



Motorcycles: licences and tests

Standard Note: SN3259
Last updated: 7 August 2013
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Section: Business and Transport

This note explains the law related to motorcycle rider licensing, including the changes introduced in the UK by virtue of European Directives.

It is illegal to drive a motorcycle in the UK without holding a valid licence. Licence entitlements vary depending on when they were obtained and the type of vehicle you wish to drive. General information on motorcycle licensing, including application procedures, can be found on the [Gov.uk website](#).

Legislation in this area derives from EU law. The collected European Driving Licence Directives require Member States to provide common standards of competence and fitness to drive. The current law applies the Third Directive, agreed in December 2006, which came into force on 19 January 2013.

Further information on motorcycling issues can be found on the [Motorcycle page](#) of the Parliament website.

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1 Licences

All the rules as to entitlement and use of motorcycle riding licences are set out on the Gov.uk website.¹

The collected European Driving Licence Directives require Member States to adopt a common format licence, to harmonise categories and to provide common standards of competence and fitness to drive. The Third Directive (2006/126/EC) was adopted on 20 December 2006. Its provisions came into force on 19 January 2013 via the *Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) Regulations 2012* (SI 2012/977). Driving entitlements obtained prior to 19 January 2013 are not removed or restricted by the Directive

The type of motorcycle you can ride depends on your age (ranging from between 16 and 24 years of age) and the size of the vehicle. There is a list on the Gov.uk website.²

New provisional licensed riders must have a valid [compulsory basic training \(CBT\)](#) certificate to ride on public roads. They must take and pass the theory and practical tests in two years. Failure to pass both parts of the practical test within two years of taking theory test requires an applicant to begin the process again.

A staged progression to more powerful motorcycles was introduced from January 1997, to improve road safety. The Third Directive provides for a series of inter-related changes to the definitions of the various categories of vehicle and to the minimum ages for particular categories, along with progressive access to some categories, including motorcycles (only for new licences issued after 19 January 2013).³

2 Testing

Theory test

Information on the format and content of the theory test can be found on the Gov.uk website.⁴

An EU-wide theory test for both vehicle drivers and motorcycle riders was introduced by the Second Directive (91/439/EEC), adopted in July 1991.⁵ The written theory test was introduced in the UK on 1 July 1996.⁶ In September 2009 case studies were added to the test.⁷

Annex II to the Third Directive lists the relevant criteria for theoretical knowledge (as opposed to the skills elements which are covered by a practical test) and also sets out the content of the theory test itself. Drivers are required to be tested on their knowledge of aspects of road traffic regulations, the driver, the road, other road users, general rules and regulations and

¹ Gov.uk, [Riding a motorbike, moped or motor tricycle](#) [accessed 7 August 2013]

² Gov.uk, [Riding a motorbike, moped or motor tricycle: Bike categories, ages and licence requirements](#) [accessed 7 August 2013]

³ for comment on these controversial changes, see: ESC, [Third report of session 2004-05](#), HC 38-iii, 27 January 2005, section 20; [HC Deb 30 March 2006, cc103-106WS](#); Transport Committee, [The Government's motorcycling strategy](#) (fifth report of session 2006-07), HC 264, 29 March 2007, para 34; and: BMF press notice, "[Brussels ain't Britain, says BMF](#)", 28 March 2006

⁴ Gov.uk, [The driving theory test for cars and motorcycles](#) [accessed 7 August 2013]

⁵ for background on UK introduction, see: DSA press notice, "Public views sought on changes to the driving test", 10 August 1992; DoT, [New Driver Safety](#), August 1993; and DoT press notice, "MacGregor announces new measures to curb new-driver accidents", 9 February 1994

⁶ [HC Deb 9 May 1994, c60W](#)

⁷ DSA press notice, "[Improvements to theory test](#)", 3 September 2009

the vehicle. There are additional requirements for special categories of vehicle including motorcycles.

Compulsory Basic Training (CBT)

Information on the format and content of CBT can be found on the Gov.uk website.⁸

CBT was introduced in December 1990 as part of an effort to improve the road safety of motorcyclists. The aim was to ensure that all learner riders had achieved a basic level of competence before riding unaccompanied on the road. The purpose of the mandatory training scheme was to reduce the high level of accidents involving motorcyclists, particularly young and inexperienced riders.

Learners are not permitted to ride on the road (including riding to the training sites) until they have satisfactorily completed their training, or are undergoing the on-road element of the training course under the supervision of a certified motorcycle instructor.

