



Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Driving tests availability](#), HC 437

Wednesday 4 December 2024

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Members present: Ruth Cadbury (Chair); Steff Aquarone; Dr Scott Arthur; Catherine Atkinson; Olly Glover; Katie Lam; Alex Mayer; Baggy Shanker; Rebecca Smith; Laurence Turner.

Questions 1–41

Witnesses

I: Camilla Benitz, Managing Director, Driving School, The AA; Carly Brookfield, Chief Executive, Driving Instructors Association; Sally Gilson, Policy Lead, Skills and Drivers, Road Haulage Association; and Lyndsey Marchant-Davies, DFT Group Secretary, Public and Commercial Services Union.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Camilla Benitz, Carly Brookfield, Sally Gilson and Lyndsey Marchant-Davies.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's evidence session—only the second of this Transport Committee in this Parliament. We are looking today at the issue of driving test availability and why it continues to be so difficult for learner drivers to book tests, some two years after the end of what we would call the covid crisis. I start by asking our first panel of witnesses to introduce themselves.

Camilla Benitz: Good morning. I am Camilla Benitz, managing director of AA Driving School.

Carly Brookfield: Carly Brookfield, chief executive of the Driving Instructors Association.

Sally Gilson: I am Sally Gilson, policy lead at the Road Haulage Association.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: Lyndsey Marchant-Davies, PCS industrial officer and group secretary for DFT.

Q2 **Chair:** Welcome to the session today. We put this as one of our early, quick inquiries because so many MPs said to me, before and after I was elected Chair of the Transport Committee, "Why can't my constituents get their test?" There is some kind of crisis, and this is long after the covid situation, so my first question is: why are people struggling to get driving tests?

Camilla Benitz: The real challenge started with covid. During covid, around 1.2 million driving tests were cancelled because of the restrictions. When things opened up, a lot of those people still wanted the tests, but on top of that were all the new people who wanted to start to learn to drive in that year. It created a surge in demand for driving tests. Unfortunately, the number of driving tests available did not match that surge in demand, and it has been sustained for a number of years, hence the acute shortage of driving tests available.

Carly Brookfield: I echo that sentiment. There is a demand and supply issue. We are in a peak demand situation, and supply is limited. We also have an issue with examiner recruitment and resourcing, and resourcing across the piece at DVSA.

Sally Gilson: We see a repeat here. I will add one slightly different thing from a commercial perspective. We have seen quite a bit of funding coming our way with regard to the HGV skills bootcamps, which have probably added to the demand for HGV driver tests, but, yes, it is mainly caused by the backlog.

Q3 **Chair:** Lyndsey, what is the trade union perspective?



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Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: Yes, obviously there is a need to recruit driving examiners. That has continually been highlighted in DVSA's business plans—the initial and subsequent ones. The key issue is that the terms and conditions that they are offering the driving examiners they are desperate to recruit have been degraded. It is now a different type of contract, which is less good than the substantive ones. That is a key issue that the PCS has highlighted. We have done some work on it, but it still is not as good as it used to be. There is a pool of people who are attracted to that type of job, particularly instructors, but it is not financially viable for instructors to move over. It is also worth noting that DFT has some of the lowest pay grades for EOs—

Chair: We are going to drill into some of the issues.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: Yes, sorry. There is also the issue of multiple booking of tests by third-party organisations, which is obviously a problem.

Q4 **Chair:** We will drill into each of the things that you have all raised. Looking from a helicopter perspective, we are still getting casework. I met a 17-year-old lad on Saturday who has no date for his test, and has paid £300 for the privilege. Is it getting better or worse? If it is not getting any better, or even if it is, is the DVSA taking the right action to make it easier to get a driving test?

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: It is not getting better. I read colleagues' evidence and you can see that waiting times are the same as or worse than in 2021. Things that could be done better include looking more widely at how to resolve it and a more robust approach to assessing how it is going. Obviously, there are the things I touched on before, such as better terms and conditions. Stopping third-party organisations buying multiple tests is a huge issue. They need to collaborate more frequently and in more detail with stakeholders, who, obviously, are sitting here today.

Q5 **Chair:** Sally, is it getting better or worse for HGV tests?

Sally Gilson: I will be slightly different from everybody else, because, yes, things really have improved for HGV driver testing. We did a lot of work post pandemic when there was the much-publicised driver shortage. We worked together with DVSA, DFT and the Department for Education; we were prioritised during that time. We have managed to get through the backlog now. We still see some issues with short-notice cancellations and obviously, during the summer, there are always issues—

Q6 **Chair:** These are the test centres cancelling at short notice?

Sally Gilson: Yes. Obviously, that has an effect on our training providers, especially if they are doing an apprenticeship route or a bootcamp route. It is important that they hit the time targets; but, yes, generally speaking it is definitely much improved for us.



