

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Work of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency 2021](#), HC 810

Wednesday 27 October 2021

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Members present: Huw Merriman (Chair); Robert Langan; Karl McCartney; Gavin Newlands; Greg Smith.

Questions 1–114

Witnesses

I: Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Minister of State for Roads, Buses and Places, Department for Transport; and Peter Hearn, Operations Director (North), Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Baroness Vere of Norbiton and Peter Hearn.

Q1 Chair: This is the Transport Committee's evidence session on the work of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. We have one panel, with two witnesses. I ask them to introduce themselves, starting with the Minister.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I am the Minister for Roads, Buses and Places.

Peter Hearn: I am Operations Director (North) for the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency.

Q2 Chair: Good morning to you both. You were due to be joined by the chief executive of the DVSA, Loveday Ryder, but she has tested positive for Covid and, I believe, is unwell. We send her our best wishes and thank both of you for being here this morning.

Mr Hearn, may we start by asking you to set out the responsibilities of the DVSA? A lot of people confuse it with the DVLA.

Peter Hearn: The DVSA is a road safety organisation. Its primary function is to conduct practical driving tests, on goods vehicles as well as cars. We also test heavy goods vehicles and trailers on an annual basis.

In addition, we have a roadside function, where we carry out roadside enforcement on vehicles. We also assist traffic commissioners with operator licensing. Everything related to vehicles and drivers on the road is the primary function of the DVSA.

Q3 Chair: Thank you, Mr Hearn. I was going to start by asking your boss, the chief executive, how she had found her first stint in post and what the challenges had been. Perhaps I may ask you instead, even though I know that you have been with the DVSA longer. Will you set out, as an overview, the current challenges, how the agency has dealt with the pandemic and where the agency is now in its performance?

Peter Hearn: As everybody in the world knows, in the last 18 months there has been a really challenging environment. It has been no different for the agency. Clearly, there have been some really significant issues to overcome in how we deliver some of our services, particularly driving tests. You are obviously elbow to elbow, sitting in a vehicle, in that environment. That is a really challenging one. We worked through that to maintain as many of those services as we possibly could. We went into lockdown three times, which obviously had an impact on what we could do.

On the positive side, at the roadside we carried on doing roadside enforcement activity. We adapted our procedures and ways of working to enable us to do that. That was a real positive. We also adapted how we worked on vehicle testing.



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It has been really challenging. Obviously, we are left with large backlogs. The backlog on car testing at the moment is double what we would normally expect. We normally expect to run at a backlog of about 250,000 tests. We are at double that at the moment. We have had significant periods in which we have not been able to test drivers, so we are now in a period in which we are trying to recover those services.

We are doing lots of additional things right across the organisation, with additional hours—bringing in people who can test and support additional throughput. We are continuing that.

We are also in a phase where we are doing some significant amounts of recruitment, to bring in additional examiners and support staff to enable us to expedite and speed up the process.

Q4 Chair: I was going to ask you about backlogs. Take some of your key deliverables across the sector, testing being a good example. What was the peak point of backlogs for some of those, and where are you now?

Peter Hearn: As I said, the backlog on car testing is just over 500,000 at the moment. There is a waiting time of just over 14 weeks for candidates to take a test. We have had periods when we have not been able to test, which has had a significant impact on how we deliver our services. We continued through the lockdowns to deliver tests to critical workers. We prioritised that around health, social care and hospital services, to make sure that the right people were getting the tests, where we could, but we had to do it with volunteers. That has been a challenge.

In the vehicle testing space, we gave exemptions for a period of time, which allowed us to reprofile and reorganise when we deliver tests. Obviously, that means that some of those tests are now out of sync.

Vehicle testing is a complex world because it harmonises with a service routine in the background. We have worked tirelessly with the industry to make sure that it can continue to maintain and deliver that.

The big challenge that we face at the moment is vocational testing. What we have done in that space is well documented. We have lots of support at the moment from the Ministry of Defence. We have 24 Defence driving examiners.

Q5 Chair: That is on the HGV side of it.

Peter Hearn: Yes. They are coming in to support what we can do. They are deployed across a range of test centres where we have high wait times to combat that. The wait time for vocational testing is just over two weeks at the minute, so it is relatively small. There is a lot of work to do with the industry in that space to make sure that it can make available candidates to be tested. That is the phase we are in at the moment. We are trying to understand how we can support them to make sure that they are ready for tests and that they are well prepared when they get to tests and, hopefully, pass first time.



Q6 Chair: As we go through this session, we will focus on the HGV side, as well as cars and motorbikes. I should mention that this morning we have launched an inquiry into the transport supply chain and logistics, so we will deliberately not go too wide this morning and stay narrow. Both of you may be pleased about that.

You said that half a million people are waiting to take their driving tests. What do you mean by "waiting"? Do you work on the basis that they could be waiting to have it tomorrow?

Peter Hearn: They are booked into our booking system. We have a 24-week window for booking at the moment. They are in that booking backlog.

Q7 Chair: In 2019, how many would you have expected to have at this time of year?

Peter Hearn: Normally, it would be around half that. We would expect to have somewhere in the region of 250,000 in that system. That would probably equate to a waiting time of around six weeks.

Q8 Chair: Do you escalate those drivers whom you consider to be in critical workforce areas?

Peter Hearn: We do. We have a process for them to apply and come forward to us. We will expedite people in critical roles. We have continued that right from the start of the pandemic. We continue to do it today.

Q9 Chair: My daughter is one of your 500,000. I dare say that, as a student, she is not in that category.

Peter Hearn: I am afraid not.

Chair: That is fair enough.

Q10 Karl McCartney: One of the phrases that you keep repeating is, "It was really challenging." I am sure that it was. Your staff did not work during the downtime of the three lockdowns. What did they do during that time? You may want to take a pen, because I have quite a lot of questions like this. What did they do during the downtime? Obviously, they were not conducting tests.

What did you, your senior management team and Ms Ryder do during those challenging times when you realised that you were not doing tests? How many people did take tests that you prepared during those lockdowns? I am very pleased that some of your staff volunteered to conduct those tests.

In that downtime and those lockdowns, you foresaw that it was going to be really challenging afterwards. How many extra people have you recruited? How many times during the week will your examiners work outside the hours of 9 to 5? Are you conducting any tests at weekends at this point in time to get rid of the backlog of a quarter or half a million people who require tests to be taken?



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Peter Hearn: Just before Covid appeared, we brought iPads into the organisation to collect the test result data. That allowed us to communicate constantly with examiners and the rest of the organisation. Before that, we would have been in a really difficult place, because we did not have that facility. That allowed us to engage.

We used some of the staff to help us in spaces like the contact centre and to do other things that they could support. But we found ourselves in that really difficult place where being able to conduct the actual physical test was not possible because of restrictions, lockdowns and so on.

We asked for volunteers. A number of volunteers—around 250—came forward. They carried out in the region of 16,000 tests to support vulnerable people who needed to be tested, for obvious reasons, particularly in the health service.

The other side of it was that we had to try to do things with staff on learning and development—anything that we could do. It was really difficult. There were times when, physically, there was nothing that we could do because of the restrictions we were working under.

Q11 **Karl McCartney:** Understood. Were any of your staff therefore put on furlough, or did you continue paying them all 100% of their salary?

Peter Hearn: No. Because of the status of civil servant, the furlough did not apply.

Karl McCartney: I know. I just wanted to make sure that it was on the record.

Q12 **Chair:** It is a fair point. TfL did.

Peter Hearn: We are now looking to recruit in the region of 300 staff. At the moment, we have just short of 90 who are actually in the business. The difference with this cadre of people is that they will work a five-over-seven contract. We are going to work over the weekend, as well as during the week. One of the challenges at a test centre will be how many people you can physically get in, because of the traffic flow. Expanding the service over seven days allows us to get a bigger throughput.

Q13 **Karl McCartney:** Has that started?

Peter Hearn: Yes. Those people are in the business. There are only 80 so far. Another 130 are in the training process.

Q14 **Karl McCartney:** How long has that been taking place?

Peter Hearn: The training process?