Direct/accelerated access

Guidance notes on the direct access scheme (DAS) can be found on the Gov.uk website.⁹

The DAS scheme allows older riders faster access to more powerful machines. The UK secured a derogation from the Second Directive to allow riders over 21 direct access to larger motorcycles provided that they took and passed their test on a motorcycle with a power output of at least 35 kW.¹⁰ Under the Third Directive the minimum age limit for accessing the most powerful vehicles under DAS was raised to 24 from January 2013.

In August 2004 the Advisory Group on Motorcycling¹¹ published a report recommending a fundamental review of gaining a motorcycle licence under DAS.¹² The Labour Government welcomed the report and stated that it would consider its recommendations as it worked to develop its motorcycling strategy, which was published in February 2005. This stated that: “further pre-test training and the Direct Access Scheme should be reviewed” alongside Compulsory Basic Training.¹³ The study was largely complete by early 2008 and provisional results were taken into account by the DSA in the design of the new motorcycle test that was introduced in April 2009 (see below).¹⁴

Introduction of the two part motorcycle test, 2009

The Second Directive set extra and more demanding special manoeuvres for the practical motorcycling test. This was originally going to be introduced on 29 September 2008, however this was put back to 27 April 2009. Since that date candidates have had to undertake:

- at least two manoeuvres executed at slow speed, including a slalom;
- at least two manoeuvres executed at higher speed, of which one manoeuvre should be in second or third gear, at a speed of at least 30 km/h (18.75 mph) and one manoeuvre avoiding an obstacle at a minimum speed of 50 km/h (31.25 mph); and

⁸ Gov.uk, [Compulsory basic training \(CBT\)](#) [accessed 7 August 2013]

⁹ Gov.uk, [Direct access scheme \(DAS\) guidance notes](#) [accessed 7 August 2013]

¹⁰ DoT press notice, “Norris keeps motorcyclists on the road”, 9 January 1995

¹¹ established in May 1999 by the Labour Government

¹² DfT, [Advisory Group on Motorcycling: Final Report to Government](#), August 2004, p69

¹³ DfT, [The Government’s motorcycling strategy](#), February 2005, action xxvi, p30

¹⁴ [HC Deb 16 July 2009, cc620-21W](#)

- at least two braking exercises, including an emergency brake at a minimum speed of 50 km/h (31.25 mph).¹⁵

Introducing these new EU standards implied significant changes to the UK's practical test for motorcyclists. The only one of these special manoeuvres in the UK motorcycling test was an emergency braking exercise, undertaken on-road during the practical riding test at around 20 mph. Whilst the EU standards specify what a test must contain, Member States were given flexibility concerning the details of how tests are organised. In the UK, the two-part test is delivered from a network of sites provided either directly by DSA or via private developers. Many of the centres are multi-purpose test centres (MPTCs) providing both motorcycle and car testing facilities (see below).

In January 2001, the DSA issued a consultation paper which described the new requirements, and sought views on those matters where the Directive had left flexibility for Member States to determine locally. In particular it asked whether the higher-speed manoeuvres should be conducted on-road or off-road and whether they should be part of the practical motorcycling test, or a separate 'manoeuvres' test.¹⁶ In August 2002, the DSA published the responses to the consultation and stated that the government had decided that testing of the new manoeuvres should take place off-road at secure testing areas for various road safety reasons.¹⁷ A further consultation paper was published in December 2002 about the delivery of the test.¹⁸ As a result of the submissions received, the DSA announced in March 2004 that:

- the new higher-speed manoeuvres would be tested on safe sites off the public road;
- other special manoeuvres would be tested off-road on the same occasion;
- all the special manoeuvres would be tested as part of a single test event, undertaken immediately before the general on-road riding assessment;
- candidates exhibiting riding skills at a dangerously incompetent level during the off-road part of the test (e.g. being unable to brake safely) would not be permitted to proceed to the on-road part; and
- the DSA would deliver the test on the basis of a new national network of 50-75 multi-purpose driving test centres, plus additional part-time sites meeting local demand for motorcycling tests; most candidates should be able to reach a test centre within 30-45 minutes, travelling no more than 20 miles.¹⁹

In November 2008 the DSA published another consultation document to finalise the format that the new test would take, including splitting it up into two parts.²⁰ In January 2009 DSA announced that it would go ahead with the new two-part test from 27 April 2009.²¹ The cost of the practical test has increased from about £80 in 2008 to between £90 and £104 in 2013.