Carly Brookfield: We had hope in our hearts that the measures that were taken last year to return over 240 personnel to frontline testing would have an impact, and by February it started to look like that. We were getting numbers nearer to the 14-week target, but by June or July we started to see it creep up to 18.4 and now we are at about 19.4, so more than a third of test centres in the UK are about 24 weeks and the rest are about 19 weeks. It is not an improving picture. The question is what radical measures we can employ to start to get the numbers going down.

Camilla Benitz: I echo those statistics. Before covid it was a six-week wait; we are now looking at a national average of 19, which, given the length of time that has elapsed since covid, suggests that the DVSA is not managing effectively to take the right action. The real challenge is to get to the root cause, which we believe sits with the driving examiners.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to Alex for the HGV perspective.

Q7 **Alex Mayer:** This is probably specifically aimed at Sally. You just said that the backlog had been successfully cleared. What effect do you think the introduction of the customer account manager scheme had on waiting times for hauliers in obtaining HGV tests? Are there any lessons that could be learned from the way that that backlog was cleared for your average 18-year-old who is trying to get a test?

Sally Gilson: Yes, we had long asked for a specific customer account manager. There was a national one, and eight across the UK. They worked well to start off with. The comments I have had from most of the training providers now are that, because of the demands, many of them are being seconded to driver testing and examining. Probably in the past year or so, not many people have had much contact with the customer account managers. We would love them to come back on a full-time basis, rather than being seconded, but we recognise that there is a huge amount of demand.

With regard to the future, one point I want to make is that we are forever trying to maintain the driver workforce. In trying to get young fresh blood into our sector, it is really important—especially, as I mentioned, going down the funded routes—that we still get tests promptly. We can lose people quite quickly through that system.

Q8 **Alex Mayer:** If the HGV test waiting times were to increase again, what effect do you think that would have on the logistics industry and the wider economy?

Sally Gilson: We have done quite a bit of analysis of this in the past few months, trying to predict the future driver demand. We have quite an ageing workforce—above the national average, with 51 the average age of a driver—and every year a number retire. Roughly 20,000 retire, and other people are moving out of the sector as well, so that is 40,000; or they get promoted. On a constant basis we need at least 70,000-plus tests to be conducted, taking into account the pass rate. It is crucial for



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us that we keep and maintain the current driver workforce. We saw what happened at the end of 2021 when we lost capacity to make deliveries. Expect the same if things start to fall back; deliveries will be delayed or not made.

Q9 **Chair:** Given some of the changes you are seeing and experience, are you concerned about road safety?

Sally Gilson: It has been pointed out to me that the quality of candidates coming for HGV tests is not quite the same. That is both their driving skills and their highway code and theory. A few say that it is as if people are learning how to pass the test, rather than learning the knowledge. I am sure that other panellists are going to make this point: because there are so many delays, people may not be going through the proper routes. Maybe a mate trains them. They are not getting the same kind of exposure to driving, and getting the same amount of practice, and not understanding the theory.

Q10 **Chair:** I think you said that the introduction of the customer account manager scheme helped.

Sally Gilson: It helped initially—until we lost them.

Q11 **Chair:** Right, okay. I think the DVSA said that they planned to widen the scheme to motorcycle training bodies. Has it happened? If not, when will it happen?

Sally Gilson: That I couldn't answer.

Q12 **Chair:** Okay. We will pick that up with the DFT team, who are sitting behind you.

Q13 **Dr Arthur:** Sally, I am quite concerned to hear what you said about standards. Is that something that should worry us? How do we fix it? Is it with better testing, or is there more that employers can do to support people in the post-test environment? Provisional plates, maybe.

Sally Gilson: That's a lot of questions. I am going on to experience that I don't have. From a more personal perspective I think it is really important that people have a certain amount of time training. As everybody knows, you can learn how to pass a test, but that does not necessarily make you a competent driver. As an organisation, we have worked hard on HGV driver training. We now start people in a simulator, to assess them and make sure that they are safe to go out on the road. Also, we do not want to waste people's money. If they are never going to make it as an HGV driver, it is better to test them on something like that first. With regard to HGV driver testing there is the next level that they have to achieve, and I would like to think that it is picked up at that point. Our trainers certainly say that they spend a lot more time on basic skills. Quality training providers would do the same.

Chair: We move on to learner driver behaviour. This is across the piece, but particularly in car learners.



Q14 **Baggy Shanker:** How has the test backlog impacted new learner driver behaviour?

Carly Brookfield: We have seen a change in consumer behaviour, if I may call it that, in that there is panic buying of tests. Pupils are starting to think about booking their driving test as soon as they start to think about learning to drive, which is not what we want. If HGV is a problem in terms of experience and learning, cat B, and CBT for motorbikes, is the foundation for all our drivers, so we must focus people on what they need to learn in that process, rather than on a headlong rush to the test centre.

One of our categorical problems in the UK is that we have a fairly arbitrary process for learning to drive. You can learn what you want with who you want until you go for the two mandatory tests, then off you go. If there is a change in consumer behaviour on top of the new driver behaviour that we have already had, we will see that problem coming into other forms of driver licensing as well. We are just not getting people experienced enough before they pass the test and in the period after their test.

