

# REPORT ON THE INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH TESTING AND KNOWLEDGE TESTING FOR TAXI DRIVERS

Tracey Aldworth

## 1 Purpose

- 1.1 For Members to consider the recommended arrangements for the introduction of English Language and additional Knowledge testing for licensed taxi and PHV drivers.

## 2 Recommendations

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>2.1 For Members to agree the recommended arrangements for the introduction of English Language and additional Knowledge testing for licensed taxi and PHV drivers.</li></ol> |
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## 3 Supporting information

- 3.1 The Licensing Committee resolved in September 2017 that a functional English and knowledge test for new and existing hackney carriage and private hire drivers be introduced. It was further resolved that the Principal Licensing Officer be authorised to agree and confirm the content and report back to the Licensing Committee. Since this time, as the Licensing Committee will be aware, there has been significant restructuring and staff changes within the Licensing Service and as a consequence the testing arrangements considered at the September 2017 meeting have not been implemented.
- 3.2 The Licensing Services has given this matter considerable thought and has concerns about the potential implications of requiring all drivers to undergo this training. AVDC currently licence in the region of 3000 drivers and continues to receive a substantial number of new applications. Aside from the practical difficulties of ensuring all existing drivers attend and successfully pass the relevant assessment, there are serious concerns regarding the implications should a driver fail the test. With new drivers this is not so much of an issue as they will not be permitted to proceed with an application until such time as they successfully pass the relevant test. The difficulty arises with existing drivers; it is feasible that a proportion of those currently licensed may not pass the new tests. As a consequence the Licensing Service would ultimately have to consider suspending, refusing to renew or revoking the driver's licence. Any of these options can be challenged by way of appeal to the magistrates Court. Given the numbers of drivers involved, this could be a significant number and appeal proceedings are extremely resource intensive in terms of officer workload and costs. There is also a question mark around the legitimacy of asking drivers to undergo additional assessments once we have approved them as fit and proper to hold a licence.
- 3.3 As an alternative approach it is proposed that the testing requirements be imposed on all new drivers and those existing drivers where there are reasonable grounds to require testing. Reasonable grounds would include instances where authorised officers identify a training need through enforcement activity or substantiated complaint. The advantage of this approach is that it ensures standards are raised, while ensuring efforts are targeted to where there is the most need, while avoiding the risk of using significant resources in protracted legal action.

- 3.4 Various options have been explored in terms of the mode of delivery and alternative approaches are proposed in terms of both English Language testing and Knowledge testing. These are considered in turn:

#### **English language skills**

- 3.5 The principal reason for assessing drivers' standard of English Language skills is to ensure that they can converse effectively, particularly in emergency situations and where there are safeguarding concerns. The ability to converse effectively in English also helps avoid job related misunderstandings such as wrong directions, fare disputes, collecting the wrong customer and misunderstanding a customer's assistance needs. In practice it is predominantly the ability to comprehend and verbalise English language that are the most desirable skills. The question for the Licensing Service is how to test this effectively and efficiently. Officers conduct interviews with applicants but this is not always reliable and there are questions around objectivity.
- 3.6 A number of local authorities now use the Versant English Test which uses speech processing technology to instantly assess applicant's linguistic skills via the telephone. The test is typically conducted at the Council offices under the supervision of a member of staff. The candidate is given a unique Test Identification Number which they enter via the telephone key pad. The candidate is asked to identify themselves and is then taken through a series of exercises which takes about 15 minutes. The exercises test the candidates ability to:
- Read accurately a number of sentences from a test sheet.
  - Repeat a series of sentences that are read out via the system.
  - Answer questions to test comprehension.
  - Rearrange words and phrases to form a meaningful sentence.
  - Free speech for 40 seconds in response to open questions.
- 3.7 The test produces a score within a given range, which correlates to certain language proficiency levels. The levels also correlate to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), which allows the results to be accurately compared against other language-based qualifications. For the purposes of driver licensing, it is recommended that candidates should have language proficiency equivalent to the threshold of levels B1 and B2 of the CEFR scale (an overall score on the Versant test of 55/80 or higher), which accords with the level typically required by other Local Authorities using the system.
- 3.8 Level B2 is defined by CEFR as follows:
- “Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options”
- 3.9 Further information about the Versant system is included as Appendix 1, which shows the instructions and a sample test sheet and score report.
- 3.10 The Principal Licensing officer viewed a demonstration of the system given by Dacorum BC Licensing Service who reported favourably about the use of the

system in their area. Views were also sought from Mid-Sussex and East Dorset Councils who both use the system and their responses were very positive. This correspondence is shown as Appendix 2. In addition Mid Sussex commented that their Members had “witnessed a marked improvement in understanding English from drivers”.

- 3.11 Tests are purchased in advance and cost £26.50 per test, however there are discounts available for bulk purchases:

<b>25- 49:</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>50-99:</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>100-299:</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>300-499:</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>500- 749</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>750-1000:</b>	<b>30%</b>

- 3.12 It is proposed that potential new drivers will be required to satisfactorily pass the test as a pre-application requirement at their own expense. Failed candidates will be able to re-take the test, again at their own expense, but they will be encouraged to take steps to improve their English Language skills in the first instance.
- 3.13 The other LAs consulted with offer exemptions from testing for drivers who are able to provide certified evidence of other equivalent qualifications. This would seem reasonable and it is recommended that AVDC adopt a similar approach.
- 3.14 Other standards approximately equivalent to CEFR B2 \*
- **IELTS:** 5-6.5 (5 is borderline between B1 and B2)
  - **TOEFL:** 87 to 109
  - **TOEIC:** 400-485 (listening), 385-450 (reading)
  - **City and Guilds:** Communicator
  - **Cambridge Exam:** CAE (45 to 59) / FCE grade B or C / PET Pass with Distinction
  - **British general qualifications:** GCE A-Level (known as A2)
- 3.15 One further advantage of the Versant system is that it can be introduced very swiftly and with Licensing Committee approval the Licensing Service would look to introduce testing at the earliest opportunity.

