



Informing Progress - Shaping the Future

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Driverless Taxis Hit the Streets of London

On 3rd September 2026, London became the first city in the UK to offer the public a ride in a self-driving taxi. Uber, working with British autonomous driving technology trailblazer Wayve, have licensed a fleet of fifteen Ford Mustang Mach-E electric vehicles onto London's streets, each fitted with Wayve's camera-based AI Driver software and surround sensors.

In a survey conducted by Uber, over 140,000 customers responded, stating a preference for driverless vehicles, and as many have registered to use the new autonomous taxis, meaning many will be disappointed given the limited number of vehicles initially available. However, it is a clear indication that users have an appetite for the technology and which direction the future of transport in London is heading.

Although the new service operates under existing private hire rules in the capital, it signals to the Government that fully automated commercial trials, albeit perhaps small-scale, may soon become a reality. For the insurance and legal sectors, the launch is the opening chapter of a much longer story about how liability, regulation, and risk pricing will need to evolve as autonomous vehicles become a part of everyday life.

The Story Behind the Launch

Founded in Cambridge in 2017, Wayve has taken a different technical path from many of its rivals. Waymo, the Alphabet-owned pioneer of the sector, relies heavily on LiDAR sensors and pre-mapped routes, whereas Wayve has built its reputation on an end-to-end AI system trained largely on camera footage, designed to generalise to unfamiliar roads rather than depend on detailed mapping of every street.

The Wayve AI-powered driver has the potential, with a little fine-tuning, to be installed in any make or model of car and operate in any city. That approach has attracted significant institutional backing, with the company's valuation reported at around \$8.6 billion, and the flexibility of a camera-first system is exactly why backers argue it is suited to a city as uniquely chaotic and characterful as London.

London's complex driving environment was always going to make it a demanding proving ground, with narrow medieval streets alongside multi-lane gyratories, and cyclists and cars mix with black cabs and red double-deckers. Such urban environments have seen European regulators take a more cautious approach than those in the US and China, where operators including Waymo, Baidu, WeRide and Pony.ai already manage fully driverless taxis at scale in several major cities.

Nevertheless, the UK government has been keen to accelerate trials and ministers brought forward the timetable for public trials earlier this year, framing the move in terms of economic opportunity as much as convenience, citing projections that the sector could add tens of billions of pounds to the economy and create tens of thousands of jobs over time.

The Operation in Practice

For now, the new Uber–Wayve service is a supervised trial rather than a fully driverless robotaxi service of the kind Waymo currently operates across 11 US cities, where some 3,000 vehicles provide around half a million paid rides per week. The new service is available to passengers booking UberX, Uber Comfort, and Uber Electric vehicles, and every vehicle carries a licensed private hire vehicle (PHV) driver who monitors the journey throughout and retains the ability to take control or apply the brakes at any time.

This is therefore a careful first step rather than a complete replacement of the conventional taxi, but it gives Uber and Wayve the early edge in the race to lead London's autonomous vehicle market. Waymo has signalled its intention to bring driverless vehicles to London and is already testing around 100 vehicles in the city. Baidu has also agreed a partnership with Lyft to trial its Apollo Go vehicles in the capital, pending regulatory approval.

The direction of travel is clear, and London looks set to become a genuine testbed for multiple autonomous vehicle operators over the next two to three years, even if the pace of full deregulation is not currently keeping pace.

The UK legislative backdrop that will eventually allow PHV drivers to be removed altogether is the Automated Passenger Services (APS) framework created by the Automated Vehicles Act 2024, whose substantive provisions are expected to come into force from the second half of 2027. Until then, in legal terms, every vehicle on London's roads remains a conventionally driven car with a highly sophisticated driver-assistance system, and existing motor liability rules apply in the traditional way.

Implications for Insurers

Even when the Act is implemented, it will not lead to the wholesale liability revolution some commentary has suggested. It builds on, rather than replaces, the core rule established by the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018, which is that an insurer bears primary civil liability to third parties injured by an insured automated vehicle operating in self-driving mode. The crucial change is that, having indemnified the claimant, the insurer will have a clearer legal route to recover its costs from whichever party was actually responsible for the failure. In most cases, this will be the Authorised Self-Driving Entity (ASDE), which will typically be the vehicle manufacturer or the software developer; in this case that would be Wayve.

To manage the shift from conventional driving, underwriting will need to distinguish with great precision between periods when a human is in control, when an authorised self-driving feature is engaged, and the ambiguous 'transition demand' window in which an automated system asks a driver to resume control. Claims handling processes will also need access to vehicle telemetry and system logs, as establishing which of these states applied at the moment of an incident will be central to an insurer's recovery action against an ASDE.

Furthermore, insurers will need to develop actuarial views on an entirely new risk profile that shifts accountability from human behaviour to software reliability. Instead of using an individual driver's history, exposure shifts to a software system's performance across an entire fleet, with the accompanying question of how quickly that risk profile can change as software is updated. The current supervised trial phase, in which a PHV driver remains in ultimate control, offers underwriters and insurers an opportunity to gather data before the harder questions of No-User-in-Charge (NUiC) liability are raised in 2027.

Implications for Legal Professionals

Practitioners advising on motor claims, personal injury, and product liability can already see the direction set by the Act even before it fully commences, and litigators can expect claims arising from automated features to increasingly centre on technical and evidential questions that align closer to product liability and software failure disputes than to conventional road traffic proceedings. Questions of whether the system's behaviour was within its authorised design parameters, or whether a transition demand issued with adequate notice and responded to appropriately, will become central. Expert evidence on autonomous system performance is therefore likely to feature in the majority of contested claims in this area.

The Act creates a powerful regulatory framework that grants the Secretary of State authority to issue civil sanctions, including compliance and redress notices, against ASDEs and licensed NUiC operators. These could potentially include compensation for physical loss and damage, or for inconvenience suffered by road users, introducing a much broader basis for redress than traditional tort law. Meanwhile, the Act's immunity rules state that a human driver in a vehicle legitimately operating in self-driving mode is legally classified as a User-in-Charge (UiC) and does not have criminal liability for how the car behaves. Instead, accountability is

shifted onto the ASDE and its relevant regulatory framework. The UiC does, however, remain responsible for ensuring the vehicle is well-maintained and insured and for responding to system requests to retake control.

A Cautious Beginning

Fifteen supervised vehicles on their own do not represent a threat to the livelihoods of London's 120,000 or so licensed taxi and private-hire drivers, and this launch is essentially nothing more than a carefully controlled trial. However, the direction of policy, the pace of investment from technology companies like Uber, Wayve, Waymo and Baidu, and the approaching Automated Vehicles Act 2024 together point towards the beginning of a transition towards a different way of travel.

Insurers and legal advisers engaged in motor and product liability must develop deep knowledge of the ASDE recovery mechanism, how to build the data and evidential capability needed to support it, and remain close as the 2027 introduction of the Act unfolds. The current trial provides the perfect opportunity and will help build towards a time when the PHV driver's seat is no longer occupied.

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