Q15 **Karl McCartney:** No—working over weekends.

Peter Hearn: We have been using existing staff who have been volunteering to do overtime. We have been doing that throughout. We would do that at a normal time. That would be a normal practice.



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Inevitably, because we are going through a training process, we need to stand up weekend working for the new staff. We are still integrating and bringing through those people. A lot of those staff have just left training, so we have to make sure that the learning and development process concludes before we can put them in.

Q16 Karl McCartney: Is there an end in sight? When do you think that the backlog will be reduced?

Peter Hearn: That is a challenging question. At the moment, if you look at the profile of where we are going, it will probably be early 2023 before we get to that space. That is as we are now. We are looking at every option. We are having conversations with third parties about some private sector support with that. There are a number of organisations that do similar things to us. What we do is very unique in the driving test space, but there are others who do assessments in driving. We have been having conversations with a number of those people and are looking to progress that to see whether there is any support that they could give us and whether we could do some development with them and train them to work alongside us for a period of time.

Q17 Karl McCartney: As a senior management team, have you learnt any lessons? Do you think that you could have done things better?

Peter Hearn: You can always do things better. Some of the challenges of these things are not immediately obvious when you start. There were issues with some of the support systems. Our booking system was towards the end of its life, and we knew that we were going to replace it. The ability to move candidates' tests around when we had lockdowns was extremely challenging because that was a manual process. There are things that we would do differently in that respect.

The thing that was paramount right from the start was the safety of staff. The conversations that we had with the Health and Safety Executive and Public Health England were about that. We were dealing with three different Administrations, so things were moving at different speeds and paces in different parts of the country. We created a safe environment in all aspects of what we do. We had to make sure that when we were able to operate it was a safe environment and we did not put anybody at any more risk than we should have.

Karl McCartney: Those are commendable answers. Thank you.

Q18 Chair: I want to focus again on the 500,000 who are waiting. Am I right in saying—I am showing my age here—that there is a requirement to take the theory test before you go on to your practical, but you have to have taken your theory test within a certain period of time of your practical? I do not know how long that is. I am sorry to display my ignorance.

Peter Hearn: Yes. The theory test lasts for a two-year period, and you need a valid theory test to be able to take the practical.



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Q19 **Chair:** Did a number of drivers have to resit their theory test because they could not get a practical in time?

Peter Hearn: There were candidates for whom, unfortunately, the theory test expired within that period of time, so they had to resit.

Q20 **Chair:** Did they get their money back, or did they have to pay again—it was their loss?

Peter Hearn: There was nothing that we could do in that respect because it is a service that they have had. They have had the theory test and have paid for that service. There was no way of refunding it because they had actually had the service. It was unlike the driving test. If your driving test was cancelled or moved, you would be refunded or we would move you into a different space because you had not had the service.

Q21 **Chair:** How much is it to book another theory test?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: It is £23.

Q22 **Chair:** Does that seem fair? I am sure that a lot of these are young people. It was not their fault that they were not able to take their test in time—it was the pandemic. Other people have been bailed out due to the pandemic. These drivers were not.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Am I allowed to answer?

Chair: Yes, please.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Excellent. We thought about this long and hard. Of course, when you take a theory test you have two years in which to pass your practical test. Towards the start of the lockdown there was a significant call for people to have their test refunded. Of course, they have already sat that test. They had a two-year opportunity in which to take their practical test. Indeed, they could have done so. The DVSA has to break even, to the best of its ability. These are people who have taken a test and received the service. One does not know why they did not take their practical test. There could be any number of reasons—not necessarily the pandemic. It would not have been fair on people paying fees in the future to subsidise those people who, for whatever reason, were not able to take their practical test.

Q23 **Chair:** I can see that point, but you could probably look at a lot of the £400 billion that the Government have put into support during the pandemic and say, "Is it fair for everybody, in every instance?" It just seems that they were slightly left behind. While it is a fair point that they could have taken it within the period, they actually had two years. It was not their fault that they were not able to do it within the two years because the pandemic intervened.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: That is true, but several thousand people let their theory test lapse every month, anyway. We looked at it. We would have had to change legislation. We felt that it was not appropriate,



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because those people had already received the service for which they had paid.

Q24 **Chair:** That is fair enough.

The last question that I want to ask is about the financial situation of the DVSA. Again, Mr Hearn, perhaps I am putting this on to you, with Ms Ryder not being here. The DVSA did not break even in the financial year ending 2021. I can imagine why. Can you give us a bit more detail on the financial situation and why the break-even did not occur?

Peter Hearn: I am not an expert in this space, so apologies.

Q25 **Chair:** I totally understand.

Peter Hearn: We are an organisation that is predominantly for driving and vehicle services. The organisation delivers a service and is paid a test fee for that purpose. We saw significant periods of time when we could not test, so the income was lower throughout that period.

That is challenging. Every element of what we do has to cover its costs. The service has to cover its costs. Trying to balance the costs of how you deliver that service and trying to modernise is always difficult, but we have tried to continue to make sure that we do that. There are things that we are doing around some of the fees to reassess some of those costs, inevitably, but that is just business as usual at our end.

Q26 **Chair:** Given that you have a backlog that you are clearing with some haste, do you expect the financial position to improve and, perhaps, to make up some of the losses in the financial year we are in now?

Peter Hearn: There is a lot of recovering of some of that revenue. As you say, we have a backlog to recover, so you would expect the position to improve. We need to reassess that.

As we know, there are things that we need to adapt and change as a result of some of the challenges that have arisen throughout the pandemic. I referred to the booking system. There are investments that the organisation, like any organisation, needs to make. We will continue to do that. Trying to provide the best service that we can for the fee that we charge is always a balancing act.

Q27 **Chair:** Minister, why was the DVSA's trading fund status revoked in April 2021? I believe that I am right in saying that that status was revoked in April 2021. Was that for the reasons that Mr Hearn has described?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I do not have the answer to that question. My understanding, when it happened, was that it was a rather internal governmental decision. I will have to write to set it out. There were certain reasons for that.

Q28 **Chair:** It probably would not be right to speculate, but—

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: It does not necessarily matter.



Q29 **Chair:** No. I just wondered whether, if an agency is not going to break even, its status is revoked for that period. Perhaps the Department could write to us to let us know the process for that and why. That would be great.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Of course.

Chair: Good. In a way, that is just as well, because I have taken far too long. I want to hand over to Greg Smith, who will start us off in the space of HGVs and LGVs.

Q30 **Greg Smith:** Good morning. Minister, would you mind explaining, for the record, the changes to the driving test for HGVs that are coming into place next month? We can then delve into them a little.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: The change that is coming in within the HGV test is to manoeuvres. I need to be clear. It is not a change to the test. It is a change to the person who will administer the test.

A few weeks ago, I was in Llantrisant, where I watched the reversing test. It is very clear that it is very well documented. The lengths of the track are very well documented, with bollards, and the candidate has to reverse in. What we hope to do in this SI is to delegate the trainers to do that reversing test and the coupling and recoupling test instead.

Of course, delegating various elements of driver testing is not new. We have delegated examiners in various companies. We are talking to the sector about it taking on that responsibility. What that does, of course, is free up the first section of the test so that the DVSA examiner can do the on-road driving tests and does not need to do what are very clear and well-documented procedures.

There is no change to the test itself. The standards will remain the same. Of course, the DVLA will check the trainers to make sure that they are doing it properly, as we do any delegated examiners.

Q31 **Greg Smith:** That is very helpful. I want to think through some of the reasons for the change. There is the backlog, but there is also the clear commitment from the Government to meet the skills shortage that we have domestically. It is very easy to see how rationalisation of who does what within the testing process can help to get through the backlog more quickly, but it does not really answer how we skill up the domestic workforce and get the HGV and LGV drivers of the future from the United Kingdom. Can you give us your thoughts on how these changes will—or will not—help that process?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Of course. The HGV driver shortage is a very, very long-standing issue, as the Transport Committee well knows. Its causes are very complex and varied. For example, more people leave the sector—of their own volition, not for retirement—every year than ever left over Brexit.