Camilla Benitz: The big challenge is that before we had the long waits for tests people would work with their driving instructor, and when the instructor thought they were going to be ready they would say, "You've a few more lessons; go and book your test." Now, because people are looking at five months, or maybe even six, to find a test, and because it is not a luxury—they need to pass for employment or access to further education—they are forced to book the test and then work to be ready by the date. That creates a lot of anxiety and a lot of pressure on young people. With a pass rate of 48%, the majority will need to go back to the start of the queue and find another test in five months, or more. It is very different from how it used to operate.

Q15 **Baggy Shanker:** You have the "Ready to pass?" campaign. Are you saying that it has not been too successful?

Carly Brookfield: All credit to the team that came up with that campaign, and have been able to push it through as something to be taken seriously. With 25 years' marketing and communications background, I would love to say that those will be the fixes to make. I think it has had some success in some areas, but the campaign has not been wide enough. Government communications only reach so far, and that is particularly the case with the DVSA. We need to look at better ways of working with pupils and their parents—a big parental campaign would be an aid, as well—to look at what is needed in learner drivers.

Although I am here to represent members, we also need to look at what driving instructors are actually teaching. The majority do a really good job, but the working as a driving instructor survey that has been published in the last 48 hours looks at the key risks that are taught when you are learning to drive. The predominant focus in what respondents say



they look at is not on the things that we need to look at. There are figures for what they focus on in driving lessons, for the key risk areas like driving distractions, after dark and driving with passengers, and they are much lower than the top 90% stuff, which is driving in urban landscapes and on motorways. Those are less risky than some of the other things. I'm going to keep banging on about how a radical overhaul of how we learn to drive in the UK is important.

Increasing the supply of tests is great, but the caveat is that increasing accessibility might create liability. We have to be careful about the balance and, if we increase accessibility to our roads, we need to take the liability seriously and make sure that those who go on to our roads are the least risky people we can have there.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: There is a point to note about the "Ready to pass?" campaign. I know that it was a target for DVSA. I have been with PCS for just over a year, and it was only in my research for the Committee today that I found out about the campaign. You can see that there has been a period of work on it. The DVSA Instagram between June 2022 and October 2023 was heavily hit, but there has been nothing on their Instagram since October 2023 on the "Ready to pass?" campaign. That's one of the ways in which predominantly young people will engage, isn't it? There is a lot of good work that could have been reused and reposted, but it is just not there. In the consequential business plans, the conversation about "Ready to pass?" has disappeared as well.

Q16 **Alex Mayer:** On learner driver behaviour, I am sure all MPs have cases in their postbag like the one I have of a girl called Abigail. She is from Dunstable, and she has decided to do her test up in Cumbria. Another constituent of mine, Kai, was told that the next available test he could get was in December 2025. He has basically given up. I was wondering what kind of knock-on effect that had on planning for things, in the sense that people might be going hundreds of miles. How on earth can you prepare for that? To what extent do you think people are genuinely giving up because it is impossible?

Carly Brookfield: There is a statistic in the same survey that I referenced, which the DVSA released this week, that shows the reasons people take a break from learning to drive: 89% of respondents highlighted the fact that the waiting time for tests was making them give up for the time being. They will take a long break, rather than keep paying out for driver training to keep them current. Then we see a sausage factory bulge at the other end, when they are ready to come back and they have a slot, and the pressure is on the driving instructor to pick that pupil up again and try to get them through the test.

There isn't a massive problem with somebody travelling to another test centre. One could argue, experientially, that they are not being cribbed for a route round their local test centre; they are going to be put into a real-life scenario and take a test somewhere they are not familiar with, but we don't want people to travel too far and have to put extra expense



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into the process. Certainly, it is about looking at how we can ease access, with the caveat that there are those who need it more quickly.

Q17 **Chair:** This preparedness to pass the test that you have all raised: is it impacting on the pass rate?

Carly Brookfield: No, the pass rate is still pretty poor, and has been falling. It is not having an effect in that respect.

Q18 **Chair:** The pass rate is falling?

Carly Brookfield: Yes. I bow to the superior knowledge of the DVSA on the figure, but we are seeing the pass rate fall. People are rushing their learning-to-drive process. They are panicked about their end goal. They are not thinking about the learning process and what they are going to have to do after reaching the end goal, which is driving as an independent driver.

Q19 **Chair:** Okay, Lyndsey, did you want to pick up on whether people are passing—

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: We are seeing from driving examiners that people aren't ready—they are not prepared—but how can you expect them to be? Everyone learns at a different rate, and as colleagues have said, you put in for the test at the start because there is no other option. "Okay, it's so far in advance—five months. I assume I'll be able learn to drive in that time." When you get towards it, and have waited so long, you think, "I may as well have a go. I'll have the experience of doing it, and see where I fall." We see that, definitely. Driving examiners say that the quality is not as good as it should be; but on the other hand, how can you expect it to be when you are not working on an accurate timeline or an accurate target?