¹⁵ [2006/126/EC](#), Annex II, paras 6.2.3-6.2.5

¹⁶ DSA, *European changes to the driving test - a discussion paper*, January 2001

¹⁷ DSA, *Implementing European changes to the driving test - a report on responses and decisions reached*, August 2002

¹⁸ DSA, *Delivering the New Motorcycling Test – a consultation paper*, December 2002

¹⁹ DSA, *Delivering the new practical motorcycling test*, 18 March 2004

²⁰ DSA, *A consultation paper: introducing the new practical motorcycling test and associated fees*, November 2008, paras 7.12-7.16

²¹ DSA press notice, "[DSA announces two-part motorcycle test](#)", 29 January 2009

Multi-purpose test centres (MPTCs)

As stated above, the DSA concluded in 2004 that the new motorcycle test would be delivered via a new national network of 50-75 multi-purpose driving test centres (MPTCs), plus additional part-time sites meeting local demand for motorcycling tests. The aim was for most candidates to be able to reach a test centre within 30-45 minutes, travelling no more than 20 miles.

In its March 2007 report, the Transport Committee reflected concerns from some in the motorcycle industry that the 'multi-purpose' test centres would reduce the number of available testing centres for motorcyclists.²² In its response, the Labour Government sought to reassure the Committee that the MPTCs "will not compromise the standards for training and testing motorcyclists ... We shall ensure that there are appropriate accessibility arrangements".²³ However, there has been ongoing concern about the 'rationalisation' of existing centres and the timely opening and availability of the new MPTCs.²⁴

The new motorcycle test was supposed to be introduced in September 2008, at the new MPTCs, but this was delayed. The November 2008 consultation document explained why:

DSA originally planned a national network of 66 MPTC sites which would deliver approximately 83% service coverage within a 45 minute / 20 mile 'travel to test' distance. These sixty-six sites would also mean that 96% of the population would fall within 60 minutes travel time and 99.5% within 90 minutes.

DSA has encountered considerable difficulties in securing sites where suitable test centres can be developed. As a result, MPTCs were not available in all areas of the country by 29 September 2008. This would have meant some candidates facing lengthy journeys (over 100 miles in exceptional cases) to take their practical riding test. DSA was concerned about the limited coverage, general inconvenience and poor customer service this would cause.

In the light of difficulties in acquiring a suitable and sufficient estate, DSA received representations from the motorcycling interests requesting deferment of the new practical motorcycling test. By August 2008, it had become clear that only 38 of the planned MPTCs would be operational by 29 September ... Having taken account of the views expressed, it was agreed that the Agency should defer implementation of the new test for a period of six months to allow a wider range of locations from which the test could be offered.²⁵

In its March 2010 report on the new test, the Transport Committee heavily criticised the use of MPTCs for the new test:

The implementation of the decision to develop MPTCs has been inept. Despite a very lengthy lead-in, it appears to have come as a surprise to the DSA that there were difficulties in getting planning consent for the large test sites. The delay in launching the test and the scramble to implement temporary measures, including a modified test suitable for much smaller test sites has undermined the case for MPTCs in the first place. It has also severely damaged the trust of the motorcycling community in the DSA. It will take a long time and much resource to mend what has been broken, but

²² op cit., *The Government's motorcycling strategy*, paras 27 and 31

²³ Transport Committee, *The Government's response to the Committee's fifth report of session 2006-07* (eighth special report of session 2006-07), HC 698, 19 June 2007, p3

²⁴ see, e.g.: Letter from Tom Harris MP to David Heath MP, 2 June 2008 [DEP 2008-1398]

²⁵ op cit., *A consultation paper: introducing the new practical motorcycling test and associated fees*, paras 7.7-7.10

the Government and the DSA now need to take urgent action to establish a way forward in collaboration with the industry.²⁶

During a debate in the House in March 2011 the Minister, Mike Penning, made it clear that the move to MPTCs was largely complete by the time the Coalition Government took office. However, where test centres were being closed and people, particularly in rural communities, were being asked to travel further to MPTCs, efforts would be made to look again at test centre provision.²⁷

3 Review and reform of the test, 2010-

In March 2010 the Transport Select Committee published a report on the new motorcycle test. Of particular interest was whether the Labour Government had made the right decision to make some of the new manoeuvres off-road and whether it was 'gold plating' the European standards. The Committee concluded:

