

NEW REPORT ON MINICAB TRADE

by Sandie Goodwin and Bob Fisher

Back in 2005, the Where To Guv report took an in depth look at the taxi trade in London. That report was published by Peter Hulme Cross AM on behalf of the Assembly's Transport Committee. That particular report included recommendations that the taxi trade should have a seat on the TfL Board, although this has not yet happened. Another was for the PCO to investigate outsourcing of inspections which has now been done.

ILLEGAL TOUTING PUTS PUBLIC AT RISK

Mr Hulme Cross has now published a new report, this time looking at the private hire trade in London. In it, the findings state that minicab drivers who illegally tout for hire should lose their private hire licences after three convictions for touting the report recommends. The report says good work by the Cab Enforcement Unit has led to 3,800 arrests for touting and a 46 per cent reduction in cab-related sexual offences over the last five years. Whether the report should have been worded more clearly is questionable though; why does it state "cab related" as opposed to "minicab" or "private hire related"? Perhaps the findings are based on figures which group both trades together – but this is unfair on the taxi trade as the sexual assaults are far more prevalent in the minicab industry. Despite the one unfortunate case which hit the headlines last month, it is normally illegal minicabs involved in this type of crime. The report goes on to warn there is no room for complacency, revealing that seven minicab-related sexual offences are committed every month. In spite of awareness campaigns such as Safer Travel at Night and services like Cabwise, many Londoners are still unwittingly taking risks by using licensed and unlicensed touts driving around the capital.

GOOD PROGRESS IS BEING MADE

Peter Hulme Cross said: "Around 1.4million journeys are made every week in London's minicabs. However, many people still do not know they are taking a big risk when they flag down a licensed minicab. If the minicab is not pre-booked, it is not insured to carry passengers, and it is much more difficult to detect offenders if a crime is committed."

"Good progress has been made in tackling touting. Arrests and convictions have consistently increased and according to surveys, the numbers of people making illegal late night journeys and being approached by touts has steadily fallen. However, it is still a widespread problem. Licensed drivers as well as private individuals are touting: around half of all those convicted of touting offences hold a private hire licence. Revoking the licences of repeat offenders would send a clear signal to drivers that touting is unacceptable."

MORE MARSHALLED RANKS NEEDED

Representatives from the private hire trade told the Assembly that difficulties in getting home late at night in London, including a shortage of black taxis, are a major cause of touting. The report recommends that the Public Carriage Office should work with the Cab Enforcement Unit to set up more marshalled ranks in London's 17 touting hotspots to provide more options for getting home.

The Committee raises concern about potential loopholes within the licensing system that can make it easier for licensed drivers to tout. Links between operators, drivers and vehicles are inadequate, allowing licences to be issued without the driver or vehicle being linked to a minicab company. This means the PCO has no record of where a licensed driver currently works - information that would be very helpful to the police when tackling touting. The report calls for a change in the licensing system so that this information is mandatory and is recorded on a database.

Police and private hire organisations told the Assembly that some small operators set up premises and obtain a licence, but then actively tout outside their office. The report recommends that resources be focused on these small operators and that their premises are closed down and licences revoked if they are found touting. Committee Members also called for an

email address, phone number and text service to be set up so private hire and taxi drivers can report illegal activity quickly and easily. Peter Hulme Cross said: "We believe that implementing our recommendations will cut the scale of illegal activity and make London a safer place in which to travel at night."

ROUT THE TOUT

When private hire licensing started through the Public Carriage Office, some of those involved in the taxi trade warned that a three tier system would evolve – black cabs, licensed private hire and illegal minicabs. Those involved in the legitimate private hire sector are already campaigning to "Rout the Tout" and stop licensed drivers touting. The taxi trade and the private hire trade both want to see an end to the illegal side of the trade and it would seem that despite campaigns such as the Safer Travel at Night receiving lots of praise the general public are still willing to put themselves at risk using unlicensed or illegal vehicles.



USE OF CABWISE TRIPLES IN TWO YEARS

Cabwise has seen a huge increase in the number of people using the service in the two years since its launch. More than 100,000 texts from people looking for a safe journey home in a licensed minicab or taxi were sent in 2007. The Cabwise service is a key part of the Mayor's Safer Travel at Night Campaign which works in partnership between the GLA, the Metropolitan Police and Transport for London to raise awareness of the dangers of using illegal minicabs and the safe travel options in the capital at night.

The latest statistics from TfL show the proportion of women willing to use illegal cabs in the West End has reduced from 18 per cent to four per cent since 2003 and there has been a 46 per cent reduction in cab related sexual offences over the past five years. A record 23,000 text messages were received in December last year.

Mayor Ken Livingstone, said: "Illegal taxi touts pose a real danger to women. Because of Cabwise, and Transport for London's licensing of the minicab trade, no-one ever has to get into an illegal cab again. Our work to crack down on illegal taxi touts, and to make London safer to travel at night, has led to a dramatic reduction in cab-related attacks on women. It has also led to more women becoming aware of the dangers of illegal minicabs, and increasingly unwilling to risk using them. It's really not worth the risk of getting into an unlicensed car, especially when Cabwise provides such a safe and easy alternative."

David Brown, Managing Director of Surface Transport said: "The Cabwise text service has gone from strength to strength and it is really good news to see that more and more Londoners are taking advantage of this innovative service.

"I would remind people for their own safety and peace of mind that licensed minicabs in London must be pre-booked otherwise they are acting illegally and may not be safe."

CABWISE
TEXT: HOME TO: 60835

MAYOR OF LONDON
METROPOLITAN POLICE
Transport for London

TEXT CHARGED AT 30P PER ENQUIRY PLUS STANDARD TEXT MESSAGE RATE. SERVICE NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE ON SOME MOBILE NETWORKS.

CABWISE
TEXT: HOME TO: 60835