

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into ride sourcing services

Bendigo — 5 September 2016

Members

Mr Joshua Morris — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Participating member

Ms Samantha Dunn

Staff

Secretary: Ms Lilian Topic

Witness

Ms Mary Sullivan, Customer and Service Delivery Manager, Scope.

The CHAIR — I will reopen the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing and welcome Ms Sullivan. Thank you for coming along today. Today we are hearing evidence in relation to the inquiry into ride sourcing, and today's evidence 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 the same privilege. At this point I will hand over to you to introduce yourself and tell us a bit about the organisation you are involved with. Then you can make some introductory comments and then we will go into some questions following that.

Ms SULLIVAN — I am the customer and service delivery manager for the Loddon region for Scope. Scope is a statewide organisation that supports people, children and adults, with a disability. Historically we have worked with people with cerebral palsy and very high and complex needs, but as time goes on that is expanding out into people with other needs. Here in Bendigo we provide accommodation support, individual support for people living in their own homes, and therapy and day programs. That is sort of a snapshot of what we do here in Bendigo. As I said, Scope is statewide. I am just from this little corner of it here.

The CHAIR — Are there some introductory comments that you might like to make?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, really to first of all say how important affordable, accessible and responsive transport is for people with disabilities. The multipurpose taxi program is often the major way that people are getting around, so it is actually vitally important for the people we support that they do have a very responsive, affordable way of getting around. Otherwise we have people who actually cannot get out and about.

I guess too, from Scope's point of view, we welcome anything that will bring more competition and hopefully improve the service. Here in Bendigo we actually have a very good multipurpose taxi program. Not enough of them — that is the problem — but we are very lucky that there is a small number of drivers generally during the weekdays. So there is a very good personal relationship with the people that use the taxis, which means that they do get out and about more. For example, people are happy to go out on a Saturday night, because they know the people who are going to be taking them home. Sometimes we will have drivers coming up from Melbourne who do not know people, and that actually does cause some problems. But when there is that personal relationship and trust, it means that people do get out and about.

The lack of it is a major barrier, so you have people who do not get to appointments, who are not able to do things because of a lack of transport. So yes, you have very sad tales of people missing out on appointments. I had one a few years ago in Melbourne of someone missing out on going to a wedding because a booked taxi did not come, so anything that actually is accessible and responsive.

The other issue, I guess too, is that any ridesharing has to include people with high support needs. It cannot just be looking at people who are independently mobile. It really does need to make sure that, if you are using a wheelchair, you have the same access as everybody else. I guess that is a bit of a concern. The requirements that are on the taxis at the moment to provide that transport should be on any ridesharing, so that it does not discriminate against people with a physical disability.

The other item I think is one of yours, which was the customer safety. Again a lot of the people we support are quite vulnerable. They have communication issues, cognitive impairment, so it is really important that the safeguards are there — that the drivers are trained; they have an understanding of people with disabilities and there is good regulation of it — so that our vulnerable customers are not taken advantage of and do feel safe and secure in what they are doing.

The other thing I guess from a Scope point of view as well in looking at ridesharing is that we and a lot of other disability organisations have vehicles that we continue to provide transport support with because there are not enough other options. We would love to get out of it, but while there are not enough options, whether they can be brought into the ridesharing, because there are unused vehicles that are well adapted. That could possibly be opportunities for not-for-profit organisations to perhaps have some increased income but also perhaps employing some people with disabilities to be involved in it. So yes, I think that was basically it from Scope's point of view.

The CHAIR — Fabulous. Yes, that is great. I think the last point you made there is a very pertinent one about the ability to use vehicles that are already capable of transporting people with disabilities and use them in a more efficient way, because I suppose with the opening up of the ridesharing economy, or however you might

like to determine it, there are options there, but they certainly need to be fostered and encouraged so that there are those options there. We have just heard today from the Bendigo taxi cooperative that some of the future of the current maxi taxis is in doubt due to a variety of different issues, and I can imagine that would place your clients in very much a disadvantaged position if that was to be the case.

Ms SULLIVAN — Exactly. Yes, perhaps not being able to go out or they can only make doctor appointments at 1.15 on a Tuesday afternoon or whatever.

The CHAIR — Yes, so to lose that flexibility would be a huge concern. We have also heard from community transport groups today in terms of the work that they do. Is there a way that those groups could better service the clients that you are talking about, in particular maybe even with the vehicles you are talking about now that are currently able to transport disabled people? Is there a way to better utilise those vehicles?

