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Equality in the driving test

Authors
L Smith, S Christmas, J Weekley, A Nuttall, B Gupta,
S Helman, I Marino, J Hitchings

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Shaun Helman (Technical Reviewer)	*Shaun Helman*	3 June 2025

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Executive summary

Driving test performance differences in Great Britain

In the Category B (car) driver testing process in Great Britain, different groups of candidates are more likely to pass than others. The pass rate for male candidates on the practical test is consistently higher than that for female candidates for example, while the opposite is true for the theory test. These test outcomes do not always align with safety outcomes. For example, despite their higher pass rate on the practical test, males have a higher (not lower) risk of being involved in injury collisions when they begin driving.

This study – a mixed methods approach to understanding inequalities

This project was commissioned by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) to better understand such inequalities in test outcomes, with the goal of improving test fairness.

The work took a mixed methods approach to understand inequalities within driver testing for the car test. First, existing quantitative data for car practical and theory tests were analysed; the focus of this was on gender differences, but disability and ethnicity were also discussed. A short review of literature on gender differences was also undertaken. Second, interviews were undertaken with learner drivers, recent test passers, instructors and examiners. This qualitative work aimed to understand barriers that might be faced by males and females in preparation for the test, and in the testing system itself.

Findings

The quantitative data analysis confirmed that there are consistent differences between males and females in terms of how they prepare for the test, and how they perform in it. Males are more likely than females to pass the practical test, and females are more likely than males to pass the theory test.

Gender differences in the theory test

Regarding the theory test, there was broad agreement among interviewees that the reason females are more likely than males to pass is that they are better prepared, because they make more effort to prepare. Males were perceived as being more likely than females to just ‘give the theory test a go’, and as being more confident in their ability as drivers (and thus not think they need to revise). The finding in the quantitative data that males are around twice as likely than females to post a very low score of under 20 (out of a possible 125) corroborates this suggestion.

Gender differences in the practical test

Four hypotheses were formulated from the qualitative work and the wider review of evidence as possible reasons why males are more likely than females to pass the practical test:

Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test.

Higher levels of motivation and interest in driving may mean males obtain more, or more relevant, prior experience before they take the test.

Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test.

Males may be more confident in both their ability to manage tasks (helping them to confidently 'make progress') and in their own judgements (not being 'hesitant' or 'overthinking'). Part of this might be that females, to compensate for their lack of confidence, may become stressed, something that may not happen to males, who are trying to compensate for overconfidence.

Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress.

Males may be less prone to anxiety, or better able to manage its impact on their behaviour, in the practical test.

Hypothesis 4: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by the examiner.

Females may be more likely to notice and interpret an examiner's behaviour and demeanour, and this may prompt self-judgement and worry about how they are doing.

One major limitation of the current study is that the variables in data available to DVSA (for example fault data on tests, survey data on test preparation) were not designed to test such hypotheses; they were designed to assess test performance. Nonetheless there were some indications in the quantitative data analysis that are compatible with some of these hypotheses. Notably:

Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test.

Males are more likely than females to report being completely prepared for their test (although this is true for those who pass and those who fail – thus it only partially supports the hypothesis).

Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test.

Males who fail the test are more likely than females who fail to report being 'unlucky on the day', while females who fail are more likely to say they made 'a silly mistake on the day'; this partially supports a 'males are more confident' hypothesis. Some of the faults males make more often than females are compatible with having more (and in these instances *too much*) confidence – for example, failing due to a serious fault related to inappropriate speed or failing to slow down at a pedestrian crossing.

Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress.

Females are more likely than males to report failing due to nervousness, which lends some support to this hypothesis.

Research gaps

Two other specific questions are raised by the work and would benefit from research to answer them.

The first is that the male advantage in practical test outcomes does not align with later safety outcomes. Research focused on understanding the link between test performance and later safety, and the mechanisms by which the former can influence the latter, would help in aligning policy intention with outcomes. While the female advantage in the theory test *does* align with later safety, the theory test is a less onerous and costly part of the licensing process. This means its ability to discriminate based on the knowledge and skills needed for safe driving is diminished, relative to the practical test. Research focused on how the theory test can exert more influence on later outcomes would be useful.

The second wider question relates to the other potential sources of inequality that might exist in driver test outcomes but for which data available do not support full understanding. These include (from gaps identified in the quantitative data analysis and the interviews) age, ethnicity, automatic versus manual transmission, self-described health conditions, special requirements, region of the country and socio-economic disadvantage.

