



MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT

WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE TAXI TASKFORCE

**Interim Brief to the
Minister for Transport Services**

September 2004

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Foreword

Minister

On behalf of the Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Taskforce I present you with an interim brief pursuant to our terms of reference.

It is clear from contributions from taskforce members this is the latest in many attempts to improve the provision of Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WATs) in NSW.

Some members have participated on similar taskforces over the past 10 to 15 years.

Meanwhile, there have been steady but still only marginal increases in the number of WATs servicing our community.

Notwithstanding this, all members have approached the task in good faith with zeal and determination.

The Taskforce has deliberately attempted not to consider our brief in the context of balancing competing rights – the kind of debate that has not yielded satisfactory options for improvement previously.

Rather, the focus of the Taskforce has been on defining a realistically achievable goal and delivering recommendations for an industry adjustment plan to reach this goal over an appropriate time frame.

The rights of all parties are acknowledged in this context.

Detailed 'Industry Adjustment' recommendations will form the final report along with funding options for your consideration.

This briefing to you is:

- a discussion of the reasons why growth in the number of WATs has been limited;
- an introduction of three possible ways forward requiring further attention; and
- an isolation of the incentives that at this stage would seem necessary to prompt industry adjustment.

This is a short report given the time frame, our ultimate report date and the ongoing investigative work the taskforce has commissioned from Professor Ross Fitzgerald.

Broad issues regarding customer service have been referred to the Ministerial Inquiry into the Taxi Industry but will also be considered further in the final report. This brief then, needs to also be read in the context of the Ministerial Inquiry into the Taxi Industry.

The Taskforce will furnish you with the detailed final report before the end of the calendar year.

I thank all members of the Taskforce for their continuing efforts and wish to acknowledge the work done by Justine Adkins in the preparation of this interim brief.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Whelan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John Whelan
Taskforce Chair

Terms of Reference

On Tuesday 8 May the Minister for Transport Services established a Taskforce with a brief to:

- Conduct an analysis of why the availability of WATs is so limited;
- Assess the argument that operating WATs is not commercially viable;
- Assess the current incentives provided to the taxi industry to operate WATs;
- Advise on a realistically achievable goal and an appropriate timeframe for achieving this goal; and
- Provide financially sound recommendations to the Minister for increasing the number of WATs.

Announcing the taskforce, the Minister noted it was unacceptable people who required a Wheelchair Accessible Taxi were left waiting for hours or were unable to get a cab at all.

The Minister stated:

“The Government has initiated generous incentive arrangements to attract more WATs into the taxi market, yet demand from the taxi industry remains slow.

“This doesn’t make sense – I want to work with the taxi industry to increase demand.

“When you consider the cost of a conventional taxi plate in Sydney is around \$240,000, it’s hard to work out why there are so few Wheelchair Accessible Taxis.

“We need to hear from the disabilities sector about the levels of customer service they are receiving from taxi operators and drivers.”

(Minister for Transport Services media release, 8 May 2004)

The Taskforce

The Taskforce's members are:

- John Whelan Ministry of Transport (Chair)
- Roy Wakelin-King Ministry of Transport
- Dougie Herd Physical Disability Council of NSW
- Maryanne Ireland ParaQuad (Newcastle)
- Ross Turner ParaQuad
- Dinesh Wadiwel NCOSS
- Phil Drew Community Transport Organisation
- Howard Harrison NSW Taxi Council
- Brian Wilkins Country Taxi Operators Association
- Kevin Byrne Disability Council of NSW / DADHC
- Paul Versteeg Spinal Cord Injuries Australia
- Amanda Ellison The Northcott Society
- Rob Lake People with Disabilities
- Justine Adkins Ministry of Transport (Executive Officer)
- Plus additional representatives from the Ministry of Transport

The Taskforce has met on three occasions to date:

- on 15 June, at People With Disabilities NSW, Redfern;
- on 21 July, at the ParaQuad Office, Newington; and
- on 25 August, at the Physical Disability Council NSW, in Glebe.

