

Road Tax Evasion - how it can affect you

A study for the Department of Transport has showed that 2.2 per cent of the vehicle miles travelled in Great Britain are by unlicensed vehicles – in other words ones that haven't paid their Vehicle Excise Duty, or road tax as it is more commonly known. Untaxed vehicles tend to cover less mileage so this means that around 6 per cent of vehicles which are in 'regular use' are untaxed. This evasion costs the Exchequer £220 million a year.

The vehicles most likely not to pay tax are motorcycles and "other" vehicles, and this is much more likely for older vehicles and is most prevalent in the North West. Evasion is particularly bad in Northern Ireland.

Vehicle tax evasion not only costs the government money. Untaxed vehicles are more likely to be used in the commission of crimes, and their drivers are likely to ignore parking and traffic law as it is unlikely that they can be traced from the number plate.

Because of this the rules have changed considerably in recent years. Cars have to be taxed unless they are expressly recorded at DVLA as not being used on the roads, with a Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN) being completed. People who do not renew their road tax can be fined "from the record" unless the car is recorded as off the road, and penalties for using a car declared "SORN" are considerable. No longer do the authorities have to prove that a car has been used on the road before fines can be levied.

The rules also mean that if a car is sold and DVLA is not notified, the registered keeper (ie the seller) remains responsible for taxing the vehicle. The responsibilities do not end there, as the registered keeper is also responsible for any parking, or other penalty charges levied on the vehicle. They will also receive speeding tickets. Some fines, (especially for parking) that are levied by local authorities can lead to bailiffs being sent to collect property to pay off the fine. These factors mean that anyone selling a car without collecting the information necessary to fill in the form needed by DVLA (which is a tear off strip on the bottom of the registration document) runs a considerable risk. If the buyer doesn't want to do the administration properly, it is almost certainly because he doesn't want a record at DVLA. The only reason to not want a record is the hope that it provides protection from penalties and prosecution – in short they want the seller to sort out their problems. Always remember to send off the buyer's part of the form if you buy a new car.

One of the new weapons the police have to counter unlicensed, uninsured and illegal driving is Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR). This automatically reads the number plate as a car passes, and checks the number against various databases. If the vehicle isn't on a database, or if anomalies arise, the car is then stopped by the police further down the road. Ultimately the combination of this new technology and law changes should make unregistered, untaxed and uninsured driving a thing of the past.

However, in spite of new regulations, number plates can still be forged. They can also be stolen, and either method can allow a car to assume the identity of another. Anyone who loses a number plate should report it to the police. It will provide a valuable defence if your plate is being used by another. And if you ever get a penalty ticket for a car that isn't yours – send it back, don't bin it.