Considerations

Three main considerations are offered for future efforts to reduce inequality in driver testing in Great Britain.

1 First, building on hypothesis 4, DVSA could examine the way customer service is interpreted by examiners on the practical test. Feedback from interviewees was that different people can interpret different communication approaches by examiners in different ways. It may be that a simple change to interaction with candidates could help to reduce any inequalities these differences in interpretation may cause.

2 Second, relating to the confidence elements of hypothesis 2, it may be useful for DVSA to explore ways of addressing a possible asymmetry in the practical test between compensating for a lack of confidence, which is likely to cause anxiety, and compensating for overconfidence, which is not. Several potential approaches to this are offered.

3 A third consideration relates to the wider narrative surrounding what 'good driving' really is – which may, by shaping the motivations, opportunities and therefore capabilities of male and female candidates, underpin inequalities. This narrative can broadly be described as one that misrepresents the driving task in favour of the characteristics of maleness that seem associated with driving in wider cultural references. Several interviewees mentioned variations on the theme of 'boys will be boys' when discussing the approach that males take to preparing and taking both the practical and theory elements of the driving test. Males were seen as more practical, more confident and less likely to 'overthink', while females were seen as, and in some

cases expected to be, more cautious and more prone to self-judgement. DVSA is in an ideal position to challenge this narrative.

In each of the above cases, there would be value in collecting data that allow the hypotheses identified in this research to be tested. This might be through routine data collection by the DVSA or through additional targeted research.

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Introduction and background

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In driver testing for Category B (car) licences in Great Britain, it has long been understood that certain groups of candidates are more likely to pass the theory and practical tests than others; for example, the pass rate for male practical test candidates is consistently higher (by around 5 percentage points) than that for females, for the years in which data are available (2007 to present). Conversely, females are more likely to pass the theory test.

One reason why such disparities are troubling for the broader transport ecosystem, various public organisations (such as the NHS) and wider society is that they do not always align with safety outcomes. For example, despite males passing the practical test more readily than females, they also have a higher risk of being involved in injury collisions in their early driving.

This project was commissioned by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) to better understand these differences and to provide greater support to improve test preparedness for all, with the wider goal of making driver testing fair, and with a continuing focus on the competencies needed to drive safely. DVSA is committed to equality, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of its work, and it is therefore critical to ensure that candidates are assessed to the same level in the driving test. Accessibility of services and removing barriers for economic mobility are at the core of the Government missions.

1.2 Aims of this study

This project aimed to understand the experiences of car driving test candidates, specifically seeking to identify the underlying reasons for any differences in test performance relating to demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity and disability. The findings will help shape future testing, inform future learning materials and change practices in the driver training industry, so that outcomes on tests can be made fairer, resulting in a more inclusive and higher-quality system.

The project took a mixed methods approach. First, existing data for the Category B practical and theory tests were analysed; this included data on test performance, pass rates and data on learning experiences. The focus of this work was on gender differences because of the data available; however, data on differences by ethnicity and disability were examined where available. The aim of this quantitative data analysis was to identify any differences in pass rates between different groups, and to uncover more detailed insights about any observed differences.

Engagement was also undertaken, through interviews with learner drivers and recent test passers, driving test examiners and driving instructors, to understand the various barriers that might be faced by different groups in terms of learning to drive and test outcomes. The aim of this qualitative workstream was to provide further insight into the differences

identified in the data analysis, possible causes and barriers to change, and therefore to inform potential developments and improvements that could be made to the wider licensing system. To align with the quantitative data analysis, this work was primarily focused on gender differences.

To inform both the qualitative work and the project more widely, a short high-level review was carried out of the limited existing research on inequalities in licensing systems in other countries and inequalities in potentially related test performance (such as in academic education).

1.3 Structure of this report

Section 2 provides context for the licensing process in Great Britain.

Sections 0 to 7 describe the analysis undertaken on available quantitative data. This includes a description of the data sources used (Section 0), analysis of practical test performance (Section 4), analysis of data on practical test preparedness (Section 5), analysis of theory test performance (Section 6), analysis of data on licence holders (Section 7), and gaps in the data (Section 8). The purpose of the quantitative analysis outlined in these sections was to understand the differences between groups in more detail than is possible from relying only on headline pass rate figures. It also, along with Section 9, which summarises the findings from a high-level review of wider literature on individual differences, informed the qualitative work undertaken in the next sections.

