



Justice and Home Affairs Committee
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0AA

7 September 2022

Dear Chair,

Thank you for your letter of 28 June setting out the Committee's conclusions and recommendations following its inquiry into the Life in the UK Test.

I would like to thank the Committee for its work in examining the Test and identifying a range of issues and perspectives that should be considered when reviewing the life in the UK handbook.

For ease, the committee's conclusions (in bold) and recommendations (bold and italicised) are set out below in the order they appeared in your letter, followed by the Government's response in plain text.

Reviewing the "Life in the UK" handbook and test

The Government should treat seriously a reform of the Life in the UK Test and of its associated handbook as a matter of priority. We are astonished that the Government has not yet conducted its long-overdue review, ignoring recommendations from select committees. The proposed timing, with no end date, is inadequate. We see no reason to delay it any further.

The Government should immediately set an end date by which a review is to be completed and published.

The Government agrees the handbook content would benefit from being reviewed and the Home Office intends to conduct a review of the handbook as part of wider reforms of the immigration and nationality system.

As I have indicated to the Committee, I intend to set out in the next 12 months the timetable for completing the review. This will follow the immediate focus on introducing and embedding the new nationality provisions under the Nationality & Borders Act 2022 and included as part of our wider sets of reform and simplification measures being considered to our nationality processes.

Requirement to demonstrate “sufficient knowledge about life in the UK”

Social cohesion, education, active participation, and the celebration of prospective citizens and permanent residents are at the heart of the requirement to demonstrate sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom. We fully endorse that approach, centred on social cohesion, a matter of primary importance. We note with concern that those taking the current version of the Test may experience it differently.

Requiring those seeking to live in the UK permanently and become British citizens to develop knowledge of Life in the UK (LitUK) supports social cohesion by promoting a shared understanding of the fundamental principle of British life, along with the history which led to the development of those principles. The LitUK handbook also provides information which will give readers a starting point to explore volunteering and getting involved in their local communities.

The Home Office is concerned the evidence from those who recently took the test suggested they were unsure what the Test intended to achieve. Alongside the review of the current handbook we will consider how we can better communicate what the purpose of the test is to candidates and the wider public.

The current handbook

The content of the current edition of the Life in the UK handbook comes across as a random selection of obscure facts and subjective assertions that most people would not know, trivialising the process. The content of the history chapter is so insensitive as to be offensive. *It urgently needs replacing.*

The Government recognises there are range of strong opinions around what is relevant knowledge of Life in the UK. The review of the handbook will need to reflect on how we might address some of the negative perceptions which have developed around the handbook, it will also consider the existing history chapter.

A new handbook

The review should consider the content of the revised edition of the Life in the UK handbook. We believe it should focus on factual content related to the rights and responsibilities of a citizen in the contemporary British democracy. The content should recognise that the United Kingdom comprises four nations. Where the handbook contains information on practical matters, the information included should be relevant to someone who has been living in the UK for several years.

The review's terms of reference have yet to be determined but we anticipate it will focus on revising the factual content of the handbook, linking it to rights and responsibilities acquired by UK permanent residents and British citizens. We agree the content of the handbook should continue to recognise the United Kingdom comprises four nations and the content should be relevant to someone who has been living in the UK from somewhere upwards of three years.

Test Format

While we are supportive of the multiple-choice format, we acknowledge it cannot possibly test candidates on values.

Questions should focus instead on factual, objective, and non-trivial matters. They should be carefully worded to avoid humour (whether deliberate or inadvertent) and insensitive content. The review should consider what safeguards will guarantee the quality of the handbook and of the questions contained in the Test, including who should draft them.

The test format has always sought to allow applicants to demonstrate they meet the requirements to have sufficient knowledge of life in the UK, which includes knowledge of the fundamental values and principles all those living in the UK should respect and support.

We agree the test cannot test a candidate's values and it does not attempt to do this. Test questions are factual, objective and focus on the key themes set out in the Handbook. While we want to ensure the test is engaging, the questions used in the test reflect the serious nature of the subject matter and the importance of the process to the candidates.

New test questions are drafted by our commercial partner PSI (UK) Service Ltd, test development experts and psychometricians. Draft questions are reviewed by the Home Office before undergoing trialling by commercial partners ahead of being cleared for use in live tests.

We note the concerns raised by the committee that some of the Home Office approved materials provided by our commercial partner, The Stationary Office (TSO), to support candidates to prepare for the test could be considered as trivialising the process. TSO are exploring and progressing infographics and timelines for some of the key content of the test, and the Home Office will continue to work with commercial partners to ensure this content refresh remains as widely accessible as is possible for all users across the test preparation portfolio.

Test Centres

Better feedback should be collected from applicants on their experience with the Test, in a manner that cannot be thought to affect the Test result.

The Home Office requests a range of feedback from applicants both during the immigration and nationality application process and at the end of the process after applicants have received a decision. Candidate feedback is sought immediately after someone has taken the Life in the UK Test.

