

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

Melbourne—Thursday, 21 October 2021

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Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Mr Chris Edwards, Manager, Government Relations and Advocacy, NDIS and Aged Care, Vision Australia.

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 our live broadcast.

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

To all witnesses giving evidence at this hearing, what you say is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Victorian constitution and also by the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following today's hearing. Ultimately transcripts will be made available on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Can you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, Chris.

Mr EDWARDS: Hi. I am Chris Edwards. I am the Manager of Government Relations and Advocacy at Vision Australia. Thank you very much for inviting us to give evidence today at the committee. Vision Australia is the largest blindness and low vision agency in Australia and provides services to over 25 000 people each year, with over 10 000 of those being Victorians. We also work collaboratively with other organisations to ensure that we represent the needs and interests of people who are blind and low-vision. In our submission we highlighted the value and the importance of the role of the Multi Purpose Taxi Program for Victorians who are blind and low vision. If I can reflect myself on what the importance of it is to me, I am totally blind myself and have a seeing eye dog, and I cannot imagine being in a world where I do not have my seeing eye dog because it is critical for my mobility. Much the same when it comes to the Multi Purpose Taxi Program—it would be a huge barrier for me not to have this available to me. It is an essential support to me and it is not a luxury. It provides me with a great deal of independence, and that is the same for me as well as many other people who are blind and low vision. I can say that it helps me live a modern Australian active life. It helps me to participate in family activities, so when I need to go and meet my son at his football game, I can do that. It helps me engage with my friends and socialise. It helps me attend appointments, like medical appointments, and it definitely helps me maintain my employment. For people who do not have the same mobility skills as me, it can be the difference in getting out of the house or not.

I want to just quickly highlight three items from our submission. I want to highlight that Victoria is leading the way in Australia with their Multi Purpose Taxi Program. The inclusion of rideshare, the level of subsidy, the technology advancements to enable connection with apps and things like that is leading in Australia. I lobby other governments across Australia to match the types of features that are available in the MPTP in Victoria.

The introduction of rideshare to the MPTP did have, I suppose, some teething issues around the experience for people who are blind or low vision, particularly in dog refusals, and I think that was because taking assistance dogs was something new to rideshare because most people were using taxis because that is what the MPTP card subsidised. What I am pleased to say is that we are seeing less of that now in reports coming to Vision Australia, but also we are seeing companies like Uber take this issue very seriously. They have actually commenced a new program that will greatly assist in ensuring that there will not be dog refusals, and that is using technology. It is reminding people about their obligations after booking and it is about having appropriate supports to follow through. I can say that every complaint that I have made where I have been refused, Uber have been excellent at following through.

Then finally, I want to probably also highlight that the ride experience for MPTP users across the board is still inconsistent. We are still seeing in taxis drivers not fully aware of their requirements under the program and seeing people who are being left on the side of the road where drivers do not want to take somebody with an MPTP card. We are seeing the burden on passengers where the system does not work and so the driver will say, 'Oh, the card's not working. You'll have to pay full price'. That really could be solved with increased electronic options, both in the taxi as well as in rideshare.

Passengers in the MPTP are being left behind by taxi companies. Taxi companies are getting more and more online apps to book, but they are not including the MPTP at this stage, and so there are features there that we cannot use.

In conclusion, whilst the MPTP does have some improvements to make, it is a leading program in Australia and something that the passengers who are blind or low vision in Victoria absolutely think is a terrific program and something that we lobby very hard for other states to follow. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Chris, for that overview and your experience, and thanks to Vision Australia for your submission. I guess I might ask the first question, and it is an interesting aspect you have given. So would you say that the new entrants, in this case it is Uber—is it a better quality, a lower quality or just a different product, from the feedback you have received?

Mr EDWARDS: Well, certainly it provides people with more options about what they can do. What I think—you know, the experience where you are using an app and you are not worried about whether the card is going to work. I think the vehicles tend to be cleaner. You know, I think that in principle it is a better experience. I think early in the piece, when the drivers were getting used to understanding that they needed to take assistance dogs, it was frustrating, but as I said I think that we are seeing a greater improvement in that compared to when it first came on.

The CHAIR: How has it been? Again I guess Vision Australia would have a bit of data or maybe members or in the sector—how has the uptake been? Has there been a great uptake that you have seen?