Ms SULLIVAN — I think there are a lot of ways that we could use it better. We have got wheelchair-accessible vehicles, and so have other people. A lot of the rules and regulations have been working against that a little bit, of what sort of systems you need in place if you are going to be hiring out vehicles and all those sorts of things. It is a little bit of an unlevel playing field, but I think some of those community vehicles could become part of ridesharing, which would make a massive difference to people. You would actually have these vehicles that were being utilised to their potential, and people with disabilities would be able to get out and participate. With the NDIS coming in, which will be 1 May in our area here, Scope's experience in Barwon is that a lot of people have got more funding to be out and about in social participation and education et cetera. So obviously there will be a higher demand for transport, and again people needing to get where they want to go at the time that they want to go.

The CHAIR — We have certainly heard a lot of concern about the impact that deregulation of the taxi industry could have on the ability for those with disabilities to be transported around, but you can see there is also a huge amount of opportunity there for under-utilised vehicles to be better utilised throughout the day.

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, and be hoping that anyone who does come into it has to have a certain percentage, or whatever — that it is a requirement of them that they have to consider people with disabilities. Because I am sure in the taxi industry, a lot of their customers are people with disabilities — aged people who can no longer drive themselves around, people with visual impairment, people with cognitive disabilities or physical. So I think we need to make it that it is to everyone's advantage to include everybody.

The CHAIR — As part of the government's current plan to deregulate the industry there is a \$2 levy per trip that is being spoken about in the government's media release. What impact do you think that might have on your clients?

Ms SULLIVAN — People who are surviving on a disability support pension are, well, surviving. There is not a lot of extra money, so every little bit that comes in does make an impact. People have got much higher costs. Transport, for example, is a high cost for people, but also just medication and often medical needs, so we would be concerned. From our point of view you would think '\$2, that is not going to make a difference', but if you are doing that morning and evening, perhaps to get to wherever you are going during the day and you want to go to the football on Saturday and out to visit family on Sunday, that is a reasonable percentage of somebody's \$470 or whatever it is a week. It is a lot of money really.

Mr LEANE — You cover a regional area?

Ms SULLIVAN — Most of our services are within Bendigo, but our therapy does go out of Bendigo so we do Echuca and some of Swan Hill and down to the Macedon Ranges.

Mr LEANE — Okay. I was just interested — I do not know if you have had a chance to speak to your counterparts in Melbourne where Uber has been operating unregulated — if an organisation like yourselves has had any interaction. I would imagine no.

Ms SULLIVAN — I think because they are not accessible.

Mr LEANE — Yes, they are not accessible.

Ms SULLIVAN — Our experience has been that in Melbourne what Scope does is have relationships with particular drivers and particular companies of drivers to make sure that the people we support get the support when they want it. That has been a real advantage and I think could happen perhaps with the ridesharing as well — that people would get a relationship with particular drivers, who then would see it as being to their advantage to be able to get these customers and keep them, but it would also be an advantage to the customers because in Melbourne we find that people who get to know taxidriviers suddenly are happy to go out on a Saturday night. They actually can get out.

We find with the people here that we support, if they know that Alan, for example, is working this particular Saturday night, they will be much more likely to go out because they know that they can ring him and he will come exactly when they want, they will feel 100 per cent safe, he will not do other work — he will not do non-wheelchair work because he knows that he has got people out. The drivers here will communicate with each other so if they know someone who has gone out for the night and it is 3 o'clock in the morning and they have not gone home yet they will stay out until get them safely home.

The CHAIR — That is great.

Ms SULLIVAN — I think there is that potential perhaps with some of the ridesharing to have what we have got with the best of the taxis here.

Mr LEANE — I suppose Scope would like to see that with any new players in this industry there would be an onus on them having disability access-type vehicles. There would be an onus on them to have that.

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, that they have to have a certain number.

Mr LEANE — A certain number. Thank you.

Ms DUNN — Thank you, Mary, for your presentation. Do you ever have circumstances at the moment where your clients cannot access transport and so they are just left high and dry, not being able to get to where they need to go, and how often that actually happens?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes. I could not tell you exactly how often, but enough just anecdotally, particularly on weekends when it is not the regular drivers. All the regular taxi customers have got to know the drivers well. If they are going to make an appointment somewhere they will sort of say, 'Oh, we will do that at 10 because we know the taxis will be free'. Also the taxidriviers will swap around if necessary to get people there. But you do hear particularly on evenings and weekends that people might be waiting for an hour or 2 hours, ringing again. You were asking about whether we are regional. The Bendigo taxis tend to be regional because a lot of the surrounding towns do not have any wheelchair-accessible taxis.

