



Driving: UK requirements

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This note is intended to provide information on the driver and vehicle requirements in the UK for foreign drivers and imported vehicles.

Information on other roads-related issues can be found on the [Roads Topical Page](#) of the Parliament website.

Contents

1	Driving licences	2
1.1	General	2
1.2	Applications by individuals seeking asylum	3
2	Foreign vehicles	5
2.1	Importing a new or used vehicle	5
2.2	Vehicle excise duty (car tax)	6
2.3	Insurance	7
3	Enforcing traffic penalties against foreign drivers	7

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1 Driving licences

1.1 General

The UK has reciprocal agreements with fellow EU Member States and with other designated countries outside the EU that permit one to drive in the UK indefinitely on that country's licence. Licences from all other countries can be used to drive a car in the UK for up to twelve months, following which the licence holder must take a test to obtain a UK licence if they wish to continue driving. This is set out in detail in DVLA guidance.¹ Broadly, the rules for the main licensing areas are as follows:

- **Northern Ireland:** Northern Ireland has its own licensing system as all transport issues are devolved. Those driving on non-EU driving licences may only exchange their driving licence for that of Northern Ireland if they are from a designated country. NI licences may be exchanged for UK licences if they were issued after 1976.
- **Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man:** You can drive on a licence from one of these countries for up to 12 months in Great Britain; after which you must obtain a GB one. You can exchange your licence for a GB one if it was issued after 1991.
- **Europe:** Drivers from the European Economic Area (the EU Member States plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) may drive using their own licence in the UK as, since the introduction of an EU common format licence, these are subject to mutual recognition. There is thus no need for a driver to exchange their licence but if they wish to, they may exchange their national licence for a British one without taking a further test. This applies to those aged up to 70 years of age. If the EU licence was obtained following an exchange with a licence from another country, usually you may only drive on it in the UK for 12 months.
- **Designated countries:** The general situation for anyone else coming to Britain, is that they can drive in this country for 12 months provided they have a valid driving licence issued by their own country or an international driving permit. After one year, drivers from certain designated countries must exchange their licence for a British equivalent in order to continue driving. The designated countries are: Australia, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Canada, Falkland Islands, Faroe Islands, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Japan, Monaco, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland and Zimbabwe. The UK system of 'designating' a country for the purpose of licence recognition is not based on reciprocity (i.e. just because another country recognises the UK licence, does not mean the UK will automatically recognise theirs).
- **United States:** The US counts as an 'other country' for licensing purposes (see below). The UK has opted not to recognise individual American states as France and Germany do because of the internal US system of reissuing drivers' licences. If, for example, the UK gave designated 'country' status to State A, the way the system operates in the US it would be possible for a driver from unrecognised State B to apply for a new licence in State A which would not contain on the face of the licence the information that he actually passed his test in State B. Thus there are no assurances that individual state licences could guarantee that the driver had passed a certain level of driving test. Similarly, if an American driver currently exchanged his

¹ DVLA, [Driving in Great Britain \(GB\) as a visitor or a new resident](#), October 2010 [INF38]

licence in France or Germany for an EU licence he would not be able to use it in the UK beyond the normal twelve month period. The reciprocal agreement between EU states only protects 'community licences' – those that have been attained by taking a driving test in a Member State.

- **Other countries:** Drivers holding licences of countries other than those listed will be able to drive for 12 months in the UK. Residents may drive for 12 months from the date they became resident, after that time to continue driving as a full licence holder they will have to take and pass a British driving test. Visitors may drive for 12 months from the date they last entered the country, if they remain here more than 12 months they must stop driving.

1.2 Applications by individuals seeking asylum

Photocard licences have gradually been introduced since July 1998 when all first time applicants were issued with a photocard licence.² Successive governments have recognised that obtaining a new driving licence is one of the easiest ways of establishing a new identity as often a driving licence is accepted as a form of identity card. Stringent passport-type checks are therefore carried out before a photocard licence is issued in order to prevent fraud.

To apply for a new photocard driving licence you can either apply online or complete form D1 available from a Post Office. Acceptable forms of identification are given as follows:

Identity documents

You must provide original documents. DVLA won't accept photocopies or laminated certificates.

United Kingdom (UK) digital passports

If you hold a digital passport (the photograph and signature appear on the same page), DVLA can confirm your identity with the Identity and Passport Service. You don't have to send your passport to DVLA.

When applying online you'll be asked to provide your nine digit passport number allowing DVLA to confirm your identity.

If you apply by post, using the D1 'application for a driving licence', write your nine digit passport number and your signature in the 'confirming your identity' section of the D1 form.

Other types of identification

DVLA also accepts the following documents as confirmation of your identity. Unlike the digital passport though, you'll need to send your identity document with your application:

- full valid current passport
- biometric residence permit (formerly known as the identity card for foreign nationals)
- UK certificate of naturalisation

² for further information, see section 2.2 of HC Library standard note [SN3060](#)

Do not send in your passport if you need it within the next month. If this is the case you should consider delaying your licence application until you can send it with your passport to DVLA.

