

TAXI ADVISORY FORUM

12 APRIL 2017

TAXI THEORY TEST REVIEW

Report by the Driver & Vehicle Agency

1. PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Forum of the ongoing work to review the Taxi Theory Test.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Following a meeting between the then Infrastructure Minister, Chris Hazzard, and the newly formed Northern Ireland Taxis Group on 3 August 2016, a commitment was given that the Department would consider the issues raised by the Group in relation to the Taxi Theory Test and associated employment concerns. At the inaugural meeting of the Taxi Forum on 19 October 2016 those in attendance were advised a review of the Taxi Theory Test had commenced.

- 2.2. The work undertaken looked at the following:

- the number of licensed taxi drivers operating prior to and after the introduction of the taxi theory test and conducted an analysis of same;
- Potential literacy issue as a factor for the low pass rate in the taxi theory test;
- the findings of the earlier review of the taxi theory test;
- consideration of modularising the taxi theory test;
- considered the merits of replacing the taxi theory test with a Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) type qualification; and
- considered additional interventions that could support new entrants into the taxi industry.

3. DETAIL

The number of licensed taxi drivers operating prior to and after the introduction of the taxi theory test and conduct analysis of same

- 3.1. The first piece of work was to get some sense of the extent of the problem in terms of numbers. To do that, the review team looked at the number of taxi driver licences issued prior to 31 October 2014, when the taxi theory test was

introduced, and compared that to the number of licences issued after it was introduced and conducted an analysis of same. The data is set out in the table below.

	Licences issued prior to 31 October 2014	Licences issued from 31 October 2014	Taxi Licence holders prior to 31 October 2016	Taxi licence holders to date
2013-14	866		15,430	
2014-15	961		14,462	
2015-16		155		13,438
2016-17¹		106		12,865

- 3.2. The statistics show an increase in the number of new taxi licences issued in the two years prior to the introduction of the taxi theory test on the 31 October 2014. However, this was expected as the changes to the taxi industry, particularly the introduction of a new taxi theory test and driving test, were well publicised and communicated far in advance of their introduction.
- 3.3. For the period 31 October 2014 to 31 March 2016 (17 months) 155 applications. The number of applications for a taxi driver licence for the first two quarters of 2016-17 was 106.

Potential literacy issue as a factor for the low pass rate in the taxi theory test

- 3.4. At their meeting with the Minister on 3 August, taxi industry representatives cited literacy as a factor for the low pass rate in the taxi theory test.
- 3.5. There are four bands of multiple choice questions that make up the taxi theory test and a hazard perception test. From the results of the four bands it is difficult to conclude that literacy is an issue. For bands one and four, where performance levels are high, candidates are able to read, understand and comprehend the multiple choice options for each question, before making the correct selection to many of the questions asked. The evidence clearly indicates that candidates are performing well in bands one and four, but poorly in bands two and three.

