

**LONDON'S MAINSTREAM TAXI SYSTEM:
SUBSIDIZATION OF DISABLED PATRONS**

**by Brian Heiser, July 2000, London,
private consultant and user of
wheelchair-accessible transportation**

INTRODUCTION

How the Taxicard works

Taxicard is a scheme that subsidises (gives financial assistance for) taxi trips made by eligible disabled people who live in most parts of London. It is funded on a voluntary basis by London Boroughs and operated centrally by a single contract managed by the London Mobility Unit.

Not all of London is covered by the scheme because:

- Providing a Taxicard service as part of the scheme is not mandatory and some Boroughs choose not to do it : London is divided into 33 Borough Councils and only 29 of them participate in Taxicard. (the 4 others either provide a different service, or none at all)

There are 20,000 taxis operating in London: most do not belong to / use a radio circuit. At present the Taxicard contract is operated by one of these companies (Computer Cab) which has 3,500 taxis using its system. All taxis in London are able to carry a person in her/his wheelchair.

It is important to know that taxi drivers are self-employed and independent. Some taxi drivers pay companies such as Computer Cab for use of the booking service – this is done via a sophisticated satellite GPS system which communicates with a small computer in each taxi – which offers work to drivers. As each Taxicard booking is made by a disabled member, via their telephone, the Computer Cab GPS system offers the job to the taxi driver who is nearest the member: but the taxi driver does not have to accept the job if s/he does not want to do it.

It is certainly true that some drivers do not want to do Taxicard work because of their negative attitudes towards disabled people. I do not have statistics on this, but there is a lot of anecdotal evidence (including agreement from Computer Cab that this is true) and the evidence of disabled people – especially wheelchair users – who see taxi drivers driving past us and ignoring us when we try to “hail them” on the street (see below).

Each Taxicard member (disabled person) is allowed to make a certain maximum number of journeys each year: this maximum depends on:

- Their level of need as assessed by the Borough in which they live, and / or
- The number of journeys allowed by the Borough in which they live.

Taxicard journeys are requested by either:

- telephoning a number which is the same across London, stating the User Number, the pick up address and the destination address, and asking for a taxi either “as soon as possible” or for a specific time in the future.

or

- stopping an empty taxi (“hailing a taxi”) in the street

Taxis will in theory go anywhere in the United Kingdom!

For each journey, the member pays a “flat fare” (between £1.50 and £3 depending upon the Borough) plus any amount on the meter that is over the “Borough fare limit” which is the total of the “flat fare” plus the “Borough Maximum (subsidy)”. The “Borough Maximum (subsidy)” is between £7.80 and £10.10 (depending on the Borough).

(I actually pay more than these, because it is traditional – and, I think, good policy – to pay a small (50p or £1) “tip” on top of the fare shown on the meter.)

Examples

This sounds complicated at first, but actually is quite simple. For example, in the Borough in which I live the flat fare is £1.50 and the Borough Maximum (subsidy) is £9.30. So if I make a journey that ends with the taximeter showing “£10.80 or less, I have to pay the driver £1.50.

If I make a journey that ends with the meter showing £15 I pay the flat fare (£1.50) plus the amount over the “Borough fare limit” of £10.80 which equals £4.20 plus the flat fare of £1.50 which totals £5.70.

The information

1. amount of subsidization of users with disabilities, per trip and per person

The way the individual journey is subsidised is explained above.

The total subsidy spent by the 29 Boroughs that operate the scheme is £5m.

Just over 500,000 Taxicard trips were made between April 1999 and March 2000.

There are 44,000 members in these 29 Boroughs, which have a total population of about (Adolf – I don’t know this figure – but I suspect it’s around 6 million. I’ll try and get a better estimate as soon as possible, but wanted to let you have this draft now.)

The average subsidy per trip is: about £10.

The average subsidy per member per year is about £115.

The above averages hide extreme variations in service offered and delivered. For example, the number of journeys made per participating Borough ranges from

63,000 in Harrow to 965 in Enfield, with 40,000 or more journeys made in each of five participating Boroughs, and fewer than 1,000 in 15 Boroughs.

This reflects:

The budget allowed by the Borough, and

The availability of taxis, which depends on factors such as:

How rich or poor the area is (and so how likely it is to have general demand for taxis)

Where taxi drivers live

It does not reflect the need or number of disabled people in each borough.

2. operational criteria used in needs assessment (who assesses, how often, appeal provisions)

This operates in two stages:

A Eligibility for the scheme:

Disabled people may become Taxicard members by sending in an application form, which will allow them membership

automatically if they receive certain State disability related pensions or benefits,
or

if the person's doctor states that the person has "a disability which prevents them using buses and trains" and that this disability will last for at least 2 years. (The Doctor's statement may be investigated by the Borough or the TCFL if eligibility is uncertain.)

