

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into ride sourcing services

Melbourne — 7 September 2016

Members

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Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

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Witnesses

Ms Kate Begley, policy advisor, and

Mr Scott Jacobs, advocacy advisor, Vision Australia.

The CHAIR — I reopen our Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing and welcome our witnesses who are present here today. Today we are hearing evidence in relation to the inquiry into ride sourcing. The evidence today is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say in here today but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Welcome to you both. Thank you for agreeing to come along today to provide evidence to our inquiry. I might get you to introduce yourselves, tell us where you fit within your organisation and make any introductory comments, and then we can go into some questions from the committee after that.

Ms BEGLEY — My name is Kate Begley. I am a policy advisor at Vision Australia.

Mr JACOBS — I am Scott Jacobs. I am an advocacy advisor at Vision Australia, and we are based at 454 Glenferrie Road, Kooyong.

Ms BEGLEY — I will start off by telling you all a little bit about Vision Australia. I am not sure how much you know about our organisation, so I will start with that. Vision Australia is the country's largest provider of services to people who are blind or have low vision. We are a national not-for-profit organisation. I should tell you all also that I am legally blind myself, so reading from notes is always a little bit tricky. We have 28 offices, and we work with 27 500 members of the blindness and low-vision community each year. Vision Australia has a strong presence in Victoria, consisting of 13 offices. There are around 90 000 people who are blind or have low vision residing in Victoria, just 10 per cent of whom are legally blind. The remaining 90 per cent of people with vision impairments are classified as having low vision.

People who are blind or have low vision do not drive and are more reliant on transport options such as taxis and ridesharing. Personalised transport services represent the closest equivalent to independent car travel for the blindness and low-vision community and are a critical link to maintaining employment, gaining an education and participating in recreational, sporting and other community activities.

Today we would like to focus on these key issues within our recent submission to the committee: the extension of the multipurpose taxi program fare subsidy; the need for regulation and enforcement of accessibility requirements; the accessibility of ridesharing apps and booking options; vehicle identification; driver awareness training; and the access rights of passengers with seeing eye dogs. We believe that the MPTP subsidy must be extended to cover all forms of ridesharing. It is vital that ridesharing is an affordable transport option for people with disability so that they are able to function on an equal basis with the rest of the community. MPTP offers subsidised taxi fares to those deemed eligible. MPTP membership is for life and subsidises 50 per cent of standard taxi fares, paying up to \$60 per trip.

Taxis are a non-optional cost of blindness. Many people who are blind use the MPTP subsidy in order to assist with the cost of travel to employment, health care and community or social activities. Figures show that many people who are blind have low incomes, which reduces transport options. Based on Productivity Commission and Vision Australia data, we estimate that at least 80 per cent of our clients are supported fully or partially through social welfare payments. Further, four out of five people who are blind or who have low vision rely heavily on subsidised services. It is important to note that although NDIS individual funding packages or plans do provide transport allowances which are based on an individual's work, study, social activities and day program attendance, NDIS plans will never fully replace or absorb the MPTP system. This is because the NDIS does not include people aged over 65 and the MPTP eligibility criteria differ from NDIS individualised plans.

We anticipate that the extension of the MPTP fare subsidy across all ridesharing services may well save taxpayer money in the long run. The hope is that costs of point-to-point transport will go down as all forms of point-to-point transport move to an equal footing in a competitive marketplace. As the MPTP is tied to the cost of a taxi fare, if taxi fares and other point-to-point transport fares come down, then so too the cost to the MPTP would be lower.

I will just talk now from my own perspective as someone who has low vision. I am a sole parent of two children, so I rely very heavily on taxis, and the only way I can use taxis all the time to ferry my children to their sports and to school and to parties and to the myriad of things that you need to do when you are a parent is with my MPTP subsidy. It is basically my critical link to having a life with my kids. Because it is only accepted in taxis, quite often when I use taxis I am out and about with the kids and I cannot see a taxi to hail — there is not

one driving past — or if I do see it, I see it too late and I am not able to hail it in time or I am on hold for ever and ever with 13 CABS and I think to myself, ‘I would love to be able to tap into this ridesharing that all my friends and family are using’ — things like Uber. At this stage it is just not affordable for me with the amount of travel I do in taxis. That is just a little bit of my perspective.

