

# Community Services Scrutiny Committee

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Open Report

Report of: Sarah Sprung / Ken Harrison

## Driving Standards Agency (DSA)

### 1. Purpose of Briefing Paper

To appraise Members of the Driving Standards Agency's decision to close the Castle Road Test Centre in Kidderminster, as they move towards new Multi Purpose Test Centres, and to outline potential reasons to put forward to the DSA in order that the District retains a test centre locally.

### 2. Introduction/ Background Information

- 2.1 The DSA announced, in May 2008, its plans to close the Castle Road Test Centre in Kidderminster.
- 2.2 The DSA confirmed that, in coming to its decision to close the Castle Road Test Centre, it had examined the options of, improving the existing accommodation, relocating to alternative premises within the Town or co-locating with operations at neighbouring centres within the applicable travel distance criterion.
- 2.3 Nationally the DSA are looking to create 66 Multi Purpose Test Centres (MPTC's) to support significant population or a key strategic location. They are being introduced to facilitate new tests introduced by the European Union for motorcyclists and in the West Midlands include proposals for South Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Shrewsbury and Burton on Trent.
- 2.4 Under current proposals, the nearest Multi Purpose Test Centres for residents of the District to access would be Wolverhampton (16.2 Miles) or Birmingham, Garrets Green (31.2 Miles).
- 2.5 The Garrets Green Site was acquired by the DSA in July 2006, and has recently been completed. Two sites in Wolverhampton are currently being appraised, both of which were put forward by private landowners. The DSA will be making a decision within the next month as to whether one of these sites will be acquired and developed.
- 2.6 At this stage it is unclear whether the intention is to eventually replace all testing facilities with MPTC's. For the time being it is understood that smaller

test centres such as those in Redditch, Worcester and Lower Gornal will remain open.

2.7 Appendix 1 details the DSA's programme for relocation of test centres during the next 12 months, this was in response to a question raised at the House of Commons in June 2008.

2.8 Appendix 2 sets out the DSA's Code of practice on Written Consultations.

### 3. Current Usage of Test Centres / Criteria for Multi Purpose Test Centres

3.1 The table below details the usage a selection of test centres within the region during 2007/08:

<b>Location</b>	<b>Usage</b>
Wolverhampton	12204
Birmingham (Washwood Heath)	10916
Birmingham (Kingstanding)	10603
Birmingham (Kings Heath)	9808
Birmingham (South Yardley)	8349
Lower Gornal	8228
Birmingham (Shirley)	6839
Worcester	6760
Birmingham (Sutton Coldfield)	6704
*Kidderminster	6514
Stoke on Trent	6301
Cannock	5946
Redditch	4656
Shrewsbury (MPTC)	3849
Stafford	3747
Rugby	3412
Ludlow	1259

\*Test Centres identified for closure

3.2 From the information supplied it would seem that Kidderminster does not have a particularly low usage rate.

3.3 The DSA's criterion for distances candidates are required to travel to practical test centres was agreed in 1998, the criterion are set out in the table below:

<b>Population Density</b> (persons per sq Kilometre)	<b>Miles to Travel</b>
1,250 >	7
100 > but <1,250	20
<100	30

- 3.4 Should the DSA continue with its planned closure of Kidderminster Driving Test Centre, residents of the District will have to travel 16.2 miles to Redditch, 14.6 miles to Worcester, 12.9 miles to Lower Gornal or 16.2 miles to Wolverhampton.
- 3.5 The District of Wyre Forest has, according to the 2001 Census, a population density of 498 persons per sq kilometre
- 3.6 The principal urban areas of the District i.e. Kidderminster, Stourport and Bewdley combined cover an area of 46.9 sq km and a population of 84,073. This results in a population density of 1,792 persons per sq kilometre.
- 3.7 This would elevate Kidderminster and its primary urban catchment population to the first band of the criterion, meaning that residents of the area should have access to a test centre within 7 miles.
- 3.8 The DSA, in 2005, relocated the Cannock, North Street Test Centre, to an alternative location within the area. The Usage for this centre during 2007/08 was 5946. The population density for the Cannock area is 1167.93, which, according to the DSA criterion for distances candidates are required to travel to test centres, would mean that residents of the area should have access to a test centre within 20 miles.
- 3.9 The Wolverhampton Test Centre is approximately 11.7 miles from the Cannock Test Centre.