History of Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Services in NSW

In 1979 the then Minister for Transport established the Joint Committee on Transportation for the Disabled to examine and make recommendations on ways of improving access to public transport facilities for people with disabilities

A Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) was introduced in November 1981 whereby people with severe and permanent disabilities who were unable to use existing forms of public transport had access to taxi travel at half the metered fare.

On being accepted into TTSS, participants requiring specially modified vehicles were allocated the code 'M50' while those able to use standard taxis were allocated the code 'M40', thereby allowing the taxi booking service radio job dispatcher to determine the type of taxi required in the circumstances.

Flashcabs



- Cheaper to convert and operate.
 - Can be uncomfortable for some wheelchair users.
 - Can provide poor visibility.
 - Especially in older models, can be difficult for drivers to secure front access belts due to limited space.
 - Regarded by some as less attractive to able-bodied passengers.
-

Following a trial period in the Metropolitan, Newcastle and Wollongong transport districts, TTSS was subsequently introduced in a number of country towns. By December 1987, TTSS had been extended to all areas of the State.

By 1983 there were 26 WATs operating in New South Wales, constituting 0.5 per cent of the total fleet.

Originally, individual networks each used their own radio networks for telephone bookings. Under this arrangement, vehicles were restricted to operation within areas covered by their respective radio networks.

The number of WATs varied widely between networks. For example, Taxis Combined Services (TCS) had 19 and Western Districts Network only had one, so the speed with which bookings were completed varied and there were difficulties. Local supply variations are still the primary problem being faced today.

To address these problems the taxi industry introduced one telephone number in 1984, providing access to a new '0200 Network'. This involved setting up a separate radio network and installing an extra radio transceiver in each WAT.

Under this arrangement intending hirers telephoned a central number and this in turn provided access to all the wheelchair accessible taxis in Sydney (except for the two operated by Northern Districts). For many years TCS has been responsible for all operational aspects of this arrangement and for monitoring and following up complaints.

In 1987 there were 43 WATs on the road throughout the State. The great bulk of these were Nissan Urvans (34), with some stretched Fords (8) and a London Taxi. Developmental costs for the Urvan and the London Taxi were borne by TCS and those for the Ford were to be shared by the Taxi Council and Special Purpose Vehicles Pty Ltd, a vehicle modification company.

In recognition of difficulties being faced by passengers in country areas where no wheelchair accessible taxi was available, \$400,000 from the 1987/88 Budget was allocated to the then Urban Transit Authority to facilitate the introduction of modified vehicles in rural areas.

Consequently, interest-free loans of up to \$20,000 (repayable over five years) were made available to country operators as an incentive to assist in the purchase or modification of a vehicle to carry a wheelchair.

Initially, an overflow of applications was expected but this did not occur and the initiative was not met with enthusiasm by some country networks.

By 1990 there were 30 WATs operating in country areas and a total of 15 interest free loans had been made. The amount and term of the loans available have been increased subsequently.

Between 1982 and 1990, a number of Sydney licences were issued to networks to subsidise the operation of their wheelchair accessible taxis.

These are commonly referred to as “nexus” licences. In 1991 approval was given for all WATs to be operated for 10 years, instead of six years as applied to a standard taxi.

In 1996 the former Department of Transport convened an Accessible Taxi Services Committee, which included representatives from several major disability lobby groups as well as the taxi industry.

It first met in 1997, with the aim of dealing with WAT booking options, compliance with WAT licence conditions, changes to the TTSS, and options for service improvement. Due to continuing complaints about poor WAT service performance and the need for reform, the Department prepared a discussion paper for the Committee in 1998.

The then Minister subsequently announced a raft of reforms to the taxi industry, including the issue of another 400 WAT licences. Legislative amendments then provided WATs had to be new vehicles, always carry a child restraint, be available for hire for at least 20 hours every day, not be driven by different drivers between noon and 5 pm and only be driven by specially trained drivers. These requirements were later relaxed.

Consideration was given in 1998 to the possibility of introducing a purpose-built taxi for wheelchair users. At the beginning of 1999 a working group of the Taxi Advisory Committee was established to inquire into the matter. The Taxi Council chaired the working group with representation from the Department, the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), the Transport Workers’ Union and the Disability Council of NSW.

