

# Top wheels for those with wheels

David Syer builds the ideal car for wheelchair users, writes **GRAHAM SMITH**

**P**EOPLE with disabilities have enough to deal with in their lives without being labelled second-class citizens when it comes to transport.

A need to accommodate a wheelchair and a pile of gear has condemned disabled people to riding in large converted vans that mark them as disabled wherever they go. But Fleetworks Mobility's David Syer is working hard to change that with his range of smaller vehicles.

"We wanted a car that basically looked like a normal car so users wouldn't feel stigmatised," Syer says.

He developed the first Freewheeler model about 10 years' ago, because he needed a suitable vehicle to carry his disabled son.

He wanted a car that could accommodate him while he sat in his wheelchair, avoiding the hassle of folding the chair and lifting his son in and out of the vehicle.

"We didn't want to drive something like a miniature furniture van," Syer says.

The idea to create a small vehicle for the purpose grew legs when Holden launched the original Combo van which seemed perfectly suited to the job. Syer and his Adelaide-based body builder, Les Brazier Special Vehicles, have since converted hundreds of Combos and Citroen Berlingos, but Renault's new Kangoo van will probably be the most popular of all.

Syer is optimistic about the Kangoo because it is available with an automatic transmission, something his customers have wanted since he began converting the Combo.

Such was the demand for an auto



**Automatic choice:** David Syer converts Renault Kangoos into well-designed transport for wheelchair users.

## WE DIDN'T WANT TO DRIVE SOMETHING LIKE A MINIATURE FURNITURE VAN

that he converted Combos to automatics. Though he satisfied the demand, it was a time-consuming and costly exercise.

The auto makes it easier for family members to drive, Syer says, and they can also feel comfortable about handing the keys over to carers who might not be able to drive a manual.

Syer orders the Kangoo directly from the Renault factory and lands them with dual-glazed sliding doors, dual airbags, ABS and a wide choice of colours and options.

Les Brazier Special Vehicles then converts them. The rear floor is modified to accommodate a ramp and restraints are fitted to hold the wheelchair securely once the disabled passenger is aboard.

Syer can supply the Freewheeler with one or two removable rear passenger seats so that the Kangoo can accommodate up to five people.

He also lines the rear area to improve the aesthetics and installs windows in the rear body sides to increase visibility and to make the interior more airy.

The converted model also has a stainless-steel fuel tank under the floor on the right side, and a stainless-steel exhaust is routed around the reworked area.

Further options can be specified from a list, including a winch to help carers get the wheelchair into the vehicle, tinted windows, and rear parking sensors.

Prices start at \$42,500 for the manual. The auto costs \$44,490, and the fully equipped Elite auto, which has a lift-up tailgate, body-coloured bumpers and fog lights, is \$46,490.

Syer sold 30 Kangoo Freewheelers in the first two months and expects to sell 10 a month.