Sections 10 to 11 describe the method, analysis and findings from this qualitative work. The purpose of this work was to provide much more detail on the potential reasons why differences between groups (especially genders) exist, and to develop testable hypotheses for these.

Finally, Section 12 summarises the key findings from the study, discusses the implications and presents next steps that might be considered by DVSA.

The appendices give additional data and information. Appendix A provides definitions for faults recorded on the practical driving test, Appendix B provides data tables and Appendix C topic guides.

2 Context – the licensing process

2.1 Learning to drive

In Great Britain, most people are allowed to drive a car from the age of 17 with a provisional licence, which means they are allowed to drive when supervised. Driving lessons can take place either with an Approved Driving Instructor (ADI) or with family and friends or a combination of both. Learners can choose whether to learn in an automatic or manual transmission car. The driving test is the same for both; however, those who pass their test in an automatic car may only drive an automatic car on their resulting licence and would need to take a further test to upgrade to a manual licence. To drive unsupervised, it is necessary to pass first the theory test followed by the practical test (within two years of passing the theory test).

2.2 Theory test

Once a person has their provisional licence they can book their theory test. The theory test consists of two parts – the multiple-choice questions and the hazard perception test. For the multiple-choice questions, the candidate has 57 minutes to answer 50 questions covering the Highway Code, traffic signs and the essential skills of driving. For the hazard perception test, the candidate is shown 14 video clips that contain at least one 'developing hazard' and must click the button when they notice the hazard starting to develop; up to five points are available for each hazard (one clip has two hazards, and 13 each have a single hazard). The maximum number of marks and the pass mark for each part are shown in Table 1; both parts need to be passed to have an overall pass.

Table 1: Theory test pass marks

Section	Pass mark	Points available
Multiple-choice questions	43	50
Hazard perception	44	75

If a candidate has a reading difficulty, disability or health condition, they can declare this when booking the test. Support available includes: listening to the test through headphones, extra time, someone to read the questions and record the answers, someone to reword the questions, using a listening aid, having a lip speaker, taking the test in British Sign Language (BSL), having a BSL interpreter.

There have been several changes in the theory test in recent years during the period included in the data analysis in this report (DVSA, 2020; 2019; 2018; DSA, 2011). These are listed for reference.

- September 2007: the number of multiple-choice questions was increased from 35 to 50 and the pass mark was changed to 43 out of 50.

- September 2009: a case study was introduced, requiring candidates to read a written case study and answer related multiple-choice questions.
- January 2012: multiple-choice questions were no longer published in learning materials.
- October 2014: foreign language voiceovers and interpreters were removed.
- January 2015: computer generated imagery (CGI) clips replaced filmed clips in the hazard perception section.
- May 2018: questions were reworded to make them more accessible.
- November 2018: clips for testing hazard perception in different weather conditions were introduced.
- September 2020: a written case study with five associated questions was replaced by a video clip with three associated questions.

2.3 Practical test

Once a driver has passed their theory test, they can book their practical driving test. The driving test lasts about 40 minutes (some drivers who have previously been disqualified for serious offences may be required to take an extended test of 70 minutes). The driving test includes:

- An eyesight check
- 'Show me, tell me' vehicle safety questions
- General driving ability
- Reversing your vehicle
- Independent driving

The driving examiner records faults on a device (using the Digital Test Report (DTR) form shown in Figure 1). Guidance for driving examiners on how to record faults is provided by DVSA (DVSA, 2025b). The full list of definitions for faults recorded on the DTR is included in Appendix A.

For each element there are three types of fault:

- Driving fault – this is not potentially dangerous, but if the same fault is recorded multiple times, it can become a serious fault should the examiner feel this is an underlying issue.
- Serious – something that is potentially dangerous.
- Dangerous – something that involves danger to the driver, examiner, public or property.

A single serious or dangerous fault results in a failure. Accumulating 16 or more driving faults also results in a failure. The form also records whether the examiner took physical or verbal action. Examiner action alone does not signify failure; however, action will generally only be taken in response to a serious or dangerous fault.

Once a driver has passed their practical test they can drive independently. Their full licence will usually be sent automatically, or, if preferred, they must apply for their full licence within two years.