The project was pursued at a national level, with NSW taking the lead role. Draft specifications were developed in consultation with all other States and Territories, as well as a draft Australian Design Rule. The matter was submitted to the Standing Committee of Transport in 1999 and further developmental work was undertaken over the next two years around Australia. There seems to be a consensus this has not yet yielded genuine progress.

Maxi taxis



- Capacity for two wheelchairs.
- Can accommodate small groups – higher tariff.
- Comfort of ride depends of model of vehicle and nature of conversion.

While for many years WATs were only required to have capacity to carry one wheelchair, for a few years they were required to have a two wheelchair capacity.

This requirement has now been relaxed, resulting in some improvements to WAT supply. Similarly, WATs no longer have to be new vehicles and there is no longer a minimum time during which they must operate.

Special WAT driver training has been reintroduced and is paid for by the Taxi Advisory Council. About 6.35 per cent of all taxi drivers hold this additional qualification.

For several years all WAT licences have had conditions attached to them requiring the licensed vehicle to fully comply with the Commonwealth's Disability Standards for Accessible Transport.

Not only does the Ministry require RTA-approved engineers to certify this, but new arrangements are now being implemented to check such vehicles for compliance more frequently.

Earlier this year regulatory amendments were made to prohibit WATs having seats installed in the area designed to carry wheelchair passengers.

Wheelchair Accessible Taxis Today – a Profile

- Today there are 451 WATs in NSW, or 7.4 per cent of the total fleet of 6,113 taxis across the State.
- A total of 322 or 71.4 per cent of these are located in Sydney, with the remaining 129 or 28.6 per cent in regional NSW.
- There are currently 1,527 WATs accredited drivers in NSW, although not all of these may be active.

The table below indicates where WATs are located around major regional centres:

Snapshot of WAT Availability in large regional centres			
Town / City	Population (2001)	Number of WATs compared to total taxi fleet	Types of vehicles
Wagga Wagga	56,722	6 / 29	Four flashcabs, two maxi taxis
Armidale	20,271	2 / 16	Maxi taxi
Coffs Harbour	46,338	7 / 19	Maxi taxi
Newcastle	136,569	5 / 159	Four maxi taxis, one stretch sedan
Broken Hill	20,363	1 / 21	Flashcab
Bathurst	29,858	1 / 28	Maxi taxi
Orange	35,521	1 / 31	Maxi taxi
Queanbeyan	31,280	1 / 16	Maxi taxi
Lismore	30,083	3 / 28	2 Maxi Taxis, 1 Flashcab
Port Macquarie	45,000	10 / 18	4 Maxi taxis, 6 Flashcabs
Wollongong	181,612	9 / 134	Flashcabs

Current incentives for Wheelchair Accessible Taxis

Conventional plates range in value from \$6,000 to \$440,000 across NSW. By comparison, WATs plates have an annual lease cost of \$1,000 in metro Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong and are free in Country areas.

Therefore WAT plates represent a very inexpensive way to enter the taxi industry. The Ministry of Transport also offers interest free loans up to a maximum \$30,000 or half the purchase price of the vehicle to country operators for the purchase or conversion of WATs.

WATs can also be used for 10 years throughout NSW versus six years for a standard cab in Sydney (eight years elsewhere), allowing for a longer service life. WAT drivers are also able to charge during the time of passenger loading (but not unloading).

Van-type WATs (like other maxi taxis) are able to charge Tariff 3 (1.5 times the metered fare) when carrying 6 or more passengers, if hired in the street. Ministry of Transport reimburses (from the Taxi Advisory Council Fund) the costs to drivers of undertaking WAT driver training.



Older style van maxi taxi with hydraulic lift

Stories from the front line: passengers and drivers

The Taskforce members felt inclusion of these examples was important for the Interim Brief. Members have also asked however, that these examples not be interpreted as portraying the total across the board experience.

- Richard, of Newcastle:

“The personal issue for me in all of this is I have no other mode of transport available – I can’t jump in a car or catch a bus so if I need to get somewhere and no cab is available I just don’t get to go. This is a significant consequence given the day to day restrictions on a person with a high level disability are significant enough without this on top.

