our membership.

A reliable, effective central booking service is extremely important for the disability community. We want to see an enforced streamlined booking system that can be used seamlessly to book WATs. Confusion between two competing booking services has caused frustration on both ends of the booking, with people booking on both services at the same time in hope of a shorter wait time, and drivers showing up to empty bookings. Enforcing a single streamlined booking service will improve reliability of WATs for users and remove the ability for people to double book services, saving drivers time and money.

***Nationalise the interstate docket system.***

Currently, each state and territory use a different system of subsidised taxi transport for people with disabilities. This requires those travelling interstate to apply for interstate payment dockets for use in taxis while travelling. This has caused issues for users, with accounts of drivers refusing interstate dockets or not knowing about them in general.

Discrimination, refusal of service, and verbal abuse are common occurrences for users of interstate dockets. We need a nationalised system for taxi travel, which would streamline the payment process, ensuring an easily understood system that works across all states and territories.

## Introduction

For many people with disability, taxis are an essential form of point-to-point transport to get to essential medical appointments, employment and broader social occasions. While many people with disability can ride in standard taxi vehicles, some rely exclusively on wheelchair accessible taxis (WATs), which are customised to transport people who use wheelchairs. Supply of taxis, including WATs is particularly important in rural and regional areas of NSW, where there is a reliance on these services since minimal alternative public transport is available.

Since 2020, the Physical Disability Council of NSW has had increased reports of issues related to taxi services from people with disabilities, to the point where many people with disability no longer consider taxis to be reliable, despite their necessity as an essential mode of transport. These issues relate to the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (the TTSS), the availability of WATs, and general use of services and are creating barriers to society for people with physical disability.

In February of 2023 the Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) ran an online survey on the experiences of people with disability using taxi services. This survey sought to understand the extent to the issues people with disability are facing with taxi services and the prevalence of these issues, with a focus on the TTSS. Most respondents were from metropolitan areas of NSW (71%), 24% from regional areas and there was also a small proportion of respondents from rural areas of NSW. All those surveyed were people with physical or sensory disabilities, ranging from vision impairment and blindness to manual and power wheelchair users.

Data from this survey provides clear evidence that the point-to-point transport network is not meeting the needs of people with disability, and that industry practices are in fact, are actively discouraging people with disability from using taxis and participating in society. While it was clear there are obvious benefits and positives to taxi services, our survey indicates that the way the TTSS Smartcard has been rolled out, and ongoing issues with customer service and bookings outweigh the positives for most users.

### What is the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS)?

The TTSS is an NSW government run scheme that provides people with severe and permanent disability in NSW a 50% subsidy of taxi fares, up to a maximum of \$60. This is inclusive of Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WATs).

When using the scheme, a participant must inform the driver that they are a TTSS participant. The driver must start the meter to calculate the passenger's fare, and at the end of a trip select the TTSS option on the Cabcharge payment terminal which will deduct the subsidy portion of the fare from the total, which is paid for by the smartcard. The remaining portion of the fare must be paid at the participants' expense with cash or card payment.

In its original conception, users were given paper dockets to give to taxi drivers, however this has now changed to a smartcard system. This smartcard is set up with corresponding payment

terminals owned by "Cabcharge" through which the smartcard uses a tap and go system. This smartcard system was introduced to make the use of the TTSS simple and streamlined, however the rollout is causing a multitude of issues for users and operators of taxis, causing confusion and frustration.

## Use of the TTSS Smartcard

Although the TTSS Smartcard has been fully rolled out across NSW, Transport for NSW still recommends that 'participants continue to carry paper travel docket in addition to their smartcard, in the event they use a taxi that is not Cabcharge enabled.'<sup>i</sup> We are disappointed that, despite significant time and resources invested in the rollout of the smartcard, passengers are still expected to maintain a supply of paper dockets as "back up" in the instance a service does not have a compatible terminal.

From our research, users of the TTSS Smartcard prefer this system over paper dockets, noting the Smartcard saves time and streamlines the payment process.

