

INFORMATION NOTE

Wheelchair accessible taxi services in Sydney and London

1. Background

1.1 Some members of the Subcommittee to Study the Transport Needs of and Provision of Concessionary Public Transport Fares for Persons with Disabilities asked the Hong Kong Government to consider the introduction of wheelchair accessible taxis (WATs) for disabled persons at its 15 January 2007 meeting. The Subcommittee would like to learn about the implementation experience of overseas practices. As such, the Research and Library Services Division prepares this information note on WAT services in Sydney of Australia and London of the United Kingdom (UK) to facilitate Members' discussion on the situation in Hong Kong.¹

1.2 In this study, Sydney of New South Wales (NSW)² is selected because it has about 400 liquefied petroleum gas (LPG)-driven WATs in operation, or 7.8% of the total fleet.³ In addition, there are a number of NSW government⁴ incentives to assist taxi operators and disabled persons in providing and using WAT services respectively. London is selected because all taxis operating in the city are wheelchair accessible and the London government has implemented the Taxicard scheme to assist disabled persons in using taxis. In addition, the London Taxis International⁵ introduced a new taxi model into the market at the end of 2006⁶, with the model capable of being modified to LPG-powered.

¹ Taxis operating in Hong Kong are liquefied petroleum gas powered.

² In Australia, there is no transport regulation relating to the fuel used for taxis. However, all taxis must comply with the provisions of the Australian Design Rules which are federal government requirements applying to all vehicles operating in the country. In fact, the vast majority of taxis in the major cities across Australia are fitted with LPG because LPG is cheaper than other fuels, as the federal government has not imposed any excise tax on LPG for environmental protection purposes.

³ The Physical Disability Council of NSW, a pressure group representing disabled persons in NSW, is of the view that the NSW government should require all taxis to be wheelchair accessible by 2016.

⁴ Taxis operating in Sydney are regulated by the NSW government.

⁵ The London Taxis International is a leading manufacturer of purpose-built taxis in the UK. In fact, London taxis, which are known as "black cabs", are all produced by this company.

⁶ The UK government has not set out any specific requirements regarding the fuels used by taxis. According to the UK government, the majority of taxis in London (and elsewhere in the UK) are diesel powered, although some may have been converted to LPG. In any event, the figures regarding the number of LPG-driven taxis in London or in the UK as a whole are not available.

2. Sydney

Legislation related to the provision of wheelchair accessible taxi services

2.1 The enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 has created a significant impact upon the operation of WATs in Australia, including Sydney. This Act, introduced by the federal government, applies to the whole country. The Disability Discrimination Act is directed at eliminating discrimination against disabled persons in a range of areas, such as public transport, employment, education, and access to premises and accommodation.

2.2 After a long consultation with disabled persons and the transport industry, the federal government published the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (Disability Standards) in 2002, prescribing how public transport should be made accessible in order to implement provisions specified in the Disability Discrimination Act, such as the standards for wheelchairs, ramps and doorways. In particular, the Disability Standards also stipulate the requirement that the response times of WATs should be comparable to those of regular taxis by 2008.⁷

Government's incentives for assisting taxi operators in providing wheelchair accessible taxi services

2.3 According to the NSW Taxi Council⁸, WATs cost two to three times more than regular taxis to purchase.⁹ The operating costs of WATs are also higher because of increased maintenance and fuel costs. In view of these issues, the NSW government has provided a number of incentives to assist taxi operators in providing WAT services in Sydney.¹⁰

Cheaper licences for wheelchair accessible taxis

2.4 The NSW government issues one-year short-term taxi licences to WATs operating in Sydney for AUS\$1,000 (HK\$5,850), compared to a one-time lump sum cost of AUS\$44,000 (HK\$257,400) for standard licences of regular taxis.

⁷ In Sydney, both regular and wheelchair accessible taxis can be called via a centralized booking network, which is known as "Zero 200".

⁸ The NSW Taxi Council is a self-regulating body of the NSW taxi industry.

