

## \*PART A

**Report to:** Licensing Committee  
**Date of meeting:** 14 September 2015  
**Report of:** Head of Community and Customer Services  
**Title:** Licensed Driver Knowledge Test

### 1.0 **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The council is responsible for licensing hackney carriage and private hire drivers. Current policy requires new applicants to pass a written multiple choice style knowledge test taken over 3 hours. The test comprises four parts: routes, regulations, highway code and basic maths. The Committee is asked consider amendments to the style, delivery and cost of the test for prospective drivers.
- 1.2 Introduction of a training module for regulations, safety, customer service and disability awareness will significantly improve a new driver's understanding of the role and responsibilities of being a professional taxi or private hire driver.

### 2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That from 1 April 2016 applicants for a hackney carriage driver's or private hire vehicle driver's licence
- (1) attend a full day course which includes training in the relevant legislation and other key information required to be a competent and safe driver.
- (2) that the course comprise half a day of training, half a day of practical disability awareness training, and a formal examination to test new knowledge.
- 2.3 That candidates for the Knowledge Test pay a fee of £97 for a test, or £67 for a re-test. No refunds will be available unless cancelled at least 3 working days in advance, although attendance will be transferable to the next available course if the Council is notified within 24 hours of the course and with good reason.
- 2.4 That officers are authorised to procure a provider for the disability awareness element of the proposed Knowledge Test.
- 2.5 That officers have delegated authority to make minor modifications to the scheme, in consultation with the Chair of the Licensing Committee.

**Contact Officer:**

For further information on this report please contact: Jamie Mackenzie (Licensing Officer) on extension 8520 or email [jamie.mackenzie@watford.gov.uk](mailto:jamie.mackenzie@watford.gov.uk).

**Report approved by:** Alan Gough, Head of Community and Customer Services

**3.0 DETAILED PROPOSAL**

- 3.1 Current policy requires that an applicant for a hackney carriage or private hire vehicle driver's licence must undertake, at their own cost, a written knowledge test. The test comprises of routes, mental arithmetic and relevant rules and regulations. Applicants must also undertake a separate disability awareness training course within three months of the grant of a licence. Knowledge tests are organised on at least a monthly basis.
- 3.2 There are at least sixteen places available each month for the knowledge test and courses are generally full at least one month in advance. At peak demand time, for example nearing December, places on courses can be full two or even three months in advance. The main reason for the level of demand is the failure rate of applicants meaning most require to retake the test a few times. This process is now significantly slowing the rate at which applicants are able to obtain a licence and in relation to private hire drivers, this is impacting on private hire operators who inform us of a shortage of drivers.
- 3.3 Most applicants, over 85%, fail the first test they sit. Many drivers (75-80%) fail the second test they sit. Most pass on the third or fourth attempt.
- 3.4 Officers verbally and via the website advise drivers of how to prepare for the test, including having example papers on the website. However, this does not appear to be effective and brings into question what the test is currently achieving. This proposal is to modernise the test to improve driver standards, but also to support candidates to achieve success and reduce the need to retake the test if candidates are suitable. The reason for the failures can be lack of local knowledge of routes, which is not something that is proposed as a training topic, but it is just as likely that applicants will fail on their knowledge of rules and regulations and highway code. Almost all applicants pass the mental arithmetic segment of the test.
- 3.5 Candidates are currently tested on their knowledge of the rules and regulations governing hackney carriages and private hire vehicles. These rules are taken from national legislation, local bylaws and conditions attached to licences.
- 3.6 On application for a test, applicants are directed to online information in the form of various literature containing the information they need to learn.
- 3.7 The rules and regulations governing hackney carriages and private hire vehicles are wide ranging and fairly complicated. It seems that the high failure rate of most first time applicants is linked directly to a lack of understanding of the principles behind these regulations, and a failure to grasp the necessary important information from the literature provided. Furthermore, it is possible that some applicants who pass the test on their third or fourth attempt have done so simply by remembering and learning the questions rather than by way of fully understanding the relevance or importance of the

questions. Different test papers are used but given the nature of the test it is inevitable that questions are repeated across some papers. If an applicant takes the test enough times, it is likely they will see the same questions appearing.