I will now pass over to my colleague Scott who will talk about accessibility and vehicle identification.

Mr JACOBS — Our experience shows that the Disability Discrimination Act is not enough of an incentive to ensure accessibility options are provided for people who have blindness or low vision. We would urge you to recommend that there be some form of regulations with an enforcement mechanism to try and ensure accessibility within the new ridesharing regulatory framework that you are setting up. Without this, too often the burden falls on the blindness and low-vision community to try and enforce these accessibility features through either the Disability Discrimination Act or court complaints, which become expensive, and it is unfair to place the burden on the blindness and low-vision community to do so.

Also for members of the blindness and low-vision community who do have access to the internet and smart phone technology, it is imperative that booking apps and online information be presented in an accessible format. People who are blind or have low vision often use a voice-over function on a smart phone in order to be able to read or navigate what is on the screen, and apps that are compatible with voice-over screen-reading software enable them to have equal access to this information.

However, for many, traditional booking methods remain essential for the foreseeable future. Research that was conducted by ACMA, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, in 2012 found that in the general population of 65 and older, only 15 per cent uses smart phones. Of Vision Australia’s 27 500 clients, around 70 per cent of them are aged over 65. We did some of our own research into this, and we found that up to two-thirds of our clients do not have access to the internet. A survey that we conducted earlier this year revealed that only 16.7 per cent of our clients use smart phones, and when you break that down by an age cohort, only about 6 per cent of people over 65 actually use them regularly; 19 to 65 is around 52 per cent, so it is still low there as well.

We believe that developments in personalised transport that rely solely on or make use of smart phone technology, such as the booking apps, will not lead to benefits for the majority of people who are blind or have low vision in the community. Technological developments are providing new opportunities for innovation, and that is a good thing; however, we feel that these opportunities need to be balanced against the emerging digital gap that is present, where there are those who can take advantage of these new and emerging technologies and there are others who cannot. We feel this could be widened unless there is an effective regulatory process put in place to ensure accessibility. As part of that, we believe that an alternative booking method needs to be required for consumers and customers who do not have access to smart phone technology.

There are similar issues arise in regard to payment terminals. Regardless of attempts to familiarise people who are blind or have low vision to use gesture-based tablet devices, it must be emphasised that this is neither the preferred, nor the most suitable, method to use for the majority of our community. The need for assistance to process transactions and to verify their account details denies passengers their independence, and it also denies the secrecy of their personal details, obviously. We think it is important that accessible terminals — for instance, EFTPOS terminals — that have a physical pin pad with the braille identification on it, orientation, should remain available in the ridesharing industry.

Similarly, with regard to vehicle identification we would tend to recommend a braille and tactile print sign on the outside and on the inside of the door — they can be reasonably easy to install — that allows people who are blind or have low vision to identify the vehicle that they are in and identify the driver. This is quite important in case of an emergency or in case of a complaint and also just in identifying that they are entering a ridesharing vehicle, so they are certain of that. In addition, driver awareness can assist here, where they verbally identify where the vehicle is instead of just pulling up and expecting someone to know that it is there. Kate has a couple of short points to finish off, if that is okay.

Ms BEGLEY — Yes. I am going to talk about driver awareness training. Driver awareness training for those in the ridesharing industry is essential for the safety of the blindness and low-vision community. People who are blind or have low vision can sometimes require door-to-door assistance in order to safely reach and

enter the vehicle and, in turn, safely arrive at their destination. Passengers must not be made to feel like a burden or a 'parcel' if they are being assisted by a driver.