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We have put together a package that is currently at 25 measures, but counting. We aim not only to address the availability of candidates coming into the sector, but the availability of training, the availability of testing and the suitability of the sector for a long-term career. It is about lots of different things going on within the entire career journey for an HGV driver. Of course, it involves not only the haulage employers but their customers, who provide the regional distribution centres, and the DVLA, which provides the testing, so it is very complicated.

We have done a number of things with regard to testing. We started off doing about 1,500 tests a week. With operational changes, we increased that by 300. We then had a further 550 by removing the B+E, which is the car plus trailer test. We have the Defence driver examiners in there, which is an extra 500. Manoeuvres will give us 500. Staging will give us 200. At the end of it, we will have gone from 1,500 to 3,550 a week.

Of course, the next challenge is, will we have people to fill those slots? We must work, and are working, with the training sector. What we had to do by increasing testing was to give the training sector the confidence to skill up, because it will have to purchase new vehicles and train more trainers. It will probably have to expand its operation to get people to come through.

One of the 25 measures was that I wrote to 1 million HGV licence holders to encourage them to come back. That is really important to get people back into the system. We are also doing all sorts of things with the newly unqualified people, whether it be with DWP, whether it be via the boot camp or whether it be encouraging the hauliers themselves to do more training. Historically, they have not paid for training. It has been up to the individual to pay for training. Training costs about £3,000, so it is not cheap. We think that there should be a fairer balance on the cost of training between the individual and the sector itself.

There are lots of moving parts, but we are intervening wherever we have a lever to make the system work more efficiently. The work of the DVLA is part of that.

Q32 **Greg Smith:** I appreciate that answer. May we focus just on the testing regime changes? What is the gap? Clearly, it makes sense for the trainers to be able to assess the trailer bit and things like coupling and decoupling. That makes total sense to me. Are there enough of them? You just talked about training the trainers. Where are we numerically? I appreciate that you are not going to give me a precise number, but can you give me a ballpark figure for where the gap is sitting at the moment between a perfect scenario to clear the backlog—and for the long term—and where we are today?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: We are doing some strategic assessment of the training sector at the moment. As you can understand, it is incredibly diverse. We know that the sector is very keen to take on this



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responsibility. We work very closely with it to do so and are working with it to train people up.

I do not have a number for you at the moment, but we know that, for example, there was a slight uptick in the wait time for an HGV test. I think that that demonstrates that people are coming through the system. I know from the DVLA that the number of provisional licences that are coming in has increased massively.

We know that it is working. It is such a big and diverse sector that it is very difficult to get anything more than estimates, but we are working very hard on any estimated shortage on the trainer side at the moment. I will happily write when we have finished our work on that.

Q33 Greg Smith: That would be helpful.

One of the concerns about any change to the testing regime that we read about in the press and that some people have raised is a safety concern. Can I put the question to you in this way? What assessment has there been of any potential safety implications of the changes to the testing regime? More pointedly, were we just doing it wrong in the first place? Is this the better model to get people through the necessary testing regime in a manner that means that they are safe to go on our roads?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I do not think that it is a question of getting it wrong or getting it right. I just think that there are other ways of doing things. Certain elements of what we have had to go through during the pandemic have meant that certain changes have been made that, potentially, were not made before. It is an opportunity, but it does not necessarily mean that everything was wrong beforehand.

As I said, on the HGV side, there will be no change to standards. We can take that as read. It is just moving from one person to another, to meet the same standards.

The concerns that I am hearing the most are around B+E testing, which is the car plus trailer test. When we did the consultation, we had 9,541 responses, which is a large number. We had twice as many people agreeing as we had disagreeing about removing the trailer test.

We should recognise that many of us in this room already have the ability to drive a trailer, even though we have never done a test. I have never driven a trailer. Certainly, if I were to do so, I would want to get some training beforehand.

What we are doing at the moment is working up, in collaboration with the industry, an accreditation scheme to ensure that people realise that if you are an inexperienced trailer driver training is still a very valuable part of road safety. We all have to take road safety responsibilities all the time. We are working with the industry on that. Of course, we will continue to support communications campaigns and other campaigns that recognise road safety relating to trailers.



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Q34 **Greg Smith:** I have a question on the same point, before I hand back to the Chairman.

Mr Hearn, on a practical, on-the-ground basis, which is the better—the system that we had or the system that will come in on 15 November? Forget the pandemic. Which is the more optimal scenario?

Peter Hearn: The trainer element of this is something that they train for. They have the facilities to use, so it seems to be the right way to move forward. It is complex, as we said, but we are going through a process to stand that up as we speak. The independence of somebody doing that part of the test is there. It will not be the case that somebody trains as well as tests. I am completely happy and satisfied that that is in place.

Chair: We have just come into an area that may be quite relevant to Mr McCartney, but he also wants to raise a matter that I may have heard him raise once or twice before.

Q35 **Karl McCartney:** I think that you visited Llantrisant.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Llantrisant, yes.

Q36 **Karl McCartney:** I just wanted to give you another opportunity to say it correctly. Did you actually have a go at reversing a vehicle and doing part of the test? Did you do better than the Leader of the Opposition?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Sadly, I did not. However, I am going to DHL in Daventry on Friday. I may be able to drive a truck there. I may see whether I can do some reversing and, perhaps, do better than the Leader of the Opposition.

Q37 **Karl McCartney:** It would be remiss of me not to say that, if you are travelling the country and having a drive of a lorry, you know that one Mr Dick Denby would be very happy to show you his computerised trailer. That can take place at Newark or anywhere in the east midlands, should you be up there at any point in the near or distant future. I am sure that he would love to show you what I have banged on about on plenty of occasions. Hopefully, you will accept that invitation.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: Mr McCartney, thank you very much for the invitation, as ever.

Q38 **Karl McCartney:** You covered people passing their test at 17 and being able to drive with a trailer. Obviously, not all trailers are 3.5 tonnes. Let me burrow down into that. Are you proposing to allow 17-year-olds who pass their driving test to have a vehicle with a trailer, but recommend that they should take some training, or are you looking to impose a restriction on 17, 18 or 19-year-olds, or whatever age people might first pass their driving test?

Baroness Vere: We would strongly recommend that anybody of any age gets training before taking a trailer out. It is something, obviously, that a lot of people never do in their entire driving lifetime. It is a certain group of people that do so.



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The other issue to recognise is that many people who drive with trailers do so in a workplace. For example, one of the people that we have on our Trailer Training Advisory Group is Kier, the road surfacing people. They drive round with trailers all the time.

Q39 Karl McCartney: But for private individuals who pass their test, obviously an occasional trip to a tip with a small trailer on the back is a bit different from towing a very heavy trailer or a 3 tonnes caravan, for instance.

Baroness Vere: Yes. People will obviously make their own decisions as to the extent of the training that they need, depending on what they are driving. If you are towing a very small trailer full of garden rubbish, that is rather different from towing a caravan down the A303.

Q40 Karl McCartney: I wanted to check that there are not going to be regulations in place. You are not going to change the law, now that we no longer have our EU driving licence. A UK driving licence will allow those who pass their test to drive a vehicle with a trailer.

Baroness Vere: Yes, it will. Of course, just to note, there will be a post-implementation review of this legislation after three years and five years. There is opportunity for us to consider it again in the future. Yes, we think that is right.

Chair: Returning to HGVs, we have covered the licensing and we have moved into testing. We have lots of question on testing, specifically. I will hand over to Robert Largan to start us off.

Q41 Robert Largan: Apologies for being a few minutes late, and good morning to the witnesses.

Mr Hearn, I have a few fairly straightforward quick questions.

How many people obtained the various categories of HGV driving licence in 2020?

Peter Hearn: We do around 25,000 tests in a year. That is our normal expectation. I think I am quoting it right.

Baroness Vere: Shall we write with that information?

Peter Hearn: Yes. I think it might be better.

Baroness Vere: We can be very precise, obviously.

Q42 Robert Largan: I was trying to gauge the difference between 2020 and a usual year, pre-pandemic. What was the rough difference between those years? That would be a helpful barometer.