88% of those surveyed prefer to use the Smartcard over paper dockets, yet nearly 60% are still using paper dockets, with 36% only using them when a driver refuses the Smartcard. For those that use the Smartcard, 66% reported problems using it, which mostly related to drivers purportedly not knowing how to process the card or wanting to use dockets as a preference.

## Practical problems with using the TTSS Smartcard

For users of the TTSS Smartcard, drivers often appeared to have a lack of understanding of how to work the new card on their payment terminals. This has caused frustration for both the passenger and driver, and it appears that there is a lack of practical knowledge in how to process the cards across the taxi network.

*"I haven't been refused the ride, but I have had to pay full fare because I forgot to bring paper vouchers with me, and they did not know how to make the taxi card work."*

*"Taxi drivers don't know how to use it [the smartcard] would like the paper booklet ticket or sometimes the card won't tap on it has to be inserted."*

*"Drivers sometimes unsure what to do. More dislike the process i.e., delay in payment, no info on payslip. I now have to carry slips + cards so driver can choose. Neither I nor driver happy. TTSS needs to consult with drivers, they are not being listened to. I'm not getting any taxis, they are no longer available apparently..."*

When drivers refuse the use of the TTSS Smartcard as payment, driver rationale was often a claim of ignorance of the scheme, claims that the card is 'faulty', and sometimes simply stating they do not want to use the card.

*"I have had so many instances of drivers trying to claim the card isn't working or it has insufficient funds, or even just outright asking if I have the card so they can quote me a higher price that I am apprehensive to use it or to call for a taxi because I know what is coming. This is not good."*

*"Taxi drivers not knowing how it works. Not wanting to use it and insisting on paper vouchers. Or trying to overcharge on fares thinking I am stupid enough to accept it."*

A common concern for passengers that were surveyed was the refusal to take the TTSS Smartcard by drivers who understood the system and had the appropriate equipment. It was often the case that drivers would give a range of what appeared to be disingenuous reasons to not take the card or asked for higher fares if passengers wanted to use the cards. 25% of respondents reported being asked to pay a 'set fare' rather than rely on the metre when using a taxi service.

*"Drivers, not knowing how to complete the transaction on the machine. Drivers pretending they don't know how to complete the transaction by claiming there is insufficient funds, drivers, telling me at the start of the trip that a person's card didn't work yesterday, so my card might not work, surprise, surprise they tried to tell me that my card was invalid at the end of the trip. Drivers trying to get a higher price out of me when they know I have the card, drivers offering to put a higher amount on the card and a lesser amount for me so they can take home or with an overall higher price. Taxi company, not responding to any of my complaints about the above issues."*

*"In my opinion, there are a lot of drivers who don't know how it works, or who are playing the system. I often get quoted a higher price for my fares once they know I have an M 40. They will even ask me if they can put a little extra on the M 40, but it won't be passed along to me. This is terrible. Also, plenty of drivers either pretend or don't know how to use the card that was introduced. Even though it has been a year. And I receive very poor responses from the actual taxi companies, because what incentive do they have to not take more money from me as a customer."*

The vast majority of survey participants wanted better customer service and understanding of the system from taxi drivers. Although 88% of users prefer the smart card over paper docketts, a lack of awareness or refusal to learn how the system works from operators has caused constant issues.

*"Drivers often refuse to use it because drivers do not know how to use it."*

*"I don't have an issue with the actual card, I just believe drivers need more education around its use."*

*"The only thing I could suggest [to improve the smartcard] that taxi drivers get a lesson in how to use it and get a better understanding of what it's for."*

Where operators are informed and use the system as it is intended, survey participants reported positive customer service experiences.

## Cost of Payment Terminals for Drivers

One of the reported issues with the operation of the TTSS system, is the use of Cabcharge terminals for payments. It is concerning that many of the complaints and issues around taxi use for people with disabilities are based around driver use of this technology.

