

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 October 2021

MEMBERS

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Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Mr Stephen Armstrong, Managing Director, Ballarat Taxis;

Mr Peter Valentine, Chief Executive Officer, Geelong Taxi Network; and

Ms Eleanor Fitz, Director, Wodonga Taxis.

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

I wish to begin by acknowledging 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 the Chair of the committee. I would like introduce my fellow committee members: our Deputy Chair, Mr Bernie Finn; Mr Lee Tarlamis; Mr Rod Barton; and Mr Andy Meddick.

To all witnesses giving evidence, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the constitution and also by the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide at this hearing is protected. However, any comment repeated outside this hearing may not be. 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 available and posted publicly on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to 15 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion with the committee. Could you please start by stating your name and the organisation you are representing today and then start your presentations. Over to you, panel. Eleanor, would you like to go first? Or Peter?

Ms FITZ: Yes, I am happy to. I am Eleanor Fitz from Wodonga Taxis. I am just looking at the submission I have got here. The key issues that we see as a company and individuals within the company are that with this expansion of the program the disadvantaged and disabled customers will become even more vulnerable. Without strict fare controls, rorting and Uber surge pricing are a very high risk for the government, and the government subsidy costs will spiral unless we have got set fares. Many of the disabled or elderly MPTP users do not have or do not use smartphones, and you heard that this morning from Colin Wells. It is very clear on that. They ring and say, 'Hello', and they have what I would call, a lot of them, a basic little 'hello phone' where they press a number and they say, 'Hello', and the phone rings and they say, 'Hello', and that is it. That is what the features are. Smartphones they do not have and they do not use.

The other thing is: how will a single credit card entry account for the expanded service not be rorted by a user's family and friends? No attention has been given to that.

A struggling taxi industry will, because of poor government decisions for its reforms, see the industry facing even tougher conditions and circumstances, with relevant service delivery reductions. We have in Wodonga an operator who very clearly puts on the side of his vehicle that he is available from 8 until 5, Monday to Friday. He does not do evenings; he does not do weekends, and that has all been allowed by the regulator, which does not regulate very well.

The decision to enable Uber to enter the market with no service amendments threatens taxpayers because of increased government costs, and I am just very, very curious as to why this seemingly unchecked decision-making was allowed and why the Mickey Mouse trial was allowed with such limitation of numbers. It was done in Geelong, and I suspect Peter Valentine will add to that when he talks as well.

So they are the key issues for Wodonga Taxis. We believe that there is a poorly performing regulator monitoring the taxi service and monitoring the disabled services, the MPTP as well, so it is a bundle full of, in my eyes, maladministration. So I will leave it at that and take questions if you have them.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Eleanor. We might go to Peter, or the whole panel, and then we will ask questions at once, so that committee members can ask whichever panel member they would like to direct their questions to. Peter, over to you.

Mr VALENTINE: Thanks, Enver. Good afternoon. My name is Peter Valentine. I am the CEO of Geelong Radio Cabs and Geelong Taxi Network. I am also a director of the Victorian Taxi Association and an executive council member of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Geelong Taxi Network has a long history of taxicab and hire car service delivery, and it has been operational in the Geelong region and the surrounding areas—Surf Coast Shire and Bellarine Peninsula—since the 1930s. Geelong Taxi Network is the largest urban network and urban BSP in Victoria, operating both conventional and wheelchair-accessible vehicles.

It is with pleasure that I accept the invitation from the Parliament of Victoria's Legislative Council to take part in the Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program, as we have a very large involvement in the transportation of aged, frail persons and persons with a disability. Our involvement extends to the NDIS program, where we were the first transport company in Australia to operate under the NDIS provider banner in the trial site of Geelong.

It is with concern that I trust that the committee will get the right outcomes from the inquiry, as I feel in some ways it appears that it is quite a fashionable idea to expand MPTP services willy-nilly as it looks and feels good, but I am concerned that the end result may not be the correct result for our most vulnerable persons, who need additional care and professional service. A lot of my concerns relate to passenger and driver safety, which only comes from extensive training, understanding and the rapport that the driver would have to deliver an essential and efficient service, coupled with vehicle safety. I was very fortunate to be able to make submissions to the CPVV's assessments on the framework of training drivers and also a part of the VTA response to this inquiry. But I get concerned that an open expansion of providers for the MPTP market could in actual fact shrink the market, not expand the market, mainly to do with the fact that that could have a disastrous effect on passengers but it is the availability of service 24 hours that we need.

