

Taxi Industry Inquiry
Professor Alan Fels
GPO Box 2797
Melbourne VIC 3001
Australia

Friday, 24 June 2011

Dear Professor Fels,

We thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the Victorian taxi and hire car industry.

About Inclusion Melbourne

Inclusion Melbourne is a not-for-profit organisation that provides services to people with an intellectual disability, helping them to create more enjoyable and rewarding lives and participate fully in the community.

Our vision at Inclusion Melbourne is for people with intellectual disability to live in an inclusive community, where everyone has the same opportunities to participate in community life and to take their place in society as respected citizens.

We believe our role as a disability support provider, is to encourage and enable people with disabilities to achieve and maintain a valued quality of life. We achieve this by supporting people to create highly personalised and flexible lifestyles based on their needs and desires. To achieve this we encourage people to participate in activities and develop relationships with people within their local community. This model of service delivery necessitates a heavy reliance on taxis and maxi-taxis.

Our response

Inclusion Melbourne welcomes the Victorian Government's independent inquiry into the Victorian taxi and hire car industry. We look forward to seeing improvements in the regulatory regime so that this vital transport system will meet the current and future needs of Victorians with a disability. Our responses are divided into the broad areas as listed in the terms of reference.

Customer and service focus

M40 card issues

The current requirement for the passenger to travel with an M40 card is problematic and adds to inconvenience and cost for some people with cognitive disability. We believe that the system could be modified to enable an electronic swipe on a monthly basis, or at the very least the ability to swipe the card once only, either at the beginning or end of a trip. Doing so would:

- prevent the loss of multiple cards by some people, necessitating additional expense by not for profit organisations in seeking to replace the card on behalf of the individual;
- reduce expenditure (as without the card the person is liable for a full fare)

We also note that the requirement to speak to the person adds to the costs of replacement and complexity for the system – given the M40 program is designed for



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people with a disability, it should have a flag to advise the VTD that the person has no verbal or effective communication and enable a nominee to speak on their behalf.

Reliability

Despite booking taxicabs a week in advance, in an arrangement that has been in place for several years (and across both major metropolitan taxi companies), Inclusion Melbourne does not receive any priority support for the people we work with – eg: when the Grand Prix is on, or during Spring Racing Carnival, or the lead up to Christmas, there is no priority at all provided to pre-booked taxis and we regularly experience people with a disability waiting for in excess of one hour during these periods. We believe that the taxi firms need to consider how (or even if they are willing) to demonstrate support for people for whom taxis form the backbone of their public transportation and make a strong commitment to these people who are reliant on taxi services.

Relationship between taxi company and drivers

We seek that the overall reliability of taxis can be improved in relation to pick up times. As an organisation that takes prime responsibility for managing hundreds of taxi trips each month on behalf of people with a disability, we often experience situations whereby we are assured by the company that the person is about to be picked up, who are relaying information from a driver. However, these drivers then do not pick up for a short trip and take an alternative fare that is more profitable. We believe that greater use of GPS tracking to provide timely and accurate information is one that should be adopted by the sector. We note that while the dispatchers are seeking to move this way it is being resisted by the drivers and we can see the need for incentives in order to drive this change and enable organisations such as ours to observe in real time, via the web, the location of the taxis who have accepted the job, so that we can accurately advise the individual, their support staff and carers of the estimated time of arrival. Likewise, such a system can deal with the allied issues of people being notified of taxi's being late, not arriving at all, etc.

Driver professionalism

While we find there are exemplary people working as drivers, it is our experience that these people are few and far between, and we believe that there should be prerequisite training and mandatory continuous professional development programs that improve the knowledge, skill and attitudes of drivers. We accept that a chance such as this would result in increased salaries, and we are supportive of this, however this would require a greater level of subsidy for pensioners in receipt of an M40 card.

