



JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Personal experience of individuals taking the Life in the UK Test - Summary of private briefing held on 26 April 2022

On 26 April, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee met five contributors who took the Life in the UK Test in recent years. This anonymised note summarises the meeting.

How contributors learnt that they were required to take the test

Four of the five contributors first learnt that they were required to take the test through conversations with family and friends. They all consulted the Gov.uk website to find out more about this requirement. One contributor referred to a helpful Facebook group.

Views on the Gov.uk website were contrasted. On the one hand, it was described as “very clear”, “very helpful and straightforward”, and “user-friendly”. One contributor found that the steps that had to be taken to apply for citizenship were very well explained. One, who had experience of applying for Schengen visas as well, found gov.uk the “most accessible” of its kind. On the other hand, one contributor had to seek external assistance to navigate the website. Another contributor found that it was not communicating well enough on how to prepare for the test. It was also mentioned that the Gov.uk website was not clear enough in signposting what was involved in the overall process of applying for citizenship, taking into account the fees for each stage of the application process and the documents that were needed.

Four of our five contributors had taken the test as part of the process of acquiring citizenship, while one had taken it when seeking Indefinite Leave to Remain. Those who had become or were seeking to become citizens offered a range of reasons for wanting to acquire citizenship, including wanting the right to vote and having a British family. Two of our contributors also mentioned their wish to secure a more stable immigration status.

How contributors experienced the test centre

In most cases contributors found that the members of staff welcoming them at test centres were friendly. Three described their experience as “uneventful”, one adding that it was “very straightforward”.

One female contributor, however, explained that she had found it “quite intimidating” to be searched and have her papers checked by all-male staff, in a small room, in front of all other test-takers. She “felt quite self-conscious”. Having made a genuine mistake with the wrong documentation, the same contributor was turned away from the test centre and had to re-book the appointment in another test centre.

Another contributor added that “the setting was rather unpleasant” at their test centre. The centre could not be accessed via public transportation, so they had to cycle 45 minutes uphill to reach it. They found the centre in an almost abandoned industrial estate, hidden behind a supermarket. There were no refreshments available, and no heating in the building itself. They concluded, upon arrival, they “just wanted to do the test as quickly as possible to escape this environment”.

None of the contributors experienced any issues with the technology put at their disposal at the test centre, although they recognised that it may not be easy to navigate for someone with limited English proficiency. One contributor pointed out that “the stakes are much higher for those pursuing indefinite leave to remain” (as opposed to those taking the test for citizenship), which means that some people taking the test may feel too anxious to navigate the technology.

How contributors prepared for the test

Contributors pursued a range of strategies to prepare for the test. One contributor read the handbook on which the test is based (*Life in the United Kingdom: a guide for new residents*) on three occasions and took around 150 practice tests. Another one spent two months practicing questions daily and approached the test much like they would prepare for a driving theory test. Another one used the official e-learning resources. Another one “treated it as a sort of Christmas pub game” with family as a way to revise – noting that their British family members failed the test. Another acknowledged that they had less of a disadvantage, having been educated in the UK and having lived in the country for some time. It was described as a “memorisation game” and a “memorisation task ... not learning about life in the UK”.

How contributors experienced test preparation

When preparing for the test, contributors generally felt confident that they would pass. The stakes were particularly high for one of them, who needed to pass the test to apply for indefinite leave to remain. Their previous immigration status, which they held jointly with three relatives, was due to expire within a month of the test. While our contributor felt confident in their ability to pass the test, they felt they “still had to put in the work to prepare for it.” Their mother felt more anxious. Had one member of the family failed to pass the test *on time* to apply for indefinite leave to remain, they could have been required to leave the country. The family was at risk of separation.

How contributors felt about the content of the handbook

Contributors were unconvinced by the content of the handbook on which the test is based.