I am concerned as to whether the inquiry is actually talking about a person with a disability or whether we are actually talking about transport for a person holding an MPTP card, and there is a huge difference, and I am not sure whether we have clarified that at this stage. In many areas—there is the service delivery, the availability of drivers, the chargeable fare structures and even, a large consideration is, fraud, potentially to be carried out by—we must include—drivers in that area or the passenger or other persons with a disability who would choose to participate in fraud. And unfortunately we have been confronted with a lot of that through the NDIS program, I must say. The fraudulent activities are either from persons known to them or unknown to them because they are not identifiable, and the vulnerability makes this process easy pickings. I consider one of the biggest hurdles to this expansion to be the variation of the passenger's disability proportionate to the level of service and a concern that some operators will only be interested in cherrypicking those with a low disability or a small disability and scoop the financial reward without consideration of a person's disability or their level of disability and particularly those at risk. Innovation seemed to excite our past CEO at the CPVV, and accordingly the trial was carried out in Geelong with a rideshare company, which was also reported to have been successful, although CPVV did not seem to want to discuss the results or the success, which was hard to understand.

So immediately that brings to mind the potential for price surging, the transportation of unidentified persons not having an MPTP card travelling as an MPTP cardholder, persons not having a 24-hour access to service and the shrinkage of service, and the significant difference in the safety standards between the different styles of vehicles of a taxicab versus a rideshare vehicle. As an introduction I hope that has given you sufficient to question yourselves and myself as to the components needed to be considered, and I offer my availability to discuss the matter further now or at any time. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Peter. Thank you to Geelong taxis. Do we have Stephen Armstrong on Zoom at the moment? If not, I might just pass over to committee members to start asking questions, because I think you have outlined in your submissions, and Eleanor and yourself have kind of outlined, the broad position and concerns of the sector. I might pass over to my deputy, Mr Bernie Finn, to ask the first question, and then we will go to Mr Barton.

Mr FINN: Thank you for that, Mr Chairman, and thank you to Eleanor and Peter for being with us this afternoon. I am very keen to know, to get an idea of, exactly the service level in your respective towns. What sort of service level does the taxi industry provide as opposed to the Uber companies? What sort of numbers are we looking at in terms of actual vehicles?

Mr VALENTINE: In Geelong, Bernie, may I say—and thank you for the question—that we run approximately 200 cabs, and 30 of those are wheelchair accessible. I am unsure of the numbers of Uber vehicles, and the numbers do seem to have dwindled in the last 12, 18 months, I must say, due to their unavailability. So I cannot give you an accurate percentage; sorry, Bernie.

Mr FINN: That is fair enough. Eleanor, how about Wodonga?

Ms FITZ: Well, a lot smaller. We have got 17 vehicles and we have got six WAT vehicles, and they all provide a 24/7 service, on a rotational basis. Weekends, the WAT vehicles tend to be high-occupancy vehicles because there are not that many disabled out at night. The bulk of the work is through the day, particularly first thing in the morning and late afternoon with kids going to and from the specialist schools et cetera. At night-time it is about groups on outings, things like that, and then on the weekends. Yes.

Mr FINN: Thank you very much indeed for that. One theme that seems to have developed today is, I think it would be safe to say, a certain degree of criticism of the regulator, and I am very keen to know your view on why the regulator seems to have done what the regulator has done. There does seem to be a certain trend in allowing rideshare companies, one in particular, to get perhaps a greater grab of the market than they might be entitled to otherwise. I am just wondering why you believe that has occurred. I am not suggesting that anybody is doing anything they should not, but I am very keen to know from people such as yourselves on the ground what you are hearing and what you feel is behind this trend by the regulator.

Ms FITZ: Well, perhaps if I may start, we have just recently had to put together a 78-page document to do with COVID requirements and regulations to meet all of the standards imposed by the regulator, some of which are untenable, and you heard some of it this morning in terms of misalignment with other public transport and what is required with cleaning et cetera. I have yet to see a detailed document that details what we need to do with disability services and degrees of disability et cetera. So in my view there is a lot of cherrypicking by the regulator as they position themselves from being the regulator for the taxi industry and rideshare to becoming the safety regulator for the taxi industry, and so rideshare seems to be out on limb on its own, which makes you wonder what the relationship is and where and how does it work in terms of what appears to be favouritised treatment in a wide number of circumstances, starting from illegal entry that was condoned by the government for a long time. I have serious concerns with what rideshare and Uber particularly are doing, and it will only be low level. They will not be interested in making a \$100 000 investment. They do not own any—well, it is not theirs; it is all their contractors—large vehicles that cost a lot of money as an investment with minimal returns. And anybody—Jimmy the goose—would know, ‘Don’t buy into this, because you’re not going to make a dollar out of it’. It is that simple. So for us in the taxi industry there is a very strong perceived view of bias and irregular considerations of what needs to be done and the way things should be done. There are all kinds of obstacles that—

Mr FINN: Eleanor, can I ask why you believe that bias exists?