“The experience of an average user ringing the Newcastle Taxi Co-operative on any day for a WAT trip that day or even a day or two ahead would result in a greater than 50 per cent experience of no cab available at the times required, therefore a wait of one to four hours (which if you are talking about a medical appointment is no use at all) or simply no cab available so you must cancel the arrangement, especially on weekends.

“The availability of cabs for ad hoc travel needs is extremely variable, depending on whether it’s mid week or on weekends, night or day. The bottom line is that outside business hours Monday to Friday it’s rare for more than one or at best two cabs to be on the road ...”

- Craig and Kerrie, his partner, of Sydney:

“Craig uses a chin controlled electric wheelchair. In the chair he is 150cm tall. This means that he only fits in a bus (maxi taxi). Although we always ask Wheelchair Accessible Cabs for a ‘bus only, no Vito’ (this is the only type of wheelchair vehicle Craig fits in) frequently other vehicles (such as Vito or Voyager) accept the call (under the mistaken belief that they can make him fit). This is time consuming as when the vehicle arrives and is obviously too small, the company must put the call for the job out again.

“I have lost count of the number of times Craig’s head has hit the roof of the vehicle because the driver operating the hoist isn’t paying attention while raising the chair. Similarly drivers are often surly about taking out seats so that his feet aren’t squashed. This attitude is unnecessary, particularly as drivers start the meter as soon as they pull up (so we are paying them to

fiddle around taking out seats, etc). It is also annoying to have to pay for the additional time it takes an inexperienced driver to strap the wheelchair in.”

Stretch sedan model



- Can provide poor visibility for passenger.
- Cheaper to convert than other options.
- No longer in manufacture.

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- Andrew, of Newcastle, described how the extremely limited availability of WATs in his area had affected both his career plan and his lifestyle. He felt that his limited transport options had effectively defined what was possible for him to achieve and had robbed him of independence and spontaneity in his lifestyle. For example, he described a recent weekend where he decided to go to the movies. When the WAT had not turned up after an hour, he had to ask his carer to drive him.
 - Tanya, of Newcastle, described the difficulties she faces relying on WATs as a single mother. She also has an assistance dog. Tanya said she would happily catch buses if there were enough accessible buses to get her where she needed to go. She said she couldn't really afford to catch taxis, even with the TTSS subsidy, but has no option at present. Tanya described how she is forced to plan her life around WATs, booking three weeks worth of WATs trips at a time. She feels that the unreliability of WATs services impacts on her ability to obtain and secure employment as late WATs have caused her to be late for job interviews in the past, which she felt made her look unreliable to potential employers. She also said that many taxi drivers display little understanding or empathy for her, one even suggesting she leave her wheelchair at home and take a standard taxi.
 - Wendy, of Newcastle, emphasised how her lack of transport options robbed her of independence. She lives with her parents and has a carer, but feels that it's generally assumed that people with disabilities all have this level of support, when it's often not the case. Wendy also said that not being able to rely on WATs to get home stopped her going out and being

independent. Wendy had attempted to use one of the accessible buses in Newcastle, but just missed it and as it's only an hourly service, ended up ringing her mother to collect her.

WAT Driver Stories

These accounts are based on phone interviews supplied by the Taxi Council on 20 August 2004. Again, taskforce members have asked that these examples not be interpreted as portraying the total across the board experience:

- James drives a Toyota Commuter Maxi because it's cheaper and having a maxi allows him access to group work. He averages 16 WAT jobs each week – 50 per cent of this is through private arrangements. He finds the lack of uniformity in wheelchair design frustrating. He feels WAT fares should be higher than general purpose fares, to compensate for 'more messing around and unpaid running' and believes his earning capacity is lower than for a driver in a standard cab.
- Lorraine was encouraged to drive a WAT as too many 'ratbags' catch ordinary taxis. She drives a Voyager Silver Service as she feels this will appeal to more passengers than a more basic vehicle. She averages 40 WAT jobs each week – 50 per cent of her jobs are through private arrangements, 50 per cent are through 0200. She is frustrated by the lack of common anchorage points on wheelchairs and feels some wheelchair passengers expect too much. For example, she regularly pushes one passenger into her home and puts her to bed to wait for her carer. She believes WAT fares should be 20 per cent higher, because she believes WAT jobs take longer to complete. She says as a WAT driver, you need more patience and to be a more skilled driver.