Mr EDWARDS: Oh yes, certainly. You know, I think that there are two types of passengers. The passengers that are sort of younger, more mobile, more technology savvy, are taking up the Uber option, but we do have to remember that people's vision deteriorates commonly as part of the ageing process, and so those people that are not as technologically minded or savvy are certainly still using taxis and the card.

The CHAIR: Okay. So I have got one final question, and then I am going to go over to Mr Barton. So your evidence—just to understand your evidence, because obviously we are going to deliberate after these public hearings—is that the existing taxi service was inconsistent and you, as Vision Australia, welcomed the competition from an app-based, technology-based company. Is that what your position is, just to sum it up?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, absolutely. It provides us greater flexibility, greater options—similar to our sighted peers. And we felt that it was unjust that, you know, if you had vision you were allowed to use it, to have these options, but where you were blind and wanted to use the taxi subsidy it was not available.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Chris. I might pass over to Mr Rod Barton. I understand he has a few questions. Mr Barton, over to you.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Chris. Thanks for coming in today. During the Inquiry into Ride Sourcing Services—back in 2016, I believe it was—your organisation stated that they had discussions with Uber about the extension of the fare subsidy to cover Uber rides and that. So that everyone is aware, these were discussions which were before the reforms of 2017, before Uber became legal. Have you spoken directly with Uber regarding the extension since 2016? And if so, what is the nature of those discussions?

Mr EDWARDS: We certainly have talked to Uber. I have met with Uber probably twice a year to talk, firstly, about the issues that we are seeing and to talk about what solutions are available, but also to talk about other states where we are keen to see rideshare as an option—in states like New South Wales and Queensland and Western Australia—and that has been openly in our election priorities when with that. And so we have certainly just shared that with them, that we are very keen and that we are continuing to lobby governments to do that.

Mr BARTON: Yes. You have advocated strongly for Uber for a long period of time.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes.

Mr BARTON: Do you have any commercial arrangements with Uber at all in terms of advertising, sponsorships, those sorts of things?

Mr EDWARDS: Only in the last probably two weeks we have accepted some sponsorship for radio which is about highlighting this new program that they have developed, and they have purchased some advertising at Vision Australia Radio simply to get the word out about this new program to support people with dogs and to highlight that they can use Uber.

Mr BARTON: Chris, it frustrates me enormously that you are still having issues with drivers accepting dogs in cars. We know it is an issue. It does happen. I am hoping it is happening a lot less these days than it was years ago when I was in cars. But you mentioned this survey: 86 per cent of the clients you surveyed said they preferred taxis.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes.

Mr BARTON: Your survey from 2016 found that two-thirds of your clients do not have access to the internet and only 16.7 per cent of your clients use smartphones. And you said during the inquiry into ride sourcing that transport which relies on booking apps will not lead to benefits for the majority of people who are blind or have low vision. So why have you been advocating so hard for the past few years to have the Multi Purpose Taxi Program extended to Uber when they do not really appear to bring any significant benefits to the clients you represent?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. So we have done a recent smartphone survey with Curtin University that has significantly changed the ratio of people that are using smartphones, and particularly we saw a big difference in older people. I cannot remember the exact statistic, but I can certainly get it to you. But—

The CHAIR: Yes, that would be helpful, Chris, if you could do that.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. What we are seeing is a significant increase in the people using smartphones across the blindness and low-vision community compared to what our research found in 2016. And the reason why is that whilst it is still a barrier for some people, as I said, that are not as technology savvy, there are a lot more people—and a lot of people of working age—that can benefit from having that option of rideshare.

Mr BARTON: Chris, are you aware that a very large percentage of Uber drivers are actually taxidrivers and they flip-flop from one platform to the other?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. I was guessing that—I mean, when I talk to some of them. And they certainly work across multiple rideshare platforms.

Mr BARTON: Absolutely, yes. In your submission previously, back in 2016, you mentioned the importance of having tactile and braille on the cars, which taxis are required to do, and also having cameras in the car, in terms of around safety. But in this submission you have not mentioned that. Is it no longer a recommendation of Vision Australia for all rideshare services to have tactile signs on the vehicle?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, that is a good question. I think one of the differences is: with a taxi you can hail it off the street, whereas you cannot do that with an Uber. And the—

Mr BARTON: Well, you can.

Mr EDWARDS: Well, you use an app to do that. When you use an app, that gives you the name, the licence number and the ID of the driver. So if you are using that, you are actually getting the same information that is in braille—in using the technology platform.

