

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

Melbourne—Thursday, 21 October 2021

MEMBERS

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Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

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Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Ms Sarah Fordyce, State Manager, Victoria, and

Ms Clare Hambly, Policy and Projects Officer, Quality and Safeguards, National Disability Services.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and any background noise is minimised.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan, I am Chair of the committee, and I would like to introduce my fellow committee members present here today: Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Rod Barton and Mr Andy Meddick.

To witnesses giving evidence: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and published on the committee website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask they be kept to a maximum of five to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please begin by stating your names for Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, Sarah and Clare.

Ms FORDYCE: Hello. My name is Sarah Fordyce. I am the State Manager with National Disability Services. Across to you, Clare.

Ms HAMBLY: Hi, everyone. My name is Clare Hambly. I am a Policy and Projects Officer with National Disability Services. I will just begin sharing my screen.

Visual presentation.

Ms FORDYCE: Thank you very much for inviting us here today. I will make a few introductory comments and then pass across to Clare to talk to our more detailed recommendations.

National Disability Services is the peak body for non-government disability service providers across Australia, and in Victoria we have got over 250 members, and they support mainly the bulk of people with complex disability needs. I would like to really say how much the Multi Purpose Taxi Program is valued by our sector and by the people our sector supports. I was speaking to someone yesterday who described it as an absolute lifeline. The Multi Purpose Taxi Program enables people to get transport to work or to community activities, day programs and medical and allied health appointments.

In recent years NDS has really welcomed the continuation of the program to people with disabilities as we have seen the whole NDIS come into our society, and so we appreciate that the program continues for NDIS participants. We have also welcomed the extension to ridesharing platforms. That is particularly important, I think, particularly for people out there who may not feel comfortable with traditional taxis and who are looking to, for example, the ridesharing platforms instead.

As we look to a world living with COVID-19, where we are all at at the moment, we know that our environment is going to have a continued focus on safety, infection prevention and control and meeting individualised needs. And so taxis and ridesharing vehicles will continue to be critical to enable Victoria to meet its inclusion objectives that are articulated in our state disability plan. Now I will pass across to Clare to talk about some specific recommendations. Thank you.

Ms HAMBLY: Thanks, Sarah. We put up some queries to our members to gather some feedback. Most of the feedback came from support coordinators, but we also got some feedback from members in a supported independent living space and also, across the sector more broadly, from day program providers. I will just summarise some of the key issues and recommendations that we have gathered in that process.

The first one is taxi wait times. The vast majority of our members who reached out and provided feedback cited extended wait times as a key issue with the Multi Purpose Taxi Program. This was a particular issue in regional Victoria, with many regional towns only having one or two accessible taxis and also often not having access to those rideshare platforms as well. Extended wait times have multiple negative impacts. They cause significant distress for users with disabilities. There are safety concerns for people waiting alone for extended periods. And they even have a financial impact. One example of this is a day program provider who is often forced to keep staff overtime to supervise or to wait with participants who are waiting for taxis. This means that those providers have to pay overtime to their staff, and that charge is taken out of the NDIS participant's plan. And there have been some examples of those NDIS participants then not having enough funds at the end of their planning cycle because all of those extra overtime hours had been taken out of their plan. So that is a key concern.

The second one was customer experience. We got some varied feedback in this space. We received some really positive feedback about the quality of customer service, but we also received some pretty concerning feedback about some of the drivers' understanding of disability. We heard of cases where drivers had ignored instructions. For example, a vision-impaired user had asked to be dropped off in a specific spot, but the driver ended up letting the passenger out in the wrong spot and the vision-impaired person actually entered the wrong house. We have also heard of drivers instructing support workers to tell a client to be quiet—things like that. So we really encourage the committee to consider how driver training could be improved to ensure that drivers are appropriately trained in order to provide a safe and inclusive environment for people with disabilities.

The third one was around application issues. A number of our members provided feedback about issues with the application process. Many indicated that they did not receive adequate information from the application assessors when an application was denied. So a number of support coordinators told us that when they rang to inquire why the application was denied it was usually due to administrative errors, like someone filling out a form incorrectly, rather than the person being ineligible for the program. We are concerned that a number of people with disabilities are actually missing out on vital access to this program because someone just filled out the form incorrectly and they were not aware of the fact that that administrative error occurred. So we would really like to see some greater information about application outcomes. We also heard that many people with disabilities have sort of given up on the process because it was all a bit too difficult. So a number of support coordinators and advocates mentioned that they would like to see an option on the form for advocates to share their contact details so that they could liaise with the department on issues related to the application.