People Movers



- Often more attractive and newer vehicles – likely to appeal to a broad range of customers.
- Newer designs and conversions can provide a more comfortable ride for passengers.

- Tony drives a WAT because there's 'more to life than money'. He prefers a Toyota Commuter vehicle because it allows him to carry two chairs, do group work and is economical and reliable. Tony believes he's completed 1,600 WAT jobs over the past seven months. He perceives some reluctance by the general public to travel in his vehicle and is frustrated by the lack of hailed jobs he gets. He also feels some WAT passengers expect too much. He says one of his passengers expects to be taken inside and made a cup of tea.

WATs – the questions

- **Are there enough WATs?**

To place the role of taxis in the transport task in context it should be noted that according to the Taxi Council taxis provide 175 million passenger journeys a year. This compares with approximately 270 million passenger CityRail journeys annually, putting in context the contribution of the taxi industry to the transport task in NSW.

This also prompts further recognition of the potential for the industry to contribute to the massive 'community transport' task – a growing task given our ageing population.

Currently across NSW WATs make up approximately seven per cent of the total taxi fleet. Approximately 72 per cent of these are based in Sydney.

For many people, WATs may be their only transport option, as the cost of converting a private vehicle for wheelchair accessibility is high and many areas do not have accessible bus or rail services. This lack of transport options can have an enormous impact on people's quality of life and make work, study, keeping medical appointments or maintaining an active social life difficult if not impossible.

By 2041 there will be 8.3 million people in New South Wales. 24 per cent or two million will be over 65 – up from 12 per cent today. 14 per cent will be over 75 – up from six per cent today.

It is the Taskforce's view that as our population continues to age, specialised transport options like WATs will become more and more important. There is evidence already of a number of more specialist transport services currently entering this market.

Community Transport services generally provide a 9 am to 5 pm service and so may not always be able to meet all their clients' needs. Also, many people reliant on WATs may not be aware of local community transport services or may not be eligible to benefit from them.

In the long term both Community Transport and taxis will be increasingly critical to meeting the transport needs of the ageing population. They stand out amongst transport providers because they can deliver door to door services. Taxis have the added advantage of being able to provide 24 hours a day, seven days a week transport from door to door.

As such they should be regarded as a pivotal part of long term transport provision – especially for people with mobility challenges. In many locations, WATs may have standing arrangements to provide any or all of the following services:

- Transport for school students with mobility issues, through the Special School Student Transport Scheme (SSSTS). SSSTS currently services about 9,000 students and has a budget of about \$45 million annually;
- Transport for veterans, through the Commonwealth Department of Veterans Affairs;
- Health related transport, through NSW Health; and
- Community transport trips, through local community transport providers.

These arrangements help to bolster the financial viability of running a wheelchair accessible taxi by providing a steady stream of revenue. The important use of WAT vehicles for school student trips however, also means the vehicles are difficult to access by other passengers requiring accessible transport during peak periods, for journeys to and from work, etc.

In short, there is an across the board query about the extent to which the WAT fleet is being utilised for wheelchair passengers. There is a developing view that this fleet is being under-utilised for this task at present – especially during off-peak periods.

In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests in many areas a high percentage of WAT bookings are made through private arrangements with drivers. Collectively, this leaves few taxis available to accept jobs booked through a network – resulting in long waiting times or in some instances jobs not being accepted at all. The large service areas covered by many networks also mean the first available WAT may be an hour or more away, despite the best efforts of all parties. This also means that participants in the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) may have difficulty in actually taking advantage of it.

Without further research, it is difficult to know what the current unmet need for WAT services throughout the State actually is. It's likely that many people have resorted to other means of transport or simply don't go out other than for medical appointments. Based on the experiences reported from a number of areas however, we can safely assume areas with higher aged populations are likely to require higher numbers of WATs.

It is envisaged that the Regional Community Transport Coordinators employed by the Ministry of Transport will make a contribution to better understanding the extent of this latent demand as well as to the extent of the local supply of vehicles for the community transport task in rural and regional areas.