Mr BARTON: Sure. Are you aware that all of the taxi companies have an app and did have before Uber?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. That is what I was saying. I certainly use, and lots of people do, a mixture of taxis and rideshares. So it is not holus-bolus, 'Rideshare's now better and we only use that'. One of the differences between the apps in the taxi company and the thing is that you still have to manually use the card. So if you are sighted, you can do the payment online, similar to sort of like an Uber-type app, whereas in the rideshare it is a bit smoother because the MPT component is also done as a part of that online transaction.

Mr BARTON: Yes, and it has certainly been raised on that particular point that it is open to widespread fraud and other people using the app because you do not have to enter any identification. There are two ways from the government's point of view. They want to make sure only people who are supposed to be using it are using it—

Mr EDWARDS: 100 per cent.

Mr BARTON: and we know that is not going to be the case. In your submission you also mentioned there need to be safeguards in place to ensure customers will receive the same level of service using rideshare options that they do with taxi services. We are very strong on safety and we have cameras in cars, we have the tactile signs on the doors and we have GPS tracking. Do you think rideshare should have to meet the same thing in the Multi Purpose Taxi Program space?

Mr EDWARDS: Well, around the tactile markers is probably not as important because, you know, you are always going to have that detail. Around cameras and GPS tracking, I cannot comment. I think that certainly some people in our community would definitely feel more confident about having cameras in there the same as taxis, definitely.

Mr BARTON: Chris, there is a number of new players wanting to come into the market. The only reason that we have not got another app for people with low vision and who are blind is that the regulator has not been able to pass them through, and they have been trying to get in for nearly two years now. So there are other options and it is a matter of getting the regulator making those things happen.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, and I think it is really important. There are technology solutions. These platforms are certainly helpful to provide options, but we 100 per cent need to ensure whatever the platform is that it is accessible to someone like me who uses voice-over technology on my phone, because if it is not built to the accessibility standards that are well recognised and well published, it creates yet another barrier for somebody like me.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Chris. It is a great point about the voice-over technology aspect and that integration. Thank you, Mr Barton. I might just move to Mr Meddick and if we have got time we will come back to you, Mr Barton. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. I will try to keep this as brief as I can. Thank you, Chris, for fronting up today and for your submission. Look, when push comes to shove there are often two ways that these committees come to a conclusion and make our findings and recommendations, and they are usually a combination of a couple of things. They are anecdotal evidence or the experiences of people as they relay them, but that is also then combined with some quantitative or qualitative data. That is really what I want to look for here, and I also might come back to some of the things you spoke about before, you know, where you talked about Uber trying to educate their drivers to take dogs for blind or vision-impaired people. The first one I am trying to look for is because in order to enact change in a legislative sense to make sure things go how they should go, that qualitative data is vitally important, so we need raw numbers in many situations. Can you tell me, or does Vision Australia have a record of, how many trips have been taken in a taxi under the program?

Mr EDWARDS: No.

Mr MEDDICK: No, okay. So likewise for Uber?

Mr EDWARDS: No, no idea.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay. Do you have a record, then, of how many refusals you have had from drivers from Uber refusing to take a passenger with a dog?

Mr EDWARDS: We would have some data on that, but clearly some people would come to Vision Australia seeking support, or let Seeing Eye Dogs know, but clearly other people would just deal with it themselves and report to the company and to CPV. I think that with CPV, for example, I would always not just rely on the taxi company or the rideshare company; I report it to them but also report it to CPV.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay. Would you have the same for taxis? Is it exactly the same?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, it is the same process. We would have how many would have experienced it over a period, but I think it is only a small number compared to what is actually happening, because a lot of people would not necessarily come to Vision Australia and report it, but we would have some numbers, yes.

Mr MEDDICK: So anecdotally you feel it is higher in Uber or taxis, or is it high across the board?

Mr EDWARDS: I think it is probably across the board now. I am not seeing any difference in that. I think, as I said, when Uber first came into the program, it was higher because there was less awareness amongst the drivers of their legal requirements, but over the period of time, I am certainly not seeing that now.

Mr MEDDICK: Can I ask—and through the Chair, of course, whether this is appropriate or not—if you have any of that data, what you do have, if you could please forward that on to the secretariat. It will assist us certainly down the track. And, Chair, if we can also ask for that information from CPVV as well, so that we can have some of that qualitative data. I think that will be really handy when that comes up.