Driver awareness training also needs to extend to the legislation around seeing eye dogs' access to public transport. On occasions when people are refused access to transport on the basis of their seeing eye dog, it is not only unlawful under anti-discrimination laws but it can also present safety concerns when people are left roadside in isolated locations.

This concludes our opening statement, and we would be happy to take any questions if anyone has any.

The CHAIR — Fabulous. Thank you both very much. I think it is something that certainly the committee has become enlightened about — the importance of accessible transport for everybody in our community to ensure that they can move around to where they need to go and that everybody can move around to where they need to go, irrespective of whom they might be. I think that with seeing eye dogs, the fact that we are still hearing of taxidrivers not allowing assistance dogs into cars is something that certainly community awareness of is growing. Obviously even one incident is too many. I am conscious that we have certainly heard that disruptive technologies can provide greater options for everybody in our community, but we seem to be at a point where the right decisions need to be made to ensure that everybody does have accessibility to lots of different options.

I am wondering: the MPTP — have there been any discussions between Vision Australia and the likes of Uber about the possibility of it extending into an organisation like Uber or other ridesharing organisations? Has Vision Australia led any of those discussions?

Ms BEGLEY — Yes, we have spoken to Uber about that. I will have to probably get back to you with more detail.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Ms BEGLEY — I know a small bit about it in that the lead policy adviser at Vision Australia had spoken to Uber about them paying the remainder of the subsidy, so Uber themselves covering the subsidy rather than it being a government-funded subsidy. I am not sure the outcome of that — well, it has not happened, so there is the outcome — but I do not know how far into the talks Bruce is. His name is Bruce Maguire, the lead policy adviser at Vision Australia. So I will be able to get back to you with more detail about that.

The CHAIR — If you could, that would be great.

Ms BEGLEY — Yes, I would be happy to.

The CHAIR — That is of interest to the committee.

Mr JACOBS — Our understanding is that across the different states they have been waiting for the legalisation of Uber before they start to look at the extension. In Queensland they are going to do that as part of stage 2, or at least it seems like they will. So there does seem to be willingness in other states to allow that transport subsidy for the taxis to be extended. They vary in the cost and arrangement from state to state, of course, so it is not directly comparable, but as we mentioned in our statement, we do tend to think because it is based on the cost of the taxi fare in general, if the fares overall come down, then we would hope that the program would cost less in the long run.

The CHAIR — Yes, indeed. With regard to driver education in ride-sourcing organisations, of taxidrivers and the like, what should that look like in an ideal world, to ensure that all drivers are aware of the needs of all their passengers?

Ms BEGLEY — The need to?

The CHAIR — To be educated about the needs of different passengers who have different abilities?

Mr JACOBS — We are working with Uber at the moment around seeing eye dog access, and assistance animals more generally, so they are in the process of developing a driver education video, I believe. I think they are appearing tomorrow; you would probably be able to find out more from them. But a large amount of the

barriers that people with blindness and low vision face tend to be lack of awareness — there are obviously some elements which are more deliberately exclusionary, but I think a lot of the time it is awareness — and then, as we mentioned earlier, making sure that there is some kind of an enforcement mechanism, rather than purely relying on the DDA, the Disability Discrimination Act, to act as an incentive, because historically that does not work. It is not enough on its own.

Ms BEGLEY — I think also there is some basic protocol that it is quite easy for people to be trained in around dealing with people who are blind, like saying things — instead of pointing to something you will articulate yourself. Just some really basic things that would be very easy to put into driver training that would make a big difference.

Mr LEANE — Thanks so much for helping us with our inquiry. The MPTP — excuse me, but what does that acronym stand for?

Ms BEGLEY — Multipurpose taxi program.

Mr LEANE — Right, and so that has been established for obviously a number of years now.

Ms BEGLEY — I believe so, yes.

Mr LEANE — So your submission is that being a group of people that are very reliant on taxi services or taxi-like services or ridesharing services, you would welcome more people into the market for obvious reasons —

Ms BEGLEY — Very much so, yes.