To use the TTSS smartcard, vehicles need to be fitted with a Cabcharge terminal, however this comes at a cost to the driver, which we understand includes buying the terminal, installation plus an ongoing fee for use. We are concerned that drivers are not wanting to invest in Cabcharge infrastructure or see this as an added expense while paper dockets are still in use and are generally wary of the Cabcharge system.

## Issues with Interstate TTSS Dockets

From responses collected through our survey, it was found that people generally were not aware of interstate TTSS paper dockets, with 38% of participants not knowing that they were available.

Of those surveyed who did use interstate dockets, 40% had experienced problems using them. For example, taxi drivers refusing to use the dockets, and there was a general consensus amongst this group of survey participants that many interstate taxi drivers either didn't know about scheme or did not understand how to use the dockets.

*"Drivers were reluctant to use them, particularly in Victoria. I think they thought it was some quaint New South Wales custom that they weren't obliged to follow. I never had anyone outright refuse to take the docket, but I had to make it firmly clear that a) I wasn't joking and b) they could either take the docket and half the money or just half the money, it was up to them. All took the docket in the end, but it would be way better if an interstate card could be invented, that way passengers wouldn't have to have these awkward conversations with drivers and drivers wouldn't have the inconvenience of wrangling dockets in 2023."*

*"Driver in Victoria didn't understand how they were used, he insisted they could only be used in NSW even though it was an interstate voucher."*

*"I haven't used them for quite a long while, but I used to use them regularly in Melbourne. I would often find that the driver had no previous experience with interstate vouchers (probably because in Victoria vouchers were no longer in use) and refused to accept them. Even when, at my suggestion, a driver contacted the operator they were not always accepted. This was difficult and embarrassing, especially because I was mostly travelling for work purposes."*

*"Cabbie in Melbourne refused to take one as he was not aware of them, same in Brisbane. Our card should work everywhere in Australia."*

There is a notable experience of poor customer service and discrimination when using interstate TTSS dockets. This has left people wanting to use the dockets stranded and often verbally abused by drivers who do not want to deal with the system. It is a common occurrence for people with disability who use these dockets to be refused trips due to driver ignorance.

*"I had the delightful experience of five taxis refuse to take me because they said they didn't have to take my voucher."*

*I was in Queensland [...] and the driver said, "not those bloody things." I was in Melbourne [...] and had a driver yell at me that I was "the worst passenger ever and you've ruined my day" for handing him my voucher. Thanks. I was in Melbourne [...] and when we got near my destination and I was filling out my voucher, the driver drove 300 metres past where I asked him to stop and said to me "you're not disabled, you can walk."*

## Reduced supply of Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WATs)

Separate from the issue of the TTSS smartcard, an increasingly concerning issue facing users of WATs has been the unreliability of these services.

This appears to be due to the lack of vehicles and WAT operators within the broader taxi fleet, and the decreasing availability of these vehicles for those who need them. This has become especially prevalent in rural and regional areas where taxi services are an essential mode of transport due to minimal public transport available.

A concerning 30% of those surveyed in the past 12 months had experienced booking a WAT that never turned up, and nearly one quarter of participants had waited more than 2 hours for a booked taxi to arrive. To counter this, several users reported booking simultaneous taxis through multiple booking systems in the hope that at least one will show up – which has the result of tying up two vehicles per passenger.

People with disabilities using taxis often rely on these services to get them to important appointments, or to save time when medical issues restrict the amount of time an individual can go without a bathroom facility. Taxis are used as a faster and more efficient alternative to public transport for many, however it is too often the case that the unreliability of services leads to heightened anxiety and stress for users.