The CHAIR: I totally agree, Mr Meddick. They are great suggestions. And also, Mr Edwards, Chris, you also talked about the Curtin University study. If you can forward that data and research too, that would also help.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: They were good points, Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: I have only got one other question then, Chair. Chris, we are always looking at all the industries to improve wherever government money is spent or we are looking at improving a sector that might even be a volunteer sector, for instance. Would you be supportive of some of those things like mandatory codes of practice rather than voluntary, some of those things we are talking about here where taxis have to meet a minimum standard of build, where they have got to have all of these things in place? Would you be supportive of mandatory training, for instance, and accreditation of Uber drivers so that they have to meet exactly the same standards of care that a taxidriver would have to undertake in any given situation? We are not just talking about blind or vision impaired here, we are talking about right across the whole sector. Would you be supportive of that? Mr Barton was talking before about the things that a taxi has to have specifically for vision-impaired and blind people. Would you be supportive of a code of practice that mandated those things for Uber? If they are going to have to service that part of the community, it would seem to me at least common sense that every player is in the market on a level playing field.

Mr EDWARDS: I do not think I am able to comment on that question in its entirety, but what I can comment on is around that disability awareness training and around that code of practice. I think that, yes, I would be fully supportive that all drivers, no matter what sort of platform they are on, should have a minimum code of conduct and have training to understand things like that they have to accept assistance dogs and understand how to work with people with a disability. Around the hardware, it is probably beyond my expertise to be able to say whether that is absolutely needed or not. I think people who have better expertise in safety would be better off commenting on that.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay, thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Tarlamis, do you have a question?

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes, Chair. I was just going to ask: in terms of the MPTP system overall, are there any elements that are not currently included in that that you feel should be included in that to improve the service?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. I think my key improvement would be to have a similar arrangement with the taxi companies where, when you book a taxi online, it manages the MPTP component of that as well—because one

of the frustrating things with the MPTP is when you get to the end of the trip, with the EFTPOS machine. I have more trouble with the MPTP card than I do with my Visa card or my tap-and-go phone. So I think that if we could smooth out that component of it, it would be good. And I think because of that, the burden becomes the passenger's, where the driver says, 'Look, it's not working. You'll have to pay full price'. Yes, there are some processes around that, but it is a bit of a challenging thing. From the scheme I think it is fine, certainly for blind people and the eligibility; we are very comfortable with that. But yes, there is still the nature of the card, and the EFTPOS machine can be difficult with taxidriviers sometimes.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. Just on that point, we have heard from other witnesses that they have been trying to get into the system to provide alternative platforms and options for users that have been having difficulty. Do you think CPVV should be doing more to try and facilitate others coming into that space to provide more options to users?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. From our point of view at Vision Australia, our goal is that someone who is blind or low vision can have the same options as sighted people. And I think it has made a huge difference for us. I mean, I do not wait very long at all to get a taxi or an Uber these days, because of the number of cars on the road. However, I had a recent experience, just in-between the lockdowns earlier this year, in Brisbane: I was at Parliament House in the middle of the city on a Thursday night, and it took half an hour to book a traditional cab in Brisbane—multiple calls to try and get the cab to come. I think we just do not see that in Melbourne anymore, because you have got these options. I can get a cab or a rideshare in very little time at all.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. The other question: I was just wondering, have you had any discussions or representations from your clients or the cohort that you work with regarding regional areas and difficulty there accessing platforms after hours? Because we have heard from witnesses that in some areas Uber drivers, for instance, limit their service to between 9 and 5 and do not operate after hours, which means that taxis then fill that gap. And sort of leading on from that, does that raise concerns that if it then becomes a situation where that taxi model becomes unviable because of that limited scope and then disappears there would be no-one to pick up that market for you—

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, 100 per cent. I mean, people who are blind or low vision rely on point-to-point transport options, and traditionally they have been taxis in regional areas. Yes, it is really important that someone who is blind or low vision can access that point-to-point transport and that it is viable, whether that is a taxi or a combination. But if it becomes less viable for taxis, that is a concern for us, yes.

The CHAIR: I will just pass over to Mr Barton to ask the last couple of questions before we go to the break. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Chris. One of the reasons why Vision Australia began advocating for the Multi Purpose Taxi Program to be extended to Uber was cost. You must be concerned that the regulators allowed Uber to come in and do surge pricing. Do you think your members are aware that Uber can surge-price under the program where taxis cannot?