#### **Knowledge testing**

- 3.16 It appears that historic decisions of the Licensing Committee in respect of knowledge testing refer to two distinct forms of knowledge testing: geographical or typographical testing and testing relating to specific legal and technical requirements of the role as a licensed driver.
- 3.17 Currently all new applicants for Hackney Driver licences are required to undertake a local knowledge test with a member of the Licensing Service. Given the nature of their work, a significant part of which involves operating from Aylesbury ranks and the ability to ply for hire within the Aylesbury District, this would appear to be entirely reasonable and it is proposed that this assessment continue. However it should be noted that Hackney Carriages can also travel outside the district, whether travelling from a rank, as a result of being hailed or fulfilling a private pre-booking.
- 3.18 It is clearly evident that a significant number of AVDC licensed PHV drivers operate outside the District as a consequence of the Deregulation Act. The majority of these drivers live and work in other areas and rarely enter the

Aylesbury District. Consequently it is arguably an unnecessary and onerous exercise to require those drivers who are legally entitled to operate outside the District to be tested on the geography of Aylesbury. What is important is that those drivers can adequately navigate themselves around any particular District that they may find themselves working. Consequently it is proposed that all new applicants for PHV and Hackney driver's licences be assessed on their ability to satisfactorily navigate between two points regardless of location. Additionally any driver who on investigation appears to the investigating officer to have demonstrated navigational errors would require reassessment.

- 3.19 All prospective drivers seeking a licence with AVDC are currently required to undergo a competent driver assessment with an approved assessor. At present AVDC has delegated this responsibility to Greenpenny. The Principal Licensing Officer has discussed current and potential testing requirements with Greenpenny and they are agreeable to introducing practical geographic/navigational testing into their current assessment arrangements for AVDC drivers. Furthermore they have reported that this is something that they would willingly implement forthwith if requested. In addition The Principal Licensing Officer has also met with another assessment company, Mann Fleet Services (MFS). MFS provide a similar service to Greenpenny, and like Greenpenny, are approved for driver testing by a number of other Local Authorities. MFS are agreeable to also introducing navigation/geographic testing alongside their current assessment procedure for AVDC drivers.
- 3.20 With respect to job related knowledge, there are key areas that licensed drivers are expected to have knowledge of:
- Safeguarding/CSE (refer to alternative assessment)
  - Equalities Act 2010: specifically accommodating wheelchair users and those with assistance/guide dogs and not overcharging.
  - Differences between Hackney Carriage and PHV operations (use of meters, plying for hire, parking on ranks).
  - Highway code.
  - Compliance with licence conditions and AVDC policy.
  - When to report to the Licensing Authority.
- 3.21 As stated in 3.19, all new drivers are required to undertake a competent driver assessment prior to application. The assessment provided by Greenpenny includes a requirement to answer questions on the highwaycode and 'cabology'. All applicants are also required to sign a statement of conformity which covers the main technical legalities and conditions associated with being a licensed taxi/PHV driver. The Principal Licensing Officer has discussed the matter with Greenpenny and they have agreed to introduce additional questions as part of their assessment to ensure the above areas (see 3.20) are covered. The Licensing Service will supply a pool of essential questions and drivers will be expected to answer these correctly. It is further proposed that in order to support this assessment process the current content of AVDC website be reviewed to ensure applicants are clearly directed to the relevant sources of material to allow them to adequately prepare for the assessment.

3.22 Similarly, MFS have agreed to the approach outlined in 3.21 and it is proposed that they be identified as an approved assessor by AVDC in addition to Greenpenny.

#### **4 Options considered**

4.1 No other options considered.

#### **5 Reasons for Recommendation**

5.1 It is recommended that the Versant English Language test be introduced for all new applicants and those drivers subject to investigation where a concern about their ability to satisfactorily converse in English is identified by officers. It is anticipated that this approach will assist with addressing safeguarding concerns, reduce disputes and complaints and raise the standards of compliance. The new testing can be implemented swiftly and there are minimal cost implications for the Council.

5.2 It is recommended that current driver assessment procedures be adapted as detailed in the report to satisfy the Council's additional requirements in respect of knowledge testing. It is anticipated that this approach will reduce disputes and complaints and raise the standards of compliance. The proposed approach has the advantages that there are no additional cost implications to the Council or drivers and the changes can be implemented swiftly. Furthermore the introduction of an additional assessment option for applicants allows for potential cost savings from additional competition.

#### **6 Resource implications**

6.1 The Versant English Test will require some administration input by the Licensing Service while the test is taken. It is proposed that this cost be passed on to the applicant. The proposed arrangement for knowledge testing will present minimal additional resource implications for the Licensing Service as the additional testing will be incorporated into existing arrangements.

Contact Officer                      Simon Gallacher Ext 5083  
Background Documents              None