Quickly, number four: expansion to rideshare. While NDS is really supportive of the expansion to rideshare platforms as a result of the role that they play in, of course, reducing wait times but also just providing that greater choice and control for people with disabilities, we did note that there does appear to need to be some further work around informing people about that opportunity to use rideshare platforms. In my discussions with support coordinators and also people with disabilities I found that lot of people just were not aware that the program had been expanded to Uber and other rideshare platforms.

One thing we also noted is that some people did note some reservations about using rideshare platforms, just around that safeguarding issue. Some felt a bit safer in taxis. And others mentioned that they would like to see a program expansion to rideshare platforms like Shebah, which is an all-women rideshare platform, because they just felt safer using that sort of service.

Number five: card misuse. We have heard of cases where the multipurpose taxi cards are being misused. This can happen when a user leaves the card in the taxi and then the taxidriver accidentally uses that card for another passenger. Or we have actually heard some pretty concerning reports of house managers in supported independent living using someone else's card if they just cannot find the right card for the right person—they just grab someone else's—and then of course they are misusing someone else's funds. So one suggestion was perhaps to think about putting some photo identification on the card. That could prevent some of that misuse.

Lastly, there is that interface with general practitioners. A number of our members raised concerns about the process where general practitioners fill out that application form. Many people who provided feedback to us noted that there seems to be a lack of understanding amongst GPs about the information that they need to include and also the parts of the form that they need to complete and the criteria upon which the application is assessed. If there are errors, people said, it is very difficult to then go back to the GP and get it all fixed. It is time consuming and it costs money. So we would really like to see some work done to improve the process and improve GPs' understanding of the application form just to reduce some of those issues.

But really, that is just a bit of an overview of some of the key feedback that we received.

The CHAIR: Clare, I loved the presentation. Again, thank you for your informative recommendations. They will inform the committee and are very helpful. I might just get straight into it and ask the first couple questions, and then I can go around the committee. You talk about improving training for drivers. So do you believe that should be across the board, not just for taxis but for rideshare and any driver in the sector? When you say we should aspire for higher standards, is that what you are saying?

Ms FORDYCE: Yes, we would absolutely support that, and we feel that that would be in line with the commitment of government around an inclusive Victoria that we would certainly like. We want actually all mainstream services, but certainly transport services broadly, to have people, have all staff, very welcoming and aware of people with disabilities—that they may have specific needs.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you for that, Sarah. And one more issue you touched on which is important is about your recommendations, suggestions around the card and the potential misuse of that. So obviously we want to protect the scheme, and your suggestion is that maybe photo ID be part of the actual card or that there be other verification methods to ensure it is not misused. Regardless, again, if it is taxi or rideshare, we have just got to make sure the highest integrity level is maintained. Is that right? That is important.

Ms FORDYCE: Yes.

Ms HAMBLBY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Excellent. On those two points I might move on to committee members. I might start off with Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Good morning, ladies—it is still morning at 11 o'clock. Thanks for coming in. I could not agree more about training, and we are talking about standards. We had probably one of the best examples of our training from our Geelong Taxi Service, where we actually bring people in, and before they actually do any work at the multipurpose end, they have to do 100 shifts—not 100 trips but 100 shifts—to make sure they really knew where they are going. They also then have to come in for a day going around to their community, around Geelong and surrounds, learning about places where they need to go. When we compare that to Uber's rideshare, where it is an online click and check, how do we measure that? How do we put that in context? Should Uber have to meet the same standard of training as the rest of the taxi industry if they want to play in this space? What is your view on that?

Ms FORDYCE: Disability services are working, I suppose, in a bit more of a regulated market, where we have quite a lot of experience of the economy and people getting jobs in that, and I suppose, drawing on some of that experience, we feel that there should be some minimum training requirements. I understand that with Uber they have got some particular programs that they are marketing to people with disabilities, and I think part of that marketing should be that they meet some minimum requirements re training in terms of disability inclusion and understanding.

Mr BARTON: I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Shebah went into receivership yesterday.

Ms FORDYCE: We understand that, yes.