⁹ In addition to providing services for disabled persons, WATs can take up regular taxi jobs.

¹⁰ The NSW government considers providing interest-free loans of up to a maximum of AUS\$30,000 (HK\$175,500) or half the market value of the vehicle (whichever is less) to taxi operators for the purchase of or conversion into WATs. (The average exchange rate in 2006 was AUS\$1 = HK\$5.85.) Interest-free loans may be repayable over a term of five years.

Longer service life for wheelchair accessible taxis

2.5 WATs operating in Sydney can have a longer service life of 10 years, while regular taxis have to be replaced every six years.

Higher rates for van-type wheelchair accessible taxis

2.6 Van-type WATs are allowed to charge 1.5 times the metered fare when carrying six or more passengers.¹¹

Reimbursement of the cost of wheelchair accessible taxi training

2.7 WAT drivers are required to complete a two-day course offered by the NSW Taxi Council, which costs AUS\$242 (HK\$1,416), in order to learn how to provide quality services to disabled persons. To encourage taxi drivers to take this course, the NSW government reimburses taxi drivers for the training cost.

Government's incentive for assisting disabled persons in using wheelchair accessible taxi services*Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme*

2.8 The NSW government has been administering the Taxi Transport Subsidy Scheme (TTSS) since 1981. TTSS is aimed at subsidizing the cost of using WATs for residents of NSW who are unable to use public transport as a result of a qualifying severe and permanent disability. TTSS participants are allowed to travel by WATs at half fare up to a maximum of AUS\$30 (HK\$176) per trip.

2.9 To be eligible for TTSS, the applicant's disability or mobility limitation must fall strictly within one of the following categories:

Ambulatory problems

- (a) inability to walk or stand and mobility only in a wheelchair due to physical disability; or
- (b) severe and permanent ambulatory problem that cannot functionally be improved, which limits walking to an extremely limited distance.

¹¹ There are no van-type regular taxis in Sydney.

Vision

total loss of vision in both eyes or severe permanent impairment which cannot functionally be improved by correcting lenses or other treatment.

Epilepsy

severe and uncontrollable epilepsy.

Intellectual disabilities

severe intellectual disabilities causing socially unacceptable behaviour.

Other functional disabilities

severe and permanent communication difficulties which render the person incapable of travelling on public transport without the constant assistance of another person.

2.10 If the application is approved, a book of paper vouchers is provided to the applicants who can use a voucher on each WAT trip. Applicants deemed ineligible to participate following an assessment of their applications may at any time appeal to the NSW government to have their cases reviewed. The review requests must be made in writing and accompanied by further medical evidence in support of their eligibility.

Wheelchair accessible taxi models operating in Sydney

2.11 According to the NSW government, most WATs operating in Sydney can carry one wheelchair only but a few may carry two wheelchairs. WATs must have ramps or hoists for access, special seat belts and wheelchair tie-down locks. The critical dimensions for the wheelchair space are an Australian standard set by the federal government, which requires: a ramp or hoist width of 800 mm, a door height of 1 400 mm, and an internal space for a wheelchair of 800 mm × 1 300 mm × 1 410 mm.

2.12 According to the NSW Taxi Council, popular WAT models operating in Sydney are:

- (a) Toyota Tarago and Hiace;
- (b) Ford Falcon;
- (c) Chrysler Voyager;
- (d) Holden Zafira;
- (e) Kia Carnivale; and
- (f) Mercedes Vito and Sprinter.

2.13 The NSW Taxi Council, Flashcab Australia and Freedom Motors Australia¹² have altogether provided five pictures of WATs operating in Sydney, which are shown below:



Toyota Tarago is the most popular WAT model, which offers seven seats plus easy wheelchair access from the rear.

¹² Flashcab Australia and Freedom Motors Australia are two leading private companies, which engage in the conversion of passenger vehicles for wheelchair accessibility.



Ford Falcon is one of the best selling WAT models in Sydney.