¹ Q1 and Q2: 1 April – 30 September 2016

Revisit the findings of the February 2016 Review of the Taxi Theory Test

- 3.6. In February 2016, a review of the taxi theory test was carried out to try and establish what, if any, action could be taken to assist new entrants achieve the required standard for the Taxi Theory test.
- 3.7. Whilst the pass mark for the hazard perception test is the same for all categories of driving tests, the pass mark for the taxi driver theory test is set higher than that of the car 'L' driver theory test. This reflects the higher standards expected from drivers who drive for a living, which is in keeping with the pass mark set for other professional drivers. Furthermore, by setting the pass mark for the test higher than that of the car 'L' driver theory test, ensured that the industry and the general public were clear of the Department's intention to professionalise the industry, by expecting potential new taxi drivers to achieve a higher standard of knowledge than that which would be expected for a novice car 'L' driver.
- 3.8. Taking account of this, and the fact that the pass rate for the hazard perception element of the taxi theory test was 58%, the review recommended that there should be no change to both the overall pass mark and the pass mark for each of the four bands.
- 3.9. The review also looked at how well candidates performed with the multiple choice questions. While it was generally accepted in advance of the introduction of the taxi theory test that the initial cohort of candidates might perform poorly, the actual level of performance was much lower than anticipated. This was quite surprising, not least because a number of multiple choice questions in the taxi theory test are either in one of the other theory test question banks (car, lorry and bus) or are derived from current questions that have been adjusted to tailor them specifically to the taxi category.
- 3.10. A review was also conducted of the performance levels being achieved in the multiple choice element of the theory test by the other professional groups of drivers. As none of these groups seemed to be experiencing any particular issues or problems, it was reasonable to conclude that the questions being asked of taxi drivers were set at the right level and no change was necessary.
- 3.11. However, a review of the performance of each of the four bands produced a rather surprising outcome. Candidates were performing very poorly in band two (Traffic Signs and Signals, and Vulnerable Road Users and Mechanical Knowledge), given that these are relatively basic Highway Code and mechanical knowledge of the vehicle questions, coupled with a requirement to understand the needs of vulnerable road users, the pass rate for this band was expected to be much higher. The pass rate for band three (Health and Safety, Legal Responsibilities, and Safe Loading of the Vehicle) was also low.

- 3.12. The main conclusion from this analysis is that we know which parts of the test candidates find most difficult. The challenge for us is to find ways in which we can provide better information about the need to prepare for the test and, secondly, what it is they need to prepare with. Finally, we need to find ways of providing better, more meaningful feedback to candidates who fail the test and engage with the taxi industry and advise them where candidates are performing poorly and signpost them to those interventions that might be helpful in improving their likelihood of a pass. In addition, as there was only one training provider offering taxi theory test training courses, we took an action to speak to other training providers in the driver testing industry and point them in the direction of taxi theory test training. It will, of course, be their decision as to whether or not they provide this service. However, we are aware that there are now at least three additional training providers offering this service.
- 3.13. The review also considered the pass mark associated with each band (currently 19 correct answers out of 25). This band pass mark was originally set at this level to ensure candidates had a good level of knowledge and understanding in each of the bands. The review also looked at all the tests completed between 31 October 2014 and 31 January 2016. An impact analysis was conducted to ascertain what the pass rate would be for each band if the pass mark was reduced by one mark. This showed that the overall pass rate for the test would increase by 10%. If the band pass mark was reduced by two marks, the overall pass rate for the test would increase by 23%.
- 3.14. This ‘what-if’ analysis, whilst interesting, does show that a relatively modest adjustment to the pass mark can result in a significant increase in the pass rate. However, the purpose of the test is not a test for a test’s sake and by lowering the pass mark to a level that the majority can pass would simply devalue the test and question the purpose in having it at all.
- 3.15. It is, therefore, necessary to go back to first principles and revisit the question, why was the test introduced and what was the objective? The overall objective of introducing the taxi theory test was to implement the provisions of the Taxi Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 for the introduction of a Taxi Driver Test and for Periodic Training for holders of taxi driver licences. The purpose of the taxi theory test was to help professionalise the industry by having some means against which a minimum standard of knowledge, skills and behaviour could be measured. While the standard is high, that is what the public should expect from a taxi driver who is operating a taxi for a profession and who must ensure that (s)he transports their passengers, including disabled and vulnerable passengers, safely and comfortably to their destination. By lowering the pass mark, just to get more candidates passing the test, runs the risk of not being able to achieve the objectives and aim of the Taxi Act.

3.16. Since conducting the review, further analysis of the statistics indicates that there is very little difference in pass rate as regard to the age of candidates. The 51 to 55 year old age group performs best (27.5%) and the 31 to 35 year old age group performs worst (17.4%).