Ms FITZ: Oh, gosh. I really do not know, and I have no hard evidence. All you can do is look at patterns of behaviour and examples shown in some of the crazy rules and regulations. Why are these being dreamed up? If you ask for answers, you just cannot get them. So it is concentric—the sets of circles just keep going on and on and on. I might add that I have another interest. I am a director and company secretary of a big aged-care facility in Wodonga and governance is something I know a fair bit about, and the governance for the taxi industry and rideshare really starts with the commissioners. They, in my mind, have failed. The governance of the CPV has failed and therefore the operational levels fail as well. It just goes down the line in terms of how things—

Mr FINN: Does the buck stop with the minister?

Ms FITZ: In my eyes, yes, it does.

Mr FINN: Eleanor, thank you.

Ms FITZ: You are welcome.

Mr FINN: Peter, what about Geelong?

Mr VALENTINE: The interesting part there is that Eleanor mentioned the safety regulator. I have noticed in the latest lot of documents they are now called the trust and safety regulator. Seriously, it is on the documents. There seems to have been a huge shift now—

Mr FINN: You do not appear to have a lot of trust in them.

Mr VALENTINE: No, we do not. And it is not at a personal level but it is at an organisational level, I must say, because when we ask for things it does not occur over a long period of time. For a prime example, the safety regulations legislation came into effect in about March of 2019 but it took 18 months to develop the two codes of practice in order for the network service providers to actually put together some safety plan without a code of practice. Now, that is just a prime example of how it has taken so long. It looks as though the effect now is all care, no responsibility, to go away from working together with an idea that we have got a safety regulator who now wants to audit and audit and audit and check. That is fine. I have got a large audit tomorrow, but I am happy to be audited provided the other 110 000 drivers go through the same process, and I cannot see individual operators being able to do that, for example, or submit a 78-page document, like Eleanor spoke of. So I am very concerned about the operation and that ability. As I said earlier, it appeared very fashionable to introduce, and we have been told if we need to move forward, we need to be innovative.

Mr FINN: Could I just ask, again, the same question I asked Eleanor: why is this happening? Why is there a perception of bias, of favouritism, call it what you will?

Mr VALENTINE: I wonder whether it is actually coming from grassroots, from the government in terms of the way that they do regulate—in other words, a major shift of responsibility from the regulator to the provider. That is where I feel as if the shift has occurred. We had a lot of prescriptive regulations before, then we deregulated and now we are on the fringe of regulating again but we really do not want to—make sure you have done all of these things. For example, trying to get an answer for four weeks about mandatory vaccinations was impossible, and at the eleventh hour all of a sudden it became a responsibility of the vehicle owner, not the BSP. Now, I would suggest there are a lot of vehicle owners out there who would not even be interested in that type of instruction.

Mr FINN: Yes. All of this sort of thing that we have been talking about—does the buck stop with the minister?

Mr VALENTINE: I believe it does, but the trouble is we can never get to him. I was told by the CEO in writing when I asked a question about the PBBS program that they would not be able to get an answer from the minister in six months—and that is in writing. Now, how you cannot get an answer from a minister in six months, I do not know.

Mr FINN: That is another question altogether.

The CHAIR: We are moving a bit off the terms of reference, Bernie.

Mr FINN: I am not sure we are.

The CHAIR: I am just putting committee members on notice. We have got Stephen Armstrong on the call—I think he dropped out before—from Ballarat Taxis. Stephen, would you like to say a few words before I hand over to Mr Barton?

Mr ARMSTRONG: I do not want to cover ground that has already been covered, but just a couple of things. I am the CEO of Ballarat Taxis, and we also run Shepparton Taxis. I have also been the President of the Victorian Taxi Association for a number of years. So my experience in the industry is vast and in dealing with taxi companies in regional areas to small and remote towns, I have a fairly good understanding of what is happening in all those places. To get back to the terms of reference and what we are supposed to be talking about—and just as an aside, what I will offer you at this point in time is that since the reforms that happened in 2017 I have never seen the morale in the industry as low as it has been in my 40 years of involvement—my concern out of what is going to happen with this Multi Purpose Taxi Program expansion is that is going to

accentuate those issues. Long-term participants in the industry are leaving in droves, and they are the ones we need in the industry. I have had calls from people running country taxi services in remote towns in tears because of what they have had to go through in recent years, from dealing with CPVV personnel to the reforms and a vast number of other things, and as Peter just pointed out, the number of audits we have to go through at this point in time when they are trying to run a taxi business from the kitchen table. So it has just been extraordinary, the pressure that these long-serving taxi operators and participants in the industry have been placed under.

