

TAXI INDUSTRY

Grievance

MR A.P. O'GORMAN (Joondalup) [9.40 am]: My grievance this morning is to the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, and it involves taxis and the service that the taxi industry is failing to provide at the moment in the northern suburbs, particularly around Joondalup. I note that this is an issue that has been ongoing over the past five years since I have been a member of Parliament. In fact, I have raised this issue with the minister on a number of occasions. Earlier this year, on 17 March, the taxi forum, chaired by the member for Southern River, came to Joondalup and held a forum with some 40 or 50 attendees, at which they put forward their grievances and concerns about getting taxis in the northern suburbs.

The particular concerns that were raised that day were about booking multipurpose taxis in the northern suburbs, those taxis not showing up, and also being unable to book a return journey. People who use these taxis are from the Northern Suburbs Stroke Support Group, so, quite obviously, they need taxis with wheelchair access. Sometimes they need assistance to get in and out of taxis, and therefore they need multipurpose taxis. They have a meeting once a month at the Joondalup Health Campus, and they try to book taxis to take them to the meeting, and they also book return journeys. Many times they are left sitting outside the Joondalup Health Campus waiting for taxis to arrive - in some instances, for up to two hours. These are people who are not 100 per cent healthy, and it does not help them much when they have to wait for two hours in the wind and rain or in extreme heat. That is the main issue.

Since that forum in March, I have noticed that there has been some improvement, and another taxi service is servicing the area. However, the same things are still happening. Booked taxis do not arrive on time to take these people to meetings. There are difficulties in getting a regular booking for people to attend meetings. The service is unreliable. Access to multipurpose taxis for wheelchair-dependent people is very limited. There are many no-shows of booked taxis to pick up people after meetings, which is what I spoke about earlier. Many of these taxidrivers do not want to do the short runs to take people to and from these meetings, and these people are not able to pre-book their return journeys. They are the major issues that arose.

Following that forum, I have received a number of letters. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will read one of those letters into the record. It is quite lengthy, but it makes the point pretty well about how much difficulty it causes people when these taxis do not show up. This letter is addressed to me and states -

As our local member could you please enquire who is responsible for Maxi Taxi services i.e. availability, punctuality and responsibility as their non-performance on Sunday 21st of May could have cost my wife Lilian her life and caused me considerable anxiety? Lillian has advanced dementia (Alzheimer's disease) and is a resident of Regent's Garden nursing home in Drovers Place Wanneroo.

As it was her birthday on Tuesday May 23rd I decided to have her home on the 21st along with our family because due to her condition it may be the last time we can do this. I rang Black and White taxis on . . .

He gives the number -

on Wednesday May the 17th and ordered a Maxi Taxi with a man I now know as Tony for her to be picked up at 10am at regent's garden and taken back at 3pm.

At 11am she hadn't arrived so I rang B and W to be told there were some difficulties but she would be picked up. I then received a call from Regent's Garden telling me Lilian had been ready since 10am but no taxi had arrived so I relayed the message I had been given. Approximately 11.50am B and W called to tell me there was a cab available and would be there in 15 minutes, they also rang the nursing home.

The Maxi Taxi arrived at my place at approximately 12.20pm instead of just after 10am. I had Lilian ready to go back at 3pm but no one arrived. My daughter rang B and W at 4.20pm and was told sorry but we only give out the bookings, we have no control over what the drivers do but we will try to get someone there. My daughter also explained that Lilian needed to return to Regent's Garden for dinner at 5pm and was becoming tired. My daughter had to leave at 4.30pm so there was just Lilian and I. I became concerned because Lilian was getting distressed so at 5.15pm I rang B and W again and said you have to tell me if a taxi will be here soon because my wife is distressed and needs to be back at the nursing home, if you can't pick her up I will have to get an ambulance. They said they will try but they really sounded like they weren't concerned. I then rang the nursing home and asked them to call B and W which they did but got the same response. I wasn't sure who to ring for what was then a non urgent vehicle so I rang one of my neighbours in the complex who is currently a paramedic working for St John's. He came up and sorted it out for me. A few minutes later Lillian had a severe seizure in her wheelchair. Thank god my friend was here, it was routine for him but devastating for me. He held her

till she came out of it as she was having problems breathing. He then rang the ambulance and told them the situation was now urgent. They came in 10 minutes and took Lilian to Joondalup Hospital emergency department who were fantastic with her. It was approximately 6pm and still no taxi had arrived so I rang and cancelled it and explained what had just occurred. They kept her till midnight then took her back to Regents Garden. Lillian seems to be recovering but she is still very tired. I have spoken to Tony at B and W but he seems to have answers for everything. I told him I would be taking it further and he said "go ahead I will give you 2 names and a telephone number which he said was Planning and Infrastructure.

