



Committee and date

Strategic Licensing
Committee.

7th September 2011

Item

7

Public

DRIVERS' KNOWLEDGE TEST

Responsible Officer

Email: Lynne.towers@shropshire.gov.uk

Tel: 01939 237492

Fax:

1. Summary

All new applicants for a driver's licence are required to take and pass a written knowledge test (taken in English) prior to obtaining a licence. Members requested that a report on the content of the driver's licence knowledge test be considered by the Strategic Licensing Committee.

This report proposes amendments to the current knowledge test, which was produced on the formation of Shropshire Council, to include detailed road and landmark knowledge. Information is also provided on the introduction of an English test for all new applicants to ensure they have the ability to converse in English with passengers. The purpose of these amendments is to improve public safety by providing a more rigorous knowledge test.

2. Recommendations

That the Committee:

Approve the proposal to amend the Drivers' Knowledge test to:

- a) Expand the local knowledge section of the test to include towns, local roads and places of interest. Where an applicant fails the knowledge test three times the application will be refused, subject to the Licensing Officer having authority to permit a further test or tests where he considers the circumstances warrant it.

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

Risk: The amendments to the knowledge test will reduce risks to public safety which could exist if licences are granted to drivers who do not have this knowledge.

Equality Assessment for drivers:

If a separate English test is introduced it must be applied equally to all new applicants.

The level of literacy required for the knowledge test is relatively low. It is felt that it is important that drivers can communicate in English if they wish to provide this service. Assistance with tests will be offered for those with difficulties in reading the questions. Help will be offered for those who are not familiar with computers.

4. Financial Implications

The introduction of a separate English test would increase the licence fee by approximately £25 for all new applicants. The cost of resits would also be £25.

The amendments to the knowledge test will not significantly affect the Council's costs.

5. Background

5.1 All councils must license private hire vehicles and hackney carriages and their drivers. In granting a driver's license the council is required to satisfy itself that the applicant is a 'fit and proper' person. This expression is not defined in statute and its interpretation is for each council to decide. Shropshire Council has adopted conditions of fitness that take the following into account when deciding if a driver's licence should be issue:-

- A criminal record check
- A comprehensive knowledge test
- A DVLA driving licence check
- A medical and
- A driving test

5.2 Each Local Authority is able to devise its own knowledge test but the common things found on the syllabus are:-

- a) A list of routes that the driver will be expected to memorise, identifying the roads between the starting point and final destination and naming landmarks along the way.
- b) A list of locations: estates, pubs, train stations etc and the names of the roads these are on.
- c) Taxi Bye-laws and Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicle Licence conditions,
- d) Highway code
- e) Disability awareness.

5.3 The length of the knowledge tests can also vary dramatically throughout the country. The London drivers have to learn 320 routes and know all the landmarks and places of interest along the runs and can take from two to four years to pass. Some other Local Authorities have extensive tests which consist of 100 questions and last for two and a half hours whilst others do not have any knowledge test requirement.

5.4 The Shropshire knowledge test presently addresses the following areas, and the pass marks for each is given in brackets. There is a time limit of 45 minutes for the test.

- a) A simple knowledge test of the area, (3 out of 4 = 75%)
- b) The Council's conditions of licences and some questions assessing the numeracy ability of the applicant (9 out of 13 = 70%)
- c) The Highway Code traffic law (7 out of 10 = 70%)

The present pass mark therefore being 19 out of 27 = 70%

5.5 As Hackney Carriage drivers provide a public service from taxi ranks and can work alone, reliant solely on the instructions of the passenger, it is generally recognised that they may be required to take a comparatively stringent knowledge test to private hire vehicle drivers. This requirement is less essential for private hire drivers as not only are they pre-booked but they also have contact with an Operator, who would be available to assist with particular problems.

5.6 Detailed road and landmark knowledge is also not presently included in the test and therefore there is no check on the applicant to ensure that they have a good understanding of the area, landmark and places of interest and know the shortest route from A to B.

5.7 Shropshire Council issues joint driver badges rather than a separate Hackney Carriage Driver's badge and/or a Private Hire Vehicle Driver's badge. The knowledge test therefore needs to be suitable for all drivers without being unnecessarily burdensome for private hire vehicle drivers. The test will be set at a standard suitable for Private Hire Drivers.

5.8 It is proposed that the knowledge test is amended to include more questions on the local area. A candidate will be expected to have detailed knowledge of the local area/relevant zone including the towns and main roads in Shropshire and be able to identify places of interest such as; cinemas; hospitals; and theatres etc.

ENGLISH SPEAKING

5.9 The knowledge test is currently taken in English and therefore requires applicants to have an acceptable level of understanding of English.

5.10 There are companies who provide a professional analysis of an applicant's ability to converse in English to an acceptable standard. 'Versant' is a company that provide this service. The Versant English test is delivered over

the telephone or on a computer and is scored automatically. During the test the system presents a series of spoken prompts in English at a conversational pace and elicits oral responses in English. The Company provides numeric scores and performance levels that describe the test takers competence to understand spoken English on everyday topics and to respond appropriately at a native-like conversational pace in intelligible English.

- 5.11 The introduction of a separate English test would allow officers to systematically test individuals on their ability to converse in English with passengers.
- 5.12 Should an English test be introduced it must be required of all new applicants.
- 5.13 The test takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. The cost of the English test is likely to be in the region of £25 which would increase the cost of the licence fee for all applicants. The cost of re-sits would also need to be paid for by the applicant.

PASS MARK AND RETEST FEES

- 5.14 It is proposed that the type and number of questions on the knowledge test be increased along with a higher pass rate for certain elements of the test. The proposals are summarised in the following chart with the current arrangements for comparison.

| Current Criteria | Current Pass Mark | Proposed Criteria | Proposed Pass Mark |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| A simple knowledge test of the area | 3 out of 4 (75%) | Routes and locations | 10 out of 12 (83%) |
| The Council's conditions of licences and some questions assessing the numeracy ability of the applicant | 9 out of 13 (70%) | The Council's conditions of licenses | 9 out of 12 (75%) |
| | | Numeracy | 5 out of 6 (83%) |
| The Highway Code traffic law | 7 out of 10 (70%) | Highway Code | 8 out of 10 (80%) |
| Overall pass mark | 19 out of 27 (70%) | Overall pass mark | 32 out of 40 (80%) |

6. Conclusions

The knowledge test can be amended to respond to concerns that the test needs to be more rigorous. In order to ensure that the drivers being licensed with Shropshire Council have all the required skills and knowledge to provide this service, the knowledge test can to be expanded to test local knowledge and the ability to speak English.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Cllr Steve Charmley

Local Member

Covers all areas of Shropshire

Appendices

None