

DISABILITY MATTERS

SUMMARY REPORT - ONLINE TAXI FORUM

2 JUNE 2022



About Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN)

Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) is an organisation of, for, and with people with disability. QDN operates a state-wide network of 2,000 plus members and supporters who provide information, feedback and views based on their lived experience, which inform the organisation's systemic policy and advocacy activities. We believe people with disability should always be at the table when decisions are made that directly impact their lives. QDN currently hosts 31 Peer Support groups across Queensland, made up of people with a diverse range of disabilities, convened by people with disability. The groups network socially, share information, life experiences and solutions, and are key to informing QDN's systemic policy work.

Introduction

QDN has received extensive feedback from members about their personal experiences of using taxis in communities across Queensland. For Queenslanders with disability, accessible public transport is an essential right of all people enshrined in international conventions, the Australian Disability Strategy, and legislative frameworks. This right is upheld in Article 9 – Accessibility of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, to which Australia is a signatory. Many people with disability across Queensland are reliant on taxis and wheelchair accessible taxis for their everyday travel to get to work, school, social activities, doctor appointments, bill paying and commitments with family and friends. This is often because other forms of transportation remain inaccessible to people with disability and the ability to own and operate a private vehicle for personal use remains unaffordable to many.

Responsibility for ensuring everyone has access to affordable and accessible public transport sits with Commonwealth, State and Local Governments. The TSS was introduced by the Queensland Government in 1987 with the aim of providing accessible travel options for people with a disability who experience profound difficulty in using other forms of public transport. It is a vital subsidy that provides an accessible option in circumstances where there is a lack of accessible public and private transport options available, a mechanism for being able to access vital services and supports, and often ensures personal safety to an otherwise vulnerable group in the community. This is important for all people with disability outside of the 10% of people who are NDIS participants.

People with disability rely on accessible, affordable, timely and quality services from Queensland's taxi industry to enable them to undertake their essential and critical day to day life activities. The need for a responsive and reliable taxi service is fundamental to people with disability participating in community life.

Taxis and people with disability

QDN members have told us that taxis are becoming increasingly unreliable, there are longer waiting times to order and wait for a cab to arrive, and many drivers are insufficiently trained to secure people in wheelchairs or provide them with appropriate customer service. People are missing their medical appointments and have reported instances of having to wait in often unsuitable conditions for long periods of time with risks to health, safety, and wellbeing for taxis to arrive. People are also experiencing insecurity about the continuation of a scheme to subsidise their taxi travel which would mean accessing essential services, and socially and economically participating in the community would become out of reach to a majority of people.

QDN Online Taxi forum for passengers with disability

In response to feedback from QDN members and the broader community, QDN held a 'members only' online event on 2 June around taxis and passengers with disability. The aim of this forum was to give members a platform to make an impact in improving the situation by leading, influencing, informing, and connecting.

QDN's Taxi Forum, attended by almost 50 participants enabled members to discuss the following:

- Issues around taxis – problems with booking taxis, excessive wait times, lack of driver, operator and provider training, issues with the Queensland Government \$20.00 loading fee.
- Issues around the Taxi Subsidy Scheme (TSS) and impacts – outstanding issues around the provision of an ongoing subsidy scheme for NDIS participants. The current TSS keeps getting extended, however members want certainty around the continuation of subsidised taxi travel as other forms of public transport remain inaccessible to people with disability.
- Generating ideas and for solutions by people with disability on what needs to happen to improve taxis going forward.

QDN and our members identified that this forum was an important opportunity to discuss shared experiences of people with disability living in metropolitan, regional, rural, and remote communities. Alongside this, it was important to identify solutions focused on improving accessibility, affordability, timeliness, and quality for passengers with disability along with broader issues around TSS and obtaining some certainty around a national solution to subsidise taxi travel.

In June 2022 in the 2022-2023 Budget, the Queensland Government has announced that increased funding of \$27.2 million over 4 years and \$7.2 million per annum ongoing for the Taxi Subsidy Scheme arising from an increase in taxi fares, an increase in the subsidy cap from \$25 to \$30 and to meet increased costs associated with lift payments.

For NDIS participants, Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers discussed the ongoing issues at the 18 March 2022 Disability Reform Minister’s Meeting (DRMM). At this meeting Ministers discussed long-term transport policy for NDIS participants, committing to co-design across jurisdictions and with representatives of people with disability on a long-term approach to how transport supports are included in participants’ plans and will work alongside accessible public transport. Noting the potential impact on programs administered by state and territory governments, such as taxi subsidy schemes, Ministers agreed in-principle, an extension to current arrangements while long-term reforms are developed. It is imperative to QDN members that access to the taxi subsidy scheme remain in place while a long term solution is found that delivers access to equal, fair, and cost-effective solutions for people with disability that does not deliver a capped scheme where people with disability have to decide what essential day to day life activities are prioritised to use allocated funding to use accessible taxi vehicles, e.g.: going to work or their doctor’s appointment.