#### **4. Key Facts to Support a Driving Test Centre in the District**

- 4.1 Kidderminster is one of just 25 Strategic Centres in the West Midlands Region, recognised by the Regional Assembly and the Government Office for the West Midlands in the Regional Spatial Strategy.
- 4.2 Kidderminster is recognised as a Local Regeneration Area both in the Regional Spatial Strategy and West Midlands Economic Strategy.
- 4.3 Whilst the Castle Road Test Centre's main use has been to provide a service for residents of the District it has also be utilised by residents from neighbouring areas.
- 4.4 The estimated retail catchment area of Kidderminster is 110,000 people which extends into surrounding Districts including some areas of Shropshire. It is understood that the existing Driving Test Centre attracts learners from parts of Staffordshire, Dudley and Birmingham.

#### **5. Economic & Environmental Implications**

- 5.1 In its Business Plan 2007-08, the DSA have stated that they expect to achieve savings of £13.8 million for the period 2004-08.

- 5.2 The nearest driving test centres to the District are located in Lower Gornal, Redditch and Worcester, giving an average distance of 14.5 miles and a round trip of 29 miles.
- 5.3 The nearest Multi Purpose Test Centre in Wolverhampton is some 16.2 miles away.
- 5.4 If the 6,514 people who took their test at the Castle Road site travelled the average additional distance of 15 miles, to alternative test centres, this would generate an additional 97,710 miles per year.
- 5.5 The additional mileage of 97,710 would result in an increase in CO2 emissions of 53.74 tonnes per annum.
- 5.6 Furthermore, 'familiarisation' is a key factor in the driving test with learner drivers travelling to the 'test centre' town to gain familiarity through lessons.
- 5.7 The rising costs of fuel have already meant that driving instructors have had to increase their prices, the cost of the additional mileage to and from test centres would also be passed onto students.
- 5.8 Driving Instructors are aware that, should the Kidderminster Test Centre Close, a common request from students may be for instructors to meet them at the test centre, due to the cost of hiring the car for the additional travel time.
- 5.9 As a result of this not only will driving instructors lose valuable income but the additional mileage and CO2 emissions calculated in paragraph 5.5 could potentially be doubled.
- 5.10 The DSA, together with the Vehicle & Operator Services Agency (VOSA), Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), Transformation, Licensing, Logistics and Sponsorship (TLLS) and the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA) form the Driver and Vehicle Operator (DVO) Group. The DVO have published their Group Plan 2007-2011.
- 5.11 Two of the priorities identified in the plan are to 'improve journey time and reliability on roads' and to 'reduce environmental impact, crime and anti-social behaviour'.
- 5.12 Should residents of the District, together with other users of the Kidderminster Test Centre, travel the additional mileage to alternative test centres, this would clearly increase the volume of traffic on the road and have a significant environmental impact, particularly if the candidate had arranged to meet the driving instructor at the test centre in order to reduce the hire costs of the car.
- 5.13 The DSA pledge, in their Business Plan 2007-08, to continue working with EU colleagues from the International Commission for Driver Testing, Department for Transport and other key stakeholders within the driver

training and fuel efficiency industries to develop the performance criteria for assessing eco-safe driving within driving tests which they plan to implement in 2008.

## **6. Potential Sites**

- 6.1 The search for new sites very much depends on the type of test facility to be provided. According to information from the DSA, Multi-Purpose Test Centre could require up to 2.5 acres. This would clearly narrow down the options to larger sites such as Finepoint, the former British Sugar or Lea Castle Hospital. This type of unique use may be appropriate for premises on the edge of the town centre or within designated employment areas. A preliminary list of possible sites is provided at Appendix 3 to this report.
- 6.2 The Council's Regeneration and Economic Prosperity team would be able to assist the DSA's retained agents, Lambert Smith Hampton, in any search for sites.

## **7. Conclusion**

- 7.1 The information contained in this briefing paper suggests that there are grounds by which the Council could request that the DSA review its decision to withdraw a driving test centre facility from the District.
- 7.2 In order to present this case to the DSA it is proposed that the Review Panel conduct further research to ascertain public opinion in this matter, the results of which would be presented to the August meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee.

## **8. Options for the Committee**

- 8.1 To agree the scope of the review (appendix 4).

## **9. Appendices**

- 9.1 Appendix 1 – DSA's Programme for Relocation  
9.2 Appendix 2 – DSA's Code of Practice on Written Consultations  
9.3 Appendix 3 – Site Locations  
9.4 Appendix 4 – Scoping Form

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