My major concern to do with expanding the program is that in regional areas you must understand the Multi Purpose Taxi Program is the bread and butter. That is what has kept these businesses running in these small towns. Bringing other players in will dilute that market, which will mean their ability to make a profit and to keep the business afloat will be unsustainable. New entrants into the market will come in and they will service from 8 to 5 or 9 to 5 and then they are gone, and then you are going to expect to rely on the old participants in the taxi industry to continue working to cover the rest of the day and the weekends. Well, that is not going to happen if they have not got that bread and butter and the basis of their ability to make a living from Monday to Friday. So what you will find—you to be very careful about this, and I have considered it for a long time—is that you will lose country taxi services in small country towns and rural areas. Regional towns like Ballarat, Shepparton and Geelong will probably survive, but there is a real prospect of losing a 24/7 taxi service.

So a couple of things: coming back to my operation in Ballarat and in particular the provision of wheelchair services, the only way we are able to offer those services and why we continue to offer those services is we cross-subsidise from other areas of our business. You ask me how I do that; we ask our single-vehicle sedan operators to pay extra base fees so that we can do coordination of wheelchair-accessible taxi runs. You know, really that is not our job. If you were in this business to make money, you would not be looking at running wheelchair taxi services. But we do it because we feel we have a responsibility to our community and we know we would be letting down a hell of a lot of people if we did not offer that service.

To incentivise drivers to come out we offer them over and above the current bailment agreement. The implied conditions as they stand at this point in time mean the driver gets 55 per cent and the operator will get 45 per cent. We offer ours 65 per cent just to get drivers to come out and cover work at night. We put our drivers out when we do not have drivers for a wheelchair at night. We have to ring up drivers and get them out of bed to come out and do it. Now, who else is going to do that? What we do is we have to pay those drivers to come out and do it, and that is just to continue offering that service. Other players are not going to do that. They do not have the will to do it. They are just a couple of things, but I do not see any new players wanting to go to that extent to service the vulnerable in our community the way we would.

The safety aspect also worries me. You know, MPTP clients are the most vulnerable people in our community, and they deserve to get the service. And they and their families need to be secure in the knowledge that they are getting a good service and they are getting a proper service—you know, CCTV, GPS tracking, tactile signs. In my opinion every driver when they apply for their driver accreditation should have to pass an NDIS check or a working with children check. I am not sure why that is not part of the whole system, but it is not. That is another thing that should be done.

I guess the only other point to make—and again I am probably covering a lot of old ground that you have heard—is the ability of the new entrants to price gouge the Multi Purpose Taxi Program and the sustainability of the program. It is obviously not an endless pit of money that you have got, and I am concerned that surge pricing in particular will mean that that fund of money is diluted and it is not going into the areas where it should go. I am not quite sure that surge pricing and other players coming into the industry where up to 30 per cent of that money can be transported overseas to multi-corporations actually passes the pub test. It certainly does not pass the test at the pub I go to. At least you know with the current players the money goes to the driver and that is where it stays.

I will not go any further or expand. Those are my key points, and I am happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR: Excellent, Stephen. Thank you. You have built upon some of the concerns. I have been impressed at the amount of wheelchair-accessible vehicles in the fleets of both Wodonga and Geelong. I am guessing Ballarat is similar. It is a relatively high percentage. I think in Geelong it was about 15 per cent of the

fleet, and Wodonga was much higher. I am sure Ballarat has got a considerable amount as well, so that is impressive. I might pass over to Mr Barton. He has been eagerly awaiting. Mr Barton?

Mr BARTON: I just want to thank our three guests here—these Johnny-come-latelys to the taxi industry have only been hanging around for 40 years supporting local communities. Eleanor and John, I do not know, when did you start in the taxi service in Wodonga?

Ms FITZ: 1981.

Mr BARTON: 1981—that is pretty impressive.

Ms FITZ: It is a long time.

Mr BARTON: It is a long time.

Ms FITZ: Yes, and in fact can I just stop you for a moment? John introduced the first wheelchair vehicle into this region, an old-fashioned stretch Ford that was huge to open the doors and put the ramp out and all of those things. He was a voice in the wilderness in his push to get it, but we got it and grew from there. So it is something I am proud of.

Mr BARTON: No, you should be very proud. You have been a great asset to your community, you and John, and I know it is a difficult time at the moment.

I just want to say thank you to all of you guys, but I am just going to have a talk to Peter Valentine about the trial. Now, Chair, I have raised a question about documents about the trial, and they have not been forthcoming, nor have I had any advice where they are. Have you got any advice for me about the documents, Chair, about the trial, which we requested?

Mr VALENTINE: You are asking me, Mr Barton?

Mr BARTON: No, sorry, I am asking the Chair.

The CHAIR: Were you asking the Chair?

Mr BARTON: I am asking the Chair.