I feel very strongly about what happened because the taxis are subsidised by the government by way of the vouchers we receive but don't seem to be accountable to anyone. If no one does anything it will go on and maybe it WILL cost someone their life. I was lucky having my friend available who is trained for situations such as this. How would I have managed on my own? I am almost 75 and have had severe rheumatoid arthritis for 38 years. If the taxi had arrived at 3pm as booked Lilian would have been back at the nursing home probably in bed resting and have had dinner and medication as normal. Everything would have been fine if this was the case. I'm hoping you can help to get some responsibility in at least the Maxi taxi service because people in wheelchairs depend on them. I would appreciate being kept informed . . .

I have a second letter, which I will not read but which is along similar lines. It is from a Mr Walter Edom of Wanneroo. The previous letter was from Mr Frank Conlan of Connolly. I ask the minister to do something to assist people who need maxi taxis. As to the taxi service in the northern suburbs, I know of people who have waited for an hour and a half for taxis on a Friday or a Saturday night, and they do not show up.

MS A.J.G. MacTIERNAN (Armadale - Minister for Planning and Infrastructure) [9.47 am]: I thank the member for the grievance. I put on record that the member for Joondalup has been very assiduous in following up these taxi matters. All of us who represent outer suburban areas know about the very real problems in getting a decent taxi service. I want to put on record my very deep concern about what happened to the Conlan family. It is not acceptable. I do not think the excuses that have been put forward by Black and White Taxis are cogent. We are constantly trying to lift the performance of multipurpose taxis. We have made numerous changes and interventions to try to improve the service of these MPT operators. I must say that notwithstanding all the work we have done, it is very clear to me that we are still not there. There is a failing of the taxi dispatch services to accept their obligations. Quite clearly, they have powers, as we point out to them all the time, to direct MPT operators to go and take a job. There is a provision in the conditions that apply to the taxi dispatch services that if a driver fails to take a wheelchair passenger when reasonably directed by an MPT coordinator to do so, or fails to fulfil his quota, the MPT coordinator shall make a record of that failure. Procedures follow on from that. After being issued with a licence, from time to time MPT drivers can be directed to take a job. I find it extraordinary that in all those hours not one MPT could be directed to take that job because there were no MPT operators anywhere near the northern suburbs. The TDSs are not taking their obligations seriously.

Having said that, I recognise that we could make more changes to the industry. The government is buying back MPT plates to reduce the costs to the industry. It has introduced an \$8 500 capital subsidy to attract more people into the MPT industry. It is also offering cadetships for MPT drivers. People who want to become MPT drivers will be paid by the government to gain their taxi licence. The government has also put in place a \$5 fuel subsidy for every wheelchair job. Indeed, the government has put in place numerous measures to try to improve the performance of MPT operators. We would like more MPT operators in the market. However, that is difficult given the current skills shortage. Even though we are prepared to pay people to train as taxi drivers so that they can become MPT operators, we are not attracting new people into the market, notwithstanding our capital and fuel subsidies and the massive reduction in the cost structure of MPT operators.

The government is now considering releasing MPT operators from their obligation to drive on Friday and Saturday nights. As members know, those nights are the peak periods, and conditions have been placed on all drivers to ensure that they work on those evenings. Many of the people who are thinking about becoming MPT operators say that they want to deal with people with disabilities and that they do not want to pick up Friday and Saturday night revellers. We are looking at how we might be able to relax those conditions for MPT operators to ensure that they drive on Sundays. Black and White Taxis said that one of the issues that contributed to the problem on the day in question was that only 21 of its 60 MPT operators were on the road. There was a limit on the number of MPT operators who could have serviced the job. We are prepared to take on board the suggestion made by the MPT sector to release MPT drivers from that obligation to drive on Friday and Saturday nights, provided that we substitute that with an alternative obligation to drive on Sundays.

I ask members of the opposition to be of some assistance when we start to enforce the rules that apply to quotas. MPT operators are required to do a minimum of 60 wheelchair jobs a month. That is not a very onerous task. Some MPT operators are fantastic and do more than 300 wheelchair jobs a month. Many do more than 160

wheelchair jobs a month. However, a significant number of MPT operators traditionally do not fulfil their quota. As soon as we started applying the provisions of the act to those drivers with an MPT licence - which is what I have told my department to do - and as soon as we started to prosecute those who were not doing their job, the opposition started whipping up protests and said that it was not reasonable to fine people for not discharging their obligation.

The member for Joondalup has a legitimate grievance. Mr Conlan has a very legitimate grievance. I make the commitment that the government will continue to make changes and work with the industry to determine how we can provide a better service for wheelchair customers. The government is very dedicated to achieving a better outcome.