

Wheelchair Accessible Taxis and Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme

Briefing Paper



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1. Deregulation of Point to Point Transport Services

In November 2015, an independent Point to Point Transport Taskforce provided a report to the NSW government with 57 recommendations. It recommended the government should examine “the viability of wheelchair accessible service given the higher capital and running costs associated with providing the services...”¹.

Another important recommendation was that the government should consider moving to a **service provider neutral subsidy scheme** for people with disabilities².

Following this review, the *Point to Point Transport (Taxis and Hire Vehicles) Act 2016* was passed by the NSW parliament and commenced on 1 November 2017³. It established a framework that “allows point to point transport services to compete more freely on service and price”⁴ and introduced a number of reforms and incentives to improve wheelchair accessible services for people with disability.

From July 2016, the following measures were introduced:

- The maximum TTSS subsidy was increased from \$30 to \$60 per trip.
- The WAT driver incentive payment (WATDIS) was increased from \$7.70 (ex. GST) to \$15 (ex. GST) per trip.
- The pool of funds available for the WAT interest-free loan scheme was expanded from \$800,000 to \$5 million, and WAT loans became available to cover the full cost of purchase and modification (rather than \$30,000 to cover just the modifications).
- The cost of Zero200, the centralised booking service for WATs in Sydney, was subsidised, saving WAT businesses \$2,130 per vehicle per year.
- WAT licence fees were decreased from \$1,000 per annum to zero in metro areas, in line with the rest of NSW.

These reforms were mostly well received by the disability community, but it has had implications for the taxi industry in competing with ridesharing services and the sustainability of taxi licenses with ongoing operating costs.

2. What's changed since deregulation?

Transport for NSW put out a tender for a new operator to manage wheelchair accessible taxis in Sydney. On March 1, 2021 a new booking service, Wheelchair Book & Ride, was introduced to replace the established Zero200 as the “government approved” centralised booking service for the Sydney area and operated by Spinal Cord Injuries Australia.

However, 13CABS, who manage the legacy Zero200 service maintained its booking platform – serving its own fleet of WATs – in direct competition with the new official booking service.

¹ Transport Disability Incentives and Subsidies Review, September 2017

² Ibid pg 3

³ Transport Disability Incentives and Subsidies Review Findings, February 2020

⁴ Ibid pg 3

This has led to a two-tiered booking system which does not serve the interests of its users, essentially splitting coverage of the available WATs. This has seen frustration on both ends of the service, with people booking on both systems at the same time in hope of a shorter wait time, and drivers showing up to empty bookings.

The Book and Ride service relies on drivers to login to a secondary app but only a small number do, even though it is a condition of the WAT license. There would appear to be a lack of information and/or reluctance to engage with the app booking service, further eroding coverage of WAT availability.

Additionally, the Book and Ride service operates only within the Sydney Metropolitan area, and Zero200 continues to operate as a commercial service. It is problematic that the centralised booking service for WATs does not operate outside the Sydney Metropolitan area, leaving regional and rural areas without this same quality of service.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns during 2020 and 2021 had a significant impact on the viability of operating WAT services with many relinquishing licenses and drivers leaving.

a. TTSS Smartcard

The smartcard was trialed and rolled out in 2021 to replace the paper travel docket. It was introduced to make it easier for users and WAT drivers and operators to cover the 50% subsidy of the trip. It is credit card sized, includes a photo of the user and works by simply tapping a taxi payment terminal.

However since its introduction, it has been plagued by issues. Taxi operators must be equipped with a Cabcharge payment terminal in order to use the smartcard. It is not a cost neutral system, with monthly fees attached to its use. As a result, some drivers refuse to engage with the smartcard, insisting on receiving the paper travel docket instead.

Reimbursement for the Driver Incentive Bonus that is attached to each TTSS passenger fare when using the smartcard is the responsibility of the taxi service operator. However, some drivers claim the operator is not reimbursing for the bonus or there is a significant delay in receiving the bonus. Therefore, they are asking passengers for the paper travel document rather than use the smartcard.

Additionally, some drivers claim they don't know how to use the smartcard further affecting its usage.

b. Other concerns affecting users

Short TTSS trips, particularly in outer Metropolitan and regional areas have been a long-standing issue with passengers waiting significant delays to be picked up. This is exacerbated with less drivers available, it has had an impact on the broader network with delays across the system. Some regional areas are severely restricted by access to WATs. Some drivers are refusing to pick up wheelchair users because they can make more money transporting larger groups of people.

A condition of having a WAT license requires holders to prioritise wheelchair passengers but there are minimal penalties applied when this does not occur. Further to this, the WAT driver is often not the license holder and so has no obligations to prioritise wheelchair passengers nor log into the app. Therefore, these regulations need to be looked at so that the drivers have some responsibility to act in the interests of wheelchair passengers. The Point to Point Commission as the oversight body is responsible for regulating the industry but there is little engagement in addressing these concerns. SCIA has raised the problems of smartcard implementation with the commission, but the response was that it is an issue for Transport for NSW.