Chair: We go to Olly now, on the driving instructor element.

Q20 **Olly Glover:** Your witness evidence has highlighted the issue of a backlog for driving instructors in their assessments. How has the current situation affected how long they wait for their practical and instructional tests?

Carly Brookfield: PDIs, potential driving instructors, have been waiting. It has improved recently, with all due respect to DVSA, but we had people waiting for their part 2 and 3 tests—their qualifying tests—for up to 20 weeks in some instances. The problem, obviously, is that they are paying for all that training, and there is a time limit on their licensing and some are falling into second and third licences. DVSA has been using discretion to extend the period for some PDIs, but a lot of these people are working part time and doing their practice and training part time. They are paying £3,000 or £4,000 a time for their qualification, and then they are not able to get the part 2 and 3 tests.

I am not entirely convinced that, moving forward, DVSA should be providing the tests. That is another matter. Divesting that responsibility



would be a sensible move, to a private sector business owner. It is a little bit like taxi and PCV testing: a few years ago we had 20-week waiting times. Going to the private sector, we have been able to do a five-day turnaround on those kinds of test. That is a consideration for the future as a radical measure: who should supply the training of ADIs and their testing process?

Camilla Benitz: One of the critical issues we also see is that we have over 2,000 trainees waiting to qualify in the AA. The big issue that they have is the uncertainty. They are people who are changing their career. They expect to be able to qualify and earn, or work part time, over a certain period; 57% of our trainees are using the “book to hold” service, which means that they have paid for a test at a future date, but they don’t know when it will be. They wait 10 to 12 weeks before they are even told the date for their test. On top of that, it will be at least 10 weeks before they get a part 2 test. Another issue is that it is an average of 44 weeks between the part 2 and part 3 tests, but the licence—Carly’s point—lasts only 26 weeks. Those trainees have to go through a whole new licence application, with all the admin burden that it creates.

Q21 **Olly Glover:** Thank you. You have highlighted the issue that most driving instructors have had their four-yearly competence checks postponed. What are the impacts and risks associated with that?

Carly Brookfield: A person might not have had a competence check for more than seven years. We have our views, as an organisation, on the qualification process for trainers. Going back to the foundations of cat B training, I think the whole ADI training qualification needs to be overhauled to make it more fit for purpose. Then, if we have people coming through what is potentially perceived as a weak qualification process, in focusing trainers on what they should be delivering to get people on the road who are safe, and then we don’t overview those people, in a professional competency assessment, on a regular timeframe, we cannot expect the end result—their pupils’ quality—to be any better, and to improve. Ignoring—I don’t mean “ignoring;” it is a resourcing issue, I get it. Again, this is a time to look at whether the whole qualification and quality assurance of ADIs is best placed with DVSA.

Q22 **Olly Glover:** My final question in this section is whether, with so many driving instructors coming out of the four-yearly cycle, you feel there is an effective process for identifying and prioritising those who might be most at risk, so that the scarce resource of competency checks can be prioritised.

Carly Brookfield: They do the best they can with the information that they have. The metrics at DVSA, in terms of what they are able to derive, are quite poor. That goes back to the legacy systems that they have for getting data out on the people whose performance they regulate, and what they look like on the ground. At the moment we do that through looking at major and minor faults on test, pass rates, and things like that.



We are working on a trial at the moment, the Milestones project, where we look at a modular process for learning to drive. Part of the pitch for that to DFT, when we got our funding for the project, was that it enables better insight into how instructors perform. With more milestones and markers for both pupil and ADI to pass, in a learning process, there is more oversight of the performance of both those individuals in the process.

Chair: Let's get on to driving examiners.

Q23 **Dr Arthur:** There are lots of moving parts here, but I can see that one of the core issues is the flow of driving instructors coming into the system. What are the issues? Why can't we retain them? Why are they not being recruited?

Camilla Benitz: Examiners, or instructors?

Dr Arthur: Examiners. Sorry.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: It's a terms and conditions thing, and a pay thing. As I said at the start, DFT has one of the lowest pay rates for the EO grade across the civil service. People start nationally, with the 5% uplift, to come in at £29,500. That is not comparable to what they could potentially earn as an instructor.

On terms and conditions, recently, to deal with the covid backlog problem at the start, DVSA brought out a temporary cluster contract. It was advertised as a temporary thing. PCS did not agree with it. We understood it was needed as a temporary measure, but it is now the measure that is available—the only contract you can get. It means you have to do regular weekend work, which is paid at base rate—plain rate, with no overtime. It is inflexible in that way. You have to do regular overtime work. You also have to travel further. It is called a cluster contract because, previously, there would be one driving examiner who would go to one test centre. Now, they are expected to go to a variety of test centres, so there is a longer commute, and their subsistence and travel is not as good.