If you've reached State Pension age, you can provide originals of one of the following in your name:

- recent (within three months) bank or building society statement showing your pension payment and National Insurance number
- BR2102, BR2103 or BR5899 letter confirming your eligibility for the State Pension

UK birth and adoption certificates

UK birth and adoption certificates can also be used, however, as they are not absolute proof of identity, they must be accompanied by one of the following:

- National Insurance card or a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions containing your National Insurance number
- photocopy of the front page of a benefits book or an original benefits claim letter
- P45, P60 or pay slip
- marriage certificate or divorce papers (decree nisi or absolute)
- college or university union card or school record

If you don't have a birth or adoption certificate, or the one that you have doesn't show your full name or country of birth, contact your local register office.

Change of name

You'll also need to provide evidence if your name has changed and is different to the identity document you provide, like an original marriage certificate, decree nisi or absolute, or deed-poll declaration.

The details you provide must show a clear link between the name on your identity document and your current name.³

The documents required were agreed by the Ministerial Group on Welfare Reform and are in line with successive governments' policies on combating fraud.⁴ They are the same as those needed for a passport application. These requirements have proved difficult for those arriving in the country without any identity documents such as asylum seekers and refugees. The Home Office has advised that standard acknowledgement letters and the National Asylum Support Service 35 document do not convey the identity of the holder securely enough to be allowed as sole evidence of identity. They could be considered as one element but other examples would be needed such as bank statements or utility bills.⁵

In his answers to a series of questions on this subject in 2000, the then Transport Minister stated that driving licence applicants who are awaiting the issue of travel documents or

³ Direct.Gov, [Identity documents and photograph criteria](#) [accessed 18 May 2011]

⁴ [HC Deb 27 January 2000, c277W](#)

⁵ [HL Deb 14 February 2002, c165WA](#)

naturalisation papers by the Home Office are advised to contact the Home Office to ask for confirmation of details to be provided for driving licence application purposes.⁶

2 Foreign vehicles

2.1 Importing a new or used vehicle

If you are permanently importing a vehicle into the UK, it needs to meet certain requirements as to its registration and construction and use standards, in order to be used on the road. These are as follows, for **new** vehicles:

A 'brand new' vehicle can be driven to GB and registered as 'new' provided the vehicle:

- is registered within two weeks of collection - this may be extended to one calendar month at peak periods, eg before 1 March and 1 September
- only has reasonable delivery mileage - DVLA considers reasonable delivery mileage to mean the vehicle being driven from the pick up point to home using a direct route
- hasn't been previously permanently registered
- has been stored before registration and is a current model or is a model that has ceased production within the last two years

Advice to importers is to transport rather than drive vehicles from the port to the first destination.

New vehicles must have a certificate of conformity as proof of type approval from the supplier or vehicle manufacturer.

Left-hand-drive vehicles from within the European Community will need a certificate, issued by the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA), under the Mutual Recognition scheme. This shows that changes have been made to the vehicle, making it suitable for use on British roads.

Vehicles that haven't been subject to European type approval will be subject to one of the following tests, they are:

- car - Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA)
- light goods vehicle - Single Vehicle Approval (SVA) test if it is a (up to 3,000kg)
- motorcycle or quadricycle - motorcycle SVA

You can drive your vehicle to and from the pre-arranged appointment before the vehicle is registered.⁷

And for second hand, or '**previously used**' vehicles:

As part of the registration process DVLA must be sure that an imported used vehicle, that's less than ten years old meets the required standards.

They are:

⁶ [HC Deb 27 January 2000, cc277-278W](#)

⁷ Direct.Gov, [Registering an imported vehicle](#) [accessed 18 May 2011]

- European type approval standards
- UK construction and use
- road vehicle lighting legislation.

Cars, motorcycles and light goods vehicles, first registered in another European Member State, must have a certificate issued by VCA under the Mutual Recognition scheme. Larger goods vehicles will need full UK type approval before they can be registered.

Cars, motorcycles and light goods vehicles first registered in a country outside of the European Union must pass the IVA, SVA or MSVA, as appropriate.⁸

2.2 Vehicle excise duty (car tax)

There are certain rules for how long a vehicle registered in another country can be used on UK roads without the owner having to pay car tax (vehicle excise duty, or VED).