The CHAIR: The secretary is following that up and will update the committee, but not at the public hearing. It will be in a confidential meeting. I want to remind Mr Barton that the committee workings are confidential, so I would rather we discuss that in private instead of in the live broadcast. Thank you.

Mr BARTON: Happy to do that, but we have had no feedback whatsoever about the request for those documents, and we have got the client sitting there now.

Peter Valentine, when the trial was done by the regulator in conjunction with Uber down in Geelong, that was over roughly a two-month period. I think they wrote to 500 people to have 100 people participate in that trial, and it turns out to be that they actually did for passengers. In that same period of time, that two months, could you tell me how many trips in the multipurpose taxi space did Geelong Taxis do?

Mr VALENTINE: For example, in our wheelchair vehicles alone we would be doing 15 lifts a day and we have got 30. So without even going to the conventional vehicles, I would suggest in the order of potentially 10 to 20. It just depends on the vehicle owner. As an average it might be 10-plus. It depends on where they are, because these people will travel either on a regular basis to community workshops or they will do it on an intermittent basis to a medical appointment or social activity. But that runs all day, every day and, I might say, into the evenings now more so than before. So if you take our wheelchair fleet alone, on an average, we far surpassed that number.

Mr BARTON: Could you just tell us what is required: if someone wants to come to Geelong Taxis and they get past you and you offer them a job, what are the requirements when they get to do Multi Purpose Taxi Program work—at what stage? And then, if they do get past that stage and they wanted to do wheelchair stuff, what is required there—around the training?

Mr VALENTINE: Basically there are seven different courses that we do. So we start with three basic courses for drivers in terms of fundamentals and then in terms of the operation and delivery of service, and the third part is geographical, which is extremely important. Now, that involves both a visual and a drive around to understand the major points for disability services. That is your basic taxidriver, and that takes some considerable introduction. So we have got that part of that program in place. Then if you want to do work for persons with disability—in other words, that comes into our gold-care class—gold care must have done a numerous number of shifts, it could be a minimum of 100, and/or a particular period of time, and at that point in time they then further train to understand the effects of the disability and how the person should deal with that. They do not need to know everything about the disability type but how they deal with different disability types, and they are led through that so that they know there are various types. The work is then only dispatched to those persons, and so that is how we do our disability care.

We also have the wheelchair-accessible work, which is different again, which means that they must have a W endorsement. The W endorsement is training people to operate a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, and again reinforced in that is the additional part about understanding persons with a wheelchair.

We also have a very high level of discipline, and that means that if there is a misdemeanour of any type, from uniform to fraud to anything at all, they are disciplined strictly and will be removed. And might I say, our competitors in the market now are the people who do not work here any longer, and the CPVV should have got rid of them long ago but they have allowed them to continue to operate. There is one of your downfalls of the CPVV. Does that help?

Mr BARTON: You mean another one, yes. I do not want to open everything up, but does Geelong Taxi own the 30 wheelchair vehicles?

Mr VALENTINE: We do, yes. And the reason we do that is because you do not dispatch a wheelchair vehicle the way that it is often done in the metropolitan area—so let us ring up, take a call, stick it in the dispatch system and let it find a car at some point in time. A person with a disability needs the job done and needs to know when they can get the job done, so the call is taken or the booking is taken and then the vehicle is searched and looked for, and the job goes to that vehicle to make sure that it is going to be dispatched correctly. That is the difference, and that is the only way that you can dispatch work to the vulnerable.

Mr BARTON: Sorry, Chair, I just have one more question for Peter, if I may. Peter, if you get a 30 per cent, 40 per cent loss in income turnover because of the cherrypicking of work by the rideshare industry, what will that mean for the wheelchair business?

Mr VALENTINE: Well, we have had a 70 per cent downturn in the last 12 months. How we are still standing I do not know. Take the 30 per cent out, you can take away 50 per cent of our vehicles. Now, I am not sure that the rideshare companies want to invest \$100 000 in those vehicles every time.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Well, we have not seen them do it anywhere else on the globe, so it will be a first if they do it here in Victoria. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. We may come back to you, give you another opportunity, but I might go to Mr Andy Meddick, who is one of the upper house members for Western Region. He has got a bit of a family story as well related to this sector, and he has got a few questions about the human impact. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you all for contributing today. I will direct my questions probably more directly at Peter, if you will, because that is the experience that I have. I live just down the road, Peter—I live in Torquay—but my mother-in-law and father-in-law, John and Isabel Boxshall, were involved in this particular type of taxiing for well over 20 years. For me and for them, it was never about something that was an income—yes, they wanted to make an income, but that was not the primary driver. It was providing a service to our most vulnerable section of the community. That was the primary driver of what they did, and the main factor for them was to have that relationship with the people that they picked up and dropped off every single day, to give those people surety and comfort that they knew that the person they were driving with was safe. They could talk to them; they could have a conversation. They formed relationships over those years, and that gives trust and faith in the industry, to my mind anyway. They are long since retired. John unfortunately is in a home at the moment with dementia, but Isabel still follows what is going on with the industry and this particular part of it and is absolutely appalled at what is happening to a sector that she took a lot of pride in.