Peter Hearn: As we said before, in effect we are doing double the number of tests now to recover: 1,500 tests a week would have been our normal amount. We are now doing double that, to recover that backlog. That is the kind of weekly figure. I will probably have to write to you.



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Q43 **Chair:** That is 1,500 HGV tests?

Peter Hearn: They would be vocational tests. Obviously, a small element of that would be buses as well, but that is relatively small.

Q44 **Chair:** But not cars?

Peter Hearn: No; purely vocational.

Baroness Vere: Basically, we lost eight months of tests. That is the rough and ready—

Q45 **Robert Largan:** So we lost eight months and we are trying to make up for it?

Baroness Vere: Yes.

Peter Hearn: Yes.

Q46 **Robert Largan:** If you can write with specific figures, that would be very helpful.

Baroness Vere: Of course we will.

Q47 **Robert Largan:** What is the current demand for HGV drivers' licences? We have talked about the number increasing from 1,500 to 3,500. Is that where we are up to?

Peter Hearn: Just over 3,000, yes.

Q48 **Robert Largan:** That is the capacity. Are we filling those 3,000 a week?

Peter Hearn: As we have said, there has been a slight lag. The training industry is now catching up. We have put in place a team of engagement managers to start to understand that industry and what that demand is. We have nine people in the team who are working with that industry. They are working with the major operators to understand what their capacity is, what they need and where that demand is going to come from. We are in the early stages of that, but we have upscaled our test delivery. We are obviously trying to make sure that we match that with what the industry is looking for.

Q49 **Robert Largan:** Leading on to that, do we have figures on what the average wait is for someone to get a practical test and theory test for an HGV drivers' licence? What is the wait?

Peter Hearn: On vocational, the wait this week is just over two weeks. It is 2.3 weeks. It is a very low figure, but it is the scaling up of the industry and the confidence level that we are working on, to know that they can bring in more vehicles and more trainers, and start to meet that. We had to make those tests available and give them the confidence to be able to upscale.

Q50 **Robert Largan:** Minister, two weeks is quite a low wait period. That is quite good. In your view, was the previous wait and delays a significant



factor?

Baroness Vere: No; it really was not. For HGV tests, it is the trainer that usually books the test. You have a little cohort of people come through your door and you have some tests booked in the future. You do not necessarily decide which person is going to take that test in the future, but as the trainer you are the person that tends to book them.

The biggest concern that I have—and I am sure Peter is working very hard on it—are regional and site variations. I will hear from some truckers in some areas that they cannot get people through quick enough. It is really making sure that we are balancing the resources properly, which is why we have put the 24 Defence driving examiners in our busiest places. As ever, there is always regional variation.

Q51 **Robert Largan:** Mr Hearn, does the DVSA have sufficient examiners to meet demand at the moment?

Peter Hearn: We have 289 vocational examiners, supplemented by the MOD support that we are getting at the moment. As we come to the change to the manoeuvre, that will add more capacity because we will be able to do five tests in a day.

We are in the process of recruiting more examiners. We have an additional 40 coming into the organisation. We will obviously keep on top of that, and we will adjust it if the demand is changing. That's the profile support that we are getting.

The conversation with the MOD is ongoing. We will reassess that need. If there is a need to have further support from them, we will obviously do that and negotiate.

Q52 **Robert Largan:** That is good to hear. How does that 289 figure, with 40 on the way, compare historically with, say, 10 years ago or pre-Covid? What numbers of examiners have we had in the past?

Peter Hearn: I would have to come back to you on that and look backwards. I can do that and write to the Committee.

Q53 **Robert Largan:** If you could, that would be great, just so we can see historically where we are with capacity.

You have talked about the steps you have taken to recruit more drivers, and there are another 40 on the way, which is good. You also touched on the Ministry of Defence HGV examiners being deployed. How many of them are being used, and when did that start from?

Peter Hearn: We trained 25 and we are using 24. We have one in reserve, as it were. They are deployed across 18 of our test centres at the moment. We review that weekly, and with 24 hours' notice the MOD can move those staff. We will move a couple around in the next week or so. Obviously, some of that demand is changing. I think it has given us a lot of flexibility. We have internal flexibility, but this has added to that



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and allowed us to be able to move to meet demand wherever it is needed.

Q54 **Robert Largan:** You say that has been really helpful.

Peter Hearn: It has been really helpful. It has also been really helpful for the MOD because sergeants predominantly do it. They could be testing a whole range of vehicles. This has allowed them to focus on vocational and HGV in particular, so it has been a really good exercise for them as well. The feedback that we are getting is that they have got a lot out of this, as well as us welcoming the support that they are giving.

Q55 **Chair:** Rob, may I interrupt to clear our records? You say that there are 289 examiners, but you have another 25 from the MOD. That is a total of 314. You have 3,500 tests per week. That means you have just over 11 tests per examiner.

Peter Hearn: We do four tests in a day at the moment. When we remove the manoeuvre, that will go up to five in a day.

Q56 **Chair:** I know that not everyone is available on the same day, but if you average it out you should be able to clear 11 tests per week, if you have 314. You say that they can do four a day anyway.

Peter Hearn: That is what we do at the moment. We are doing four a day, yes, and then we will change to five as we have more time because we will take the manoeuvre out.

Q57 **Chair:** On that basis, they can do that in two days. Why can you not clear through more than 3,500?

Peter Hearn: The thing that we have been saying is that the challenge for the industry is the training regime. It is that ability to train, prepare and present people for tests. That is the next step in this chain that we are working on and trying to understand, so that we can make sure there is more capacity in the industry to train more people.

Q58 **Chair:** What I am saying is that with 314 working, to get through 3,500 tests, they need to do only two a day. I recognise that not everyone is there on the same day, but you must be able to do more than 3,500. That is what I am saying.

Baroness Vere: I completely get what you are saying, and I would like to look into that. There will be issues around centre utilisation. There will be holidays, etc. There may be some who are part time. Perhaps we will just investigate that a bit further. I agree that, with that number of people, why on the face of it are we not doing more tests?

Robert Largan: That was going to be my next question.

Chair: Sorry, Robert. I have given you some figures. Maths is not my strong point, but I think this is all right.

Q59 **Robert Largan:** How many of your examiners are full time and how



many are part time?

Peter Hearn: I do not have that figure in front of me. The total complement is 1,500 and 92 full-time equivalents. The headcount is slightly different because some of those are part time. That is the make-up of it. Obviously, 289 of those do vocational testing and the remainder do cars and motorcycles.

Q60 **Robert Largan:** To change tack slightly, Minister, can you explain in a bit more detail the proposals to allow the emergency services to test their own drivers? Is there a danger that they are going to end up marking their own homework?

Baroness Vere: No. Delegated examiners have been around for a very long time. The DVSA, obviously, not only puts the examiners through their paces in the first instance but checks what they do on an ongoing basis. The proposals are for emergency services to test each other's drivers. It just puts extra flexibility into the system. We think it is a helpful thing to do. There is no impact on safety. There is no change to the quality of the examiners. It would just be helpful to give them a bit more flexibility.

Robert Largan: I am just wondering how much easier my articles would have been when I was training to be an accountant if my own firm could have marked my work for me. Thank you very much.

Q61 **Chair:** Some of the driver training schools would welcome more delegated powers, and perhaps their work is then audited. Do you think that is a viable way forward, or does it compromise independence and safety?

Baroness Vere: Delegated testing happens in all sorts of different places. For example, in aviation, commercial pilots are tested by a delegated tester. I am not saying that using the private sector is a bad thing. The interesting thing is that much of the private sector is not currently involved. Peter was talking about the tender that we put out to see if they had any people we could train up very quickly to be driving examiners. Nobody came forward for the tender at all.

I would not rule out the greater involvement of the private sector in the future, but obviously they would have to have the capacity to be able to step in. Again, as I said for the manoeuvres, it is a small part of the test. It is an important part of the test and a very well-defined part of the test. We think that the sector can do it. We would not be in the market for just moving the entire test to the private sector, for any number of reasons, including the fact that they may not have the capacity.

