

WHITCOMB STREET MINICAB SERVICE *by Martin Low*

Martin Low is Director of Transportation at Westminster City Council. In this article, he talks to Taxi Globe about the minicab service in Whitcomb Street. Elsewhere in this issue of Taxi Globe details can be found of the demo being planned by trade associations on 5th February as feelings within the taxi trade are running high about the scheme.



SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Martin told our reporter: “There appears to be a lot of misinformation regarding the new experimental marshalled minicab service operated by West1 MiniCabs and Heart of London Business Alliance Limited from a booking office on the south side of Leicester Square with a pick up point in Whitcomb Street. I therefore wish to set the record straight with the taxi trade.

This is a pilot scheme aimed at getting more people home safely, and is to compliment the excellent service provided by licensed taxi drivers. The new service, which is still in a trial period, is about safer travel at night. It has arisen because there are rarely enough licensed taxis to meet demand. We want to wage war on the touts who plague our streets and charge huge fares at the end of a journey.

I have met representatives from Transport for London and the Metropolitan Police and was impressed with the approach being adopted to tackle touts in the City of Westminster. The Public Carriage Office takes action against any licensed private hire driver who is found to have been touting. I understand that about 40 drivers have had their licences suspended since August 2008 following a change in policy introduced by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson. The Leicester Square marshalling service is intended as an additional way of people getting home safely, rather than a replacement for black cabs, which are still very much in demand and valued by the Council. We have of course supported the introduction of the marshalled black cab rank by Leicester Square in Cranbourn Street.

PROBLEMS WITH UNLICENSED MINICABS

Sadly we do have problems with unlicensed minicabs taking advantage of vulnerable people who have often had too much to drink. I believe our scheme helps to combat unlicensed minicabs, which illegally take trade from both black cabs and licensed minicabs and are far less safe than other services. We have also faced accusations that the City Council is employing people to act as “touts” for the marshalled minicab service. This is not the case. The Council employees in question were in fact the Council’s City Guardians who were handing out leaflets to promote the Council’s campaign “Some things you only do when you’re drunk” which includes publicising several safe travel numbers. The first of which is the Taxi One Number, an alliance of 7,000 registered black cabs.

Private hire vehicle touts have been operating in the area and we are working closely with the police and the PCO to tackle this problem. The most recent

enforcement operation in January resulted in five arrests in the Whitcomb Street area, none from West1 MiniCabs, which is operating our minicab marshalling service.

The PCO is taking action against a private hire operator (once again not West1 MiniCabs) who appears to have been using a clipboard controller accepting bookings on-street at the junction of Bear Street with Charing Cross Road recently.

ANY SUGGESTIONS FOR RANKS WOULD BE WELCOMED

Finally, if any drivers have suggestions for additional taxi ranks, then I would be happy to hear from them.

Martin Low

Director of Transportation

Westminster City Council,

64 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6P

COMMENT FROM ED THOMPSON

Taxi Globe asked Ed Thompson, Director of Taxi & Private Hire at the PCO for his comments on Whitcomb Street and the planned demo on 5th February 2009. He said: “The PCO’s role in all this is rather modest, despite grossly misleading statements in some trade papers to the contrary. A currently licensed operator was granted a licence for an additional operating centre in Leicester Square.



“The touts should be the real targets here. PCO staff are working closely with the police to curb the activities both of solo touts and illegal operators. Licensed drivers convicted of touting are having their licences revoked every month. We are also very keen to continue working with Westminster Council and the Cab Ranks Committee to improve taxi ranking facilities.”

“We understand that this planned demo is based on recent, misleading statements in some of the taxi trade press about the PCO. If so, it is aiming at the wrong target at a time when the trade faces really serious problems brought on by the economic downturn. Suggestions that the PCO has ‘granted permission to a minicab company to operate an official rank’; ‘are intent on extending the Whitcomb Street experiment all over the metropolis’; or have a ‘biased and prejudiced attitude’ in favour of minicabs etc are complete rubbish and taxi drivers should not be fooled by them.

“We have spent around £200,000 paying licensed taxi drivers to marshal the Cranbourn Street rank over the last few years. This has made it easier for late night passengers to use licensed taxis. We’ve also worked hard and spent money to introduce and maintain marshalled ranks at Romford, Beckenham, Bromley, Kingston and Liverpool Street. The PCO would rather work with the trade on positive measures to improve the cab driver’s lot than see everyone’s time and energy wasted because of misinformation and anti-PCO propaganda.”

SAFER TRAVEL AT NIGHT SUCCESS CONTINUES

Campaigns to inform the public about Safer Travel at Night in the capital have been on going for the past few years. It is a partnership between the Mayor of London, Transport for London (TfL) and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) who work together with organisations across the Capital to help make London safer at night by offering, and raising awareness of more safe travel options. As part of the campaign there has been hard-hitting TV, radio and online advertising campaign warning women of the dangers of illegal cabs.

Latest figures from TfL show that cab-related sexual offences are down 44% per cent since 2002. These Met Police statistics prove the campaigns are successful. But research shows about half late night travellers incorrectly believe minicabs can pick up passengers that approach them in the street. Unfortunately these figures are a total, not given separately for taxis and minicabs.

The Cab Enforcement Unit (part of the TfL-funded Transport Operational Command Unit) continues to carry out night-time operations in touting hotspots

and has made over 4,000 arrests for touting and cab-related offences since 2003).

A PCO spokesperson said: “Unlicensed touts pose a real danger to late night travellers and through its Safer Travel at Night campaign, Transport for London (TfL) and the Metropolitan Police are continuing their efforts to crack down on illegal cabs. The Cab Enforcement Unit, which is part of the TfL-funded Transport Operational Command Unit (TOCU), increased its night-time operations in the run up to Christmas, targeting known touting hotspots.

“Since August 2008, the Cab Enforcement Unit has made 245 arrests for taxi touting, 59 of which were in December. Our message to Londoners is that illegal cabs just aren’t worth the risk, but the same applies to any licensed driver tempted to tout - if they’re convicted, they will lose their PCO driver’s licence.”

During December 2008 more than 15,000 people used the Cabwise service in the capital. Passengers simply send a text to the Cabwise number and get the number for one taxi and two private hire companies sent by text to their phone.