

LICENSING COMMITTEE – 19TH MAY 2010

**OPTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF KNOWLEDGE TEST FOR PRIVATE HIRE AND
HACKNEY CARRIAGE DRIVERS**

Agenda Item 6

Background Papers:	None
Corporate Implications:	Refer to table at end of report
Options:	See body of report
Risks:	None

Executive Summary

Members requested that officers research the possibility of introducing a knowledge test to the application process for Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Drivers.

This report highlights the various options open to members and the possible implications involved.

Once a framework is formulated the proposal will be put out to consultation. A report will be compiled and brought back to the Licensing Committee for final approval.

Decision

To decide whether to introduce a knowledge test to help assist in deciding the ‘fit and proper’ test for applicants of Private Hire or Hackney Carriage drivers licences.

If the decision is made to introduce a knowledge test;

1. To provide feedback and direction to the Licensing Section and formulate a desired outcome.

1. Knowledge Test

The general principal for establishing a knowledge test is to improve the standards of the provision of passenger transport by taxi and private hire vehicles within the District. To improve the standing and status of Hackney Carriage and Private Hire driver’s within the passenger transport industry.

Locally, over the last 6 months complaints have been received regarding a minority of licensed drivers’ lack of knowledge of the roads and routes within the borough, general standard of driving and customer care, together with disputes arising out of misunderstandings caused by language difficulties.

A knowledge test would address some of the above concerns giving applicants a detailed knowledge of the District, licensing legislation and show a basic understanding of English.

2. Implementation considerations

If the requirement for knowledge tests is introduced, the Council could give "Grandfather Rights" to existing holders of a HCD or PHD licence and determine that a person who holds a current HCD or PHD licence was not required to undertake a knowledge test.

3. Costs

To reduce the long term costs to the Council, it is proposed that the knowledge test procedure is automated allowing the electronic delivery of tests. Whilst providing greater flexibility for drivers, to take tests at different times in the day throughout the week, it will also create an electronic record of those taking tests, and automatically mark the test paper, providing a full audit trail.

There is a possibility that external funding could be secured through the Quality Taxi Partnership. This would make the proposition for an electronic system more viable as the initial funding would be covered and the long term benefit of an electronic system would remain. The requirement for a member of the licensing team to supervise and mark papers could be removed.

The cost of the knowledge test will need to be incorporated into the fee for the appropriate licences.

The figure ranges from £15 in Three Rivers DC to £73 in East Hertfordshire.

If an electronic system is not used consideration needs to be given to the frequency of the Knowledge Test. It appears that the most common approach is to run the Knowledge Test on a regular timetabled slot either weekly or monthly.

4. Content

The areas that commonly appear in other local authority knowledge tests;

- Licence conditions
- Highway Code
- Places of Interest
- Routes from A – B

Consideration needs to be given to the number of sections and questions.

The format of the questions needs to be decided. Do we use subjective, objective or a mixture of the two?

Example

Subjective

What is the shortest route from Freeport Shopping Village to Braintree Railway Station?

Objective

If a driver is convicted of an offence whilst a current licence holder he must:

- A. *Inform the Licensing Dept on renewal*
- B. *Wait to be contacted by the Licensing Dept*
- C. *Inform the Licensing Dept in writing immediately*
- D. *Do nothing it's personal and data protected*

The shortest route between two locations

Name roads/location of a places of interest for example; schools, pubs, restaurants and churches etc.

Questions relating to licence conditions, Byelaws and the code of conduct specific to relevant legislation (private hire/hackney carriage).

A study guide is sometimes provided to assist new applicants and what they will need to learn. This could also a series of sample questions.

5. Details

Concerns have been raised over some driver's inability to adequately converse with passengers and staff. This would become more apparent if applicants are required to participate in a knowledge test.

Local authorities take different approaches; some allow applicants to bring interpreters and others require an English Test.

One of the companies that provide English Tests is called 'Versant' www.versanttest.co.uk. The Versant English Test is a fifteen-minute spoken English test for adult non-native speakers of English. The 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 Versant English Test provides numeric scores and performance levels that describe the test taker's competence in spoken English – that is, the ability to understand spoken English on everyday topics and to respond appropriately at a native-like conversational pace in intelligible English.

This will bring some consistency to assessments and provide a tangible standard for applicants.

Officers would find it difficult to systematically test individuals on their ability to converse in English with passengers. What is an acceptable level is not only debatable, but is also difficult to measure.

Also, at the moment, no clear policy exists for officers to follow in this respect and, indeed, there is no policy making it clear that the ability to communicate verbally in English is a requirement of a hackney carriage driver.

As part of the process applicants could be required to input their national insurance number as a means of proving identity and right to work.

When an applicant fails the knowledge test it would only be right and proper to give the applicant a chance to re-sit the test. There are currently a number of approaches being adopted by Local Authorities these include attending the next available test or waiting for a period of time to pass (e.g. month). There are also a number of Local Authorities that after a number of unsuccessful test the applicant is required to pay an additional fee.

If the electronic system is not used consideration needs to be given to the frequency of the Knowledge Test. It appears that the most common approach is to run the Knowledge Test on a regular timetabled slot either weekly or monthly.

Consideration needs to be given to an appropriate pass mark. An 80% pass mark appears to be the most commonly used grade although several authorities have a lesser pass mark for private hire drivers.

Corporate Implications				
Financial:	As in all licensing functions the costs are recouped from the applicants and/or licence holders			
Legal:	Local Authorities are able to take reasonable steps to ascertain applicants 'fit and proper' status			
Equalities & Diversity:	Applicants whose first language is not English maybe disadvantaged.			
Customer Impact:	Additional costs will be passed on to applicants			
Environment & Climate Change:	None			
Consultation/Community Engagement:	Local Committees	N/A	Partners	N/A
	Public	N/A	Staff	N/A
Key Decision:	No			
Public/Private Report:	Public			
Officer Contact:	Rachael Crouch			
Designation:	Licensing Officer			
Ext No:	2790			
Email:	rachael.crouch@braintree.gov.uk			