Whilst further research is being conducted into this matter it is clear in general terms there is a paucity of supply of these vehicles in most parts of New South Wales. Certainly some parts of New South Wales are well serviced,

including parts of the Mid North and North Coast. It is also clear given the ageing nature of the population; this supply must be increased.

- **Are the incentives currently in place working?**

The current package of incentives, aimed at encouraging the growth of WATs must be changed.

At this point the Taskforce queries if there are appropriate financial incentives in place for taxi drivers to make driving WATs an attractive option.

It is recognised that drivers are a vital part of the provision of WAT services.

All parties agree that, whilst there are mostly honest, professional WAT drivers, there are also a number who routinely breach their licence conditions, by failing to prioritise WAT work, an issue for the Ministry of Transport. A number of WAT users have expressed the view that customer service levels are low amongst drivers, with many drivers appearing resentful of their obligation to assist passengers without remuneration at the end of a journey.

The taxi industry has told the Taskforce they have rigorous measures in place to bring drivers who are breaching WAT licence conditions to task, including suspension of them from their network. There does not seem to be agreement on the magnitude of this issue however, or the success of measures designed to combat it. The Ministry is actively addressing the issue of breaches of this type.

The taxi industry is facing a driver shortage at present, for both standard and wheelchair accessible taxis. This is another factor which keeps otherwise available WATs off the road in a number of areas across the State. There may be a number of reasons for this, but the lack of a guaranteed regular income has been presented as a significant factor.

As the current driver shortage is seriously impacting on the ability of the taxi industry to provide WAT services, it may be that a wider effort needs to be devoted to driver recruitment, training and retention and the current package of incentives revised to better target drivers. The Taskforce will make recommendations pursuant to these matters in its final report.

The taxi industry believes it is more difficult for WAT drivers to attract legitimate non-WAT passengers due to a range of factors, including:

- Belief amongst some able-bodied passengers they are using a WAT at the expense of someone who needs it more;
- A majority of pre-booked work meaning less freedom to pick up 'hailed' jobs on the street, as they may not fit in with the next pre-booked client – therefore, more 'dead running' from job to job; and
- Different change-over times for standard and wheelchair accessible taxis meaning a WAT driver has limited opportunity to supplement his WAT shifts with shifts in a standard taxi.

This seems to have led to a general view held by the taxi industry that WATs are not a viable business opportunity and are an imposition to be 'borne'. Professor Fitzgerald will further explore this. We know already that WAT services are operating well in certain areas of the State, often in places which have large aged populations and/or reasonable tourist traffic but still fairly small populations in total.

In itself, this poses a key question: How can ten WATs be apparently viable in a place the size of Port Macquarie, yet only five WATs operate in a city the size of Newcastle due to an apparent lack of commercial viability?

WAT users also report a range of complaints with WAT drivers, such as:

- Drivers maximising the period of paid waiting time at the commencement of a journey. Many WAT users report that drivers flick on the meter too early and load the passenger as slowly as possible in order to maximise the paid waiting time, which leaves passengers feeling 'ripped off';
- Drivers who lack the appropriate level of knowledge regarding handling and securing of wheelchairs. This creates annoyance amongst passengers but may also mean that their security is placed at risk;
- Drivers multiple hiring their vehicle, without prior consultation with the original hirer, who may have waited an hour or more for the vehicle in the first place.

The minimal financial costs associated with taking up a WAT plate have also raised questions. Is it the case that a number of WAT plates have been taken up across the State but never used, or is the minimal cost of WAT plates causing concerns at the potential devaluation of conventional plates in the market place? Professor Fitzgerald will explore this further.

But what is clear is the cheaper plates have not yielded large scale, cross metropolitan and regional improvements in WAT supply.

Options identified

The following three options will be further examined in much greater detail in the final report:

Option 1 - Evolution of a universally-accessible taxi fleet

The main attraction of this option is that it would remove a great many of the anomalies currently existing between conventional and wheelchair accessible taxis, such as different booking systems, plates and different training requirements for drivers.

A universally accessible vehicle also provides broad appeal by offering improved transport for people with mobility issues, older people with mobility aides as well as parents with infants carrying baby capsules, prams, etc.