PCS has done a lot of work, and we have just about avoided industrial action on this, because we pushed back on the terms and conditions and tried to improve them, but we are aware that it is just not attractive enough to get people of the right skills and calibre, and retain them. It is just not fitting. DVSA can see this, because in every business plan they have set a target for recruitment of driving examiners that oversteps, meaning that they are aware that there will be an issue with retaining them; but every single time they have not met the target. On the most recent business plan that is in place, I had a meeting with DVSA driver ops colleagues last week and said, "Can you tell me how many people you've recruited each month for the last six months?" I'm still waiting for it, which means they are unable or unwilling to give us the information.



They have acknowledged that they will not meet the most recent target, which is not a surprise.

Q24 Dr Arthur: Going back to the cluster contract, what does forcing people to work unsocial hours do for the diversity of the workforce? It is not going to be attractive for a lot of people who have caring responsibilities.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: Exactly. That's the thing: we want driving examiners to reflect the broad set of learners, and it is not going to do that, because childcare will be an issue.

A troubling culture is starting to emerge within DVSA of bullying and pressure on existing driving examiners in particular areas, where there is now a focus on particularly low pass rates. That is an issue. There is also a focus on removing what are considered low-test routes. There is pressure on driving examiners to resolve that, in some areas, by pushing up their test rates.

Let's not forget what DVSA is about. It is about ensuring and regulating road safety. It is not about inflating test figures to deal with a backlog. It is about road safety. That is a huge issue that our examiners are coming to us with. They say they are starting a whistleblowing process. Some of the things I have read are quite distressing, and the pressure they feel.

Q25 Dr Arthur: Before I came here, I worked in academia for many years, and the notion of people being encouraged to pass students was one where there was always tension in universities across the UK. Is that what is happening? People feel under pressure to pass students they might not feel are safe to go on the road?

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: In some areas, yes. There is now a new way to assess how each examiner is doing, with a new focus on low test pass rates and routes. There used to be a more holistic approach, looking across the board and finding the average, and then seeing whether anyone was working way outside that average. Now, it is specifically about the lower end. That has been brought in under the radar without the trade unions' knowledge and without consultation with us. I read something yesterday from a member who said they were told that if they did not improve their pass rate it might lead to disciplinary procedure. People aren't there for that culture. Driving examiners want to see people passing safely. They don't want to be involved in that unsafe element.

Q26 Catherine Atkinson: You've raised four particular areas: pay, travel to different test centres, forced weekend working and the culture and pressure. In relation to the 130 that we see being lost annually, what do you think the main issue is for them? Is there an order to those concerns?

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: All I can give you is what the DVSA has given me, and obviously what driving examiners have said. The DVSA does analysis of why people leave. In the last 12 months the top thing was pay, and the second was culture. That is what I can give you. I can



only reiterate what we are being told by driving examiners and LDTMs. During the time when LDTMs were doing full-time testing, that was not rolled out particularly well. We frequently had LDTMs in tears. LDTMs are local driving test managers, and that means they manage each driving centre.

As my colleague was saying, there was a time when they went back to full-time testing to try to reduce that, but it was not rolled out particularly well. We had them in tears, and I know that people have left because the stress was too much. Of course, people are coming in, but when they are dealing with the hard end of the long waiting lists, people are frustrated and upset because they have waited so long for the test. It is not very comfortable to be on the end of that.

Q27 **Chair:** Carly, do your members ever feed back to you concerns about who is being passed? Are they reporting pressure?

Carly Brookfield: Yes. There is some anecdotal reporting. They try to have a good relationship with local test centres. They are sympathetic with what examiners are going through. There is sometimes some concern. A driving instructor might show concern the other way, which is that not enough of their pupils are passing, but there is some concern about the down pressure on examiners at the moment.

Going back to the point about recruitment and diversity, one of the things is, yes, you can throw more pay at people. I definitely agree that it is not attractive. In the hunting ground for driving instructors—the prime hunting ground—it is not an attractive career at the moment to go and work for DVSA. They know the pressures there and they know that the pay is not brilliant, so they are not going to switch. If you look at the driving instructors survey again, you can see that earnings are going up in our sector, so you are not going to switch away from that.

As an employer, I know it is not just pay. I can't just throw more pay at my employees to make them work better. Flexibility is a huge thing as well. In the past, DVSA has looked at introducing more part-time examiners to get that diversity, with working mums and things like that, to get more people in who could work part time. If you are looking at a pressured job, you are more likely to stomach looking at that job if you know you are only going to have to do it for x hours a week rather than thinking you are grinding with a yoke on your back for full-time hours.

