

Dear Member,

As we now embarked upon yet another new year, it is appropriate that we advise members of developments as these have happened and those still to come, Suffice it to say that 2015 will prove just as challenging for the taxi industry as any of the years now past.

If you are reading this letter then you have obviously been able to get into the members forum section of our web-site. Please remember that in creating this forum, we have done so to provide members with the facility to make posts and share views, problems, successes and matters of general interest to the trade. It is not intended to be a place to vent your feelings in a defamatory way no matter who or what the target may be. We will remove any offensive material and require the member concerned to give assurance it will not be repeated.

Electric Vehicles:

In mid-December we had a visit from Transport Scotland the purpose of which, was to advise us that the Scottish Government were making funds available to assist taxi operators to purchase electric vehicles. This funding is to be made available from April 2015 and may be as much as £ 20 million. I am not 100% clear on what shape the funding will take but it may be assistance with deposits and or interest free loans.

The Government are also prepared to instal fast charge stations at a cost of around £50 K per station, however this will be on the basis that they can be shared with other users. These have already been installed in Dundee where one private hire group have had 4 such stations made available. These fast charge stations can fully recharge in around 30 mins and the further good news is that the electricity required for charging, is totally free, for now at least. Who would have thought it possible to run vehicles without fuel cost. Clearly this is a major boost for any operator considering going electric.

We made the point that this will discriminate against areas where the taxi fleets are made up entirely of purpose built vehicles, or vehicles adapted for wheelchair access and that consideration should be given to assisting operators who are purchasing new vehicles fitted with the latest generation low emission diesel engines. They agreed to look at this but were unable to give assurances at the time of the meeting.

Before going to print we hope to be in a position to give contact details to any member who may be interested in becoming involved in the electric vehicle/ save the environment push.

With regard to the para above, I have now been advised that matters are still in development and plans are still to be fully and finally formulated. I will keep members advised just as soon as I have firm information.

Regeneration committee:

Earlier I sent members a copy of a video put together by a Government committee known as the Local Government and Regeneration committee. The video was their way of encouraging members of the public to give their views on four questions posed at the end of the video. The questions were as follows:

Is there a consistency between Black Cabs and private hire licensing regimes?

Are enough taxis available?

Are they accessible enough to impaired users?

Should all drivers have to meet the same standards, levels of knowledge and Background checks?

We responded on behalf of our members and were subsequently invited to attend a hearing on 21st January, to give oral evidence to the committee who have been tasked by the Government to gather evidence on all matters relating to, “ The Air Weapons and Licensing(Scotland) Bill 2104” and not just Licensing matters in isolation. The meeting was scheduled to last from 09 30 till around 11,00 hrs.

Dr James Cooper was one of the invited speakers, his subject was APPS dispatch companies, how they operate and the difficulties that may be created for licensing authorities in terms of ensuring their compliance with Licensing regulations. Dr Coopers evidence and questioning took more than an hour of the meeting time and if the Government were in any doubt about what the activities of these suppliers might be, they are certainly in doubt no longer.

For information purposes, the main protagonist in APPS supply appear to be the group UBER, who have now applied for booking office licences in both Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Back to the main thrust of the meeting. There were 3 from the trade in total including one from Private hire. The questions asked seemed to be more random than structured and at times were awkward. The main and most concerning of these questions being, “is the present two-tier system of licensing still relevant?” Clearly from our perspective it is but as you can imagine, the private hire rep had an entirely different viewpoint.

It was a surprise that this subject should be raised at all given that we had previously been assured that this had been considered and shelved. It may now be that this will become a live issue again and of course this could mean another battle for another day. The upshot of this line of questioning is that we have now submitted a supplementary written evidence response for the committees consideration. A copy of this response will also be lodged in the members forum section for your perusal.

One of the things that disturbed me most about this evidence hearing is the seeming haphazard method applied to choosing who was called to present evidence and the notice given. For example Edinburgh City Private Hire were present, but since they were basically only representing themselves, the committee were only hearing the views of one group from among some 10,000 private hire licensees nationally. The Federation on the other hand were representing a much wider membership.

In my experience, it is never good to go into these situations divided, as this is usually apparent and makes the eventual outcome more likely that in spotting divisions, the committee will reach their own conclusions often paying little regard to the what has been said by the parties involved.

The solution of course would be for both groups to meet and agree a strategy in advance. However, this would be difficult at this time as private hire do not appear to have a representative body. One answer, and I accept this will be controversial, is for the STF to consider representing both sides of the hiring divide by offering membership to groups with more than the 25% private hire in their fleets that our rules currently allow. This of course is something we could or would not embark upon without the express approval of our membership.

This will be a subject for discussion at our next AGM.

Edinburgh Airport:

I understand that the appeal to the sheriff regarding Edinburgh City's Private Hire booking office licence at Edinburgh Airport, still awaits a decision by the sheriff. Hopefully her decision will be with us soon.

Booking office fees.

Edinburgh City Council have announced that they are about to increase booking office fees from the current £500,00 to £700,00. This represents an increase of 40%. It seems the Council are sighting as justification, the legal challenge at Edinburgh Airport. Edinburgh's booking office Licence fee was already the highest in Scotland and it seems they are intent on keeping it this way. It will be interesting to see if this is reduced at some point in the future when there are no court challenges.

Stats:

Purely as a matter of interest. The latest statistics from Transport Scotland show that there are now licensed in Scotland;

Taxis 10,508 and Private Hire Cars 10,280 of which 4,914 Taxis and 342 Private Hire cars are wheelchair accessible.

Bill McIntosh

General Secretary.