- 3.8 It is anticipated that a period of focused training prior to the examination will instil in new applicants a genuine understanding of the principles behind the regulations leading them to be able to make informed decisions from the very start of their careers.
- 3.9 Training prior to a competency test is common place in many spheres of work, a notable example being training for holders of personal licences. It is a requirement of the Licensing Act 2003 that holders of a personal licence will have a formal qualification. Likewise, the Security Industry Authority require new security staff to have formal, accredited training. There is no intention to accredit driver training yet but this could be a future possibility.
- 3.10 In addition to training about rules and regulations it is proposed to deliver elements of the current professional driver update course currently provided for existing drivers. Much of what is discussed at this update course would be relevant to new drivers, particularly the segments on driver safety and customer service. Whilst there would not be a test for this part of the training it is felt that the opportunity to deliver this additional information should not be missed.
- 3.11 It is important that new entrants to the trade are able to provide a safe and effective service to people with disabilities, who often rely on licensed vehicles as their primary form of transport. This was recognised by the Law Commission in its report on Taxi and Private Hire Services<sup>1</sup> which said:
- One of our key provisional proposals to promote equality and accessibility was that private hire and taxi drivers should be required to undergo recognised disability awareness training. This received unanimous support, and statistics published by the Department for Transport show that it is far from a universal requirement in current local licensing conditions. Lack of such training means that some drivers may be less likely to be aware of the needs and rights of disabled passengers; this can contribute to unacceptable practices, for example ignoring their attempts to hail a vehicle, carrying them in an unsafe manner, refusing to carry them at all or charging extra for the service.
- 3.12 Current policy requires applicants to arrange, at their own cost, training in disability awareness. Currently, the nearest provider (at St Albans District Council) who we were recommending applicants use as the cost is only £30, have a lengthy waiting time of between 2-3 months. Naturally, applicants are reluctant to book ahead without first having passed the knowledge test. This adds further delay to them attaining a licence with attendant knock-on effect on local private hire business.
- 3.13 It is proposed that a partner provider be found to deliver disability training in house as part of the improved and extended driver training and knowledge test. The council would be assured training would be delivered to an acceptable standard and prospective drivers would have less to organise when applying for a licence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Taxi and Private Hire Services*, Law Com LC437 (2014), para 1.41  
([http://lawcommission.justice.gov.uk/docs/lc347\\_taxi-and-private-hire-services.pdf](http://lawcommission.justice.gov.uk/docs/lc347_taxi-and-private-hire-services.pdf))

3.14 Costs

The current cost paid by applicants for the test is £35. This is paid at the time of booking and is non-refundable, non-transferable. Given that most drivers take either three or four attempts to pass the test, the average cost to the driver is currently £105 - £140. The average time spent taking these tests is therefore 9 – 12 hours (and the average officer time per candidate per test is around two hours) Additionally, disability awareness training costs approximately £30 if undertaken at St Albans Council. If undertaken privately, the cost would likely be greater. Therefore, at present the average total cost is between £135 - £170.

3.15 It is proposed to charge £97.00 per driver for the new test. Current charges across Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire vary between £15 and £105 – but these charges don't include the disability awareness training too. It is understood the cheapest council, Three Rivers District Council, is about to review their test and fee, Stevenage charge £75 for an hour-long test, and Luton charge £74 for a computerised test. None of the councils offer training as part of the test, and all report high failure rates similar to Watford that indicate most applicants will pay repeatedly before passing.

This charge is comprised of the following costs per driver based on 16 drivers per course:

Administration, booking, database management - £7  
Correspondence to driver – £5  
Room Booking - £8.75  
Training – £6.25  
Test Supervision – £6.25  
Disability Awareness - £30  
Marking test papers/notification to driver – £25  
Training Booklet - £10.00  
General knowledge test administration and development - £5.00

Costs are calculated from council charges and no profit is made on this basis.