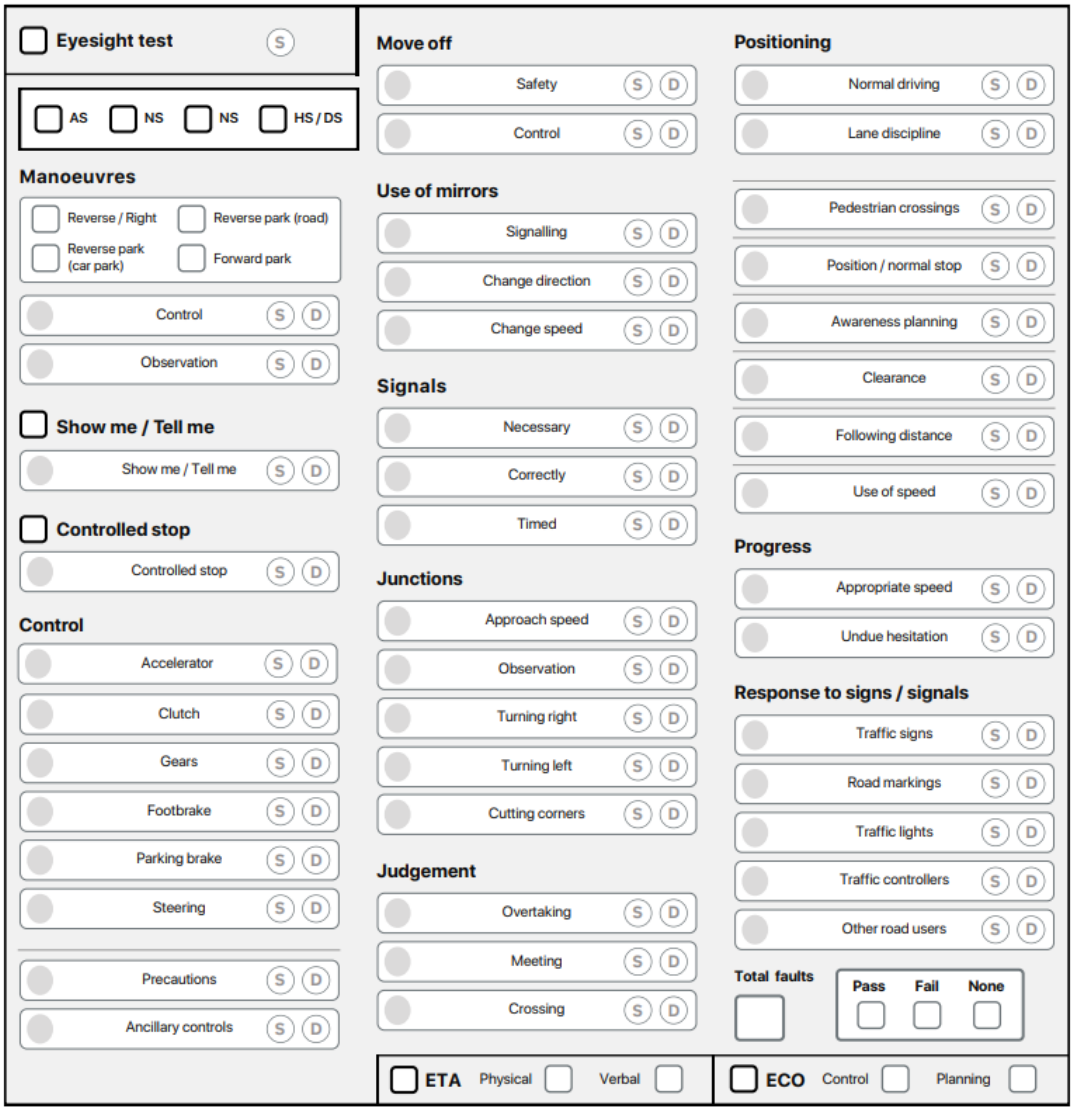