Mr EDWARDS: I think that, yes, they are certainly aware of that, the people that use it. As far as I am aware, our clients are completely aware of the surge pricing, and I think that that is where the importance of choice is key. As I said, I am not totally using Uber or other rideshare platforms; I am using Uber sometimes and taxis sometimes, because if there is a particular surge pricing, I will use taxis because it is going to be more cost effective.

Mr BARTON: And that is exactly how the drivers work too, Chris. They jump into their private cars when they know the surge pricing is going to be up. You know, Friday afternoon at 5 o'clock when Collingwood is playing Essendon at the MCG and it is raining, they all jump into their Ubers so they can get those three or four times increases in fares.

Mr EDWARDS: Yes. So I think if we were locked in to rideshare and with surge pricing, that would be a concern. What is important is that people, as you say, are aware of what surge pricing means for them and that they do think of other options and not just accept that surge pricing.

Mr BARTON: According to data submitted by Uber themselves through a recent Senate inquiry, Uber drivers and delivery workers in Sydney make less than the minimum wage for casual workers, even at peak

hours, and the Transport Workers Union has come out and said they make probably 10 bucks an hour. Taxidriviers have received one pay rise in the past 13 years and have not received a fare increase in seven years. What does Vision Australia think? If we are going to have a quality service, do you think we need to have a minimum wage set for these people supplying these services?

Mr EDWARDS: I think that the quality of drivers sometimes does reflect, you know, the remuneration that people get. I think that the passenger experience with drivers is mixed. I think that we get some really good taxidriviers and we get some really good Uber drivers. So I do not know what the answer is, but certainly it is really important that we have drivers that understand the needs of people with disability and know how to support them.

Mr BARTON: I could not agree more, Chris. I think one of the problems is that we have a casualisation of the workforce now and the part-time Uber drivers, part-time taxidriviers—they certainly do not have the care. If I could just say one thing to you, Chris, it is that if you are having trouble dealing with any taxi network in terms of if you want to talk about education—I have a sneaking suspicion that there is not a taxi company that is not going to talk to me about improving our services for the people you represent.

Mr EDWARDS: Absolutely. We are always keen to continue to educate drivers and to look at systems that are robust that will support people that do get refused with dogs. I can tell you I have been on the floor of the Senate in the Australian Parliament with my dog, I use my dog everywhere I go, and to call up, whether it is a taxi or rideshare, and to be refused is the most demoralising thing—

Mr BARTON: Unacceptable, Chris. It is unacceptable in this day and age.

The CHAIR: We are actually out of time, but because you just said it, Chris, I will need to ask you. You did say exactly what we heard in a lot of the evidence—that a lot of the vulnerable cohort, not just people with vision impairment but others as well, like to call with complaints when they are making bookings. But in terms of a complaints-handling process, is there a number to call with the new entrant or are there no numbers?

Mr EDWARDS: With Uber, yes. One of the options within the app is to complain about assistant dog refusal. So it is an assistant dog issue. One of the things I can say is that Uber have been absolutely sensational in following complaints through. I am much more confident about where an Uber complaint is up to than generally when I have made complaints to the taxi to do that. But having said that, either of them, I still report to CPVV as well because it is a legal issue.

The CHAIR: So you are saying, really, ultimately the responsibility is with the regulator to make sure that this kind of awareness and discrimination is appropriately handled? Is that your view, Chris?

Mr EDWARDS: Yes, I think it is both: the immediate reaction from the company to ensure that the driver immediately recognises that it is unacceptable, but I want the regulator to actually provide that legal component to it, which I would think that they should be fined in most cases where they have breached the law.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Chris. On that note, I know we have gone over time. It has been a very interesting, informative and great discussion with you and Vision Australia. On behalf of the committee we say thank you. If we have any additional questions, are you happy for us to reach out to you?

Mr EDWARDS: One hundred per cent. That is no problem at all.

The CHAIR: And if you could forward that data and information that Mr Meddick was asking about—

Mr EDWARDS: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: just about the complaints you have had. Whatever you do have, because you are right: not everyone would come to you—and also that Curtin University research paper. On that note, committee members will now take a short 10-minute break and we will meet back at 11.30. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.