We note the committee's concern candidates may be disinclined to provide honest feedback in case this somehow impacted on their test result. Feedback is not disclosed to test centre staff and tests are electronically marked immediately following a test to ensure any feedback provided by candidates could not influence their test score. We will explore how this can be made clearer to applicants.

While usually uneventful, the experience of candidates at test centres is crucial.

Every test centre should be staffed with male and female staff. Test centres should be accessible via public transport. The review should consider solutions to make sure candidates are not required to travel excessive distances to take the Test, including perhaps by opening more test centres and test slots or by making it possible for candidates to take the Test online from elsewhere.

Every LitUK test centre has a mixture of female and male staff and scheduling aims to have both female and male staff present at all testing slots. Test takers are also able to request during validation if they require or would prefer a female member of staff to conduct validation or security checks. They will be allowed to re-book their test if no female staff members are available.

The Home Office will continue to work with PSI to ensure test centres are accessible to candidates and reduce to a minimum the need for those taking the test to travel long distances or undertake lengthy journeys. A drive time review held in June 2022 established the average drive time to UK test centres was 29.5 minutes. PSI continue to review network shape against drive time and are currently exploring feasibility of adding locations which could result in a drop of overall drive time.

In addition, a remote testing pilot which allows customers to complete language testing remotely via their personal device went live this month and results will be analysed when complete to determine the benefits for both the customer and the Home Office for delivery of the Knowledge of Language & Life tests.

Alternatives to a test

Information about possible adaptations should be publicised more widely and the review should consider whether the current list of adaptations and exemptions is sufficient.

The Home Office will consider what further information it can provide as part of the test booking process to ensure candidates are aware of how they can request Test adaptations.

Test adaptations are driven by candidates requests rather than a limited list of adaptations. If the Committee has evidence of individuals whose needs have not been met, we would be more than happy to take these up with the Test supplier.

Citizenship courses actively promote social cohesion and gender equality. We regret that the Home Office appears to exclude the reintroduction of the course. Their discontinuation disproportionately affected specific groups of prospective citizens and permanent residents who may find a test particularly challenging. *The Government should reintroduce citizenship courses as a way of fulfilling the civic knowledge requirement. Citizenship courses should only be offered as an alternative to the test. They should be offered at a reasonable cost. Courses should be either delivered in-house or outsourced to a not-for-profit organisation.*

The Government keeps the approach to meeting the requirement to have sufficient knowledge of life in the UK under review and when the handbook content is reviewed, we will consider how it should be assessed.

As the Committee heard there is a balance to be struck between the benefits some will receive from participating in courses, the wider societal benefits which may flow from this, and the need to operate an efficient, consistent test process which is affordable for the majority of candidates. This must also be done without putting undue cost burden on the taxpayer.

Requiring applicants to demonstrate this by sitting a multiple-choice test continues to provide applicants, who are required to meet these requirements, with a consistent and simple method of demonstrating they meet the knowledge of life in the UK requirement. This is supported by the pass rate of the test having been consistently high, with most successful candidates passing at their first attempt.

In contrast, when ESOL with citizenship courses were abolished in 2013, very few applicants were utilising this method for meeting the knowledge of language and life in the UK requirements for settlement and citizenship.

We thank the Committee for highlighting the evidence it heard around alternative test mechanisms, which the Home Office will take into consideration when setting up the handbook review process.

The costs associated with preparing for and taking the Test can be prohibitive for some people, taken in the context of the wider process of applying for citizenship or permanent residency. *The review should consider ways of lightening that (cost) burden to solve any accessibility issues.*

The Home Office continues to ensure the cost of preparing for and taking the Test is kept to a minimum. This is to ensure the cost of the Test does not deter applicants from applying for permanent residence or British citizenship. The current cost of the test is £50 and the LitUK handbook is priced at £12.99.

The review will consider affordability when recommending any changes to the handbook and test.

We invite the review to consider the full breadth of evidence that was submitted to us as part of the inquiry. It could be the basis of its terms of reference. We particularly urge the Government to consider the lessons from other countries which have adopted a similar test.

The Government would like to thank the Committee for undertaking this inquiry and the evidence it has gathered. The Home Office will consider the full breadth of evidence submitted to the Committee as part of the inquiry when reviewing the handbook and test.

We welcome the Government's acknowledgement of the importance of engaging experts and stakeholders in reviewing the handbook but regret that the Government's commitment falls short of constituting an Advisory Group. *An Advisory Group should be reappointed immediately. Its membership should be diverse and reflect the experience gained over the past two decades. It should conduct the review of the Life in the UK Test, referring to the points raised in this letter.*

The Government is clear the Home Office will need to engage a range of experts and stakeholders when undertaking a review of the handbook, but at this stage the Government cannot commit to setting up an advisory group.

The Home Office will consider all options for delivering a proportionate review of the handbook, recognising any review must take into consideration diverse perspectives drawing on the recommendations from the Windrush Lessons Learned Review.

The Home Office will set out the process for reviewing the handbook in the next 12 months.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Foster', with a large flourish at the end.

Kevin Foster MP
Minister for Safe and Legal Migration