So I want to ask probably a very localised question to begin with. Given the trial was taking place in Geelong, other drivers who work for Geelong Taxi would have obviously seen this taking place out on the street, these trials taking place. Were they giving feedback to you? How did they feel? Because their mental health, seeing another player in the market to begin with when you have got rideshare doing what they do and then seeing them sort of infringing upon this area, which I think they felt that they kind of owned because they were giving that particular service—how did that make them feel? Did they give any feedback on that?

Mr VALENTINE: They were concerned, first of all, that the trial was taking place. However, in terms of effect, we are not sure how much effect it had because we are not sure how many passengers were transported. In fact we were once told by the CPVV senior management that there were no trips completed at all. So I am interested to find out how many trips did actually take place et cetera. We did not feel much of an effect because I do not think very much happened, but I must say we never got the same support, nor did any other company, to promote ourselves as that particular trial that was set up by the CPVV. I cannot really comment on the effect because we just went as hard as we could, as we normally do. And you are 100 per cent correct in terms of you only offer this service and deliver the service because that is what you have traditionally done. I have heard it said three times before: if they think they are going to come in here and make money out of a wheelchair-accessible vehicle fleet, it does not work that way.

Mr MEDDICK: No.

Mr VALENTINE: I mean, the drivers are remunerated quite well through the system, but in actual fact, if you take the whole process into place, in terms of the vehicle and the operation—and we do not want Victoria full of vintage, old vehicles either. That is the other issue.

Mr MEDDICK: Thanks for mentioning that, because that segues quite well into my next question. We often hear about the creation of a level playing field—that since the entry of rideshare operations there has not been a level playing field and that that should always have been in place. This is a question that is open to all of you of course. I put this question to others, and I do not claim to know 100 per cent of the ins and outs of the taxi industry and what would be required to do this, to establish it, but they have been reasonably supportive of, for instance, a mandatory code of practice where minimum standards are set, there must be training and accreditation, much like you were talking about that you already do, Peter—you have these levels that people have to meet—so a rollout of that, if you like, across the state, so that that had to be achieved. Now, that is whether you are in a traditional taxi environment or whether you are a rideshare operator; you would have to meet those standards. But that would not just apply to the driver; it would apply to the vehicle. So we are talking about, like with your wheelchair vehicles, for instance, if you want to be in that space, then you have got to buy a vehicle that is equipped to do that. You have got to spend the same amount of money, have the same security arrangements in place, the same insurance that any other vehicle and driver would have to have in place, so that there would be an actual level playing field in that respect. Is that something that any of you would be supportive of? If it is regulated and they have to adhere to it and you are all in the same ship, is that something you would be supportive of?

Mr ARMSTRONG: Can I answer first? Look, I am certainly supportive of that, and maybe it is time for a broader review of this whole area of service in the Multi Purpose Taxi Program, but anything that is going to encourage us to provide a service that is better, we are happy to be a part of. And as you just said, all we want is a level playing field. We are confident in our service, we are confident in our community that we can provide a service as good as anyone, but you need to do it on a level playing field. You know, you cannot do it with one hand tied behind your back, and that is where we feel we are at the moment. But as far as setting a mandatory code of practice goes, I cannot see how anyone could disapprove of that. I think it is a great idea, and maybe that should be coupled with a whole lot of other reforms.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Eleanor, you had your hand up. Would you like to add anything to that? Otherwise, Mr Meddick, do you have another question?

Mr MEDDICK: I would like to hear what Eleanor has to say. Thanks, mate.

The CHAIR: Excellent.

Ms FITZ: Thank you, Chair; thank you, Mr Meddick. Look, a basic code of practice—wonderful—and it should be applied and it should have layers to do with training for disability services. That is really important.

Beyond disability, we should not forget the aged as well, because their needs are often parallel to disability but are kept separate in terms of training, so there needs to be layered training. The fundamental thing aside from those very key issues is recognition by the committee and by the government that taxi services are not basic economics of needs and wants. Looking at the demand factors, we need taxis to go to the doctor, to go out somewhere, to do something. We do not want a taxi until we need it, and basic economics tells us that the more we provide the wants the less the services will become, and it is leading towards now being unsustainable with the amount of rideshare that is out there and with the volume of work that is there.