I would really encourage a focus on not just flexible working hours but on whether there are more flexibilities and—God knows I'm going to say it—working from home. It is a crazy idea, but we have looked at it before for examiners. All my examiners—we run an advanced testing regime—work from home and they all enjoy flexibility. They like the fact that they can combine driver training with examining as well. It is a bit difficult because, under the EU directive, you are not supposed to hold an ADI badge if you are an examiner, but it is about anything we can do to attract people who already have knowledge of driver training to these



careers and offering that flexibility would be a good way to look at the resourcing issue.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: I completely agree with what my colleague was saying at the start about how we need diversity. One thing we need to be concerned about with working from home is that we have seen an increase in assaults, and some really quite nasty assaults with driving examiners being in hospital for a period of time. That is the thing with working from home. Going back to a specific test centre, the particular one I am thinking of happened on a weekend when they were the only person testing. They were the only one in the test centre. When they were very viciously assaulted there was no one around to look after them, so we need to temper that idea with ensuring safety. I fully agree with my colleague on part time or flexibility to get a wider range of people in to make it more attractive.

Carly Brookfield: On our advanced test, particularly in the taxi sector where we see quite a lot of aggressive behaviour towards examiners, we deliberately don't give the result for 24 hours, and we email the result because we had assaults on our examiners. We got round it by doing that. Obviously, we always work to try to preserve security. That would be a concern, and I completely echo that, but there are ways we could manage it.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: More work needs to be done because we have had some quite nasty experiences of female driving examiners having people in the car—because you can take someone—masturbating in the back of the car. It beggars belief. That is a really awful situation. It is not just the aggression; it is the other things about being a lone worker. I would like to see proper and robust analysis of that, and development of that, before we go towards it, but I agree that there needs to be more flexibility. It needs to be more attractive as a job.

Chair: We are doing very well for time. Do any of my colleagues want to follow up with supplementary questions?

Q28 **Steff Aquarone:** This may sound like a stupid question. I am extremely sorry to hear of the accounts you have given. Standing back and reflecting on everything that has been said so far, is the test just too cheap? Is that part of the problem? I am conscious that it is extremely expensive to learn to drive, but is there an economic factor at the bottom line?

Carly Brookfield: Yes, it probably is. There is a difficulty in that you cannot make profit on a Government service. There is always going to be that dynamic. For example, if you look at things like the theory test—you have to pass it before the practical test—it becomes a throwaway item. If you look at the number of attempts on a theory test, it is cheaper in some respects than topping up your phone. We are dealing with a youth audience. I know that we have learners over 25, but we are dealing with a mentality that is, "I'll just keep having a go at it."



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I don't think just putting in an increased cost is going to be the thing that makes them wise up about it. It might be accessibility. I am contradicting myself on accessibility and liability, but if we just allow people to keep having a go at something, its value is cheap. If we say to people, "If you fail it more than twice you're not coming back for another six months," we might have a better value determination in the mind of the consumer. I don't think just putting the price up is going to be the issue. It will be what other deterrents and incentives we can put into the system that will engender better behaviour.

Camilla Benitz: I disagree about price being the issue. It is important that we think of the users of the service and think of young people. We are already seeing a drop from 35% of 17 to 20-year-olds who used to hold a driving licence. That was back in 2019. It is now 27%. That is a really significant drop. Not being able to drive has a very significant impact on people's opportunities.

We regularly hear about that. We have one pupil at the moment who desperately wants to work in the creative industry in Manchester, but he cannot get there until he passes his test. He knows he has at least five months to wait for that test before he can start working. This is holding back young people, and it is not because of the price. Many of them are using ticket resellers. I have heard of tests reselling for £250. People are spending the money out of desperation because they need to learn to drive. They need those opportunities, and we need to support people with that, not charge them more.

Q29 **Dr Arthur:** I was going to bring this up later. I think it is a really important issue. My understanding is that the test price hasn't gone up since 2010, which is absolutely incredible. One of the things Lyndsey might hear when she is in negotiation about better pay is the constraint on the finances of the organisation. Even if the test price had kept pace with inflation, there would be more money coming into the organisation. Hopefully, Lyndsey, that would mean better pay for your members.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: This is a really difficult one and there is a spread of opinions. The problem isn't necessarily so much the cost of the test. It is the availability of the test. We cannot have this situation where we have people who, if they can afford more, get a test quicker. That is not fair and is not how the process should be.

The real issue we need to look at is why third-party test sites can buy up multiple tests, how that came to be and why it has not been reduced back to one driving licence number, one test. What happens is that third-party sites harvest the driving licence number. You put it in and then, without the learner's knowledge, they book five more tests. They are never not going to do that, because what they do is sell them on and they make commission. It is a really good business that they have identified, and until we stop it there will always be a backlog because the tests are always going to be booked up.



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As a trade union, we have asked why that cannot be repealed. The answer has been very evasive: “It’s just not that easy,” and so on. We have heard from a number of different sources in DVSA that the reason why they cannot do it is that they did not follow the proper legislative process to bring it in, and they don’t want to make people aware of that. That is why it is harder to remove. If you went back to one driving licence number and one test, I think that would help. As to whether it should be increased or not, I am not going to make a full comment on that.