However, a small minority of Boroughs do not allow Taxicard membership to disabled people who have certain other entitlements such as free bus passes (see below): we believe this refusal is illegal.

B Number of subsidised trips allowed

Most Boroughs now allow different number of journeys to people with different levels of disability. For example, my Borough, Camden, allocates up to an initial 70 trips per member (based upon answers to questions in the application form – such as:

Do you use a wheelchair?

Do you have difficulty walking 50 metres without help or special equipment?

Are you able to use public transport?

How long have you had your disability/illness

Please describe the nature of your disability or illness

And

Do you have a free bus pass for older people?
Do you have a free bus pass for disabled people?
Do you have a green parking permit?

Once the initial allocation has been used, it is possible to apply for a further allocation of up to 70 more journeys.

Needs assessment is carried out initially by the TCFL who check the application form (see above) and then 22 of the Boroughs do the full eligibility and trips allocation assessment themselves (the TCFL does the whole eligibility assessment on behalf of 7 Boroughs)

3. system used for paying subsidies to users with disabilities and their acceptance by users, cab drivers/companies, the general public

The system for subsidising users is explained above: the total of all subsidies for the past month is paid by the TCFL monthly to the taxi operator (Computer Cab) who pays the individual taxi drivers each week the subsidised portion of each Taxicard trip the driver has made.

I am not aware of any survey data on acceptance of this system, but my impression is that it is acceptable in principle to:

Users (although the actual levels of cost are considered high in comparison to the fares charged by Dial-a-Ride for comparable journeys, and disabled people who can use buses can do so free if they have a bus pass).

Cab drivers, although the extent to which they participate in Taxicard depends on the detail of the allowances to them in the different Boroughs (see 6 below)

The company;

The Boroughs, which are able to receive a great deal of accurate and real-time budget and other monitoring information.

4. money flows and control systems in place

Money flows are:

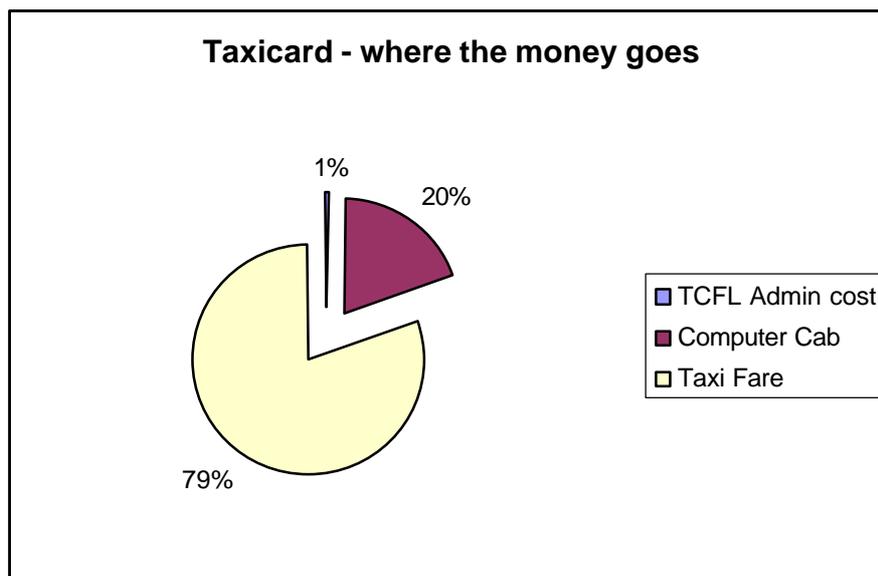
From the user to the driver at the end of each journey – a proportion of the metered fare.

From the TCFL to the company monthly – the aggregate of all (metered fare – fares paid) for all Taxicard journeys made in the previous month.

From the company to the drivers weekly – the aggregate of all (metered fare – fares paid) for the Taxicard journeys each has driven in the previous week

From the Boroughs to the TCFL quarterly – an amount agreed at the start of the financial year

At the end of each financial year – TCFL reconcile the budgets with the Boroughs depending on whether there has been an under- or over-spend.



Control systems are:

The user must show her/his Taxicard membership card, which has the user's photograph on it, at the start of each journey.

The driver must swipe (electronically register) the user's "swipe card" at the start of each journey if it has been booked by telephone, and also at the end of the journey if the taxi has been "hailed" in the street.

The electronic registration of journeys and their details, including the total cost shown on the meter at the end of the journey, is collected by the company (Computer Cab). The aggregation and analysis of this data is routinely supplied by the company to the TCFL, and by TCFL to the participating Boroughs.

- 5. statistics such as statistics on cab rides taken by wheelchair users as percentage of total cab rides, average number of rides by disabled user,**

Wheelchair users make about 6% of all Taxicard trips – I do not know what % of Taxicard members use wheelchairs.