Q62 **Chair:** You said that you would look into the numbers—

Baroness Vere: I am going to look into those numbers, yes.

Q63 **Chair:** I will write to you on behalf of the Committee and say, "This is how I read it," and that starts that process off.



Baroness Vere: Great.

Q64 **Karl McCartney:** I do not know which one of the two of you might be able to answer this range of questions. I am going to drill down on HGV qualified numbers. Who is responsible for training and the extra testing of petrochemical HGV drivers—those who deliver our fuel?

Baroness Vere: That is the ADR people.

Q65 **Karl McCartney:** So, nothing to do with you, then. Peter?

Peter Hearn: No. We just do the practical test—the physical driving test itself—and that is a separate process.

Q66 **Karl McCartney:** For those who need it, whether it is a closed shop or not, the numbers of those people who are qualified to deliver fuel to our fuel stations is a separate thing industry-wide?

Peter Hearn: Yes.

Q67 **Karl McCartney:** Are you aware of any numbers of those people who are qualified to do that, or not?

Peter Hearn: Not at the minute. I would have to go away and write back to you on that.

Q68 **Karl McCartney:** Fine; in which case I am going to direct that to you.

Baroness Vere: Yes, we do have those numbers but I do not have them to hand.

Q69 **Karl McCartney:** The question I would like to ask is: four months ago, how many qualified fuel delivery drivers were there? Does that compare well to what there were a year ago or two years ago? How many were there two months ago? Some of us think that there might not have been a shortage of drivers. How many do we have every year? What is the natural wastage? Is there a 10% turnover of those numbers every year? How many extra are trained per year? It is to try to ensure that we do not have the run on fuel that we had a few months ago. I will leave that with you, and you can write back to us.

Baroness Vere: I will very happily do so, but, of course, this has nothing to do with the DVSA. We have done an ADR extension, so anybody whose ADR is going to expire will have until 31 January to redo it. We have done targeted comms to ADR holders to invite them to come back to the sector. Of course, we have mobilised MOD tankers.

Going back to the crux of the matter, yes, there were some vacancies in the sector, but there had been for quite some time. Nothing had happened. As we know, there was a run on fuel. That was caused by specific circumstances and not by a shortage of fuel within our country.



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Anyway, the sector is well aware. I can give you exact stats on where we are. We helpfully had some MOD drivers to help out and make sure that the petrol stations are full to the brim.

Q70 **Karl McCartney:** E10 fuel rather than E5 now.

Baroness Vere: Indeed. We are obviously keeping that under review. I will get all the stats for you.

Q71 **Gavin Newlands:** You have touched on various elements of the consultation. I want to move on to why the Department has decided to consult on the changes. Is it specifically for the HGV driver shortage?

Baroness Vere: Yes. It was prompted by the HGV driver shortage but, as I said, for many responses to the coronavirus pandemic, it has presented us with an opportunity. We did have a lot of responses to the consultation—9,541. If I look at the sorts of things that we were asking, yes, it was in response to the pandemic, but in slower time would we have done the same thing? Quite possibly.

Q72 **Gavin Newlands:** I accept that the driver shortages had been ongoing for some time and exacerbated by the circumstances of Brexit, but why is the Government making a permanent change to the HGV driving test to tackle what is, at this point in time, a short-term crisis?

Baroness Vere: I have possibly tried to explain that already. There is an opportunity to do this now. We do feel that a permanent change is appropriate. In many other circumstances, you take the opportunity when you see it. If I look at the responses to the consultation, first, there were many of them and, secondly, they substantially agreed with the measures being proposed.

Q73 **Gavin Newlands:** I suppose there are those who think it is potentially a diminution in safety.

Baroness Vere: They would have responded to the consultation as well.

Q74 **Gavin Newlands:** There were many voices—RHA, among others, and Andrew Malcolm, who is no stranger to the Government. He is chief executive of the Malcolm Group, which is based in my constituency. He is concerned. In principle he says that he obviously understands—I think we can all understand—why you have tried to make these changes. It is to unlock test dates, but he is seriously concerned about the safety aspect. He thinks that you have cut far too much out of the process of the test. That was his biggest worry.

What do you say to Andrew and others involved in the industry who think you have just gone too far?

Baroness Vere: I have not cut anything out of the process of the test, unless he is talking about staging, where people do not have to do a class C to go to a class C and E.

Q75 **Gavin Newlands:** I think it is the fact that you have deleted elements of



the testing. Some elements have been cut from the test itself. I think those are the concerns. You do not think that there will be any impact whatsoever on road safety or safety in yards across the country as a result?

Baroness Vere: Of course, road safety is our primary concern. What we have done within the concept of the consultation is to ask people to share their views with us. We have listened really carefully to what they say. We will take away what they have said. There will be an impact assessment, which will set everything out.

With regard to the concerns raised by the Malcolm Group, it would be interesting to hear exactly what they are. The substance of the test for the manoeuvres, for example, is not changing. It is just who is actually testing it. As I have said, much delegated testing goes on.

The alternative that he might be talking about is staging, where you used to have to take two tests. You would have to take your class C and then your class C plus E. We are saying that you can go straight to class C plus E, which given that we have a shortage of articulated drivers seems eminently sensible.

Q76 **Gavin Newlands:** I think that was the specific point he was talking about. It was the single test for articulated vehicles. There is that slight concern about trading off safety against recruitment—from some, not all, because you have made the point about the consultation responses.

Who do we ultimately hold responsible? In a few months' time or a year's time we will see the results. Is it the DVSA or the DFT that are ultimately responsible for the effects on road safety of these changes?

Baroness Vere: The SIs will go through their parliamentary process. There will be an impact assessment. Everybody will be able to see that. We have to note that as we are reviewing all these we have to have safety absolutely at the top of our minds, and we must do whatever we can to make sure that there is no diminution in road safety.

Q77 **Gavin Newlands:** It has been said that with the changes there are expected to be up to 30,000 slots made available for HGV tests. I have been sent lots of correspondence on these issues. It has already been admitted that there are not enough trainers to fill that gap at the moment. You obviously have a recruitment exercise under way, but there is a concern from one trainer—a former DVSA employee—who said that a number of these slots are already being taken up by normal car driving tests rather than any vocational tests. Is that the case? What proportion thus far of the extra slots made available are being used by cars?

Peter Hearn: We have not converted any of those slots that have not been used to car testing. They have all gone to vocational. They are all available for people to use.



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Baroness Vere: But you could understand that if eventually we have to use short-notice car tests, why wouldn't you?

Q78 **Gavin Newlands:** If we do not have enough examiners for the vocational—

Peter Hearn: You do not want examiners sat around if they could do a different test and reduce the backlog elsewhere. We would obviously use that, but we have not done any so far.

Gavin Newlands: I think we have kicked that specific question around enough. Thank you, Chair.

Q79 **Greg Smith:** We have talked about the desire to get more people learning to drive HGVs. One of the things that has come out, which you mentioned earlier, Minister, is the skills bootcamps. There has been a lot of speculation, not just from the HGV world but from the regular car-driving learning experience that this Committee has looked at in the past, about whether bootcamps are a good way to learn a skill like this. For what it is worth, I have no question over them from the car evidence we saw.

What analysis has been done, either by using international comparators or a straightforward table-top exercise, to determine how robust a bootcamp is as opposed to the way in which people have historically learnt to drive an HGV?

Baroness Vere: I am slightly concerned that the word "bootcamp" is being taken as read. This is a DFE policy. There is an accelerated procurement that is out there at the moment. It closed on 22 October. The activity is due to start in November.

If you or I wanted to become an HGV driver, our training would probably take us about three weeks. These bootcamps are not trying to do some sort of ridiculous, compress-it-into-five-days type of thing. There is nothing to suggest that they would be anything other than what a standard training would be if you were to go into the private sector. I can find out more information from the Department for Education on that, particularly as the procurement has probably yielded some results now.

Q80 **Greg Smith:** That is fair enough. Are you aware of any other international comparators where the training of HGV drivers is done radically differently from the way we have done it in the United Kingdom?