*"I am a manual wheelchair user and continually have an issue getting taxis, to the point where getting a taxi is so difficult that I only use them as last resort. I am unable to catch wheelchair accessible taxis because my wheelchair has no head rest or tie-down points. I prefer to catch sedans because the transferring is easy, and I feel safe. Because non-WAT drivers are no longer required to offer "reasonable assistance" I have had drivers refuse to load my wheelchair, or drivers cherry pick my fare. Early today 3 separate times taxis were dispatched to*

*do the same job. As you can imagine, having to dispatch a number of taxis to find a driver that is willing to take me has increased wait times."*

*"Every occasion has been an absolute nightmare. Even when taxis are booked 3 days in advance. They never turn up without numerous calls to the taxi provider.*

*This has caused many missed specialist appointments, continence issues in public while waiting, missed medication, overtime rates to support workers due to not being able to leave the participant unattended, participant anxiety and psychological distress."*

Due to unreasonable wait times for WATs and the lack of availability of vehicles, people who rely on these services have missed vital medical appointments. We are concerned that this lack of reliability is inhibiting the capacity of people with disability to use taxis as a means of connecting with their communities, since attempting to find a taxi to go out is often stressful and frustrating and therefore not worth the effort.

*"Taxis don't come when I book them. I'm never rude or antisocial, I just can't get them to accept the booking unless it is a really long journey. I haven't been to the hospital for any outpatient appointments for 3 years. I haven't physically been to the GP for over 2 years. I can't make a medical appointment anywhere because I usually have to cancel at the last minute because I can't get a taxi. I can/could use a service like WAT in Sydney, but they charge double what a taxi does, and I can't afford it. I don't go anywhere anymore I just stay at home- it's less stressful and less frustrating."*

*"As I live 1.9km from the shopping centre I have difficulty getting a taxi to pick me up in the wheelchair. As it is a five-minute drive to the shopping centre. I book a taxi two days in advance and the taxi drivers will not pick me up due to the short distance and small fare. It's a huge issue due to missing Doctors' appointments. I'm charged by the doctor's surgery for not cancelling more than 24 hours before Doctors' appointments."*

*"I can't use wheelchair taxis anymore, as 50% of the time they don't turn up or arrive 30 minutes late. I have missed so many appointments as a result, and it is incredibly stressful."*

*"It's become truly bad. I'm wary of even booking now. I now limit outings to those I can wheel to/from. I missed several events that cost me a significant amount for tickets. I missed a relative's funeral service. I have no faith in the taxi system to meet my needs now."*

Long wait times are often the norm for people using WAT services, with loading and securing the passenger in the vehicle also adding time that must be accounted for when travelling. Participants note that there are often issues with this process beyond waiting times, which might be the result of inadequate training for WAT drivers.

*"Training for drivers [could be improved] - I've never had one secure me properly ever despite the detailed instructions inside their vehicle. Also, there are long*

*waits now, over an hour even though you pre-booked and then they just don't bother showing up."*

## Wheelchair Accessible Taxis & Booking Services

One of the major challenges for the taxi industry has been the streamlining of booking services for WATs. As it currently stands, there are two separate numbers for booking WATs, however both these booking services cover the same vehicles and operators. This has caused issues with double bookings, leading to unreliable services and confusion for users and operators.

As of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021, the centralised booking service for WATs across Sydney was set to transition fully from Zero200, owned by taxi company 13Cabs, to Wheelchair Book & Ride, operated by Spinal Cord Injuries Australia (SCIA)<sup>ii</sup>. Wheelchair Book & Ride operates only within the Sydney Metropolitan area, and Zero200 continues to operate as a commercial service. It is also problematic that the centralised booking service for WATs does not operate outside the Sydney Metropolitan area, leaving regional and rural areas without this same quality of service. Often it is the case that people with disabilities living in regional areas rely on these WAT services due to a lack of accessible and reliable public transport.

The changing over of this centralised booking service appears to have been highly problematic, resulting in overlap and confusion for users and operators of WATs. Our members have reported that WAT bookings via the centralised booking service are now unreliable, and operators have reported frustrations with the current situation too.