Forum overview

QDN’s online forum involved having speakers at the beginning that included representatives of persons with disability, Government departments and peak taxi industry body. Participants then had the opportunity to move to breakout rooms facilitated and moderated by QDN Peer Leaders and staff to generate feedback from individuals about what is working, what’s not and what they see as potential solutions to improve taxi systems moving forward. QDN produced this report from the feedback gathered at the forum.

Speakers

The forum was opened by Dr Chris Sarra, Director-General, Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships. The keynote speakers at the online forum included:

- Elisha Matthews, QDN Peer Leader and QDeNgage Consultant

- Suzanne Rose, Executive Director, Policy and Regional Operations, TransLink Division Department of Transport and Main Roads
- Blair Davies, CEO, Taxi Council Queensland

Presentation Summary

The Forum was opened by Dr Chris Sarra, Director-General, Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships. The forum's first panel speaker was Elisha Matthews, QDN Peer Leader and disability transport advocate. Elisha set the scene for the forum by giving an overview of her lived experience by sharing the day-to-day impacts that are happening with people's experiences as passengers, including why it is important for people to have affordable, accessible, timely transport, particularly wheelchair accessible vehicles and the taxi subsidy scheme. Dr Sarra spoke about how at the March 2022 Disability Reform Ministers meeting, Ministers identified a long-term transport policy under the NDIS as a priority and committed to co-design across jurisdictions with representatives of people with disability on a long-term approach to how transport supports are included in participants' plans and will work alongside public transport. Ministers agreed in principle to continue current TSS arrangements while the long-term reforms on transport policy for NDIS participants are developed. Suzanne Rose, Executive Director, Policy and Regional Operations, TransLink Division, Department of Transport and Main Roads spoke about Transport's role in the provision of accessible transport options for people with disability and the taxi subsidy scheme. Blair Davies, CEO of the Taxi Council of Queensland, acknowledged that provision of wheelchair accessible taxi services was in need of improvement. He said that he was committed to listening to what people with disability had to say and working with them and their representative groups to improve taxis for people with disability in Queensland.

Breakout rooms

Participants were allocated to breakout rooms to discuss the issues and to identify three key actions going forward. Breakout rooms were facilitated by a QDN Peer Leader with a QDN staff person providing support. The aim of the breakout rooms was to gain member feedback on the following questions:

- What's working?
- What's not working?
- What could be done differently?

Key actions identified by participants

1. To undertake further engagement and co-design across key stakeholders

To build upon this forum and hold further activities of engagement and co-design to bring together people with disability and their supporters, government, and industry to work together to find solutions and co-design services, procedures, and products to improve the taxi experience for people with disability.

2. Improve the availability of taxis including sedans and wheelchair accessible fleet

Proposed actions:

- Government, Taxi Council Industry and Ride Share industry to work together to develop a plan to increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis on the road to meet demand and surge times. This will include:
 - Specific workforce strategy including incentives to increase the number of drivers.
 - Specific plan to address issues created by the deregulation of the taxi industry and providing incentives to buy, own and operate wheelchair accessible taxis, attracting drivers who want to do a good job.

3. Deliver opportunities for inclusion and accessibility training for drivers, co-designed and co-delivered by people with disability

Proposed actions:

- Develop incentives and easy to complete training sessions co-designed by people with disability for all drivers, operators, and taxi company employees about effectively working with customers with disability to deliver quality services. This to include:

Training for drivers to include modules on handling and tie-down procedures for equipment.

4. Improved booking systems that enable people with disability to access user-friendly, accessible, automated app and online booking systems

Proposed actions:

- Review approaches and systems in place in other jurisdictions and develop a plan and investment to:
 - Develop a specific app for people with disability to pre-book any transport option.
 - Create a wheelchair accessible taxi option in all automated booking systems i.e., phone, computer, app
 - Apps where you can input specific information about your travel needs, disability, drop off and pick up points
 - Develop strategies to prevent operator booking errors.

5. Deliver system and industry policy reforms

Proposed actions:

- Identify and develop a plan for policy reform to deliver compliance incentive options to ensure driver's prioritise people with disability jobs over short fares or other fares considered 'easier and quicker' to undertake.
- Re-examine the requirement for scooter users to transfer to a taxi seat.

6. Deliver timely and responsive taxi service for people with disability.

Proposed actions:

- Develop incentive options that support the prioritisation of drivers to pick up people with disability;
- Identify industry benchmarks for quality services and through partnership by Government, Industry and People with disability, an annual industry award recognition program for drivers and incentivise good performance.

7. Deliver an ongoing Taxi Subsidy Scheme to ensure equal continuity of access to essential taxi services for people with disability.

