

SGS TESTING ONE YEAR ON

It is now one year since the vehicle inspections at Penton Street ceased and SGS took on the role. In the beginning there were some teething problems and one of the centres was late in opening but now the taxi trade has had time to get used to the way SGS tests vehicles. SGS had already been undertaking the testing of private hire vehicles; this was a new service which was specifically developed to deal with the licensing of the private hire trade vehicles in London. With taxis SGS were taking over from an existing service.

APPOINTMENT SYSTEM CHANGED

When SGS began to test taxis, the appointments system was run in the same way that SGS ran it for the private hire trade. This meant appointments being sent out weeks in advance and the vehicle arriving on the day for testing. But for the taxi trade this did not work so well and there were some initial problems with getting appointments. Mike McGee, the Contract Manager at SGS, whose office is at the Hanworth Testing Centre, explained: "When we took over testing the SGS appointment system replaced a manual system which had been used by the PCO at Penton Street. This system had dictated the way appointments were allocated. Our facility is using a fully automated system. This resulted in these initial problems but SGS were quickly able to identify the problems and put them right. The system is now running much better and we are getting good feedback about the Call Centre and the way they deal with customers. The system is tailored to the needs of the taxi trade."

OPENING HOURS EXTENDED

As part of the on going attention to customer service, SGS and the PCO hold regular User Group meetings with the taxi trade to see where things can be improved. One of the things which soon became apparent was that the Groups all reported they would like longer opening hours at the centres. This was addressed and now the centres are open from 7am until 6pm according to demand. SGS pay a great deal of attention to the planning side of their business and have developed analysis of the bookings so that they know how many staff they need at each centre and when they are needed. This has also been of benefit to those wanting appointments at short notice, for example if they have had an accident and need a taxi testing urgently to get back to work. Each quarter, SGS look at the number of taxis due in for testing and allocate their staff, but they are also flexible enough to react to day to day shortages caused by problems such as staff sickness. Once all the appointment slots have been allocated, it allows the management team to decide which examiners can be utilised at which centre. Many of these examiners are happy to move around from one centre to another.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Since the opening of the centres, SGS has carried out over 23,000 inspections. The majority of these are cabs which are presented by overhaulers, although some drivers and owners do present their own vehicles. The geographical areas of the test centres has seen 40% of testing carried out at Deptford, 40% at Tottenham with the remaining 20% being tested at Hanworth. The first time pass rate over the past year has been 49% of taxis at their yearly presentation, with 63% passing on the mid year which started in October last year. The main reasons for failures are brakes, suspension, steering and lights, so this is something that those presenting cabs need to be aware of. The sophisticated electronic equipment that is used by SGS means they can analysis all sorts of data and determine why vehicles fail. This means for example that if there was a particular problem lots of taxis were failing on SGS would be able to identify the problem and take any necessary action. This could include new vehicles; should a recurring fault be identified SGS would liaise with the manufacturer to advise them there was a problem.

STATE OF THE ART TECHNOLOGY

The MAHA equipment used by SGS to test taxi and private hire is used in many other applications and inspections. It is tried and tested and calibrated to the highest standards by VOSA who set the standards. This includes the standards set for the diesel test. Mike McGee is convinced that this on going investment in the equipment is good for his customers. It means that the system used to test vehicles is fair; as the standards are set by the Government's department rather than the licensing authority it also means the testing standards are stringent. But the technology has to be used by staff who are well trained in how it operates.

With this in mind, more analysis of data shows Mike McGee exactly who has the highest pass rate and who the lowest each month. This information is then used in ensuring on-going training for the staff using the equipment. It rules out one examiner having a particular thing he specifically looks for. Again this means a better service for taxi owners. Mike said: "Examiners will receive more training to ensure standards are consistent. At some point every examiner will find himself at the top of the list of passes and at the bottom. This way of analysing statistics means all our staff are giving the best possible service. The on going training is a good thing and the staff at our centres recognise this. It is working from their point of view as well – during the twelve months SGS has been responsible for testing taxi we have not had anyone leave, whether they were newly recruited to the role or joined us from Penton Street."

The SGS service is audited by both VOSA and the PCO. This monitors all staff and gives the service a quality assurance across the board. This has to be good news for the travelling public. It means they can be assured that the vehicle they are travelling in meets high standards and is safe. SGS pride themselves on offering a transparent service that is fair to everyone; the team are happy to meet with the User Groups, which consist of the main presenters to each individual test centre, and discuss their comments and feedback. These meetings are not for the purpose of discussing individual problems, but to find out where the service as a whole can be improved.

TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

During the period when the early teething problems were being found, Mike McGee says that the taxi trade was understanding of the problems. "I would like to thank the trade for their understanding. It seems this is on-going – recently we had a computer problem and even then the trade reacted well. We were able to re-book the tests in again within the following 48 hours and try to minimise any inconvenience caused. When we took on the testing from Penton Street, we knew there had been some disquiet and that for certain people within the taxi trade we could have experienced some resistance to the changes. However, it would seem that our intention to deliver a fairer service has been proven. I would also like to commend presenters on their behaviour at our centres. Even when a vehicle has failed we have not had cause to report bad behaviour to the PCO, presenters are prepared to discuss the reasons for failure."

REASONS FOR FAILURE – HOW TO AVOID THEM

Mike McGee would like to remind drivers of some points which have caused problems.

- Please remember to bring all the necessary documentation with you to the test centre, including certificates for meters
- Brakes, steering, suspension and lights are the main reasons for failure
- Please arrive on time for your appointment, allowing 10 minutes before that time in order for the vehicle to be at the optimum temperature for testing
- Please consider the neighbours at our centres – we have received complaints of presenters revving cabs near their premises. It is better to make sure your engine is "blown out" during your journey to the centre

THE FUTURE OF TESTING

Mike thinks that garages who are now investing in electronic testing equipment themselves to use before presenting the vehicle to SGS will become more common. There are already some garages who have made this investment to ensure that the taxis they are presenting meet the necessary criteria. This will continue to help the trade meet the required standard.