It is common for users of WATs to book a service from both Wheelchair Book & Ride and Zero200 at the same time, creating double bookings to try to 'hedge their bets' on getting a vehicle as soon as possible, or even to have one show up at all. PDCN is aware of cases where drivers have turned up for prebooked services to find the person has already been picked up. This only creates further delays for the already limited fleet of WATs available. At the same time, people with disabilities are keen to build personal relationships with WAT drivers, sharing contact details so they can get in contact with drivers directly when in need of transport rather than use the booking services provided, as this has become the more reliable option.

WATs are not classified as a dedicated service exclusively for wheelchair users, meaning they are able to pick up other jobs as they arise<sup>iii</sup>. It has become apparent that drivers are choosing to prioritise jobs that are not people with disability, since people with disability are reporting that drivers are cancelling 'their' jobs.

It is explicitly outlined in the Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Licence Compliance Policy (2018) that drivers of WATs must prioritise wheelchair users<sup>iv</sup>. Jobs that include groups of people and longer distances bring more lucrative incomes for drivers than choosing to pick up a person with disability who may be relying on the service, in breach of policy. This only puts more strain on the limited availability of WATs in operation and has resulted in a general distrust in the service, with people with disability often waiting over an hour for a vehicle to arrive.

## Conclusion

It is clear from our findings that the accessible taxi system is not working for a large proportion of our membership. While we know that there are many drivers who provide excellent customer service for people with disability and often build strong professional relationships with their passengers with disability, the information we have received across our survey indicates that there has been an unacceptable declining trend in customer service across the industry which appears to correlate with several regulatory changes in the point-to-point transport system.

It is not appropriate that people with disability as end users of the point-to-point transport system are forced to bear the brunt of industry conflicts, either internally, or with the state government.

Our members need reliable and safe point to point transport, with a system for processing TTSS subsidies that accords with modern customer service expectations across transport. We expect the taxi industry to adapt to the smart card system and expect entities like the Taxi Council of NSW to drive an expedient transition period. If barriers exist to adoption, these should be provided to government with a view towards resolution.

In relation to the TTSS scheme, it is integral that operators transition to the smartcard system and are adequately trained to deal with passengers using the scheme, and those with disabilities more broadly. Passengers should not be charged more to use a smartcard and should not be asked to use the paper docket in preference to the smart card.

Government and the taxi industry should also work together to increase WAT fleets to meet demand and decrease obscene wait times and cancellations. Further, driver training to a higher standard must be implemented. This may be achieved through further incentives for drivers and operators of WATs, and ongoing and renewed driver training programmes.

Booking systems need to be streamlined, with one service providing reliable tracking and booking of taxis, especially WATs. It was found through our survey booking taxis was often a simple process, however the reliability of these bookings was overwhelmingly disappointing.

Taxis are an essential mode of transport for people with disability, and TTSS is an overall positive and beneficial scheme for its users. Issues come with the reliability of the taxi operators, to the point where users have often lost faith in using taxis all together. These issues are fixable, and systemic failures need to be addressed. If nothing is changed, the taxi system will continue to fail its customers with disability.

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<sup>i</sup>Transport for NSW (2023), *TTSS Smartcard Rollout*, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> February 2023

<<https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/projects/programs/point-to-point-transport/tss-smartcard-rollout>>

<sup>ii</sup>Transport for NSW (2023), *Wheelchair Book & Ride*, NSW Government, accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023 <<https://transportnsw.info/travel-info/ways-to-get-around/taxi-hire-vehicle/wheelchair-book-ride>>

<sup>iii</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2023), 'Other factors affecting adequacy of service', *Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Inquiry Report*, accessed online 10<sup>th</sup> March 2023 <<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/wheelchair-accessible-taxi-inquiry-report#factors>>

<sup>iv</sup> Point to Point Transport Commissioner (2018), *Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Licence Compliance Policy*, NSW Government, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2023 <<https://www.pointtopoint.nsw.gov.au/about-commissioner/policies/wheelchair-accessible-taxi-licence-compliance-policy>>