



Wheelchair Accessible Taxis Community Consultation March 2007

Introduction

In 2005, the Minister for [then] Urban Services, Mr John Hargreaves MLA, formed a Reference Group to provide recommendations to improve services provided by wheelchair accessible taxis (WATs).

At the end of 2006, the Public Transport Regulation Unit within TAMS sought feedback from WAT users about service delivery, particularly in the period since the formation of the Reference Group.

TAMS arranged and facilitated two focus groups, a day and evening session held in March 2007, to gauge perceptions and satisfaction levels of WAT users.

A total of 27 people participated in the two focus groups. Participation was voluntary self-nomination and a random selection process was used to select participants. Carers were also invited to attend. People who were unable to attend were provided with the questions by email or post and their feedback was also incorporated.

Each session commenced with participants outlining their individual experiences and was followed by group discussion based on a series of open-ended questions. The participants then took part in a poll where the information was compiled and results tabulated.

Overall, the focus groups were successful, with participants expressing thanks that they were able to have the opportunity to offer their feedback. The full report compiled by the Community Engagement and Communications Team has been provided to the Public Transport Regulation Unit and the Minister. Suggestions, themes and key issues will be integrated into future policy on WAT licensing and public transport.

Key Issues

Attendees raised issues based on their personal experiences and perceptions of WAT services. To gauge satisfaction levels of WAT services, the providers of the service were not involved in the consultation process and were not asked to provide a response. Any incidents that breached safety issues have been investigated by the Department.

Community Engagement

The focus groups identified five key issues:

Bookings and Availability of WATs

The main issue raised by a majority of the participants, was the unreliability of the current network booking system, especially when users had recurring doctors' appointments or the ability to book weeks in advance for specialist medical appointments.

Lift fee and WAT subsidy vouchers

Generally, there was confusion amongst participants about the correct use of the lift fee. Some participants reported that drivers do not accept WAT subsidy vouchers interstate, even though reciprocal arrangements are in place. Participants also advised that drivers had instructed them [as passengers] not to fill them out – they [the driver] would do it, thereby not allowing passenger to know the total trip cost.

Safety and equipment

Three key sub-themes became apparent from the group discussions concerning safety. Participants noted the following concerns:

- Training and knowledge of drivers
- Standard of WAT vehicles and equipment
- Associated issues with delayed pick-ups

Driver behavior

In general, most participants from both focus groups were supportive of drivers (particularly if they made private bookings with regular drivers) and commended these drivers as being courteous, helpful and reliable.

Discussion about dissatisfaction in this area centred on some drivers assuming a passenger's physical disability affected their mental capacity.

New taxi service

The focus groups were held just prior to the commencement of the new taxi network, CabXpress. The majority of participants expressed a high degree of interest in the new company, and the topic generated lively discussion. In both groups, the Public Transport Regulation Unit representative outlined some details about the new service but reminded participants that the Department is the licensing and regulatory body and some questions would need to be referred to the Networks directly. Participants acknowledged this and expressed gratitude for the information provided.

Suggestions

The focus group discussions generated the following suggestions:

- Users should be able to initially request a vehicle type from a list of options (as some WAT users can transfer into a regular vehicle).
- Training needs to be an accredited, formal and transparent process.
- A pictorial instruction card (or similar) be visible inside a WAT service at all times to assist the driver in securing the wheelchair.
- An intercom system could be fitted to WAT vans as it is sometimes difficult to hear/talk to the driver over engine noise.
- Regular inspections should be carried out as many WAT vehicles seem unroadworthy.
- An information sheet be produced for WAT users outlining their rights and responsibilities for both user and driver;
- WAT Subsidy Scheme Vouchers could be updated, with the WAT number and a revamped look and feel;
- WAT Subsidy Scheme Vouchers could be replaced with a card system similar to the Victorian system.
- Drivers should have the experience of being in a wheelchair, perhaps as part of their training.

“Thanks for the opportunity to participate in the focus group. I found it helpful to hear the experiences of others (which very much mirrored my experiences) and also gained some useful information”.

Comment from participant