3.16 Applicants who failed the test would be able to re-book to sit the test, without the need for training in disability awareness, for £67 per application. This secondary cost is calculated by way of comprising the same administration and training costs as the first test minus the costs of the disability segment.

3.16 Example Syllabus

*09:00 – 11:00:*

Rules and Regulations  
Driver Safety  
Customer Service  
How to report safeguarding concerns (Adult and Children)

*11:15 – 12:15*

Test of local routes

*12:30 – 13:15*

## Rules and regulation examination

*13:15 – 14:00*

Lunch

*14:00 – 17:00*

## Disability Awareness Training

- 3.17 It is proposed that drivers should undertake a topographical test on routes and how to plan ahead. This test should apply for hackney carriage and private hire licences although the format of each test would be significantly different.
- 3.18 As private hire drivers are in a position to pre-plan a route, the topographical test will focus on using a map, planning ahead for local delays or traffic conditions, and testing of some major routes such as to or from the hospital and other landmarks. It is the experience of the licensing team that a test on routes, however basic, shows a candidates' willingness to approach the examination and the job of a driver in a more serious and professional manner. Some degree of learning outside of the training course must remain to ensure high standards. However this will not be taught as part of the training syllabus.
- 3.19 The route test for hackney carriage drivers will remain unchanged from the current format.
- 3.20 The remainder of the test will be (as now) a multiple choice paper consisting of ten questions on rules and regulations, ten questions on the Highway Code and five questions on basic mathematics.
- 3.21 The test will be conducted in two parts. The first, on routes, will take 60 minutes. The second, consisting of all other parts, will take 45 minutes.
- 3.22 Applicants will undertake the test after the morning training period. The afternoon will be spent in disability awareness training.
- 3.23 Further benefits to this approach are anticipated through early contact and team building among prospective new drivers and the opportunity to prevent bad habits from forming when drivers are without guidance at the beginning of their careers. Drivers will have access to a concise syllabus and example questions booklet prior to the course date. This will incorporate all of the relevant information. They will be expected to study and learn this prior to the course. The information will be available to download from our website in line with current policy on providing information to customers and a paper format provided on the day.
- 3.24 Consultation with stakeholders has taken place over the last twelve months with verbal and written comments received from four private hire operators. Further consultation is proposed on the specific content of the course though not the general format.
- 3.25 It is proposed that the new knowledge test should commence from 1 April 2016. This allows for procurement of the provider for the disability awareness training, preparation

and a period of transition from the existing scheme. Initially the course will be run twice a month but demand will continually be assessed with the aim that applicants do not wait longer than 30 days to attend. It is anticipated that with an increased first pass rate demand is likely to decrease substantially and the course will then only be necessary once a month.

- 3.24 Given that courses are generally booked in advance by up to two months, candidates for the first course in April 2016 will likely be booking by February 2015 and provision should be in place by then to provide course information and literature for applicants.
- 3.26 Wider Application  
Each borough determines its own application criteria. In Hertfordshire there is a mix of application procedures with some boroughs requiring that all drivers undertake a written knowledge test, whilst others require only hackney carriage drivers to undertake a test.
- 3.27 This local approach has both benefits and drawbacks. The benefit to the local authority is the ability to set criteria that best suits local residents. The drawback is that drivers working 'cross-border' are likely to have very different regulations imposed upon them potentially leading to poor customer service and confusion.
- 3.28 It is proposed that all local authorities Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire be offered the opportunity to use this training in order that standards be homogenised across the most likely cross border trading zones. This would have the simultaneous benefit of both raising standards and ensuring that all drivers are happy that they are working on an equal footing. This is being discussed by Heads of Service across Hertfordshire and will be further explored if the recommendations proposed are agreed.
- 4.0 **IMPLICATIONS**
- 4.1 **Financial**
- 4.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that there are no financial implications arising from this report. The training and tests are self-funding.
- 4.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)
- 4.2.1 The Head of Democracy and Governance comments that individuals have the right of appeal against the refusal or revocation of a licence to the Magistrates Court.
- 4.4 **Potential Risks**  
None identified
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Background Papers

None

File Reference

None