- They found it in some cases trivial. One contributor remembered, for instance, learning how Mothers’ Day was selected every year. Another one remembered being asked about Welsh cakes, and learning about the footballer Bobby Moore, whose name may be unfamiliar to younger citizens. They felt, “I didn’t know what the test wanted from me.”
- One contributor felt that it was easy to get caught out on multiple choice answers meaning the wider principle behind a question could be lost. For instance, one contributor

remembered being asked about the number of jury members in criminal courts in Northern Ireland, where the number for Scotland was given as one of the potential answers.

- They expressed concerns about gender equality. They argued that men are more likely to follow sports than women, making it easier for them to answer some questions about football or golf.

There was also a lively exchange about the historical content of the test. One contributor admitted they “don’t particularly enjoy history” and found these questions difficult. Another said they personally had a “great passion for history” but was “not sure” if the Life in the UK Test was the right platform for learning about the subject. One argued that “some general knowledge” of history “might be considered a part of being British”, but questioned the value of facts about the Bronze Age — the history of the NHS or women’s rights were more relevant for citizens today. They also had concerns about the use of “simplistic” language “at loss of nuance.” They felt offended to read that “the British Empire was a force for good in the world” without critical engagement. A statement to the effect that the UK had fought alone against Nazi Germany was insensitive to other countries which had fought with the UK. They felt that words such as “good” and “bad” should not be used to describe historical developments.

Overall, contributors found that they did not learn much by preparing for the test. Two added that they had since “forgotten most of what [they] ha[d] learnt”.

What contributors would have liked to find in the handbook

Contributors were unanimous that they would have liked to find more practical information in the handbook. The “welcome pack” that is being distributed to Ukrainian nationals finding refuge in the UK was put forward as a starting point for a revised Life in the UK handbook. Another contributor without family in the UK felt they would value a greater focus on the sort of information that fellow citizens might ordinarily learn from the family home. Examples they mentioned included more information:

- on the rights and obligations of permanent residents and citizens;
- on financial matters and taxation, such as how to settle a self-assessment tax return when self-employed;
- on religious celebrations of various faiths;
- on embracing diversity;
- on the Commonwealth;
- on how to navigate local government (e.g., how to respond to a consultation);
- on how to access emergency services;
- on how to obtain a national insurance number;
- on how to obtain a driving licence;
- on devolved jurisdictions.

Contributors responded positively to the proposal that the handbook could include further developments on the meaning of the rule of law. They explained that the handbook did contain some information on legal or jurisdictional matters, such as on the jury duty and on the death penalty, but was lacking depth on the fundamental principles underpinning the British legal system.

It does not mention, for instance, the high standard of proof expected by courts or the difference between a citizen and a subject.

How contributors felt about the questions in the test

Contributors had little recollection of the questions contained in the tests they took. They however kept vivid memories of how they felt about them.

- One contributor explained that “some of the questions were totally bonkers”, adding that they were “a bit insulting actually”. They had a feeling of “being dehumanised for having to jump through another hoop” in the long process of obtaining citizenship.
- Another contributor remembered that some questions were imprecise. For instance, a contributor could remember a question about the number of years “between two elections”, with no mention of what elections the question was about.
- Contributors were unanimous that “the test itself is very English-centric”. They regretted that some questions were set in English-specific context, whereas few questions related to the Northern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh contexts specifically.
- They felt that some questions were attempting to assess values. They made the point that values are difficult to assess via multiple-choice questions, and that values are also constantly changing as society evolves.

How much did it cost contributors to take the test

Contributors explained that there was “substantial financial cost” associated with taking the test. They mentioned the £50 fee payable upon booking the test, as well as the cost of training materials. Those travelling to a test centre had to pay for fuel and to park their car, or for their train journey. One contributor drove three hours each way to get to their test centre. Another calculated that it had cost them £354 to take the test in two attempts.

Contributors also mentioned a range of opportunity costs. Some had to take days off work to attend the test centre. The time spent preparing for the test and taking it was described as “time away from family and friends”, i.e. as actively hindering integration within British society. As one contributor put it, taking the test felt as “a Saturday not spent with children”.