Taxicard members make on average one trip per month. This hides huge variations in frequency, with some members making as many as 11 or 12 trips per month.

I do not have any statistics on taxi use by the general public: the next London Area Travel Survey (they are done every 10 years) will start soon but data will not be available until next year or the year after.

6. method of remunerating the cab driver/cab company for the additional time it might take to have a wheelchair using customer. Do cab drivers have an economic incentive/disincentive to take disabled customers?

Drivers have no incentive to carry out Taxicard journeys: there is sometimes a small economic disincentive since taxi-drivers start their meters when they accept a booking and there is an amount already on the meter when they arrive at the member's house (or wherever) – the "run-in"; the maximum run-in allowed on Taxicard is £2 (£3 in four Boroughs), so if a driver has to go further, or has to wait at the address if he is early for a "time" booking, the driver is unwilling to accept the job.

Drivers are paid an extra £1.50 (£2.50 in four Boroughs) to take wheelchair-users. This will change to £2.50 in all Boroughs from October this year. This is charged to the Borough, not the Member.

The different run-in (£2 or £3) and wheelchair user incentive (£1.50 or £2.50) is as a result of an experiment in four Boroughs that demonstrated that the small extra incentive / allowance appeared to have a large beneficial effect on quality of service (taxi availability/willingness and promptness).

7. driver training (contents, frequency, trainers, financing)

TCFL say:

"Drivers are given Disability Awareness Training when joining Computer Cab and learn how to use the wheelchair ramp. They are not under any obligation to undertake refresher training, but we are pressing Computer Cab to improve the training regime."

Computer Cab say:

"...drivers are able to provide assistance at the start and end of the (journey). This assistance is enhanced by the disability awareness element in the taxi drivers' training programme, as well as courses run by the taxi operators to improve disability awareness."

Many Taxicard users would say that driver training should be improved. I have personally had many experiences of taxi drivers not knowing how to use the access features of their taxis, and being unfamiliar with helping wheelchair users.

8. safety provisions for wheelchair users while riding (liability, accident record?)

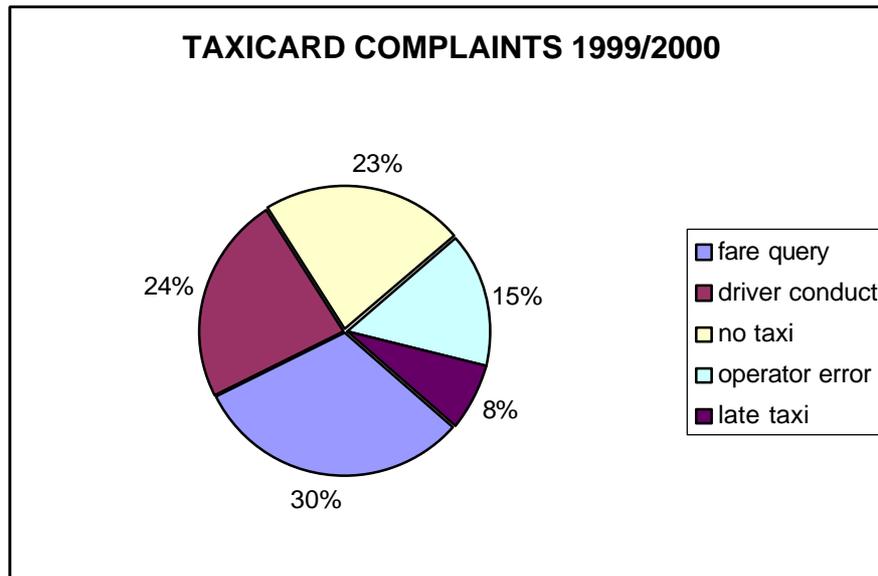
The most modern London taxis have good safety features for wheelchair users: we travel facing the rear, with the wheelchair strapped to the taxi and a seat belt around the disabled passenger. The most modern taxis have integral ramps which fold out from the floor: previous versions (which make up most of the taxi fleet) have ramps kept in the boot, which many drivers are a bit reluctant to use. Nevertheless, if used properly the taxi is a good and safe means of transportation.

Boroughs specify the level of insurance liability. Computer Cab's public liability insurance covers the Taxicard user for neglect on behalf of the driver up to the point of entry, and then the driver's public liability insurance takes over until the end of the journey.

We introduced a procedure in December 1995, which allows us to record any incidents or problems associated with Taxicard journeys that are reported to us by drivers or our customer service agents. Accidents involving Taxicard users are entered onto the log, showing the date, relevant details of the cardholder/driver and a statement of events. Since the start of the log, 21 accidents have been recorded circa 2.5 million journeys.