Q30 Rebecca Smith: Coming back to what you said, Camilla, and what was just discussed in terms of the availability, the age and the challenge for younger people, it struck me that we are the Transport Committee, and we look at other transport challenges. Do you have data looking at regional variation, particularly between urban and rural areas? Clearly, there may well be an abundance of tests available in urban areas, where people have other options for travel, versus small market towns or countryside areas, where a young person being able to drive really is the step to accessibility and travelling around. Do you have any sense of issues in certain parts of the country or areas that are problematic?

Camilla Benitz: Yes, we do. As the AA, under the Freedom of Information Act, we have what the availability is for a test centre. We can provide that afterwards. It will show some real regional hotspots that absolutely need to be tackled to give people those opportunities.

Q31 Olly Glover: Reading your witness evidence, one gets the impression that at times things have been attempted by the DVSA that have worked for a while—for example, only letting instructors book tests. One of you said that improved things for a while, but then it was rolled back. Do you get the sense, or have you seen, that there is a coherent, structured plan looking at all the different ingredients that will lead to a recovery in the backlog and the processes?

Carly Brookfield: It has been a very reactive time for them. It is not down ended. They have had a massive backlog to get through, so I cannot blame them for reacting, particularly with the downward pressure from consumers, their Government overlords and everybody else. There have been some proactive strategies. When we have our regular quarterly meetings with DVSA, we talk in a very proactive manner. Whatever we put in place has to be sustainable, or we are just going to see the bulges again and not be able to manage them.

I am concerned about measures being a little more short term. It is difficult because if you try to return 240 people to the backline, you suffer somewhere else in your resourcing. If this is of the utmost priority for the agency at the moment, I think, as an employer myself, that I would sustain those people being in frontline posts. I am not sure what I see as more important on this for this agency at this moment in time.

It was our suggestion that the restriction of the booking system only to ADIs continued. It was successful when it was tried. The pushback on



that is that we are decreasing accessibility for pupils. With my road safety hat on, I am less concerned about that accessibility than I am about liability. The driving instructor should be the arbiter of who is ready to go to test. We are not letting them do that if we just let pupils decide, with their inexperience, when they are ready and when they are going to book the test. They, in turn, put pressure on the driver/trainer to get them ready for the test they have booked, with sometimes no discussion with the trainers themselves.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: You asked if the DVSA has a well-thought-out plan. The answer is no. You may think, "As a trade union, what is your involvement?" Bear in mind that the first time I had sight of any business case or the following extensions was on 23 October this year. They have not given them to us because we are not part of the collaboration or consultation at the start, to say, "How can we think laterally of a broad plan that will deal with this?" It is just not there. I feel it has narrowed as time has gone on, if you look at the documents. They are just focused on, "We'll get these people in and we'll do it by recruiting," but they are not hitting the recruitment targets.

There needs to be a robust look at what has and has not been achieved, with proper lateral engagement with colleagues here and everyone who has a vested interest. I don't feel the seriousness about it, particularly when I go to driver operations meetings, and they are leading it. They do not appear to really understand, in my opinion, the seriousness of the situation. They do not appear to have the concern that we all certainly have. They say, "Oh, we're going to see if it works."

Q32 **Chair:** Lyndsey, you said you were only party to some key documents late on. Presumably, PCS is the recognised union for driving examiners.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: Yes.

Q33 **Chair:** What proportion of examiners are members of the PCS?

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: I don't want to disclose that just because it is our trade union right, but it is a significant majority.

Q34 **Chair:** That's fine. Yet you say you are not included in documentation.

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: No. There has been no meaningful consultation. It is a battle every day.

Q35 **Catherine Atkinson:** You were talking about the possibilities of instructors doing part-time examining. You said there were some regulatory obstructions to that. Is it regulatory?

Carly Brookfield: You're going to ask what the regulation is, and I won't be able to tell you.

Q36 **Catherine Atkinson:** There is an element of them being paid less and having to travel further.

Chair: This is examiners.



Catherine Atkinson: Examiners. It is about whether or not we can encourage more instructors to do part-time examining to be able to fill the void. What are your thoughts on how that could be encouraged and whether or not there are barriers to that encouragement?

Sally Gilson: One of the things that we have suggested is delegated examiners. Back in 2021, I think it was, the previous Government allowed approved training providers to do the module 3a part of the HGV driver test. That is the manoeuvre test, so it is the reversing element. The bus sector already has the ability to do delegated examining and the other practical element. Obviously, if that was allowed as well within the HGV sector, it would free up quite a bit of capacity and be a good win. We have been pushing for it for some time.

Carly Brookfield: We run an examiner regime. One of the reasons people are attracted to it is the flexibility to be able to combine driver instruction and driver training. They work across all licence categories. It is not just learner. They do some part-time testing as well. I think that helps retain them. Going back to the part-time thing, if you have some variety in your role, you are more likely to enjoy it.