Baroness Vere: I will pass on to Mr Hearn in a second, but can I add that training for a qualification and training in the job are two different things? We have to understand that, when somebody does go into a particular employer, they will have lots of different vehicles of lots of different types. It is rather like driving in a different car. You need a bit of time in it to get used to it. It is not the case that somebody comes out with their HGV licence, hops into the nearest cab and drives up to Coventry. There is a period of adjustment. There will always be a period of training in the procedures for the relevant employer.



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I will hand over to Mr Hearn in case he knows anything about the international position.

Peter Hearn: There is nothing in terms of comparators elsewhere. What we are doing is comparable with everybody else. There is nothing that stands out that others are doing differently in that respect. We continue to have conversations with colleagues right across Europe, and right across the world in some cases, to understand that. We continue, and we always will do, to see what innovation other people are bringing in, if anything.

Q81 **Greg Smith:** Where is it best in the world to learn to be an HGV driver? I very much hope the answer is the United Kingdom.

Baroness Vere: This country.

Peter Hearn: The United Kingdom, absolutely.

Baroness Vere: We have the best road safety records in the world.

Q82 **Greg Smith:** Fantastic. That is what we like to hear.

We have probably done HGV learning and testing enough. My final question is this. How many people do you want, or do you aim, to get through their initial training and then into the workplace to do their in-job training over the next 12 months, either through the DFE's skills pilot or the more traditional route?

Baroness Vere: Obviously, we want to provide as many people as the sector needs. Trying to get a handle on exactly what the acute shortage of drivers is versus the longer-term systemic shortage is quite tricky. We think it is probably about 35,000. Again, the graph does not go like that because we tick up at various times of the year when different things happen in haulage. By the end of 2022, all being well, there should no longer be anything that you could refer to as an acute crisis.

This is not just a thing that the Government can solve. It must be up to the industry to come forward, too. If everything goes well from what we are doing, that is what we expect to happen.

Q83 **Greg Smith:** I am totally on board that it is not the Government's problem to solve.

Baroness Vere: It is for other people too.

Q84 **Greg Smith:** From that helicopter position that the Government have, looking at the industry, in terms of the sufficiency of numbers wishing to learn to drive an HGV, does that 35,000 include retraining from other driving professions? I know for a fact from a coach company that you visited, Minister, in my constituency that they are losing coach drivers to go and become HGV drivers. With the 35,000, is that just on HGVs, and then we are going to find ourselves 20,000 coach drivers short later, or is it a pretty holistic number?



Baroness Vere: I recognise that there is going to be a transition. Obviously, I hear it from local authorities as well because some of their refuse drivers are choosing to go to different jobs. It is certainly not our intention to try to poach any drivers from any industry at all. People will change as the market circumstances change. Pay has gone up in certain areas.

One of the bits of the sector that I really want to be able to tap and bring back on board is people who have recently left—26,000 leave a year. About 10% of all drivers leave for reasons that are not retirement. What can we do to make the entire system better for them, so that we do not have people being poached from either bus or coach? I certainly do not want that either. I would like other people to come back.

As you recognise, there will be a market economy that will have to shift. Things will have to change for certain people, but overall I welcome the fact that HGV drivers are getting paid better.

Peter Hearn: We continue to allow conversations with the industry, including bus and coach. CBT organisations of a similar nature are represented on there. We make the vocational tests available, and they include buses and coaches. We keep abreast of all those indicators, and we continue to talk to the industry.

Q85 **Greg Smith:** I am sorry to come back on that because I am mindful of the time, but do you have a tracking mechanism within the DVSA of people who currently hold a bus or a coach qualification but are now seeking to get an HGV licence, or are the systems not technical enough?

Baroness Vere: The DVLA would. The DVLA could probably do that analysis.

Greg Smith: If we can widen the scope a little bit, I think it would be an interesting piece of data to understand where the transitions are happening.

Q86 **Chair:** Before we move on, I have a couple of follow-ups. According to a written parliamentary question, the DVSA's key performance measure is that a candidate should not have to travel more than 40 miles in a rural setting, or more than 40 minutes in an urban setting, to get to a test centre, unless they choose themselves to travel further.

Is that being met across the UK or Great Britain?

Peter Hearn: We have a network of test centres around the country. Are we talking about vocational?

Q87 **Chair:** I am going to come on to examiner centres. You tell me. Is that a performance measure for vocational?

Peter Hearn: As I say, we have a range of test centres. Some of those move and change with demand. We have the added facility that, if we do not have a facility in a particular area, we can work with an individual



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operator to set up what we call a customer site to introduce another test centre to meet those demands. We are satisfied that our network is meeting those demands. It is obviously a constant balance of trying to resource that with examiners.

Baroness Vere: But substantially, yes. We meet the 40/40.

Q88 **Chair:** I was going to ask you which parts of our isles do not have that key performance measure in place.

Peter Hearn: We operate slightly differently in some of the more remote areas. We would book in some of the remote areas on what we call "to hold". If it is on a remote island, for example, we would wait until we get a programme of work and do it that way. There are some slightly different variances, depending on what that demand looks like.

Q89 **Chair:** You talk about remote islands. Yesterday, I met a colleague of ours, Alistair Carmichael. He was talking about the challenge in the Shetland Islands. I think that for three and a half years there has not been a centre because the last one was developed over a school. As a result, DVSA have put in a planning application for another site. At the moment, I think I am right in saying that you cannot take the test on the Shetland Islands. Is that your understanding as well, Mr Hearn?

Peter Hearn: That is correct. We do not have a test facility on Shetland at the moment. We have been working extensively. We used to use a playground of an old former high school for that facility. That is now being redeveloped.

We have been working hand in hand with the local authority on the island to identify other areas. We had identified an area, but for some reason they withdrew our ability to operate from that site. We did not actually start, but we had gone through a process with their help to do all the preliminary work on that.

We are waiting for the outcome of a planning application, which is due in the early part of next month, to understand whether that is going to be possible.

The council unfortunately withdrew the physical licensing of that and will not let us operate from that site. That is unfortunate because the last thing we want is for candidates and learners to have to travel anywhere off the island. This is just for vocational and module 1 of motorcycles. Cars are unaffected.

Q90 **Chair:** Yes. He was talking about a point that a lot of colleagues have brought up, which is the culture. Understandably, for an MP in a constituency such as his, they all know each other and come together to provide solutions. He felt that there was a solution that would be a good one for everyone, including the DVSA, which was a particular site. You just would not engage and, as far as you were concerned, it had to go somewhere else. His community are saying, "We just would not go and



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test there because it does not work for us in terms of our travel.” As he is saying, they are not full time—they would not be, because they just would not be used. These are part-time people.

He described a culture where he has tried to engage. I know that he has engaged with both of you, but he does not feel as if he is making any progress. Therefore, you will end up in a site that is not popular with those who have to work there.

Baroness Vere: I have met Mr Carmichael.

Chair: Yes; he mentioned that you had.

Baroness Vere: I have spoken to the chief executive of Shetland Council. There is a difference between not engaging versus agreeing with everything that he wants, and we are not going to do that. We have to think of value for money for the taxpayer.

A site has been identified by Mr Carmichael and his—potentially—friends. It is very close to the centre of Lerwick. It is very expensive. I think the cost per test is something like £1,000. It would be eye-wateringly expensive.

There is another site—a perfectly good site—at the airport. It is less than 40 minutes away from the other site. It is easily accessible. It is owned by Lerwick Council. They had a verbal agreement with the DVSA that they could use this site. Then an email arrived saying that the site was “no longer available to you”. I checked with Shetland Council. The site is still available, but it is not available to DVSA. I find that odd. The site is substantially cheaper than the expensive site in Lerwick.

Can you see where I am coming from? I am not entirely sure that I am seeing why the taxpayer should be paying through the nose for a site very close to the centre of town, when there is a perfectly good site. Let us also remember that most people only go to a DVSA site once or twice. Hopefully, you pass your driving test and only go there once. The only person who might have to travel is the trainer.

Q91 **Chair:** I think his point was that the trainers would not travel there. I do not know the geography as well as he does.

