

Going undercover

[standfirst] In March, OnRoute joined the Metropolitan Police Service's taxi and private hire team on duty at King's Cross.

When we arrive at the police station, we find the two officers we will be accompanying – PCs Rich [REDACTED] and Chris [REDACTED] – just about to head down to the taxi rank and waiting area in their ‘mock’ private hire vehicle (it’s actually a police car complete with blue lights). They are both casually dressed in civvies, because as Rich explains: ‘The things we detect we can only detect covertly.’ However, underneath their jackets they are both wearing CCTV video cameras that can record video and audio so if a driver ever queries their evidence it can be verified.

Comment [D1]: Neil, if you would prefer that we just call them Rich and Chris this is not a problem

The team aims to improve the safety of the taxi and private hire trades and to clamp down on illegal touting and there’s a very good reason for it being based in Kings Cross, as Chris explains. ‘It’s quite unique to other large stations in London because of the sheer amount of space the ranks, dropping off, picking up and waiting areas cover. That makes it a good place to find illegal drivers and vehicles, and during a shift (7am to 5pm) we can check more than 30 vehicles.’

As we drive past the head of the taxi rank outside Kings Cross we see a group of TfL’s compliance officers and Rich comments that the police work with them all the time. ‘It’s much better to have a compliance officer with us because they have handheld devices with them, which we don’t have, and they can check data such as a driver’s licence and other records straight away. It works both ways – if they see something or someone they want to stop, as police officers we have the powers to stop that particular vehicle.’

Today we are headed further down the rank to where taxis frequently over-rank to make sure no one is blocking the road. They’re not, but Chris immediately spots a private hire vehicle waiting in a disabled bay. Rich pulls in behind and Chris gets out to check the driver’s badge, inspect the vehicle over and have a word.

We are parked almost at the end of the waiting area and while Chris chats to the driver, another private hire vehicle tries to pull in behind the police car. There’s no space, so he stops in the road and Rich gets out of the car and tells him he has to move on if he doesn’t want a £40 fine for obstruction of the highway. Rich explains in these instances the driver is reported to TfL and gets a warning. If this happens again the driver’s PH licence can be **revoked**.

Comment [D2]: Silka and Neil, I know there is a points system, so don’t know how many points they get for obstruction of the highway – can someone check how many times they’d have to be reported before having their licence revoked?

We then move over to the taxi rank and Chris notices a taxi with an illegal rear tyre. It turns out the driver only got his badge two weeks earlier, but he’s going to lose a day’s business today as he’s sent home to get it replaced.

We then see the most stupid manoeuvre of the day when right in front of us, a private hire vehicle pulls up across the entrance to the head of the taxi rank blocking both it and the main road in the process. Rich has a long chat with the driver, who will definitely be reported to TfL as he’s also not wearing his identifier.

Before Rich can finish there, Chris notices a taxi that doesn't have its second MOT. It turns out the taxi is rented, so this could result in a £1,000 fine for the owner and if it was involved in an accident its insurance would be invalid. The driver is also not wearing his badge and his licence is unsigned so he, too, is definitely going to be reported to TfL.

And just to round off a catalogue of offences Rich spots a driver who is obviously looking at his phone while in charge of a moving vehicle. 'Sorry it's been such a slow day,' says Chris as we prepare to leave. (Slow? In fact xxx drivers were XXX, XXX and XXXXX during this one shift.

[Pullquote] 'Some of the drivers really love us and the fact we are policing the trade. Others don't, but they're usually the ones who have been caught doing something illegal.' Chris Baker, police officer

[Boxoff] **RTPCs taxi and private hire policing team – in numbers**

1 Inspector

5 Sergeants

55 Police Constables

Six teams

Covers the whole of London

Comment [D3]: Neil, to finish it off can we put down how many drivers were actually cautioned/fined/reported to TfL during Rich and Chris's shift on Wednesday 29 March? If you have any other good figures for convictions etc we could quote that would be great