Ms DUNN — They are providing that.

Ms SULLIVAN — A Bendigo taxi may go up to Echuca or to Kerang or something for the day and that leaves everybody here a bit high and dry. That is when you often get really quite long waits and so people will be an hour, an hour and a half, 2 hours. You just cannot get where you are going. All the taxi users tend to make sure they get a taxi much earlier than they need it, but then they will sometimes still be late. They will come in halfway through the movie, so is it worth going?

Ms DUNN — So you are building insurance into your travel arrangements?

Ms SULLIVAN — They always build insurance in, yes. I think they are still finding in parts of Melbourne — I know just anecdotally from people — that some of the drivers are still not prioritising wheelchair taxi work, even though they do have the wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

Ms DUNN — You said you had your own transport as well, and I am assuming it only operates certain times because that is about the programming that you run?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes. We have at the moment here four vehicles: two that are coasters — not coasters, they are Mercedes Sprinters — and so they do the getting people to and from activities during the day, so they are busy from about maybe 8 until 4.30, and the rest of the time they are only occasionally used if people are

going to Melbourne or something; and then we have two vans that are attached to houses, so they are busier a little bit more often and there would be more evening and weekend work.

Ms DUNN — So you see there is a potential, I guess, in the downtime for those vehicles to pick up the slack, if you like?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes.

Ms DUNN — But at the moment the rules and regs prohibit that from happening?

Ms SULLIVAN — Prohibit, yes. It is funny; one of the staff said to me at the end of last week when we were talking about Uber and ridesharing and all sorts of things, ‘Oh, Saturday night we could take the vans out and we could drop people off and pick them up and do whatever and everyone would have a great time’. Yes, well, they would because we have got support workers who understand people with disabilities —

Ms DUNN — Yes, who get it.

Ms SULLIVAN — and customers then who feel very comfortable about getting where they need to go.

Ms DUNN — I guess if we see them — and we are going to see changes to the transport act — you would be looking at some way that you might be able to participate in some sort of ridesharing service of your own?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, and I think all the other community transport that is around that is not being utilised to its full potential — —

Ms DUNN — Yes, where it has got downtime.

Ms SULLIVAN — Downtime, yes.

Ms DUNN — Thank you.

Mr BOURMAN — Thank you for your presentation, Mary. Roughly how many of your clients, people, whatever they are, would need something to the level of a wheelchair assist, like a maxi taxi or something like that?

Ms SULLIVAN — We support about 80 people in our day service programs, and out of them probably it would be about 70 per cent who would need a wheelchair taxi, and some of the others would actually need support with their cognitive impairment, perhaps. It is quite a lot of people using them.

Mr BOURMAN — Which brings me kind of to my next question, but you have answered most of it. For those that need support because of their cognitive abilities, what does that entail? Does that mean someone rides with them, or does someone help them into the car? How exactly does it work, on average?

Ms SULLIVAN — Very occasionally you have someone who needs somebody with them, but more often than not it is actually drivers who get to know the person and drivers who are happy to listen to, say, the family members or the support staff at one end and the support staff at the other.

Mr BOURMAN — Okay, so it would be them being comfortable with the person as much as helping in the car, or whatever?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, which is, I guess, that whole thing — that people do need to have some training. You just cannot come in and suddenly become a ridesharing driver; you need some level of training and knowledge.

Mr BOURMAN — You may not know the next one, but with the people who do use the maxi taxis and things like that now, is there a government rebate for the people? Obviously they are on a pension, would be my guess, and I would like to hope they are not paying the full fare. Do they pay half or something like that?

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, there is the multipurpose taxi program. So people who use a wheelchair have the lifting fee, which I think is about \$14. That is subsidised by the MTP — you probably know better than me —

and then you get a half fare. That makes a tremendous difference. So people, instead of maybe paying a \$25 fare, are perhaps paying a \$12.50 fare.

Mr BOURMAN — When you are on a pension, it all adds up.

Ms SULLIVAN — Yes, so that is really important for people on their limited income.

Mr BOURMAN — Excellent; thank you.

The CHAIR — At that point, Ms Sullivan, thank you very much for providing evidence to the committee. You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's evidence for proofreading, and ultimately that evidence will make its way onto the committee's website. Thank you very much for your evidence today.

Ms SULLIVAN — Thank you for the opportunity — anything to improve things for people with disability.

The CHAIR — We will close our hearing.

Committee adjourned.