Contributors emphasised that these costs directly associated with taking the test came in addition to other costs associated with an application for citizenship or indefinite leave to remain:

- Fees payable to the Home Office. One contributor explained that they had to pay over £1000 in fees to the Home Office as part of their application, and that it was “nerve-wracking” to know that they would have to pay these fees again if they had made a mistake in their application. Another contributor explained that, because they were applying with three relatives, they had to pay over £4000 in fees to the Home Office.
- Costs incurred by steps taken to meet other requirements for citizenship or indefinite leave to remain. One contributor mentioned that some of those taking the Life in the UK Test also had to take an English language test, adding to the overall cost of their application. Another contributor explained that their biometric details had to be collected as part of their application. They spent six hours travelling by train, taking a day off work, for a five-minute appointment to submit their biometric details.

Overall, contributors described these costs as “prohibitive”, noting a “real accessibility concern”. One contributor mentioned that some families cannot afford to apply for indefinite leave to remain or citizenship as a group. They must decide which member of the family can proceed with an application. Another contributor felt uncomfortable that they had been requested to “buy [their] way in”. They explained that, if they were deemed worthy enough of becoming a British citizen, they thought that they should not be required to pay.

What contributors felt the purpose of the test was

All five contributors described the purpose of the test as “unclear”. One declared that, from their experience, “it was unclear what the purpose was in general”. Another added that “it needs to decide what it wants to do”. Another contributor concurred that they “don’t know whether the test knows what it wants to do”.

Two contributors wondered whether the test was designed to filter prospective citizens and permanent residents. One, who had been a resident in Britain since their early childhood, said that “it felt like an additional barrier”. The other one explained that “it felt as a resilience test”, testing their commitment to the country.

The experience of another contributor was particularly telling in this respect. They were unable to take the test a first time because they had made an administrative mistake in good faith. They left the test centre crying. They remember deciding they would not continue the process of applying for citizenship, thinking: “I am not going to do this anymore”. They had been discouraged by the process.

Another contributor wondered whether the purpose of the test was to assess whether someone has successfully integrated or to facilitate integration. They would oppose both interpretations, arguing that integration is a two-way process and is too vague a concept to be assessed in a test. They instead made the case that the test “should be about participation” (in society and political institutions).

Contributors’ overall experience with the test

Contributors used very strong words to describe their overall experience with the test. One explained that they had felt “dehumanised” because the test “feels like another hurdle” on their path to citizenship. Another contributor felt they had been treated as “a criminal” for the same reasons. A contributor warned that “the test can damage” communities because it was “really insulting” and treating prospective citizens and permanent residents as “second-rated”. One contributor commented, “I wouldn’t say before or after the test there was any difference in how British I felt or how confident I felt about my ability to live in the UK.”

What changes to the test contributors recommend

Contributors were unanimous that the Life in the UK Test had to be reformed. Four of them supported the existence of *some* test, one being more hesitant. One explained that a “test has the potential to be very, very helpful”, another one describing it as “a learning opportunity”.

Many recommendations related to the content of the handbook on which the test is based (see above). Other recommendations were put forward:

- Two contributors invited the Committee to consider special arrangements, such as the possibility to take the test from home. They argued that people with lower literacy, mental health issues, or financial problems may require such special arrangements.
- One contributor suggested that prospective citizens and permanent residents could be invited to take part in a scheme similar to the Duke of Edinburgh award as an alternative to taking the test. They argued that research should be conducted to put together a list of activities which could be used to increase engagement with life in the UK.
- One contributor suggested to add an unmarked open question at the end of the test, where test takers can explain why they feel part of British society: “I would have loved to have had the opportunity to say why I feel British.”

All of our contributors acknowledged that their experiences were not necessarily representative of the population taking the test, particularly that each of them was highly educated and at ease with the English language but their willingness to appear before the Committee and speak openly was greatly appreciated.

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