Regarding **permanent** imports, the Direct.Gov website states:

Vehicle tax will be payable in line with the vehicle's first registration date in the UK. If the vehicle has been previously registered abroad, the date it's first registered in the UK will determine the amount of vehicle tax that's payable. DVLA will also allocate a vehicle registration number appropriate to the vehicle's first registration abroad.⁹

However, there are international agreements which provide for the **temporary** use of a vehicle in a foreign country for a limited time, usually six months in a 12-month period. A visitor to the UK may use a vehicle displaying foreign plates, provided that all taxes (including VED) are paid in their country of origin.¹⁰ Successive transport ministers have also made this point, for example:

For the first six months in this country, vehicles from the Republic of Ireland and other European Union countries must meet the requirements of their home state. Subsequently, they must meet this country's requirements: they must have British licence plates, and they must have paid vehicle excise duty. I have asked the DVLA to ensure that vehicles reported to it, or seen in checks, that do not have the appropriate tax discs are clamped—and I believe that in some cases there are powers for them to be confiscated.¹¹

While there are no routine checks on vehicles coming into the UK, the police, the DVLA and VOSA do carry out vehicle spot checks. DVLA tend to check for things like valid car tax while VOSA checks for road worthiness. It is not possible to calculate possible lost 'revenue' from foreign vehicles failing to pay car tax, however the overall figure for the cost of VED evasion, based on an evasion rate of about 0.6 per cent, is £34 million per year.¹² In July 2010 the Transport Minister, Mike Penning, set out the various ways in which VED evasion is detected and penalties enforced:

A comprehensive package of measures is in place making vehicle excise duty convenient to pay but difficult to evade. Registered keepers are sent renewal

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Direct.Gov, [Temporarily importing a vehicle](#) [accessed 18 May 2011]

¹¹ [HC Deb 20 July 2004, c148](#)

¹² DVLA, [DVLA Annual Report & Accounts 2009-10](#), HC 178, July 2010, p35

reminders to alert them that the vehicle excise duty is due and offering a variety of ways to license their vehicle. Online and telephone services are used by a large number of customers together with the traditional paper service at the Post Office.

Those who fail to license their vehicles are subject to proportionate enforcement measures ranging from automated penalties from the vehicle record, through to direct enforcement action such as the wheel clamping, impounding and, ultimately, disposal of the unlicensed vehicle. The latest national statistics on vehicle excise duty evasion shows that this package of measures has been successful and 99.4% of all revenue payable in 2009 was collected.¹³

If anyone is concerned that they have seen vehicles that may be in breach of the rules, they can report any such vehicle to the DVLA.¹⁴

2.3 Insurance

European law requires all vehicles registered in a Member State to have insurance for the use of that vehicle in any other Member State. The police have powers to stop and check any foreign vehicle to ensure the driver has appropriate insurance cover.¹⁵

3 Enforcing traffic penalties against foreign drivers

There have been a number of initiatives to tackle the problem of foreign drivers who incur traffic penalties in the UK and then return to their countries of origin. The most long-standing is the [SPARKS Network](#). This enables local authorities in the UK and EU Member States to collaborate to resolve issues concerning cross-border enforcement of civil traffic contraventions (i.e. parking, moving traffic violations, non-payment of congestion charge etc.). London was one of the pioneering areas for this programme.

In a 2007 PQ the then Home Office Minister outlined other initiatives in this area as follows:

The growing use of automatic number plate recognition cameras, which check passing vehicles against various databases, is already helping enforcement action against the drivers of foreign registered vehicles detected speeding and jumping red lights. The number plates of those who leave the country without being dealt with can be recorded on a database and so be detected and dealt with on return here. We have also taken a number of measures to improve enforcement action against the drivers of foreign registered vehicles. These include a provision in the Road Safety Act 2006 which will allow the exchange of driver licensing and vehicle registration information with other countries. Further help will be provided by the European framework decision on the mutual recognition of financial penalties, which will allow courts in one member state to have the penalties they impose enforced in another and by the international convention on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications.¹⁶

With the exception of the measures in the 2006 Act, these are all now in force in the UK.

For a long time, there have also been plans to institute EU-wide cross-border enforcement of non-financial penalties.¹⁷ However, the UK Government has decided not to opt-in to the provisions, for the following reasons:

¹³ [HC Deb 20 July 2010, c187W](#)

¹⁴ Direct.Gov, [Reporting an untaxed vehicle](#) [accessed 18 May 2011]

¹⁵ [HC Deb 20 July 2006, c682W](#)

¹⁶ [HC Deb 25 January 2007, c2020W](#)

¹⁷ see, e.g.: [EC A Deb, 25 January 2011](#)

The draft directive intends to improve enforcement of certain road traffic offences committed using vehicles registered in another member state. It aims to facilitate the exchange of registered keeper data between member states' registration authorities, to help identify offenders.

While broadly supportive of the objectives behind this measure, the UK did not opt in to the directive because, on balance, it did not appear to be in the UK's interests to do so at this stage.

In the UK we prosecute drivers for road traffic offences, rather than vehicle keepers. Given that the directive only provides for the exchange of vehicle keeper information, we had concerns around our ability to effectively pursue fines against the drivers of the vehicles, in the absence of effective provision to compel foreign registered keepers to disclose who was driving the vehicle when the offence was committed.

[...]

We also had concerns around affordability. There would be significant start-up and running costs were our police to use keeper information obtained under the proposed directive for enforcement purposes.¹⁸

¹⁸ [HC Deb 5 April 2011, cc62-63WS](#)