

TAXI AND PRIVATE HIRE DIRECTOR TALKS TO TAXI GLOBE *by Sandie Goodwin*

Black cabs are often described as “traditional” and there are some who like the trade for its old fashioned heritage. These qualities are just a part of this much loved taxi trade though; today’s new taxis are far more technologically advanced than ever before, with prototypes of different fuels to power taxis hitting the headlines recently. An integral part of the trade is the licensing of both the vehicles and the drivers, together with the famous KoL. It is therefore a particularly appropriate time



for the new Director of Taxis and Private Hire, John Mason, to grab the old style PCO by the scruff of its neck and give it a good shake to improve services. During 2009, the PCO came in for a good deal of complaint from the trade and so it has been with great interest that the trade has watched John Mason take office and take on the challenges of ensuring the trade is dealt with not only fairly but also in the most cost effective way.

SIX MONTHS ON

John certainly hit the ground running when he took up his role in September 2009. During his first six months, he has been meeting lots of different people involved in the trade, including drivers, trade reps and radio circuits as well as those from the private hire industry. Some meetings have been at Palestra, some at other offices; at other times John has been out on the street to see some of the problems which have been outlined to him, including touting, a subject of great concern to both the taxi trade and those in legitimate private hire operations. John became Director from a different sector within TfL. He was responsible for the implementation of Congestion Charging enforcement contracts. John has an “open door” policy and welcomes comments and emails from taxi drivers – he may not always be able to answer a question immediately but will always get back to those who contact him. John has also encouraged the TfL staff involved with the trade to look at the systems that are in place and improve them. He told Taxi Globe: “The back office staff that were at Penton Street are now at Palestra in an open plan, modern office. This move is making things more cost effective. One of the changes which the trade may have noticed is that we are now the Taxi and Private Hire Office rather than the PCO. This brings a more modern feel to the service and I am already investigating systems to take advantage of technology to improve the way driver licensing is carried out. At the moment there are thousands of paper files. It is my intention to offer drivers an improved service and make cost savings. It should be remembered that TfL does not make a profit from licensing fees, so any savings could potentially be used to reduce fees.” Some of those on the staff have now left, such as Len Simkins. A new member of the team is Helen Chapman, who is John’s Deputy. The changes being made will improve the way staff deal with licensees and at the same time improve the moral of everyone in the office.

MODERNISING THE LICENSING SYSTEMS

Moving away from the PCO image of the “old days” at Penton Street began when SGS were appointed by TfL to undertake vehicle testing for both taxis and private hire. The equipment used at the SGS Centres is the latest state of the art. John has also reviewed the fees for this testing. From April 10, the fee for vehicle inspections will be reduced by £10 with a £50 fee for re-tests being brought in. He hopes this will improve the first time pass rate, currently at around 39%. “Why should those who present their cab in a condition to pass first time subsidise those who don’t?” asks John. “Any surplus that is left would then be used to reduce the following year’s fees.” Advice is being given to garages where there is a low pass rate consistently to help them improve their standards. SGS will not be earning any more money from the re-test fees, the purpose is to keep costs as low as possible for taxi owners.

OPEN LINES OF COMMUNICATION

As part of his promise to open lines of communication with the trade, John is introducing a “Meet the Director” session for members of the trade. The first presentation will be made by John on 7th April at Pier Walk in Greenwich. The presentation will be followed by a Q&A session. These meetings are aimed at those drivers who do not belong to a trade association as there are already regular meetings with the trade reps and they can inform their members of what is going on. Further details of the meeting will be available shortly.

“As Director of Taxi and Private Hire, I want to take a sensible pragmatic approach to working with the trade. The Taxi and Private Hire Office should be helping drivers, not putting barriers in their way. I want a set of business rules which make it clear what the consequences are of certain actions. Things such as the letter sent out to all private hire operators about touting just after Christmas – they know that if their staff are caught, their operators licences will be revoked. I also want to make changes to the complaints procedure and deal with complaints on the basis of the severity of the complaint. But it is my role to be impartial, and work within the legal framework licensing provides. For example, we will not be closing satellite offices just because the taxi trade sees this as having their work stolen. But if an operator is acting illegally there will be consequences.”

TACKLING TOUTING

On the subject of satellite offices and touting, John said that he has received complaints, including images from taxi drivers about touting. However, it is not necessarily the case that touting is taking place. “Undercover teams are out watching for touting,” John explained. “And before anyone says well I don’t see these teams in operation, this is exactly the point – they are undercover! There are more high visibility operations planned too.” John understands from his numerous meetings with the trade that touting is one of the main priorities and he intends to keep working together with other agencies such as the police to ensure that touting is dealt with – safer travel for all passengers is important.

2012 IS ON THE WAY!

Meetings are on going about the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The taxi trade (as well as the private hire trade) have been told that there will be more work due to the Games but so far nothing definite has come from the ODA. TfL has significant input into these meetings to ensure that the Games are successful for everyone. The countdown has already begun to the 2012 Games and the trade still has questions which need answers from the ODA.

GOING FORWARD

John has gained an understanding of some of the challenges facing the taxi trade in the short time he has been in office. His role as Director will never be boring there are always new challenges! The Mayor’s Air Quality Strategy is an important issue and finding a solution to clean up London’s air will be on going. The trade was hit hard when the previous Mayor’s requirement meant costly conversions to taxis which did not meet Euro 3 standards and this time the Mayor is considering putting an age limit on cabs as part of a solution. TfL was advised late last year by lawyers to find out whether there is a case in London for a taxi fleet containing some vehicles that are accessible to disabled people who use larger wheelchairs. John Mason, TfL’s Director of Taxi & Private Hire, said: “Following legal advice we have been undertaking research in to how users of larger wheelchairs want to get around the city and whether London’s taxi fleet meets their requirements. This process should be complete by the end of March 2010.” Going forward through 2010 will be an interesting time for the taxi trade and the good thing about John Mason is that he will listen to the trades’ concerns and not be afraid of making any necessary changes.