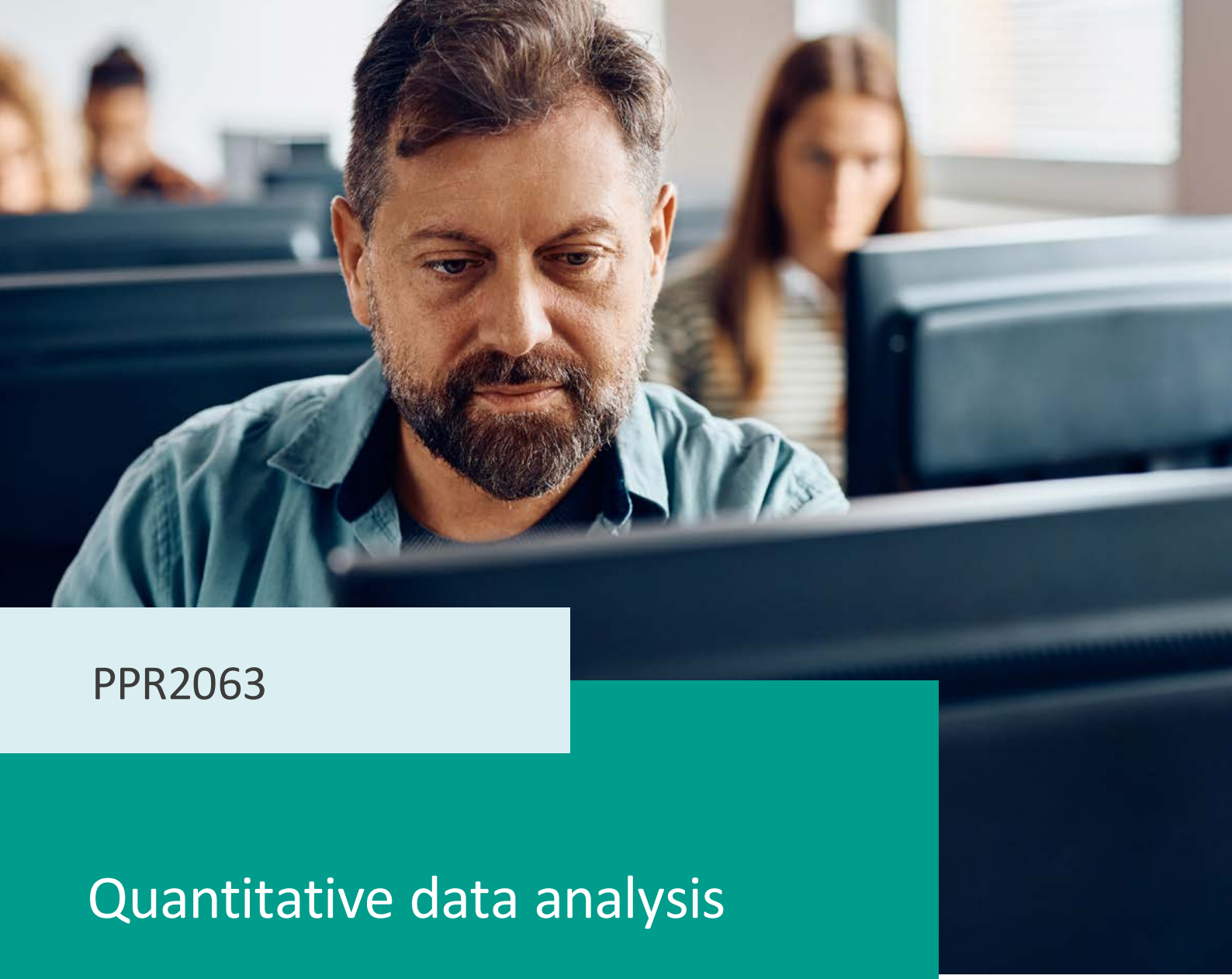