3.17. This additional analysis also included reviewing the pass rate for the multiple choice and hazard perception elements separately. This analysis produced a surprising result insofar as it showed that the pass rate for each element was in the mid 40% and mid 50% respectively. When the two elements of the test are combined the overall pass rate drops to below 20%.

3.18. The review paper made a number of recommendations which included:

- **Publishing the statistics in relation to the band scores**

This information has been made available from 1 November 2016.

- **Engage with trainers and industry to establish why some candidates are struggling**

A lack of preparation for the taxi theory test was cited as the major contributing factor to the low pass rate.

- **Review how we inform candidates of what to study and where they can get the taxi manual**

References to the learning material will be available within the policy information displayed during the online booking process, via the booking confirmation notifications and via the call centre.

- **Consider publishing a multiple choice taxi theory test practice paper**

A practice paper has been produced and is currently being developed into an interactive on-line test which we aim to publish on NIDirect by April 2017.

- **Review the training manual to establish if it needs / can be made more user friendly**

An assessment on what, if anything, could be done to make the training manual more user friendly has been undertaken. However, due to the size of the document (191 pages), options were limited. One of the simple modifications was the inclusion of hyperlinks to the various sections in the manual to improve navigation.

- **Consider the practicalities of modularising the taxi theory test**

The theory test provider reviewed what the impact would be on the taxi theory test if changes were implemented to award credits to candidates for each band so that they wouldn't have to re-sit a band previously passed. For completeness, they are also looking at uncoupling the multiple choice and hazard perception elements of the test.

3.19. Other issues for consideration:

- **Practical implications of modularising the taxi theory test** - Modularising the taxi theory test will ultimately increase the number of tests a candidate has to take before being issued with an overall pass certificate. This may impact on theory test waiting times for all theory test categories and the cost of the taxi theory test (currently £34). If the test is modularised, the candidate may have to pay £34 per module. This may increase the cost of the test from the current £34 to £170.
- **How long could a candidate bank their module credit** - Given that the current legislation states that a theory test certificate is only valid for two years, it seems reasonable to set a similar timeframe for the completion of all four modules and the hazard perception test.
- **Uncoupling the multiple choice and hazard perception elements** – This may require a candidate to take at least two tests, making the cost of taking two shorter tests rather than one longer test, more expensive to the candidate.
- **In contrast to the taxi theory test, what merit is there in the suggestion that a Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) type qualification might be better suited to the taxi industry** - If a CPC type qualification replaced the theory test element, it would be difficult to assess a candidate's knowledge and understanding of the material being taught as CPC courses do not generally contain an assessment element. The concept of a CPC type qualification is in essence what is currently in place although it is in the form of a taxi driving test. It is likely that a CPC type qualification would include all the information currently used to support the theory test, but it would be taught in a classroom style. In terms of the cost benefit analysis in what is a price sensitive industry, the cost of classroom based training over a number of hours may be considerably more expensive than the £34 for the current theory test. Also, at the end of the training, as mentioned above, there would be no assessment and, therefore, no way of knowing whether the minimum standard has been achieved.
- **Provide enhanced feedback to candidates** – If a candidate fails their theory test they are given a breakdown of their band scores to help them identify what areas they may need to focus on. For example, in band

one there are a number of elements which include but not exclusively: alcohol levels, traffic, attitude, awareness and planning, fuel consumption, concentration / distraction, motorways and weather conditions. The detailed breakdown could provide the candidate with information on the specific topic areas the candidates needs to revise further. This change has already been implemented.

- **Additional training providers** – We have in the region of 30 training providers delivering taxi periodic training. We have engaged with them and with Approved Driving Instructors (ADI) to gauge their interest in delivering taxi theory test training. To date three additional training providers have started delivering taxi theory test training. We are compiling a list of providers and will publish this on NIDirect website.
- **English Audio Voiceover** – this will read the onscreen text in English to the candidate through headphones. This facility should be available by April 2017. This change will assist those candidates who may have reading difficulties, or where English is not their first language.