9. quality of service as perceived by disabled customers (contact with switchboard, waiting time, drivers' attitudes, complaint and redress provisions, monitoring instruments)

I am not aware of any survey data on user satisfaction. However, complaints are monitored and the chart below gives a breakdown of the main current areas of complaint.

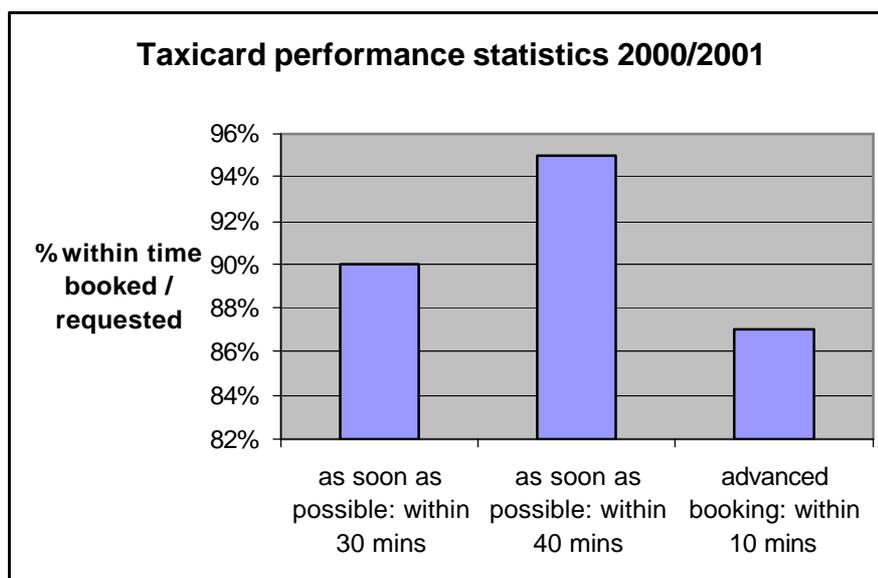


Only about 1,600 complaints were made in the year 1999/2000 (when 500,000 journeys were made). The chart disguises extreme variations between parts of London: in some parts of London by far the most complaints were that no taxi was available, but in other parts this was not a major problem.

It must be stressed that availability of taxis is at present a serious problem with Taxicard in some parts of London.

I am not aware of any redress having been given to any dissatisfied Taxicard users: there is certainly no right to redress for costs incurred by users as a result of a late taxi or a booking not being fulfilled.

Performance figures



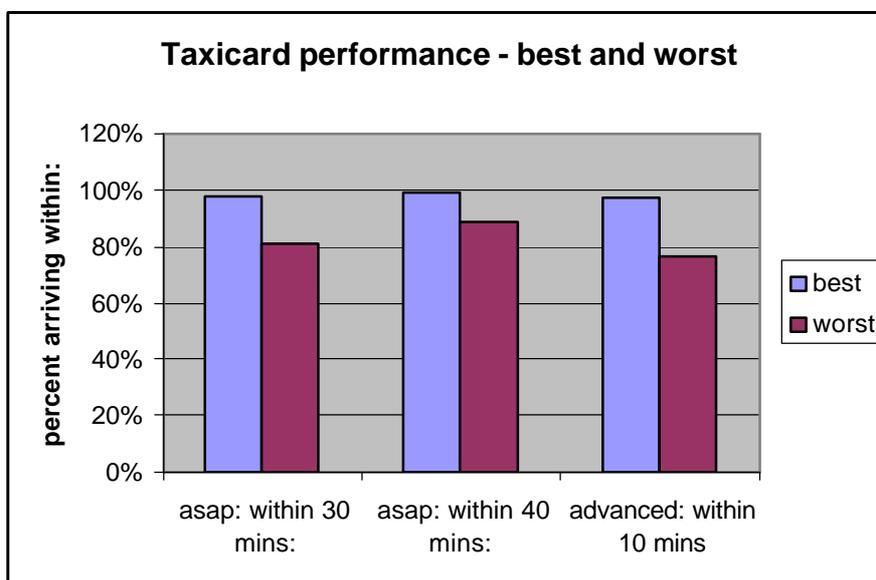
The chart shows that on average across London:

90% of taxis requested “as soon as possible” arrived within 30 minutes

95% of taxis requested “as soon as possible” arrived within 40 minutes

87% of taxis booked for a definite time in the future arrived within 10 minute sof the booked time.

However this hides considerable variation between different parts of London, and the next chart shows the same results for the best and worst Boroughs:



10. How can drivers/cab companies be compensated for the longer distances to get to disabled customers than to non-disabled ones? Pros and cons.

This is not an issue: Taxicard members live in the community and so do not necessarily live further from taxis than any other users of a taxi radio circuit.