Chrysler Voyager can accommodate one wheelchair and four passengers.



Mazda Premacy is a new WAT model, which offers five seats plus easy wheelchair access from the rear.



Van-type WAT can accommodate two wheelchairs and eight passengers.

3. London

Legislation related to the provision of wheelchair accessible taxi services

3.1 The primary legislation concerned in London is the Disability Discrimination Act passed in 1995, which is aimed at improving accessibility for disabled persons. This Act requires all taxis operating in the UK to be wheelchair accessible by phases, with full compliance by 2020.¹³ London taxis have been wheelchair accessible starting from the first phase launched in January 2000.

Government's incentives for assisting taxi operators in providing taxi services to disabled persons

3.2 The London government has not provided any financial incentive to assist taxi operators in converting taxis to allow wheelchair accessibility.

Training for taxi drivers

3.3 The London government has issued a booklet entitled *Getting it Right* and a DVD teaching taxi drivers the way to assist disabled persons in using taxi services.

¹³ This arrangement is intended to allow sufficient time for small town taxi operators to comply with the wheelchair accessible requirement.

Government's incentive for assisting disabled persons in using taxi services

Taxicard scheme

3.4 The Taxicard scheme, being jointly managed and funded by the London government and London borough councils, offers reduced taxi fares for Londoners who have difficulty in using public transport owing to serious mobility problems. There are about 77 000 Taxicard members in London.

3.5 Taxicard members have to pay a £1.50¹⁴ (HK\$21.5) flat fare per trip, plus any additional metered fare above the subsidy. The maximum subsidy per taxi trip amounts to £10.30 (HK\$147.6) (daytime), £11.30 (HK\$161.9) (evenings) and £12.80 (HK\$183.4) (nights and weekends).

3.6 People who could join the Taxicard scheme automatically are those:

- (a) receiving the higher rate mobility component of the disability living allowance¹⁵;
- (b) registered blind; or
- (c) receiving war pension mobility supplement.

3.7 If the applicant is not in one of the above categories, he/she either has to get a doctor to certify that he/she is eligible for the Taxicard scheme or he/she has to undergo a mobility assessment and possibly attend an interview to verify the eligibility.

Features of taxis operating in London and new taxi model introduced into the market

3.8 To assist disabled persons in using London taxi services, all taxis are fitted with the following features:

- (a) ramp;
- (b) intermediate step;
- (c) swivel seat;

¹⁴ The average exchange rate in 2006 was £1 = HK\$14.33.

¹⁵ The disability living allowance is a benefit for people who need help with mobility or personal care or both. There are two rates of payment for mobility, which are the lower rate and the higher rate mobility components. People who cannot walk are classified in the higher rate mobility component category.

- (d) coloured grab handles;
- (e) intercom; and
- (f) seat belt.

The internal space of London taxis should be at least 700 mm × 1 200 mm × 1 625 mm to carry a wheelchair.

3.9 As regards the new taxi model introduced into the market, the London Taxis International states that the new TX4 model¹⁶ has been put on sale since late-2006. This taxi model can be modified to use LPG engines, providing easy wheelchair access and large luggage storage space.

3.10 In particular, the TX4 model has the following accessibility features:

- (a) integral fold-out ramp with extension;
- (b) wheelchair restraint belt;
- (c) demountable intermediate non-slip step;
- (d) rear swivel seat for disabled passengers;
- (e) grab handles and seat edges for poorly sighted passengers;
- (f) built-in induction loop and intercom in rear;
- (g) easy release lit exterior door handles for the arthritic; and
- (h) optional powered swivel seat that could be lowered to the floor of the taxi.

¹⁶ The current selling price of the TX4 model is over £40,000 (HK\$573,200).

3.11 The London Taxis International has provided three pictures of London taxis in operation, which are shown below.



London has used the TXII taxi model since early-2002.



TX4 is a new London taxi model.



A taxi driver is assisting a wheelchair user in getting into a TX4 model taxi.

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