Baroness Vere: Okay, but he is a driving instructor. Driving is what they do. It is not exactly as if we are saying that he would have to travel for hours. It is 40 minutes.

Q92 **Chair:** I take the point about value for money, but has anybody negotiated a price on that? Again, we are drilling into the detail of a constituency case but it is interesting. It is not, “This is the price, and it is too expensive.” It is, “Well, hang on, we are not doing it for that, but we will go for this.” It is that type of thing. Has that been attempted?



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Baroness Vere: We have had a report done. We have engaged with people. I would really want to find a solution here. I think we have one—the airport site—but we just need to work to get that to happen.

Q93 **Chair:** But you are both comfortable with the culture and the engagement that goes on with MPs and the community to find solutions for sites like this? At the moment, it is the islanders who have the challenge because they cannot take their test.

Peter Hearn: The vast majority of that engagement is being done by me. I have met Mr Carmichael on a number of occasions. We have had several virtual calls on top of physical calls, and we have worked with the local authority. With their support and help, we have a site that we think is operational. It is ready to go. It could be operational within a week, but unfortunately the council have withdrawn our ability to operate from that site. We are going through a planning process and that formality, and we hope they re-engage with us and reconsider.

Q94 **Chair:** I think he has a debate in Westminster Hall on this at some point, so he can speak for himself. We are always happy to represent our colleagues.

I want to talk about HGV driver hours next. There has been a decision by the Department for Transport to extend the temporary relaxation of the retained EU driver rules in England, Scotland and Wales. The daily driving limit can be increased from nine hours to 10 hours up to four times in a week, and also there is the replacement of the requirement to take at least two weekly rest periods, including at least one regular weekly rest period of at least 45 hours in a two-week period.

You are shaking your head. Have I got that wrong?

Baroness Vere: It is not “and also”; it is “or”.

Q95 **Chair:** I beg your pardon.

Baroness Vere: You can only use one or the other.

Q96 **Chair:** That is correct. Can you explain why the Department decided to do this? Was it about trying to get more HGVs on the road due to the shortage?

Baroness Vere: It is really important to understand this. As I have said, we have these 25 measures. There is no one measure that fixes this. When we originally spoke to the sector, there are certain hauliers in the sector that find an increase in drivers’ hours very helpful because they give that extra bit of flexibility. It is a minority. Remember that there are 70,000-odd licensed operators, and for the current extensions we have been told that something like 115 operators have notified us that they will use it. In order to use it they have to provide evidence that there is a detriment to the wider community, either animal or human health. They have to provide details of the improvements that it brings to the



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community, and they have to provide assurances that driver safety will not be compromised.

We do have very strict safeguards on it, but my view is that even if it provides an extra hour's relief on a certain day to allow certain deliveries—because sometimes deliveries get held up and cannot happen because drivers' hours have expired—you just want that flexibility to get the deliveries in within the hours.

I accept that it is not a widely used intervention, but it is very helpful, particularly in these circumstances that are set out in the guidance where we are talking about a few deliveries and key elements within the supply chain such as medicines and veterinary medicines. It is those sorts of things. It is important.

Q97 **Chair:** What formal assessment was made of the safety implications of these changes by the Department?

Baroness Vere: Of course, we have considered the safety of the changes all the way through. When you were explaining these, you were saying that you can go from nine to 10 four times a week. Actually, that is just an increase from two times a week, so the additional hours that you can do is only an extra two hours. It is not that you are required to do them, but for most people it just gives that extra flexibility.

On the rest periods, there is no diminution in the overall amount of rest at all. It is just shuffled around a bit. The way those rest periods are worked out is the same as for international driving. It has already been safety assessed on international routes. That is the pattern of rest periods that you would usually have.

Our assessment is that, obviously, the guidance is there and says very clearly what the health and safety responsibilities are for the employer, but these are very small changes and will not be used consistently over a long period by a particular driver. It is just to add a little bit of flexibility. As I say, I think that less than 0.7% of operators at its height—when we were on 517 notifications over the summer—were actually using it. Again, it is a helpful intervention.

Q98 **Chair:** I readily admit that, for me, it does not look that great a change, but I am not in the industry. In the Department, did you take the same view? It did not appear to be a great change, so you are not going to model the safety implications, or was an assessment made and the feeling was that this was okay and it will not impact safety to any degree, in which case it is good to get everything moving? Was that the approach taken?

Baroness Vere: I will have to look in terms of what the formal assessment has done, but we certainly felt that the safety safeguards were there. We recognised that all drivers have to fall underneath the 2005 working time regulations anyway. That stays there as a safety net. Yes, we felt, given how many people will be taking it up, that the



safeguards we have in place and the work that we have done—I will check exactly what the formal assessment was and the extent to which we were able to lay those formal assessments alongside the SIs—is a useful intervention.

Q99 Chair: Our comrade, Grahame Morris, cannot be with us today, but I know that he would like me to ask what discussions you had with the unions and what their response was when this change was thought about and talked about.

Baroness Vere: Yes, we obviously discussed with many stakeholders, alongside the employers as well, all the way through this. I do not think that it will be a surprise for you to hear that the unions were not particularly supportive. It is also the case that, for example, the RHA were not supportive of this. Of course, they just want lots of cheap EU labour. They have nailed that particular flag to their mast and they are not going to take it down. Anything that is not that, I am afraid, they are not particularly supportive of.

What we do find is that it is the customers that we need to make sure we listen to as well in all of this. It is the people who provide the goods within the supply chain that need these animal or human health or welfare products that we need to get out into the system. They are the people that we need to listen to as well. It is a difficult balance.

Q100 Chair: I read the thoughts of Unite the union. You touched on the RHA. I was quite surprised at the strength of feeling from Logistics UK, who are normally the least vocal of the three bodies that I have just mentioned. James Firth said that, instead of trying to paper over the gaps, the Government should be working with the industry to produce a plan to support moving drivers through the current bottleneck of HGV driving tests. He said that the Government had ignored the will of those who will be most affected by the changes.

That is strong stuff. Why has the industry taken against these measures, given that they are actually designed to help it to deliver the logistics?

Baroness Vere: I do not know Mr Firth, but I would say that he used the words “doing these things” instead of getting testing sorted, but it is as well as. The point is, we cannot just do one thing. We have to focus on lots of different interventions because we could be facing quite a crunch going forward. As I said, there are not many people who are using it, but those who do are providing a very useful service.

I think it is worth highlighting the role of the DVSA, because we are, after all, talking about the DVSA today. They have done 97 checks on people who have notified the Department that they are using this extension. In those 97 checks, there were 53 drivers’ hours offences, but none of those was serious. Therefore, none of those was given penalties. Those 53 drivers’ hours offences were not necessarily related to extended hours at all. In fact, I think very few of them were, but I do not have the figure.



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What I am trying to say is that, of the people who are using these extensions, they are not abusing them.

Chair: I am just struck by their tone. As you say, we will look into this more when we look at the issue as a whole.

Let us move away from the HGV side of things and go back to the car. I will pass over to Gavin. Karl was going to start us off, but we have covered that part and he has gone.

Q101 **Gavin Newlands:** Peter, you have set out the waiting time to obtain a theory and practical examination to drive a car. How do these figures compare at this point of time with pre-Covid?

Peter Hearn: We would normally expect around a 250,000 backlog and a waiting time of about six weeks. We are now experiencing double that with the backlog and a 14-week waiting time. These are significantly outside of what we would expect, but they are clearly linked because of the backlog.

Q102 **Gavin Newlands:** Is that for the practical or theory?

Peter Hearn: That is on practical.

Q103 **Gavin Newlands:** What about theory?

Peter Hearn: On the theory test, we make the service available and there is no backlog. There is nothing outstanding at the moment on the theory test.

Q104 **Gavin Newlands:** Is there still a backlog on theory tests in Scotland?

Peter Hearn: We have availability. We have had a number of issues, as you may be aware. We have transitioned to a different contract for the theory test. We are looking to open up a lot more theory test centres. We have 173 at the minute. We are looking to go to over 200. Prior to that, on the previous one, it was 180. There is a significant expansion of that, but there are tests available in the network. The challenge for some people, obviously, is the distance to travel to do that.