A universally accessible taxi fleet would also greatly assist in meeting the requirement for equal waiting times, between conventional taxis and WATs as specified in the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act Standards.

It is acknowledged that such a fleet would need to comprise of a range of vehicles, to accommodate the differing requirements of both taxi drivers and users.

Consideration of this issue poses a number of major questions such as:

- Who bears the cost of converting the current taxi fleet?
- What effect would such a change have on conventional plate values?
- Over what period could this be achieved?
- What incentives should drive the change?
- What would be the impact on running costs for operating this type of vehicle?
- Should there be exemptions to a policy of this kind?

These issues will be further examined in the work currently being undertaken by Professor Ross Fitzgerald on behalf of the Taskforce.

Option 2 - Nomination of mandatory minimum of 10 – 20 per cent of taxi fleet to be WATs

With this model, we have the benefit of learning from the Queensland experience. In Queensland a mandatory fleet minimum of 10 per cent accessible taxis has been legislated. The current figure is approximately 11 per cent.

More research needs to be undertaken into how the following questions would be addressed pursuant to this proposal:

- How would the vehicles to be converted be identified?
- How was the identified target arrived at and how meaningful is it?
- Does it meet the demand for these services and how responsive is it?
- Would it effectively become a cap?

In NSW a number of regional taxi fleets currently meet this requirement, but still may not satisfy the local demand for these services. In other areas, the actual need for these services may be adequately serviced with less than 10 per cent.

The compliance costs for the Ministry in this scenario would also be higher than for Option 1 and it would need to be decided how such a requirement was to be interpreted, as networks may have the requisite number of vehicles in their fleet but still have them off the road, due to mechanical issues or driver shortages.

Option 3 - Localised targets for numbers of WATs

Under this option, the need for accessible taxi services would be researched and mapped by the Ministry of Transport's Local and Community Transport Division, taking into account local demographics, rates of disability and zero car households, amongst other factors.

A localised quota for WATs could then be applied from place to place. Again, this would be costly and difficult for the Ministry of Transport to enforce and may add to the complexity of an already overly complex market.

This model would however provide a realistic 'demand' justification for the required increase in numbers of accessible taxis. The required research exercise is a worthy task no matter which model is finally adopted.

This option also recognises the fact that in some parts of NSW the demand for WATs appears to be met without a universally accessible local fleet. Even this however makes a dangerous assumption of minimal latent demand in these areas.

A final option of this kind then, would be a demand responsive model but highly complex as the current market anomalies would be retained.

The extent to which the current incentives can be adjusted in relation to any of these options is of course a function of the availability of funding. The Taskforce will be exploring different funding opportunities.

To this end the Taskforce has agreed to include one of these opportunities in Professor Fitzgerald's brief. That is, Professor Fitzgerald will conduct a without prejudice examination of the viability of a small levy on all passenger trips or journeys as a means of contributing to a taxi improvement fund. The Taskforce has asked Professor Fitzgerald to examine this idea further with reference to:

- the amount of a levy, whether it be for example 10, 20 or 30 cents per trip or per journey;
- the volume of the revenue raised by such a levy;
- the method of collection
- the general viability of such a proposal;
- the length of time for applying such a levy; and
- how any funds raised would be used to improve the taxi industry for all consumers.

The Taskforce has briefly discussed this without committing to it in any way.

It has been raised by the Taskforce Chair, recognising a small levy on passenger trips could generate significant revenue for industry improvement.

This suggestion arises from studying recent history where a \$1 levy applied to passenger trips in order to fund security improvements for drivers. The Taskforce understands this levy generated approximately \$110 million in about 18 months.

The Taskforce would not entertain a levy of this magnitude, however the nature of the precedent will be examined in detail.

Other funding options will also be examined and reported on.

Conclusion

The final report will discuss in far greater detail each of the three options briefly touched on in this report.

It will outline what the Taskforce believes should be the components of an industry adjustment plan to achieve the recommended goal.

All parties agree that each of the three options referred to here are achievable - provided certain conditions are met.

All parties agree there is no quick fix to this issue. Any industry adjustment plan would need to be implemented over a period of five to 10 years, with key supply milestones identified throughout the period.