Figure 1: Digital Test Report (DTR) (DVSA, 2022)

There have been several changes to the practical test during the period included in the data analysis in this report (DVSA, 2019). These are listed for reference:

- September 2008: an assessment of eco-safe driving was introduced.
- October 2010: independent driving became part of the test, requiring candidates to drive for 10 minutes following a series of road traffic signs or directions displayed on schematic diagrams.
- October 2014: foreign language interpreters removed.
- December 2017: significant changes to the test including independent driving extended to 20 minutes, following directions from a sat nav, testing different manoeuvres and answering a 'show me' safety question while driving.



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Quantitative data analysis

3 Data sources

3.1 DVSA data

The datasets used in the quantitative analysis are briefly described in the following section. Note that the terms 'gender' and 'sex' are both used in this section and in the subsequent analysis; in each case the term used is the one from when the data were collected.

3.1.1 DVSA published data

Various datasets related to learning to drive in Great Britain are published annually by DVSA (DVSA, 2025c; 2025d) and are available from April 2007 to March 2024. These datasets include the number of practical and theory tests taken and the number of passes, each disaggregated by age, gender, test centre and month. Data are also available showing test attempt number, passes with zero faults and the most common faults made. Within this analysis the postcodes of test centres were used to allocate each test centre to a region or country. Datasets are also available relating to Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) (DVSA, 2025a).

3.1.2 DVSA detailed data

To gain further insight into test performance, unpublished detailed data were provided by DVSA in accordance with the permitted uses of these data and data privacy legislation. This comprised two anonymised datasets containing details for all test candidates in Great Britain taking either the practical or the theory test in March 2024:

- The Digital Test Report (DTR) data for 184,341 candidates (see Section 2.3) providing information on test results and all recorded driving faults.
- Theory test results for 103,446 candidates including multiple-choice and hazard perception scores, and any special support requirements requested by candidates.

Both datasets also contained age and gender.

3.1.3 DVSA test preparation survey data

In addition, DVSA provided data from its driving test preparation survey. This is a voluntary survey sent to candidates in the week following their test, regardless of the result, to understand how learners prepared for their test.

The survey includes demographic questions on gender, age group and ethnic group and asks respondents if they have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more. It also asks if they had any of a pre-set list of reasonable adjustments at their latest test because of a disability, learning difficulty or health condition, but these data were not available in this project.

Among other things, the survey asks questions about respondents' experiences while learning to drive (including amount of professional instruction and practice with family or friends), the result of their most recent test, how prepared they felt for the most recent test and the perceived reason for failure, if relevant.

The dataset contained the demographic data and test outcome of all those who completed the test preparation survey during the period 2 July 2024 to 12 December 2024. In total there were 90,292 respondents, approximately 9% of driving test candidates in that period.

A higher proportion of those who passed their test responded to this survey than those who failed. Therefore, the pass rate indicated in the survey data is much higher (75%) than that for all candidates (47% in the same period), meaning findings could be skewed towards test passers and therefore should be used with caution.

3.2 Other datasets

3.2.1 NTS data

The Department for Transport (DfT) undertakes an annual National Travel Survey (NTS). This is a survey of households in England only and includes a questionnaire and travel diary. The questionnaire includes characteristics of households and individuals, including whether they hold a full car licence. Households are selected as part of the sample and individuals in the household are asked to complete a survey and travel diary. A weighting is calculated for each household and used to estimate results representative of the entire population in England. Further details about the NTS methodology can be found in the NTS technical report (Department for Transport, 2024a).

DfT publishes summary statistics based on the NTS data, including the number of full car driving licence holders by age and sex from 1975 onwards (Department for Transport, 2024c).

Detailed NTS data were accessed via the UK data service (Department for Transport, 2024b) and linked and analysed using PowerBI. This provided household and individual data to understand the characteristics of individuals with and without a licence, disaggregated by other characteristics, such as region, age, sex.

4 Practical test performance

This section explores test performance in the practical test in terms of gender, age, region, type of pass (attempt number, zero faults) and reasons for failing. It also explores the more limited data available associated with test performance by ethnic group and by those with health conditions.

4.1 Gender – overall

In the 12 months ending 31 March 2024, DVSA conducted almost two million (1,945,225) practical driving tests. A slightly higher number of test-takers were male (1,057,391; 54%) compared with female (887,823; 46%). Just under half (931,494; 48%) of all candidates passed. Figure 2 shows the practical test pass rate by gender and calendar year based on DVSA published data tables DRT121B (DVSA, 2025c). Note that the 2020 data cover only three months January to March due to the suspension of driving tests during the coronavirus pandemic.