In addition, the interstate use of the TTSS is fraught with issues. Users have noted being refused services, abused and discriminated against while attempting to use interstate docketts when travelling. Many interstate drivers are not aware of the interstate TTSS scheme, as each state has its own specific taxi subsidy scheme for people with disability. This has caused confusion and frustration for interstate travel.

The incentives listed above to entice and retain WAT services no longer work as other costs have impacted such as ongoing running costs, monthly network fees, fuel increases, vehicle registration and insurance.

c. Snapshot of concerns:

1. A two-tiered system operating with different customer platforms. The legacy Zero0200 service operated by 13 Cabs, running in conjunction with the Wheelchair Book and Ride service.
2. Despite it being a condition of their licence, holders are not downloading the 'app' which makes it impossible for them to see and receive WAT bookings. As few as 10% are logging onto the app. WAT drivers are often not the license holders and therefore have no obligation to license conditions.
3. Wheelchair-accessible-taxis are refusing to pick-up wheelchair users because they make more money transporting groups of people.
4. Some drivers are refusing to use the TTSS smartcard and insisting on paper docketts claiming their taxi service provider is not reimbursing for the Driver Incentive Bonus.
5. Drivers are claiming their hydraulic ramps aren't working to avoid carrying wheelchair users.
6. There has been a reduction in the number of WAT drivers across all regions. This is partly because of the pandemic and drivers not returning, and partly because the current incentives available on licenses, vehicles and fares need to be reviewed.
7. Point to Point Commission will not intervene.
8. The lack of availability of wheelchair accessible taxis continues to cause people with disability significant anxiety with uncertainty if they will arrive at their destination, regardless of how far in advance they book their journey.

9. 30% of WATs don't arrive at all. Some users are waiting as long as seven hours to get home late at night. Others have had to call the police for assistance when their booked taxi had failed to pick them up.
10. School buses are not designated accessible and there are too few taxis available to pick up children and take them to school.
11. Deregulation of the point to point transport industry, including WATs has seriously undermined the independence and human rights of people with disability.
12. Some regional areas are without even one wheelchair accessible taxi.
13. Drivers do not like, and therefore decline, short or local fares.
14. People with disability who travel with the assistance of companion dogs say drivers either refuse the ride or take off before the customer can get into the vehicle.
15. TTSS users travelling interstate have faced issues using the interstate vouchers. Drivers do not know or understand the system nationally.

3. Point to Point Independent Review 2020

In July 2020 another review report⁵ was released with a number of further recommendations to improve services for people with disability. Most notably was that "The TTSS be immediately made available for use with community transport or to other suitably authorised service providers in regional locations without a taxi service"⁶ and "All wheelchair accessible transport incentives and subsidies be extended to all authorised point to point transport providers i.e. provider neutral access for all such providers"⁷.

There were also specific recommendations for regional locations to improve point to point services. These included Transport for NSW and the Point to Point Commission working with stakeholders to develop a plan to address any unmet need and community transport operators encouraged to become authorised bookings service providers⁸.

These recommendations must be given priority status.

4. SCIA & PDCN Position Statement

SCIA & PDCN propose a number of measures to address the systemic issues TTSS users are experiencing.

1. Organise a high level roundtable with a commitment from all stakeholders to discuss systemic issues – Transport for NSW, Point To Point Commission, Taxi Council, 13 Cabs, WAT operators, WAT users. The government must commit to open consultation and work with the sector to dramatically improve taxi service provision for all people with a disability.

⁵ Point to Point Independent Review 2020, July 2020

⁶ Ibid pg 8

⁷ Ibid pg 8

⁸ Ibid pg 9

2. Current WAT incentives are outdated and ineffectual.
 - a. As a priority, remove any costs associated with the Cabcharge payment terminal for using the TTSS smartcard. Use of the smartcard must be cost neutral for taxi service providers.
 - b. A commitment from Transport for NSW to review incentives for WAT licenses and no interest loans for WAT vehicles. There are still considerable costs associated with operating and running such a service.
 - c. It has been mooted that the Driver Incentive Bonus is to be increased. When and by how much?
3. Smartcard implementation across the entire fleet of WATs and education to ensure all drivers and operators understand how to use it.
4. Appropriate oversight, enforcement and penalties by the Point to Point Commission for non-compliance of the WAT license. This must also include operation of the vehicle and wheelchair restraints, and conduct of the driver.
5. Transport for NSW will commit to implementing the recommendations of the Point to Point Independent Review 2020.
6. Create and enforce a single streamlined central booking system across the whole state.
7. Nationalise the interstate booking system.