Mr BARTON: I knew George. She was pretty amazing, and she was a good operator, but it was a very difficult market to go into. Her timing was not good. It was difficult before COVID, and with COVID obviously she was not able to trade her way through that. So it is very disappointing, because she was running a good service.

There are opportunities, and I think it is really sad that we have heard over this inquiry of a number of other operators wanting to be able to come into the market so we can have more operators. We could have had hire cars coming into the market; we could have had different things. But overwhelmingly the impediment seems to have been the regulator's ability to make that happen, so hopefully we will come up with a set of recommendations to streamline and get more players into the marketplace.

You said just previously that some of your members were not comfortable getting into a taxi. Can you explain to me why that is? And before you answer that, I will just say that a very large percentage of taxidrivers are your Uber drivers and vice versa. They flip and flop. If there is money to be made on a Friday and Saturday night, they are going to jump in their Ubers because they get the exploitative surge pricing, and then they flip into the taxis where they have consistent work during the week.

Ms FORDYCE: Clare, do you want to respond to that one?

Ms HAMBLY: I think I might have misspoken. From my discussions with people, generally people are more comfortable getting into taxis than they are Ubers.

Mr BARTON: Oh, more comfortable.

Ms HAMBLY: Yes, more comfortable with taxis; I think there is a sense that they are more regulated than Uber. I suppose as well, there is also the technological barrier for many people, that Uber is a new thing for many or rideshare platforms are a new thing for many people and people are a bit more comfortable with taxis. But, yes, that is certainly what I have been hearing.

Ms FORDYCE: Just following on, I spoke to a participant yesterday, a woman who was saying she really liked the Shebah-type offering. I understand it is no longer, but potentially there could be something else coming up. Certainly we have heard recently from the Disability Royal Commission that the incidence of abuse and harassment of women with disabilities is very, very significant. So many women with disabilities are particularly aware of the risks. I know women in the broader community are aware of risks with taxis and ridesharing vehicles, but women with disabilities face particular risks and would be aware of them. My understanding is that many women with disabilities are particularly looking for taxis or ridesharing vehicles where there is a level of training and kind of guarantee and safeguards around the workforce.

Mr BARTON: That is one of the reasons why we put cameras in taxis all those years ago, and I can say: does it fix it 100 per cent? No. But does it take away inappropriate behaviour 95 per cent of the time? Yes. Then also there is evidence when we need to prosecute thereafter. It is one of the things that we have been asked to consider: knowing that people with disabilities are more prone to sexual assault, whether we should have cameras in all commercial passenger vehicles, including the Ubers, if they want to play in the Multi Purpose Taxi Program space. Do you have a view on that?

Ms FORDYCE: I suppose from an NDS position we feel that a very robust quality and safeguard framework is appropriate. Because many services are now funded by NDIS, which is a national program, we urge state governments to keep an eye on the regulatory framework that occurs nationally. For example, there is some discourse at the moment that perhaps all people who have more than incidental contact with people with disabilities funded by NDIS should be subject to that national NDIS worker screening check—the NDIS check—which is actually administered by Services Victoria. So that could be an option as well.

Mr BARTON: It is worth considering.

Ms FORDYCE: Sometimes people generally are considering that, in the context of a royal commission and consideration of whether we have appropriate quality and safeguarding mechanisms in our society. So that could be an option, or cameras.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, ladies. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: And a very good overlay about the added vulnerability of women as well for disability. The aged care royal commission also spelt out some instances and examples that were quite disgusting and disturbing for all of us. So thank you for raising that again and highlighting the major issue. I might pass over to Mr Tarlamis, if Mr Tarlamis has a question.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, ladies, for your submission and for coming along and talking to us today and imparting your valuable knowledge to us as part of this inquiry. As part of your opening statement you spoke about cost and the importance of trying to get those costs lower and I was just wondering: do you think that those operating in the Multi Purpose Taxi Program should be able to surge-price?

Ms HAMBLY: I think from my discussions with providers it sounded as though the surge times or those real key wait times were around at the start and end of day programs. They were around 9.00 am and around sort of 3.00, 3.30; they were the key peak wait times. I do not know, Sarah, if you have a view on surge prices?