We broadly support the approach the Government has taken to the test itself. We do not agree with some witnesses that the EU Directive has been 'gold-plated' by the inclusion of too many, or too taxing exercises in the UK version of the test. We are confident that, in itself, the new test could help to improve the standards of motorcycling, but by failing to obtain a derogation from the EU Directive on the speed requirement and by insisting on the introduction of Multi Purpose Test Centres, the Government has failed to apply common sense and work flexibly with the industry.²⁸

In June 2010 the new Coalition Government launched a review of the two-part test.²⁹ An interim report was published in December 2010. In a statement to the House, the then Road Safety Minister, Mike Penning, said that his intention was to move towards a single, on-road test by 2012.³⁰ An update published in April 2012 stated that progress had been made in identifying potential alternative manoeuvres and the kinds of location that could be suitable and work was underway to evaluate these options to see if they were feasible, safe and deliverable in all areas. There would be a public consultation on any proposals for changing the motorcycle test and, subject to the outcome of the consultation, a new version of the test could be introduced in 2013.³¹

However, in July 2013 the Roads Minister, Stephen Hammond, announced that there would be no changes to the test and that manoeuvres would remain off-road for both safety and cost reasons:

Stephen Hammond said: [...] The Motorcycle Test Review explored whether the whole of the practical motorcycle test could be carried out on the road without jeopardising rider safety or test standards and without increasing costs. The research clearly shows that such a move would increase incidents and cost more money.

[...] Research carried out for the review showed that an on-road manoeuvres test would lead to 17 times the number of serious incidents per year – especially as a result of the higher speed exercises. The research also showed it would increase the

²⁶ op cit., *The new European motorcycle test*, para 44

²⁷ [HC Deb 22 March 2011, c928](#)

²⁸ Transport Committee, *The new European motorcycle test* (sixth report of session 2009-10), HC 442, 23 March 2010, para 79

²⁹ [HC Deb 8 June 2010, cc7-8WS](#)

³⁰ [HC Deb 20 December 2010, cc157-58WS](#); for further details, see: DfT, *Report of the motorcycle test review*, 20 December 2010 [[HC DEP 2010-2333](#)]

³¹ DfT, [Update on the motorcycle test review](#), 3 April 2012

duration of the test which would result in higher costs for both candidates and the DSA.³²

The Government stated that since the review began in 2010 the DfT and DSA had made a number of improvements in motorcycle testing including better recruitment for examiners; improving the booking process and opening more testing sites. More particularly, regarding the test itself, trainers can now request both modules of the motorcycle test to be taken 'back to back' and the order of manoeuvres has been changed:

... to group the slower and higher speed exercises together. This included taking the emergency stop before the hazard avoidance; treating speeds at 5% below 50 kmh as a riding fault rather than a serious fault and reconfiguring the cones on exiting the circuit. These changes have been welcomed by both examiners and trainers and have resulted in fewer incidents, particularly during the avoidance exercise.³³

Also in July 2013 the DfT issued a consultation on changes to the minimum standards for vehicles that can be used in a driving or riding test. This follows European Directive [2012/36/EU](#), which amends the Third Directive. The majority of the changes must be introduced by 31 December 2013, apart from the changes that relate to large motorcycles which do not have to be introduced until 31 December 2018. The changes are as follows:

allowing a tolerance of 5cc below the minimum specified engine size for motorcycles that can be used for the test (categories A1, A2 and A)

reducing the minimum engine power requirement for medium motorcycles used for the driving test (category A2)

raising the minimum engine power requirement for large motorcycles used for the driving test (category A)

introducing a minimum, mass weight requirement, for category A motorcycles used for the driving test (category A)³⁴

The impact assessment gives the Government's view that the majority of the changes offer a relaxation of the current rules applied to the standards for vehicles used for driving tests and some were sought by the UK in order to help the affected business sectors to be able to comply with Third Directive.³⁵

³² DfT press notice, "[Motorcycle manoeuvre testing to remain off-road following review](#)", 4 July 2013; and: DfT, [Motorcycle manoeuvres review: the feasibility and safety implications](#), 4 July 2013

³³ *ibid.*, "[Motorcycle manoeuvre testing to remain off-road following review](#)"

³⁴ DfT, [Further European changes to driving licences and driving test requirements](#), July 2013, pp5 & 7-9

³⁵ DfT, [Amendments to the Driving Licence Regulations to introduce changes required by EU legislation for vehicles used for taking driving tests: impact assessment](#), July 2013, p5