Taxi booking systems

Inclusion Melbourne submits each Friday afternoon a comprehensive excel spreadsheet for the coming week detailing every taxi, itemized by the number of passengers, their names, pick up location, destinations, times and contact people. This is backed up by daily variations also being reported and updated on the spreadsheet as well. However, the use of information technology in the industry appears to be very low, such that no one in Victoria at present can offer us a portal that would enable us to build and save regular taxi runs, and edit these on the fly, so that they are directly inputted into the taxi company dispatch systems, rather than being relayed and re-typed across from our spreadsheets. A significant system enhancement would be the development of stable platforms that enables greater self-directed approaches by consumers, coupled with

features that enables registered system users to track and locate the vehicles currently undertaking registered trips. Such a system would also enable custom reporting, so that organisations can pay a single monthly account and then charge the actual expenditure to each individual without significant administrative expenses in reviewing hundreds of receipts. Such a system could also be used by community support organisation to identify potential abuse, enabling easy reporting per passenger on regular trips, and seeing if there are out of the ordinary charges on particular days that warrant further investigation or reporting to the VTD. As an example, we work with a man with an intellectual disability whose regular fare is under \$10 to travel from home to a particular community activity, yet upon review of his accounts we have discovered on occasion he has been charged \$15 for the same trip. At present the oversight is reliant on staff comparing invoices and receipts from across weeks, rather than simply being able to generate a simple report.

Safety for passengers and drivers

Supporting and working with people with a disability, we note the following areas that we would like to see be addressed by the recommendations of the inquiry:

- Managing the variation in costs for a regular trip (potential financial abuse of people with disabilities);
- Drivers continuing to ask people with a disability for a cash payment when it is clear from the booking that the fare is to be settled via account
- Drivers providing a duty of care to the passenger in relation to drop off locations (eg: dropping off across the road from the destination so as to avoid traffic issues, requiring a person who potentially lacks road safety awareness to attempt to cross a road without support).
- Improvements in waiting times for previously booked journeys, particularly for people who use wheelchairs.

Support for and training of drivers

Following on from our earlier comments regarding additional training for drivers, we believe that in addition to the media reports regarding the introduction of a Melbourne based version of 'the knowledge' we would like to see that if implemented, this prerequisite knowledge of Melbourne's arterial roads, major destinations, tourist attractions and health facilities also requires drivers to gain detailed knowledge of a region within metro Melbourne, eg: inner east, west, northern, etc.) so that there is encouragement for drivers to operate within local areas, and an ability for the VTD to begin to monitor taxi availability via the numbers of drivers with qualifications in particular regional locations.

Further, we would recommend that as part of a pre-requisite training program for drivers, that a module of the course require drivers to develop skills in communication / community support, from which they could select a particular skill to focus on, whether it be communication with people with English as a second language, communication with people who are non-verbal, disability awareness training, support for older people, or other similar modules that could be delivered within a one day workshop.

Sustainability, in economic, environmental and social terms

Inclusion Melbourne acknowledges that the proposals contained within our submission would require additional funding to implement, and likely lead to demands for greater pay for drivers. We support an increase in pay to drivers, particularly as it would address the perennial difficulty due to driver shortages that we currently experience. We

recognise that in order to meet the additional expense the people we support would require additional subsidises to be provided to people on pensions via the existing M40/M50 programs.

We also believe strongly that in a state with a growing population, the number of taxis should be established relative to population so that there is a fixed ratio, subject to review every 10 years to ensure that the ratio is still appropriate for the time. This would initially be established via independent analysis from an academic research unit or appropriate consultancy, and once established, that the government commit to a population based licensing policy, so that each year, subject to population fluctuations, additional licenses would be released or bought back automatically. This ratio should also contain measure for the release of maxi cabs and ensuring appropriate license numbers in regional and rural areas.

Inclusion Melbourne believes that the difficulty in accessing maxi cabs suggest that additional work must be undertaken to ensure that they are not diverted from transporting people with a disability to more profitable trips to the airport. For this we suggest that the number of trips that must be undertaken monthly with a person with a wheelchair be increased in order to keep the higher subsidies and fares that the maxi cabs attract.

Finally, in order to ensure that taxis remain a viable local public transportation option, we propose a review of the fare scales, and the possible adoption of a sliding scale of fess, such that a shorter fare may attract a higher cost per kilometre or minute, so that older people and people with a disability are not disadvantaged in simply wishing to travel to local neighbourhood shops. We believe that through providing appropriate incentives, we may be able to encourage more drivers to focus on becoming local divers, thus building community and supporting people from particular localities without being at a financial disadvantage for doing so.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the Victorian taxi and hire car industry.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Daniel Leighton', written over a circular stamp or seal.

Daniel Leighton
Chief Executive Officer