



Memorandum from:

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1. It has come to the MSA's notice that the Transport Committee has decided to undertake an enquiry into the Department for Transport's Executive Agencies and Non-Departmental Bodies. Among other matters, we note that the committee will be considering "whether the Agencies' performance is satisfactory and whether they are sufficiently accountable?"
2. Unfortunately, details of the enquiry did not come to the notice of The MSA in time for us to submit formal evidence to the committee. However, we thought it might be of interest to you if we commented on a couple of the matters raised during the enquiry by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee (session 2000-01) which was the subject of their Seventh Report entitled The Transport-related Executive Agencies of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions - you will recall it was published in March 2001.
3. The MSA submitted written evidence to that enquiry. Within that evidence, we quoted a DSA press release from September 1997; Driving Test Administration goes High Tech (54/97). It stated that the DSA were having a new computer booking system, that the contract was worth £15 million over seven years and was due to be operational in late 1998. It also stated "The system will be configured ready for connection to the Internet."
4. Giving evidence to the enquiry on 17 January 2001 the DSA chief executive was pressed as to when driving schools would have access to the practical test booking system. He said: "I would guess we would probably start to do that some time towards the end of this year."
5. In its report the committee stated: "We recommend that the Driving Standards Agency give driving schools direct access to the DTCS booking system, as was promised, as soon as possible."
6. The government's response to the report stated: "The Government recognises that driving schools and their pupils want a reliable driving test booking service. Performance and reliability of the Driving Test Control System have improved since its introduction in 1999."
7. "DSA is developing the necessary systems to provide access to the booking service via the Internet, delivering on the commitments given in the Modernising Government White Paper. It is intended that access will be initially available for theory test bookings from November 2001, subject to robust systems being available. Internet access to the practical test booking service will follow in 2002."

8. The DSA now states: "We are on target for launching the practical test online in summer 2003. The software has been procured and we are currently at screen design stage."
9. Considering that the then chief executive was saying in September 1997 that the test booking system was going to be ready for connection to the internet in late 1998. It would seem to us that delivering a promised service some five years behind schedule, if it happens in the summer, is not entirely satisfactory.
10. The other matter we wished to raise with you is that of the DSA record on ADI standards. In our evidence we stated: "Only a few check tests are being conducted. It is reported that the DSA check test programme may be as much as two years behind. Whilst few instructors like being check tested we feel it is vital that these checks are carried out if ADI standards are to be improved as set out in the Government's Road Safety Strategy. We request the select committee to recommend that the DSA take immediate steps to recover the ADI check test programme within six months."
11. The committee report stated: "A related difficulty was reported by BSM, which said that tests of trainee Approved Driving Instructors are frequently delayed to an even greater extent than those for learner drivers.
12. "As a result Instructors waiting to qualify are often compelled to seek an extension to their qualification period, creating administrative work for the Instructors, their employers, and the Driving Standards Agency itself. The delays to the tests are in part the result of a shortage of supervising examiners. That shortage also lies behind the fact that 'check tests', or examinations at short notice of the abilities of already-qualified Approved Driving Instructors, 'are seldom carried out, if at all'. The Motor Schools Association says that "it is reported that the Driving Standards Agency 'check test' programme may be as much as two years behind ... it is vital that these checks are carried out if Approved Driving Instructor standards are to be improved as set out in the Government's Road Safety Strategy". The Chief Executive of the Agency admitted that it did not carry out enough 'check tests'. We agree. We recommend that the Driving Standard Agency employ adequate numbers of senior examiners and other staff, so that it is able to ensure that the driving test is of a high and consistent standard, and that Approved Driving Instructors are examined promptly and 'check tested' frequently."
13. The government's response to the report stated: "The Agency is reviewing its long-term requirements for senior and supervising examiner grades, taking into account the recruitment opportunities into those grades. It is also considering measures to recover the shortfalls in the programme of 'check tests' for Approved Driving Instructors, including the temporary promotion of suitable staff to the SE(ADI) grade.
14. "Quality control is a key element of the Agency's management of its staff, and is essential to the delivery of the Government's road safety targets. A review of the existing quality assurance mechanisms for operational staff is currently being undertaken by an independent team from the Vehicle Inspectorate. They will report their findings in the autumn. DSA will give full consideration to their recommendations."

15. The waiting times for ADI practical examinations have improved. However, the check test programme is still behind and at a recent meeting senior, DSA officials stated that check testing was not a priority.
16. We believe DSA does have the ability to recapture the check test programme. In a response to a letter from the MSA in September 2002, the DSA chief executive stated in his reply: "You questioned whether, if we suspended the Schools Programme for one year, if that would enable the check test programme to be recaptured. At present, the Schools Programme, recently renamed Arrive Alive, will use the equivalent of 10 driving examiners and two senior examiners to deliver 4,500 presentations during this financial year.
17. "The number of check tests that could be conducted in the number of days covered by Arrive Alive presentations is around 6,000. I should point out, however, that Arrive Alive presentations are delivered by driving examiners who do not conduct ADI check tests."
18. One might of thought it possible to suspend the schools' programme and re-train these examiners. A cynic might suggest that the DSA is more interested in their non-statutory activities than in their statutory ones.
19. It seems to us somewhat ironic that while the DSA are failing to deliver a statutory service that ADIs have paid for in advance it received the Prince Michael of Kent Road Safety Award for providing a non-statutory activity paid for from general taxation.
20. We do not believe the DSA's performance is satisfactory regarding the items mentioned above. As to their accountability, clearly it would appear not to be to the driving instructors who are their customers.