Proposed actions:

- Queensland Government to work with Commonwealth to support and guarantee the continuation of access for NDIS participants and non-NDIS participants to a taxi subsidy scheme that is not capped and delivers accessible public transport options to people with disability who experience profound difficulty in using other forms of public transport. It is important that solutions are co-designed with people with disability.

Detailed participant issues and suggestions from Breakout Rooms

What's working

- Using the app is helpful to see where the taxi is and helps passengers understand how far away the driver is and be able to plan their needs, safety, and support.
- Some passengers have drivers who will call them directly prior to pick up to let them know where they are.
- Some apps are starting to ask if you need a wheelchair cab which makes it easier for people at the booking stage without having to wait online for an operator.
- Many participants reported positive experiences with drivers stating, "Most taxi drivers are wonderful; some are really keen to help".
- 'It is positive when I can contact a driver directly who I know who then delivers a functional service'.
- When calling from a mobile you get a text response to update you about expected arrival times and what is happening.

What's not working?

- People with disability feel that there is no incentive for taxi drivers to provide rides to them.
- Better communication – drivers are reporting that they don't get a confirmation text or message from the app if you leave a message, which in turns causes issues for the rider, miscommunication and people waiting longer as they detailed their pick-up location in the messages.
- Drivers aren't being communicated to via their company. Important and vital information is not being passed on, this then causes issues for the driver and taxi user.
- As towns and cities grow the number of locations for safe taxi pickups for people with disability haven't.
- More consideration needs to be given by councils to install more ramps similar to those at curbs so that people in wheelchairs can get off the footpath and into taxis.

- Driver training is needed as there has been examples of drivers dropping passengers at ramps that aren't accessible
- The wait time for taxis is an issue, with wait times in Brisbane commonly 1 hour or longer. Wait times in smaller towns and rural areas are even longer.
- Concerns around ongoing continuation of taxi subsidy scheme. Members are looking for certainty that it will continue.
- Very inconsistent service across regions. Some drivers show empathy and an awareness of disability needs, others none.
- Accuracy of information shared by the operator to the driver through the call centre is frequently not accurate.
- Experiences shared that the app wasn't user friendly, with bookings cancelled when they realise the service is for a person with disability.
- Short journeys that people with disability have no option to take. Common experiences shared is that short fare journeys are cancelled. Up to nine cancellations for one job.
- People with disability are not able to use the TSS on the yellow taxi app when there is a fixed booking.
- Since ride share companies have been introduced and regulations changed, the experience of catching taxis has decreased dramatically.
- Wait times have continued to increase over the last 12-18 months and this experience was shared by all attendees.
- In North Queensland there is a lack of drivers and they advised that the costs involved are not worthwhile for wheelchair taxis.
- There appears to be no incentive for taxi operators to buy the bigger vehicles.
- When making a booking with cabs, there are significant wait times when you call. Waiting for an operator can be 15-20 minutes to get a booking in the system.
- It is better to obtain a relationship with drivers and call them directly.

What are our ideas/solutions?

- If you are blind – hybrid/electric cars are hard to hear when they pull up. Arrange some way to hear when they pull up such as a text message.
- To make wheelchair accessible taxis - less incentive than for group bookings.
- To enable drivers to be able to pinpoint our location from the app.
- Better co-design and consultation on the booking system/ the app/ the call centre/prebooking – talk to us about how to resolve issues.
- Better communication and better training from people with lived experience, including co-design with the initial training that drivers get – interactive training session.
- Taxis need accountability, and they need to write why they're cancelling (like in ride share apps) to keep drivers accountable.
- Strategies where we can work with partners to improve wait times for people with disability.
- Tracker to advise where the taxi is.
- Increasing the lift loading to offset the petrol and other transport costs, especially in the current climate.

- There could be a national app just for wheelchair services across all taxi services: sign up, put in your details and TSS number. Room for information about pickup and drop off, tailored for people with disability.
- Reliability of website and technology, all future design of the website and technology needs to be co-designed.

Conclusion

The issues and concerns raised by forum participants, make it clear that the experiences of people with disability highlight the need to improve taxi services for people with disabilities. Co-designing solutions in partnership with people with disability, government and the taxi industry is fundamental to achieving improved taxi services for people with disability in Queensland. The State government working with the Commonwealth to reach agreement about access to a non-capped taxi subsidy scheme particularly for NDIS participants, is fundamental to people with disability having ongoing, affordable transport. Increasing incentives for drivers and owner operators of taxis will keep them invested in providing vital transport services to people with disability. Co-designed technology solutions that are tested by people with disability will ensure that catching a taxi is as easy for people with disability as it is for everyone else.

QDN looks forward to continuing this work, by and for people with disability and further engagement with key stakeholders to pursue these issues and recommendations and will continue to update members on this important issue.