

PRIVATE HIRE NEWS

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The news magazine of the Graded Private Hire Companies
Incorporating the London and Southern Private Hire Car Associations

Welcome to edition 31 of Private Hire News. The Association has once again been very busy as we move rapidly into a fully regulated industry in London. April saw the end of the temporary vehicle permits issued by The PCO and we now officially know that there are in excess of 30,000 Private Hire Vehicles Licensed in the capital.

Vehicle Licensing was in my opinion, always going to be the watershed for regulation of Private Hire in London and there are some significant facts emerging now the process is complete.

The superb quality and young age of the newly licensed Private Hire Vehicles has shocked many and London's Private Hire Industry can be proud to say it has one of the best and probably the biggest small vehicle people moving fleets anywhere in the world.

The tiny screen discs are everywhere and to those of us who know what they represent the diamond discs are a small but significant indication of what has been achieved.

The final number of licensed vehicles will be known in the next few weeks when the stragglers are brought into the system. As happened with driver registration there were a significant number of vehicles with temporary permits left in the system near the end of the process. This meant that up to 10,000 temporary permit holders had not come forward for licensing as close as four weeks from the deadline date.

Having seen this happen with driver licensing the PCO and SGS put in place contingency plans for a deluge as the closing date loomed. There was inevitably going to be some difficulty getting slots in the late March and early April period but SGS kept their testing centres open for longer and did their best to accommodate everyone.

Inevitably there were some problems, especially registering brand new vehicles, however if companies followed the advice published on our Internet Message Board and contacted SGS as we advised, as far as we know all the stops were pulled out to help all the operators and drivers concerned.

We know by the amount of magazines being returned to us that the number of Operators in London is contracting, with some going out of business and some being consolidated into other companies by partnership or acquisition.

As well as the reduction in the number of operators there is also clearly a big reduction in drivers. The 60,000 to 100,000 figures once commonly branded about, now looks more like 30,000 to 35,000.

Our own private estimate was always 40,000 to 45,000 drivers and we still believe that this is the necessary operating level to provide an adequate number of pre-bookable Private Hire Cars to meet demand.

Clearly there is now a serious shortage of drivers in the industry and more worrying less and less are entering the sector.

We know that drivers are being lost to the criminal record checking process, but surprisingly to some, not that many. The PCO have refused a fairly small amount of drivers for criminal record check reasons, and some drivers with previous offences that would not impact on public safety have successfully appealed and been awarded licenses (as happens elsewhere and in the taxi industry).

More worryingly is the amount of drivers who are falling down on the ridiculous DVLA Group 2 medical requirements. This subject was debated in our recent member's meeting and once again we will be covering the subject in this magazine. In human terms there are clearly some tragedies happening to drivers whose doctors are at odds with some of the DVLA group 2 requirements.

A great cause for concern is who is meeting the demand for the journeys that are not being met by the licensed industry because of driver shortages. The answer is simple, illegal touts who illegally ply for hire off the streets especially during the evenings and weekend periods.

A trip into Central London after 22.00 any night of the week tells the sad story. More and more illegal activity is also being

reported outside clubs, pubs and busy restaurants anywhere inside the M25, so the problem is now clearly pan London.

Illegal touting remains very high and sadly some caught touting are even licensed or holders of temporary permits. Touting is an activity that undermines both the licensed industry and public safety. This and unscrupulous drivers undertaking 'Private' (or more appropriately 'Stolen' work by giving passengers a card with their mobile number on it), all adds up to lack of control and danger for the public.

The relatively insignificant screen discs are a step in the right direction towards eliminating illegal touting. The discs also make the industry a little more recognisable to the public and enforcement agencies; however in isolation they are simply not visible enough.

The Association's views on signage have always tended to be cautious, however it is clear that touting is not significantly reducing and many operators want their basic right to identify their vehicles. They also want the right to advertise their companies as well as their licensed status with more realistic signage.

Another reason for better signage is for the much needed entry into the bus lanes.

The LPHCA members meeting had a full debate on signage, bus lanes and a wide range of other issues and our meeting at The National Union of Teachers is fully covered in this edition of Private Hire News.

The final point to make in this editorial is on the tremendous progress the Association has made providing benefits to members.

New benefits like reduced credit card charges, cheaper phone call deals, free replacement licensed vehicles for non fault accidents and fantastic terms on short term leased licensed vehicles are all adding value to membership and helping to fund the association and its vital work.

In addition to the ever-growing number of partners who now give special terms to LPHCA members, we are pleased to announce the setting up of a free member's help-line that the Association is funding. Details of the new help-line and much more is in this edition of Private Hire News.

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