If we looked at some more flexible recruitment options for people, it would attract more people into the sector. It is not just driver trainers, although they are arguably the ones with the best working knowledge of the system. I agree that looking at more delegated examiner roles would be a good part of the solution as well.

Q37 **Steff Aquarone:** I'm going to make myself wildly unpopular. I am conscious that a lot of my young constituents cannot afford driving lessons, so they are taught by friends or relatives. Is there a danger that some of those initiatives actually make it much harder for those people to access driving tests? Do you have any views on that?

Carly Brookfield: I have been trialling a learning to drive programme at the moment called Milestones. It looks at what things they need to learn to pass the test and be a successful, safe and independent driver. A lot of the stuff we prescribe in the programme is e-learning and increased theory testing. In the UK, we trail badly behind other countries in terms of theory testing. Sweden has something like 12 or 13 theory tests. In the training of examiners, the training of instructors and the training of pupils, we need to get better at looking at how e-learning can be wrapped around practical training.

It sounds shocking for somebody representing practical driving instructors to be talking about e-learning, but that blend would make it more accessible to more people, as well as being more price accessible. There is the issue that learning to drive is getting very expensive. However, we encourage parents to look at investing in the process because, if you don't invest properly in the learning to drive process, it will cost you even more dearly post test when, six months down the line,



they have totalled the car and the insurance premium has gone up, with the biggest cost of all being the life of your precious child.

Camilla Benitz: To solve this, the crucial thing is to get to the root cause. I am very happy that we are talking about the importance of getting more driving examiners. Without that, the system is just grinding to a halt. For example, right now for instructors we have 57% on the “book to hold” that I mentioned—just waiting to qualify. We have an extreme shortage of driving instructors as a result. In the AA, for example, we need 300 more but they cannot qualify. That makes it harder and more expensive for learners to find a driving instructor. Until we really solve the root cause and get very focused on solving it efficiently and not getting distracted by the symptoms around it, it will be an ongoing problem. We have to look at the system as a whole. That is key.

Q38 **Chair:** I have a quick question and then a wind-up question. All warrant card holders were redeployed to conduct driving tests. What impact did that have on DVSA’s wider operations?

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: It was a really tricky time. We had a situation where driving test centre managers were doing full-time testing, so they brought people in from the vehicle side to do some of the line management, but within that key health and safety issues were missed. We have a system where, if you have had a previous candidate who has been aggressive or violent, they come with a marker so that the next time they come for a test there is a marker, and two examiners are meant to go out with them. We have had some key issues when those markers have been missed, putting our driving examiners in danger.

From the vehicle side, it is like new money for old rope or robbing Peter to pay Paul. There is only a certain number of people, and if you stretch them across, things are missed. On the vehicle side I noticed that there was a back-up in the regulatory checks they needed to do. On our side there were health and safety occurrences, because the people coming in to do line management were not as experienced. We found that the LDTMs, the test centre managers, were being both people. They were doing examining all the time and picking up on some of the issues that weren’t being covered. As I said before, the result was that we had some very distressed LDTMs. We had meetings with them and people were in tears, saying, “I can’t keep going like this.”

You will notice from the business plan that one of the things the DVSA has identified is the risk of burn-out for driving examiners and local driving test centre managers the longer this goes on. It feels like the LDTMs, who are being mandated to do additional mentoring, are always at the hard end. If you don’t watch it, they will leave. Again, we have asked for the leaving rates of driving examiners and LDTMs, and we are still waiting for them.

Q39 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I am going to ask you all very quickly what



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two things the DFT or DVSA should do to change this situation.

Camilla Benitz: I would actually just choose one thing, which is net growth of driving examiners so that there is greater availability of test slots. That net growth is really important. Retention is arguably more important than the acquisition. It is the two combined.

Carly Brookfield: I would look at considering closing off the booking system until we can get through the current crisis to anybody but ADIs, to be a better arbiter of who is truly ready for test and ready for licensing.

Sally Gilson: I am going to be greedy and have two.

Chair: I said you could have two.

Sally Gilson: Delegated examiners would ease the situation. I agree with the fact that pay and conditions have to be improved for examiners because DVSA cannot compete with the commercial world, and people will move to training instead.

Q40 **Chair:** When you say delegated examiners, do you mean just in your sector or all sectors?

Sally Gilson: I speak for our sector.

Q41 **Chair:** I just wanted to clarify that. Lyndsey?

Lyndsey Marchant-Davies: Retaining the previous terms and conditions; removing the cluster contracts; and making sure there is no further degradation of terms and conditions, as a broad one—get it all in. The second is, obviously, proper collaboration and consultation with the trade unions and other colleagues around this table in a meaningful way.

Chair: That is really useful. Thank you for your contributions today. There is a lot for us to pick up with the DFT Minister and DVSA colleagues in the second session. That brings us to the end of this session. Thank you very much for the evidence you have sent in, the time you have spent preparing and for answering our questions so comprehensively.