

A solicitor by profession, former traffic commissioner Joan Aitken worked in and around government for most of her career, chairing employment and disability tribunals, the General Dental Council, and for many charities – including two cycling trips for Transaid, of which she was recently named a trustee. So it's no wonder that she has an eye for the bigger picture. That means not just watching over the HGV and bus and coach operators, whom she refers to as 'lifeblood industries' in terms of the country's economic well-being, but also the communities in which they work.

Says Aitken: "There's many a public inquiry that has turned into a mediation event where the outcome has been good neighbourliness and respect. I went to do a public inquiry in Loanhead [near Edinburgh], where the operator, who also had a waste transfer station, wanted to place additional vehicles there. There were objections from householders on the roads leading up to site, including [rubbish] windblow coming from the waste transfer site. And I went to visit, and I was appalled at the state of the road: rubbish lying here, there and everywhere. It came to the public inquiry, and I described to the operator what I'd seen, and he said to me: 'It's a shitehole, isn't it?' And I said: 'Yes it is. What are you going to do about it?' He replied: 'Well, I think we'd better just clear it up.' I said to him, 'I'm going to be back to check.' The next week I was in that area, so I drove all the way up that road: not a bit of rubbish to be seen. When you achieve that for people, you feel pretty proud of yourself."

Aitken's brief as a TC also takes in preventing rogue operators coming into the industry. She has argued in the past against accelerated targets to reduce the processing time of licence applications for new operators. She explains: "I don't think a new application can be granted

The nation's conscience

Scotland's traffic commissioner Joan Aitken OBE retired in February, after 15 years of service. Before leaving, she tells Will Dalrymple her views about the importance of community goodwill, local knowledge and respect for bodily functions

in weeks. I think we do need time to look at who is applying, and why. You'll notice I very carefully said 'new operator'. If it's somebody who's been a sole trader or in partnership, and we've known about them for years, and they are changing partners or going into another limited company, that's totally different."

KEEPING BAD PEOPLE OUT

She adds: "If I can keep bad people out by not giving them a licence, that's a lot less grief to the compliant industry and to road safety than if we let anybody in, and have to do catch-up after there have been road traffic incidents, or wheel loss, or driver fatigue, or not paying road tax, or whatever. The licence represents a commitment to being safe and a fair competitor."

Knowing the operators and their businesses, as well as what they face on the roads, is a key asset of the entire traffic commissioner system, she argues. "Each of the regions and counties of Great Britain have their distinctive features, and the localism that traffic commissioners can bring means that they can have an understanding of the operating conditions. So if a driver says, 'I keep getting stopped at the Dartford tunnel', or the chairman of a council says that he or she wants to do this in Liverpool, to have that local knowledge and engagement is added value."

Memories of many conversations

with drivers have cemented her outrage about the discrimination that drivers face when it comes to toilet access, which she blames as part of the reason for the lack of females in either road haulage or passenger-carrying roles. She contends: "I don't think that these industries are attractive to women, and that is for a reason that bears on the disrespect that there can be on people who drive for a living. I think it's appalling that male drivers – let alone female drivers – are denied toilet access at delivery points. I think it's shocking that industries that could not do their business without the driver do not afford that driver the collegiate respect that he or she deserves as part of the team."

WHAT MAKES A GOOD OPERATOR

Turning to a happier subject, Aitken has no trouble expressing her vision of what makes a good operator. She replies: "It's someone who knows in his or her own skin that they can do the job, and need not fear an inspector's call. They just know that they are on the ball and can look the world in the eye." In contrast, the biggest warning signs that the grasp of an operator is slipping are prohibitions – whether for roadworthiness, annual test fails, or some other problem revealed during a routine roadside stop. Continues Aitken: "Often, an operator can be reasonably compliant, but then during a period of




business expansion, compliance gets forgotten in the chase for business, particularly new business.”

The TC’s vision about her own role is equally clear. When asked what makes a good traffic commissioner, she replies: “The absolute fundamental attribute is fairness. Fairness and evidence, when you’re dealing with something as important as road safety, and also an operator’s livelihood. I’m not going to take that away based on gossip or guesswork. So the fundamental attribute of a traffic commissioner is to pay heed to evidence, to be fair, to be robust, and to do so without fear or favour.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Toward the end of the interview, Aitken looks back on her tenure. She has achieved a lot in her time. She considers: “The profile of the traffic commissioner is higher than it has ever been. The industries know that I expect them to be professional; I don’t expect them to do catch-up, but to be on the ball when they turn a wheel. I expect their vehicles to pass the annual test first time – they know that. I expect them to know what their drivers are doing, and that they will be properly rested, and I expect them to be safe. And they know that.

“Whether they are hauliers or bus and coach operators, I expect them to be contributing to make Scotland a good place to do business in. Because we’re safe. Because we actually care about our communities; we care about where we are doing business.

“It’s not about a truck or a bus; it’s about the operating conditions for people; respect; and being profitable. We also like the pride that many of our family businesses take in their traditions, and the service that they bring to their communities.” 

FURTHER INFORMATION

Full interview transcript – www.is.gd/ovagev