Q105 **Gavin Newlands:** Back in June, four months ago, people in Scotland were waiting 16 weeks for theory tests. Where are we now in Scotland? I am aware of the distancing issues.

Peter Hearn: That was the challenge, because the capacity was reduced. We were on the old contract. We had an opportunity to clear up a lot of those backlogs, but unfortunately because of the distancing restrictions that we still had in Scotland we were not able to do that throughput. We have gone to a different contract now. We have opened up a new network and those tests are available.

At the minute, we are not in the best position in the sense of coverage of some of those centres because we have centres still opening. Some of the islands in particular have suffered from that, but they are opening.



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The good news on Lerwick in particular is that there is a centre opening tomorrow. That has been one of the restrictions. There will be three centres on Lerwick, whereas before there was only one. That network is building. Unfortunately, we have had some issues with some of the IT side of that.

Baroness Vere: But Scotland was always going to lag quite significantly because of the 2 metres social distancing being in place for much longer than in England.

Q106 **Gavin Newlands:** Without going into the whys and wherefores of which Government took a position on social distancing, is it not the case that it is incumbent upon the DVSA to invest? There are plenty of business facilities available close to, or right beside, where a lot of these theory tests were being sat. They could have been utilised by the DVSA to ensure that the same opportunities were given to Scottish people to sit the theory test.

Peter Hearn: The challenge in that space was the technical side of the IT being a secure system and how that system operates. It has been that infrastructure that has been the challenge. There have been other physical challenges—building materials and other things to equip some of these centres—but predominantly it has been an issue with IT because of the technicalities of having a secure system. That is what has delayed this.

We are looking to expand this network to over 200, as I say, so there will be a lot more test centres than we had under the previous contract. That feels like a positive.

Q107 **Gavin Newlands:** With the change in contract and the increase in the number of test centres, would it be fair to say there will be a much fairer spread in coverage across the countries and regions of the UK?

Peter Hearn: We have done analysis to make sure that that fits the requirements in terms of people's access to that, but we will make sure that we continue to review it. If necessary, we will obviously open up more centres to equip for it. We have the ability to be able to open up a centre.

Q108 **Gavin Newlands:** Could you send that analysis to the Committee, to show us where the centres are going to be and how there will be a fairer distribution of coverage?

Peter Hearn: Yes.

Baroness Vere: I would also say that they are all 100% accessible.

Q109 **Gavin Newlands:** Excellent. In my own constituency we have eight cases of constituents who have struggled to get theory tests or practical tests early in the year. There were different arrangements in Scotland. Again, I can understand some of the rationale as to why you would not



refund some of the theory tests, but there are obviously people in the position where they simply could not access any practical test whatsoever before the theory test ran out. It was not their fault that it lapsed, despite their best efforts.

It is a little unfair that people in that situation cannot access a refund, when you could not access a practical test in Scotland.

Baroness Vere: Of course, as I said, it is a two-year period in which it is valid. What I did not say previously, which is probably the main reason why we do not refund these, is that you want people to have up-to-date road safety knowledge. You want people to have taken the most recent hazard perception test, and that does change. That was the overarching reason why. I accept that some people will have to pay another £23, which, in the context of learning to drive is—

Q110 **Gavin Newlands:** For a lot of folk, it is more the extra wait. You said yourself that there is a lack of centres. It is the extra wait rather than the £23 that is the issue for some. The £23 is a point of principle for others as well.

Moving on to my last question, this is going back to trailers and trailer testing. I have asked the Secretary of State this question, but I did not get much of an answer in the Chamber. I have since written to him, and colleagues on the Committee have written to him because of constituent interest in the training sector.

There is a significant impact on the changes to those in the training sector and those who concentrate on trailer testing, as I am sure Mr Hearn is aware. For many, that sector was decimated. We are not talking about tens of thousands of jobs here, but this is people's livelihoods. Their sector was decimated overnight with the removal of the requirement for testing.

For example, I have a constituent who recently invested £30,000 in a vehicle and £4,500 in a trailer, and then took out a £6,000 business support loan, which the Government encouraged, to get through Covid. He finds, the minute he gets through Covid, that the sector has been completely taken away from under his feet.

What do you say to people like that who have invested so much and actually taken on debt, with the Government's encouragement? I appreciate some of the rationale behind it, but obviously lots of people are affected. What is the Government doing for those people?

Baroness Vere: I completely accept that there will be a transition for the training sector. As I have said and outlined previously, we will be, and are, encouraging people still to get training. If I was that lady or that gentleman, it is very much a case of working with the Government and the organisations that we are working with on this group to set up this accreditation. Clearly, the training sector could work together and do a campaign to ensure that they get their voice out there as well.



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I accept there will be a transition, but I expect that the vast majority of training businesses will remain in business because there will still be training to be done. Many of them, of course, do not only do B + E anyway; they do other things, too.

Q111 Gavin Newlands: I accept that, but obviously many do. An accreditation scheme has not yet been set up. Even if that were the case, and a proportion of those who currently do not have to sit tests decided to take training, as they will be encouraged to do, that is still an incredibly long delay. The vast majority of these businesses will have folded long before that comes to pass unless there is some sort of transitional support from the Government. I take it that no transitional support has been discussed at any point from the DFT or the Treasury. Have any of those discussions ever taken place?

Baroness Vere: What we have seen during the pandemic is that the most innovative and those who are willing to take risks can often survive and thrive in difficult circumstances. I am not going to tell your constituent how to run his or her business, but there are all sorts of things that you could do to attract people to your business for training.

Gavin Newlands: I would suggest that he took on over £40,000 of risk investing in the business. I do not think I will be getting anywhere else, so thank you, Chair.

Chair: Thank you, Gavin. We will ask you to write to us about the test centres and the 40 miles, 40 minutes, as well as the theory test centres being opened. I do not want to be too Shetlands based—as an East Sussex MP it is a long way from home—but I think that all of its theory tests were cancelled for October because there was nowhere to go. I think it has been resolved now, but I am just interested as to the map.

Peter Hearn: We can do that.

Q112 Chair: Right at the start I asked for an explanation of what the DVSA does. It does confuse a lot of people in terms of DVSA and DVLA. One is responsible for testing and the other is responsible on the licence side of things.

Minister, I could not ask this question of Mr Hearn, but if you were a management consultant would you not say it makes sense to have one agency doing both? It might be more joined up seeing as it is all part of one process that drivers need.

Baroness Vere: I would say that it has not actually crossed my mind.

Q113 Chair: It has never come up?

Baroness Vere: It has not really, no. Once you get to know them, they are actually very different. We know what they both do. They are very different. I have never felt that combining them into a single group would be advantageous at all. However, what I will say is that DVSA, DVLA and VCA do work very well together when flows of information need to go



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from A to B. I do think that maintaining the focus on road safety and driver and vehicle testing is critical.

There is an interesting thing about DVSA that I had not appreciated, and that is the amount of enforcement that they do and the amount of fraud that they detect in the system. Mr Newlands asked why we couldn't just open a new system, and rightly pointed out the secure IT. It is the case that people try to take the theory test as somebody else. I think the DVSA does a very good job at detecting where people are trying fraudulently to game the system. Any reduction in our security around our IT systems would be to the detriment of their ability to detect that fraud. That is really why we could not just do quick pop-up centres.

I asked the same question. "Can't we have pop-up theory test centres? Why not?" I was told, "Oh, it is because of the IT." People do try to defraud the system. We clearly cannot have that.

I think they do a very important job in combining those two things, so, no, I do not have any plans to combine the two. I just think it would not be good for anybody.

Q114 **Chair:** So, you see safeguards in separating the two.

Baroness Vere: I do, just in terms of management focus, but also working within the DFT agency family. It works well.

Chair: We will just have to be better at getting the "S" and the "L" the right way round.

I thank you very much indeed, Minister. You are a regular attendee in front of us, and it is always good to see you.

Mr Hearn, thank you as well. Will you also pass on our best wishes for a speedy recovery to your chief executive?