All parties agree at this stage the absence of an appropriate incentive for drivers is a key problem. The Taxi Council has made the point that even a fully accessible fleet could not be relied upon for service improvements without driver incentives. This is acknowledged.

And all parties agree improved enforcement of WAT licence conditions is a critical step.

A Universally Accessible Vehicle has however been acknowledged as generating:

- by definition, equivalent waiting times for people regardless of their mobility, assuming appropriate incentives for drivers;
- no need for multiple plates with multiple values and the market anomalies this seems to perpetuate;
- no need for the different call centres or booking systems currently in place (although this has been queried by the Taxi Council); and
- a broader appeal for taxis – as mentioned earlier, with the appropriate design a universally accessible vehicle can assist parents with prams and capsules, older people with electronic mobility aids as well as people with wheelchairs.

Given the significance of the cost of both converting conventional taxis to wheelchair accessible or universally accessible vehicles and the purchase price differential for the two types of vehicles this is an option that could not be pursued without re-engineering of current financial incentives.

The extent to which current incentives can be adjusted to assist in advancing consideration of the three options presented here will ultimately depend on financial resources available for an industry adjustment plan.

The next step for the Taskforce then is to analyse what is financially achievable and to develop the final recommendations accordingly.

The Taskforce hopes this approach will generate real change – and not consign this report to gathering dust only to be picked up and studied by the next taskforce of this kind.





Minister for Transport Services

M E D I A R E L E A S E

TASKFORCE TO BOOST WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE TAXIS

Tuesday 8 May 2004

The Minister for Transport Services Michael Costa today announced the formation of a taskforce to look at boosting the number of Wheelchair Accessible Taxis (WATs) in New South Wales.

"People with disabilities tell me the low number of Wheelchair Accessible Taxis is a serious concern," Mr Costa said.

"It's appalling that people who require a Wheelchair Accessible Taxi are left waiting for hours, or are unable to get a cab at all."

Mr Costa said Ministry of Transport figures show:

- Only 7 per cent of taxis in New South Wales are wheelchair accessible – 418 of the 6,000 taxis across the State;
- Sydney has 299 Wheelchair Accessible Taxis, with just 119 WATs for all of regional and rural New South Wales;
- Newcastle has only 5 WATs servicing over 130,000 people; and
- Wollongong has only 9 WATs servicing over 170,000 people.

Mr Costa said the current incentives to operate Wheelchair Accessible Taxis included:

- Cheaper licences – \$1000 per year in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and the Central Coast, free in rural and regional areas;
- Longer service life – WATs can be licensed for 10 years throughout NSW, compared with 6 years for a standard city cab; and
- Interest-free loans – available to country operators for the purchase or conversion of WAT vehicles.

"The Government has initiated generous incentive arrangements to attract more WATs into the taxi market, yet demand from the taxi industry remains slow," Mr Costa said.

"This doesn't make sense – I want to work with taxi industry to increase demand.

“When you consider the cost of a conventional taxi plate in Sydney is around \$240,000 it's hard to work out why there are so few Wheelchair Accessible Taxis.

“I would also encourage people with disabilities to make submissions to the Taxi Industry Review currently being conducted by Allan Cook.

“We need to hear from the disabilities sector about the levels of customer service they are receiving from taxi operators and drivers.”

The Terms of Reference for the Taskforce are:

- Conduct an analysis of why the availability of WATs is so limited;
- Assess the argument that operating WATs is not commercially viable;
- Assess the current incentives provided to the taxi industry to operate WATs;
- Advise on a realistically achievable goal and an appropriate time frame for achieving this goal; and
- Provide financially sound recommendations to the Minister for increasing the number of WATs in New South Wales.

Membership of the group will include representatives from:

- Community Transport Organisation;
- Council of Social Service of NSW;
- Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Association of NSW;
- Disability Council of NSW;
- People with Disabilities;
- Physical Disability Council of NSW;
- Spinal Cord Injuries Australia;
- The Northcott Society;
- NSW Taxi Council; and
- NSW Country Taxi Operators Association.

The Taskforce will be chaired by the Ministry of Transport.

It will provide an Interim Report by 30 August with final recommendations to the Minister by 30 October.

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