Ms FORDYCE: Yes. I suppose I would say that the key issue for our sector is to make sure there is availability—availability when people require the supports and that could be supports in terms of transport or other supports. In the disability sector the NDIS prices are adjusted to take account of changes in awards so there is extra funding for services on weekends and so forth, and that does provide the participant with some choice. Do they require a service, be it transport or another service, on a Saturday night when things are going to be more expensive, or will they do that activity on a Tuesday at lunchtime? So it does put it in the choice and control of the individual participant, so as a general approach we would support that. We support choice and control, but of course I have already mentioned our commitment to quality and safeguarding, so it is a balance there. We would not have an objection to surge pricing.

Mr TARLAMIS: And do you have a concern that the consequences of that could actually lead to less services for the vulnerable cohort? I say that on the basis that if some operators in the market are allowed to surge-price, but others are not, that would make their business model more financially viable and maybe force others out of the market. Currently we know that Uber, for example, do not have any wheelchair-accessible vehicles in their fleet, whereas taxis do. If one business model was more financially viable than others, forcing the other player out, then it could lead to a situation where the services that could be provided, like wheelchair-accessible vehicles, may disappear from the market, which would create that inequity.

Ms FORDYCE: We would certainly not want to see wheelchair-accessible vehicles disappearing. I suppose what we would like to see is more of an even playing field. It does not sound fair if one group can have surge pricing and another group cannot. We would think that taxis can provide—they have got a good reputation and have probably got a lot of existing customers and things they can build on. But the regulatory playing field should be more even so that then the market can respond to the need, and in our sector the need is going to be for particular times, for well-trained drivers and for vehicles that are accessible and so forth.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. Just in terms of picking up on the point that Mr Barton raised around cameras and the concerns around card misuse, as I understand it with the Uber system once you log in you are logged in in perpetuity. You do not actually need to re-show that card again, so it sort of reinforces that if there were cameras required across the platform that would be another way in which you could protect it, because having a card with photo ID on it as proposed would not address the concerns through the rideshare component of providers because they are not required to show a card. So that would not address that, whereas having cameras in vehicles would act as a deterrent, you would think, for people to do the wrong thing.

Ms HAMBLY: From the feedback that I gathered, the card misuse by taxidivers that I was alerted to was not intentional. A lot of it was someone accidentally picking up someone else's taxi card and using it incorrectly, so in that sense I do not think cameras would fix that issue.

Mr TARLAMIS: But it would address the issue around safety, and you spoke about how some people are more comfortable with cameras because they feel it is more regulated. If that was across the board, then that would provide some additional comfort for them, knowing that there was that protection in place.

Ms HAMBLY: Yes.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Barton, do you have any additional questions? We have got time for one more.

Mr BARTON: Only one, Chair?

The CHAIR: I think our next witnesses are here, and we are running tight today, sorry. My apologies, everybody. We have several witnesses today.

Mr BARTON: Just in terms of wait times, there is a very different thing going on between metropolitan Melbourne and rural and regional Victoria. We know, and we heard this very week, that we have got decisions being made by taxi operators not to expand or replace wheelchair-accessible vehicles because of the market damage which has been done by expanding the fleet from 10 500 taxis up to 50 000-odd vehicles because they have to cross-subsidise. We are walking a very fine line here about where we are going to end up, so how do we walk that fine line to make that balanced? The taxi industry does 60 million trips a year with a complaint rate of probably less than 1 per cent, and the market cannot deal with this. This has to be regulated, in my view. Do you agree with that view?

Ms FORDYCE: I think that what we see our role as would be probably the same. We support quality and safeguards. We have identified the issues that we believe need to be addressed. We would absolutely want to see—we welcome—having ridesharing in the market as well as taxis, because we support principles of choice for people with disabilities. In terms of actually how you get there, in terms of navigating that whole thing, I am afraid I would not think that we would have that expertise. We would—

Mr BARTON: You can handball it back to us. That is okay.

Ms FORDYCE: I think so. But I think what we have been able to do is just identify the issues from our members' perspective and our broad kind of principles that we support.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sarah, Clare and the National Disability Services for your submission and presentations today. It has been very informative. I have really enjoyed it, and I like the fact that you have come prepared with some recommendations, some options, for the committee to consider. And you are right; some of these policy areas overlap and maybe it is in the jurisdiction of the committee to make recommendations to government on these broader issues. But I appreciate your contributions today. On behalf of the committee we say thank you. Now the committee is going to go to a short break before our next witness.

Witnesses withdrew.