So the reforms overall have been mostly misguided. There may be some good intentions there somewhere, but there has been very little thought given to the consequences of the decisions. So yes, we will do this. Somebody gets a hot idea in the CPV, 'We'll do this'. COVID is a good example of it in terms of the incredible amount of work that they have demanded and then absconded in terms of authority and counter-checking to see what is happening. 'What a great idea. You make it happen. We'll take no responsibility for those decisions'. So we are now facing an unsustainable entry surge, with Uber wanting to enter the disability market, and without really strict controls it will be a whole lot of cherrypicking and there will be absolutely no benefit to the taxi industry, which will decline even further. Everything my colleagues are saying is absolutely correct. That is the reality of it. I would respectfully ask that the committee give that really serious consideration—that the entry surge, that the lack of real regulation and accountability and the focus and behaviours of the regulator get serious attention, because it is unworkable as it is. That is almost a little rant, I guess, there. So sorry about that.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is slightly off the Multi Purpose Taxi Program and more broad, but I understand your frustration. Mr Meddick, do you have any more questions?

Mr MEDDICK: Not at this stage, thank you, Chair, unless Peter has got something else he wants to add to that.

Mr VALENTINE: I was just going to say, Mr Meddick, that I did mention it earlier that I think if this group is considering the Multi Purpose Taxi Program, that is fine. But are we considering the disability sector or the Multi Purpose Taxi Program? Because there are a lot of people with a disability outside that MPTP for whatever reason, so you cannot provide for one that you cannot provide for the other. The other interesting thing is it really does not matter what vehicle you use. Whatever the service costs is what the vehicle costs. What we are actually talking about with the MPTP is the percentage of that cost that the government are prepared to pay. That is really what we are talking about, because it does not matter who you put in the vehicle or what service you do, it is the same for either a person with an MPTP or without an MPTP card.

The CHAIR: Mr Valentine, just to clarify, this motion was obviously referred from the chamber by Mr Barton and it was in response to the changes to the Multi Purpose Taxi Program. But as part of the terms of reference we do reflect upon the impact on the disability sector also. It is one of the terms of reference. So there is a considerable overlap, but obviously the multipurpose taxi reforms are what triggered this inquiry, so obviously that will be our main focus but the disability impact is part of that anyway because there is a considerable overlap. But the disability sector is much broader, but this is the multipurpose taxi aspect of it.

Mr MEDDICK: That is it from me at the moment, thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Excellent, Mr Meddick. At this point I might ask committee members if they would like to ask any additional questions. Mr Tarlamis, Mr Finn or we can go back to Mr Barton. Deputy Chair, do you have an additional question?

Mr FINN: No, I am very happy to hand back to Mr Barton.

The CHAIR: Mr Barton, I know you are eagerly waiting. Over to you.

Mr BARTON: I am relaxed. I just want to say what a difference it makes when people have got skin in the game and understand the business. You have articulated what the reality is, so my question in terms of the Multi Purpose Taxi Program is: did the CPVV come to you in your businesses and then in your role as an industry body and ask you, 'If we do X, what do you think will happen to Y'?

Ms FITZ: Never.

Mr VALENTINE: No.

Mr BARTON: You did not have to think about that for a moment.

Mr VALENTINE: No. We do not have to think about it, because what we actually do is go and ask the CPVV questions, and generally it takes six months to get a response. Like, it has taken me six months to get them to consider changes to one of their own contracts, which they wanted to apply eight months later until I objected. Then they decided that I was correct because they put the rules in place last March and not last November. So in terms of working together, I do not know whether it is constraints on them or whether they are not allowed to do anything, but they are all like frightened chickens just at the moment. You ask them something and they scurry into the chicken coop.

Mr BARTON: Why do you think we have come to this? Why do you think there is a disconnect and it is completely unrelatable between the industry and the regulator? The decision about the Multi Purpose Taxi Program was in the middle of a pandemic when thousands of cars are not working and they decide to do this.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton, for clarifying it is in relation to the Multi Purpose Taxi Program.

Mr BARTON: Yes, in relation to the Multi Purpose Taxi Program.

The CHAIR: In that context, yes.

Ms FITZ: Because they never asked for input from the industry from the outset. With respect, Chair, you cannot really separate the two for questions like this, because there is no—you used the word skin, Mr Barton—within the officers at an operational and executive level. So they get bright ideas—these light bulb moments—but because they have no experience and they are too proud, I do not know, to ask for input, dreams get dreamed and then it is ‘Make it work’. And a lot of it is unworkable—absolutely unworkable. That is why we have the problem, whether it is with multipurpose or anything else.

In my first degree many years ago I was taught that if you want to crush innovation, you count and you audit and you count again and you hold people back and hold back the tide and plug the dyke and all of the rest of it to do what you have to do to stop any kind of surge of discussion and opposition to what it is you are trying to do. That is the modus operandi of the CPVV—block and delay. Whether it is taxi reform generally or the MPTP it really does not really matter. That has been the operational tactic of the organisation.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Ms Fitz.