Mr LEANE — but the frustration is that without the MPTP being in place in that area, it is the affordability issue. Does that pretty much encompass it?

Ms BEGLEY — Yes. A lot of my friends who are legally blind and also have an MPTP card, like myself — none of us use Uber. All of my other friends, who are fully sighted — everyone — if we go out, everyone is using Uber. We do not. We are all taxi users, and that is solely based on the fact that we have a subsidy. We definitely think it should be extended to all ridesharing services.

Mr JACOBS — So the MPTP varies depending on your level of disability. It is uncapped if you are legally blind. It is quite a wide range of different criteria that are attached to it. It includes your financial situation as well as your residency and medical criteria. So it is not a kind of blanket pass, but it does have a very large impact in supporting people who need to be able to engage with the community and be included, obviously.

Mr LEANE — Absolutely. I think we all understand that.

Mr BOURMAN — I have only got one question — or a comment, I guess. To make a vehicle friendly to someone with low vision, you are talking about tactile things, I would assume — braille on doors. To be honest I have never looked at a taxi from that perspective. I will do that from now on. I guess the question I have is: if Uber or ridesharing cars are private or semiprivate cars, have you got any idea how that could be actually done to someone's vehicle without making it essentially a taxi with all the same overheads?

Mr JACOBS — Not speaking to lock in technical possibilities here, but something like a magnet version of a sticker that could be applied and then removed from the outside of the car. You could have something similar on the inside — maybe a velcro thing that attaches to the inside of the door. The technical elements of that sort of thing can be worked around. It is more around having a standardised thing so that every car you get into that is a ridesharing, you know where to try and touch it.

Mr BOURMAN — And just the transaction process now, I am actually curious because I have caught Uber in America — where it is legal, just for the record — and I actually got someone who was a mute as a driver, which was a lot easier to deal with because all he did was type it out on his phone and show it to us and all of that, but it gave me an appreciation of how difficult it could be. The process now for paying in a taxi — does the taxidriver read it out to you and you know the numbers on the pad of the EFTPOS machine? Exactly how does it work?

Ms BEGLEY — For me I use PayPass, so I do not key anything in. I ask the taxidriver what the amount is, and the taxidriver always tells me the amount after the subsidy, so the amount that I have to pay. I just have to trust that that is correct, because I cannot see the thing. Then I just use PayPass, so I am not keying anything in. I think the advantage of Uber is that you do not have to do anything and you do not have to rely on a driver and trust that they are telling you the right amount, because the amount all happens behind the scenes and is processed and directly put onto your credit card. No-one is keying anything in. It seems like a very good system for people who are blind or who have low vision, the current Uber payment system.

Mr BOURMAN — I guess the problem for people with low vision would be the swiping or something like that to accept the fare or whatever.

Ms BEGLEY — Yes.

Mr JACOBS — It relies a lot on trust, I suppose, is the key part. Anecdotally you hear stories of some clients who have had that trust breached. It is obviously a rare event, but it is more that it takes away the independence and the ability to know and to be secure with yourself as well. I think that is a big part of it.

Mr BOURMAN — We would not need the police if everyone obeyed the laws. In fact we would not even need laws, but anyway.

The CHAIR — I have one final question. We have been talking about the \$2 levy that has been bandied around by the government. I am interested to understand what impact an additional \$2 levy per trip would have on people represented by your organisation.

Mr JACOBS — We do not have an organisational position on the extra levy, as to who should pay for it or how it should be structured in the fees at the moment.

Ms BEGLEY — Essentially for us, I guess, it would be a \$1 levy.

Mr JACOBS — With the MPTP, yes. It is also important to know that there are a large number in the community with low vision that may not have an MPTP pass. So they are still reliant on it but they also face a lot of the same obstacles. That is something else to bear in mind.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Ms Begley, and thanks, Mr Jacobs, for agreeing to appear before us today. You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's evidence for proofreading in coming days, and those transcripts will ultimately be made available on the committee's website. Once again, thank you for your attendance today.

Witnesses withdrew.