

Local Democracy or Local Bureaucracy?

In the early seventies members of The MCPA (The Minicab Proprietors Association), the forerunner of the old Private Hire Car Association and then ultimately The LPHCA, were campaigning for Licensing of Private Hire in London.

By 1976 those lobbying had convinced the Government to do something, however what was done was a poison chalice to many in the Taxi and Private Hire Industries. Government's answer to the request for better regulation for Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles was The Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions (1976) Act.

London was, thank goodness, excluded from the Act, a debt that is forever owed to The London Taxi Industry who believed that Licensing of Private Hire would be a disaster for them.

Unfortunately for the Taxi and Private Hire Industry in the rest of England and Wales what was to follow has produced the very worst scenario possible for those working in a transport sector, a set of widely differing rules and standards throughout the land.

Thankfully in London we avoided local authority control (that was being championed by some who clearly had not thought things through). In the main, only the better elements of Private Hire regulations from the 76 Act's found their way into Sir George Young's 98 London Act. This meant that we were spared 32 different sets of rules by 32 different London Boroughs.

There is nothing wrong with Local Democracy and there are many bright hard working people in Local Authorities throughout England and Wales however only a fool would believe that over 350 different sets of rules and regulations for an Industry, and most importantly the travelling public, makes sense.

We will never be able to provide truly integrated 'door to door' transport while there is such an onerous and bureaucratic overhead on our industry. The stories from outside London are horrendous.

The plank of wood story is one that makes me smile as apparently one authority has a plank of wood they put across the back seat and if both doors don't shut the vehicle is deemed too small. Plank power wood you believe!

On a more serious note the cross border issues and one rule on this side of the road one rule on the other cause much pain for the industry. Ultimately this must impact on service provision and standards to the travelling public.

Different signage, medicals, CRB checks, vehicle requirements, fares, fees, standards of service and ultimately the amount of vehicles that are available are the bi-product of this mass of Local Bureaucracy. How can any modern transport provider operate reasonably when such diverse parameters are applied town hall by town hall?

Driver shortages are by far the biggest problem for many Private Hire Operators and these shortages are compounded if not directly caused by this mass of red tape.

Recently the Office of Fair Trading looked at the sector and concluded that it was time for change and The OFT report was castigated by the Transport Select Committee. The Government has backed The OFT findings but little or nothing is about to change as there is clearly no political will or agreement to do the right thing.

So here is a message for the Politicians. The raft of rules and regulations created by this mess really needs addressing for the best interests of the industry and the travelling public.

On a recent visit to Ronia Cars on the border of the London Metropolitan area in Staines I met Lynda Murley whose family have been in the Private Hire Industry for many years.



Lynda told me that it is a nightmare taking on a new driver because of the bureaucracy involved. The CRB record checking process is taking up to 16 weeks and by this time some of those brave souls who parted with their money to go through the licensing process have had to find other work.

This inconsistent process actively discriminates against both Operators and Drivers by Geography / Regulator. Lynda tells me that nearby Local Authorities with different parameters and criteria for entry can have their drivers working in days rather than months. With the temporary regulations in London (which were hard fought for by The LPHCA) we can now get drivers into work a just few weeks rather than months.

Blue sky thinking by some local authorities means quick entry into the industry yet in other areas there is now a serious problem with driver exits from the industry greater than driver entry. Lynda tells me that illegal touting is rife in Staines and the victims are the travelling public, the legitimate operators and drivers.

Ironically this all means one thing - the onerous requirements put in place by some Local Authorities to allegedly protect the travelling public, actually conspires to compromise their safety because there are simply not enough drivers to meet demand. This leaves passengers the dangerous choice of walking or taking their chances with illegal touts, etc.

In some Local Authorities demand is unmet by Operators that are bureaucratically constrained and who struggle to stay solvent. Whilst in other areas sensible, efficient rules give operators a reasonable path into the industry enabling them to survive and provide safe service levels to their local community.

In London we have some issues with inconsistency throughout the U.K. and in particular with medical requirements. We are not convinced as a Trade Association that has campaigned for Licensing that the eyesight requirements and diabetes criteria are pitched correctly in London.

We will be writing to the Public Carriage Office on this subject in depth but as we have said many times before we feel the DVLA group 2 requirements are unclear, too onerous and inconsistent.

It is no coincidence that apparently 50% of Local Authorities only require DVLA Group 1 for medical, so this perfectly illustrates what is wrong with taxi and private hire licensing in England and Wales.

Fail in one Local Authority pass in another, complete madness. Local Democracy No – Local Bureaucracy Yes. Its time for change, Politicians please take note.

LPHCA Forum board

See posts running on The LPHCA website message board on page 38.