Mr ARMSTRONG: Can I just add a piece to that? You asked the question about why they did not come to us and why they present these reforms without consultation. I cannot really answer that, only CPVV can answer that, but I will go back as far back as the Fels inquiry and what emanated out of that. The fallout of that is that there seems to be a genuine mistrust of the big players in the taxi industry for whatever reason. Unfortunately us small guys in regional towns got bundled up into that whole basket. I do not know why, because it is ill-conceived and it is ill-informed, because all we have ever done is do the best for our community and for the industry, and we put our hearts and souls into it.

The other part of it is the loss of knowledge at the CPVV has been enormous over the last five years. I mean, the turnover has been that great, and you are talking to people and trying to explain about the effects of their decisions and the ramifications of their decisions that they are going to make and the flow-on effect that is the end result with the taxidriver and the customer, but they do not get it. They think you are being self-serving and that you are just saying this to block what their great new innovation is, and that is not the case. You know, we are the ones with the vested interest in this industry. There is a real lack of industry knowledge at CPVV, and they are doing it all on a theoretical basis. We are here to help, and we want to help, but we are not being asked to help.

Mr VALENTINE: If I could also make a comment, I have got to say I feel as if the current management of CPVV are under instruction—or are carrying out themselves—to do a box-ticking exercise in a number of areas. In my hand I have a submission to the CPVV called ‘Assessing the framework for training of wheelchair-accessible vehicles’. That was in December 2019 as a result of a large paper which did not have particularly good facts in it called *Assessing the Framework for Training Drivers of Wheelchair Accessible*

Vehicles, and there were many faults in that. And a second one called ‘Do you use or care for someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter?’. Now, that is about the second or the third time that we have done the same process, and that was about training of drivers and what would be recommended. I have not heard a poop or a peep, because it is nearly two years since then and we have heard nothing. So I do not know—

Mr BARTON: You cannot be rushing these things, mate.

The CHAIR: But Peter, could you actually, if you may, send a copy to the committee, to the secretariat—just email that in—so we can have a look at it as well?

Mr VALENTINE: Absolutely. And may I say that I am about to be audited again tomorrow. I have been audited in the last three months. We have had a massive preparation for the audit. I had to have a phone call to see if it was okay to take a phone call to see if it was okay to have the first meeting, and then I had the first meeting to see if it was okay that we started with the second meeting. Now we are going to have four meetings on an audit for ourselves.

Now, they know—because they made a comment that, ‘We know that if we have an audit with you that we’ll have a good result’. Now, is that telling me that they are after 10 good results so they can say, ‘Well, we’ve looked at 10 places across the state and we’ve got a high result’? But there are 110 000 operators out there; I do not think you are going to get a good result out of those. And once you start handing that MPTP work to those people—you have only got to walk in the streets of any suburb, and if you would put your mother-in-law or your son or your daughter or anyone in some of those cars, I will go he.

So that probably answers your question as to why I get frustrated and annoyed about what is going on with the CPVV and how realistic they are as to how practical they are about ticking a box. And I am sorry, in all my time in the industry—but that is how I feel, and it should not have ever come to that.

The CHAIR: We understand that you are very unhappy with the way the relationship is. Eleanor, do you want to say a few words?

Ms FITZ: Yes. Can I just add a little bit more to Peter. We had an audit very recently, and this included our WAT vehicles. It was linked to COVID as well, but it was multipurpose vehicles. And the CPVV actually asked us, as the sole booking provider, if you like, for Wodonga, ‘How many other taxis are operating in Wodonga, and who are they?’.

Mr BARTON: You tell me.

Ms FITZ: The regulator asked Wodonga Taxis, called the manager of Wodonga Taxis to ask. ‘Do they know what is going on?’ is the question.

Mr BARTON: I will refrain from using the phrase that I would normally use at this stage, but there are a large number, and that is for the benefit of the committee. The amount of independents out there—they have no idea who is out there, and yet they are only regulating those who are doing it correctly.

The CHAIR: Interesting insight. Thank you for sharing that. I do notice that it is 3 o’clock now, and on that note—although it has been an interesting discussion, a pretty frank discussion, with committee members, some of the stories that have been told, especially about the morale in the sector at the moment that you have shared, are disheartening. And in relation to the Multi Purpose Taxi Program, which this committee is looking at, we will take on board that feedback. And like I said, if you can forward that document as well, that might provide some further insight. But to all of you, Wodonga Taxis, Ballarat Taxis and the Geelong Taxi Network, I just want to thank you all for taking time out of your busy days to be with us today.

Witnesses withdrew.