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The cost of compliance and cleaner city air

What might we expect in the wake of last month's High Court ruling, which found against the government's current clean air strategy? The legally binding outcome, which is not being appealed, compels ministers to come up with a new plan to radically reduce NOx pollution. And fast. But planning is one thing: delivering it equitably, even painlessly, is quite another.

There's more. The FTA (Freight Transport Association) and others were concerned that DEFRA's (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) now discredited clean air strategy already went too far. Their concern: in the absence of adequate, sensibly priced CAZ (clean air zone) compliant Euro 6 vehicles - especially vans - many fleet operators would simply be forced out of their markets.

Now, however, campaign group ClientEarth and the court are likely to force DEFRA to concede twice, even three times the number of CAZs previously proposed. And it would be no surprise to see the due-date brought forward to 2018, instead of 2019 or 2020. If both turn out to be the case (and there are few alternatives to appealing the judiciary and the populace), the future looks anything but festive.

Something has to give. And that something surely ought to be ministers' resistance to putting their hands in their pockets. Yes, that means taxpayers' money. But, given that most fleet operators are hardly flush with cash to accelerate vehicle renewal cycles, how else might they rise to this challenge which inevitably affects us all?

As we go to press, ministers are silent. But nothing short of a national scrappage scheme for, say, pre-Euro 3 trucks, buses, vans - and cars - will cut the mustard. That and serious incentives to encourage uptake of alternative transport fuels, such as gas, dual-fuel diesel and LPG (liquefied petroleum gas), hybrids and full electrics.

We wish you a very merry Christmas and a compliant New Year.

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Editor