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14 February 2012: Introduced back in 2008 as part of efforts to improve air quality in the capital, the Low Emission Zone (LEZ) has now introduced tighter emissions regulations to force heavy polluting diesel vehicles to become cleaner. Since January, thousands of vehicles have had to comply with minimum Euro 3 emission standards when travelling within the LEZ. Non-compliance is clearly not an option, with the government imposing stinging daily charges and hefty fines.

As a result, many fleets will be forced to upgrade to newer compliant vehicles. Others may have to choose short-term hire to cover them for occasional visits to the capital. For others, long-term hire is a more effective option, when operating a heavy diesel vehicle in the capital is a daily occurrence.

Where larger fleet operators are likely to have laid out a significant initial investment in order to ensure compliance, smaller operators may find it more challenging, not necessarily having the disposable capital to invest in new vehicle purchase. Let's take a closer look at the facts, to see what the new regulations mean for the fleet operator.

1. As many as 85,000 or 37% of vehicles already operating in the capital may be affected. UK wide it is estimated that as many as 1 million LCVs out of 3.75 million could be affected by these new regulations.
2. Daily charges can be up to £200 for larger vehicles such as buses and coaches - an unappetising option for many. However, fines for non-compliance can be as high as £1000.
3. Even for those travelling into London on the odd occasion, it can still result in prohibitive operating costs. A van travelling into the capital once a week and paying the £200 charge on each trip can result in an annual payout of £5,200.
4. Options to avoid paying charges include fitting a filter. However, be aware that the lead-time to have one fitted and certified can be up to three months.
5. Converting an existing van to ensure compliance is not always a viable option. For example converting a 2002 VW Caddy with 210,000 miles on the clock could be anything from £1,800 to £3,500; more than the value of the vehicle itself, making the acquisition of a newer vehicle a more effective prospect.
6. The stringent emissions standards will, for the first time, affect vans, lorries, buses and coaches registered before 1st January 2002.
7. The LEZ emissions standards affect all roads within the Greater London area, including those at Heathrow and parts of the M1 and M4. However, the M25 is not included (even where it passes within the Greater London Authority boundary).
8. Euro standards were introduced in 1992 for passenger vehicles, with light commercial vehicles following in 1994, to ensure that the new vehicles being produced were 'cleaner' than previous models.
9. An army of cameras within the LEZ are able to read vehicle number plates, checking them against a database compiled using data from the DVLA and VOSA. Avoiding the new regulations is clearly not an option.
10. The LEZ operates 24 hours a day, 364 days a year, including Bank Holidays and should not be confused with the Central London Congestion Charging Zone, which operates 7.00am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday excluding Bank Holidays. Remember, congestion charges still need to be paid even if you comply with LEZ standards or have paid the daily charge.