



LowCVP's Andy Eastlake ULEZ, CAZ and diesel decisions: the air quality agenda

As I sit and ponder this month's column, the Mayor of London has announced the next stage of consultation on the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ), while DEFRA and the DfT will imminently publish the revised National Air Quality Plan which will have far-reaching proposals for Clean Air Zones at its centre.

Meanwhile, four select committees have taken the unprecedented step of announcing a joint inquiry into air quality. So there can really only be one focus for the fleet manager today: "What do I do about diesel?". Diesel remains the mainstay of the UK's road transport fleet and still provides the most efficient engines for longer journeys and heavier loads (though other options are catching up). Fortunately, the dramatic improvement in emissions from the Euro VI requirements (from 2014) means that the trucks and buses now on sale, meet (and exceed) all the proposed emission zone targets, and can genuinely be considered part of the solution to urban pollution. But in the van and car fleets, whilst the decisions on what and when to buy are much more difficult, the range of options is also much wider. The latest figures show that pure battery electric vehicle sales (which had been rather flat) are 30 per cent up in March (46 per cent YTD). This is the one cleaner vehicle segment which won't have been adversely impacted by the revised VED rates introduced this month, so will continue on this upward trajectory.

Announcements are (finally) coming thick and fast in the van segment too, with both full electric and range-extended van solutions from the major OEMs and small volume manufacturers vying for your future business. In all this, though, probably the most frustrating aspect is the lack of conclusion on the test requirements for the next generation of Euro 6 vehicles. With the media (and several political leaders) denouncing certification data, what is the fleet buyer to believe? The technology to produce clean diesel cars and vans, exists and is well proven on HGVs. The targets for the fully compliant (real world driving) verified low emission vehicles, are in place. But the regulation is not in law, so it is impossible to certify a clean vehicle, even if you have produced one. This regulatory bottleneck also holds back the next generation of electrified solutions and alternative fuels together and, indeed, the scope for policy makers keen to stimulate low emission solutions.

The fleet market is rightly demanding that truly clean vehicles must be available in the market and, from where I sit, the manufacturers want to provide these, so the sooner we can sign the Euro 6 RDE regulation the sooner we can encourage the rapid uptake of the widest range of vehicles with robust, comparable evidence of real world performance.

The LowCVP is working across all its members and government departments to develop evidence and policies based on the next round of certification information which will see a step change in benefits to users and allow the markets to move forward.

I suspect we are all in for a bumpy ride over the next few months. But, for low emission fleets, while today things may seem opaque, I can see light at the end of the tunnel and the start of a much clearer pathway based on robust evidence and coherent policy. We must remember that amongst all the justified focus on air quality, the climate challenge has not gone away and is no less urgent; indeed, it will surely outlast the need to clean up local pollution. It is worrying that progress in the transport sector in the last few years on CO₂ has slowed. The LowCVP is working to join up air quality and climate policy and will continue to maintain a focus on both objectives.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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