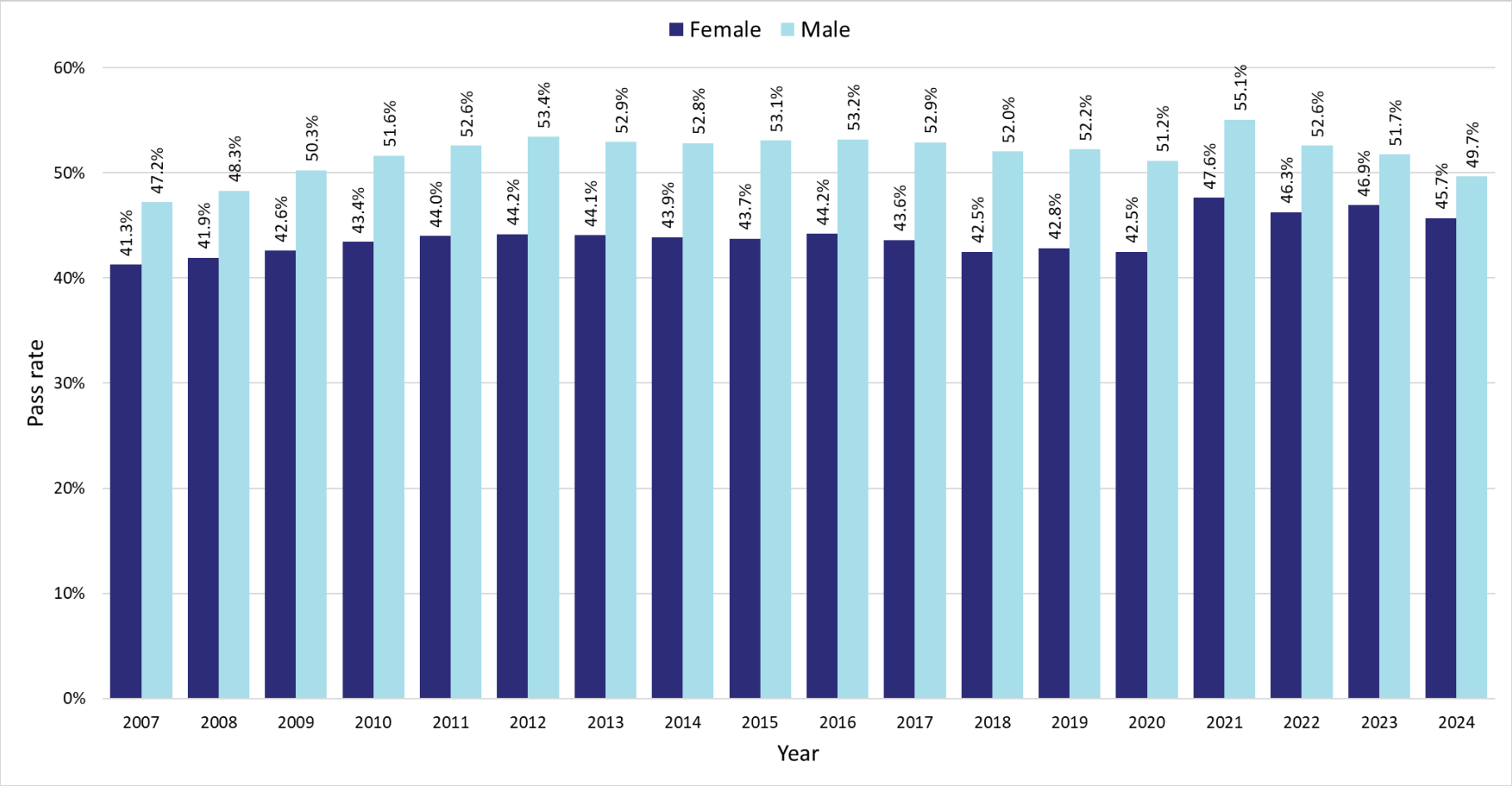

Figure 2: Practical test passes by gender and year (April 2007 to March 2024) (DRT121B – DVSA published data)

Male pass rates were consistently higher than female pass rates across all years. This indicates a persistent gender gap in pass rates. Male pass rates fluctuated around the 50–55% range, while female pass rates generally remained at 41–47%. The difference between the pass rates for males and females is statistically significant for each year (Z-test for proportions, $p<0.001$), but the effect size is classed as very small ($d<0.2$).

For females, there was a gradual increase from 41.3% in 2007 to a high of 47.6% in 2021, followed by a slight decline, ending at 45.7% in 2024. For males, pass rates increased more significantly, reaching a peak of 55.1% in 2021, but declined to 49.7% in 2024.

Both genders saw a noticeable increase in pass rates in 2021, potentially due to fewer test-takers and changes in testing procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic. This peak was more pronounced for males, with a jump to 55.1% in 2021, the highest rate recorded.

4.2 Gender and age

DVSA published data table DRT121C (DVSA, 2025c) gives information on test candidates and pass rates by gender and age.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of total tests conducted by age group and gender between 2011 and 2023.

Figure 4 shows the practical test pass rate by age group and gender between 2011 and 2023.

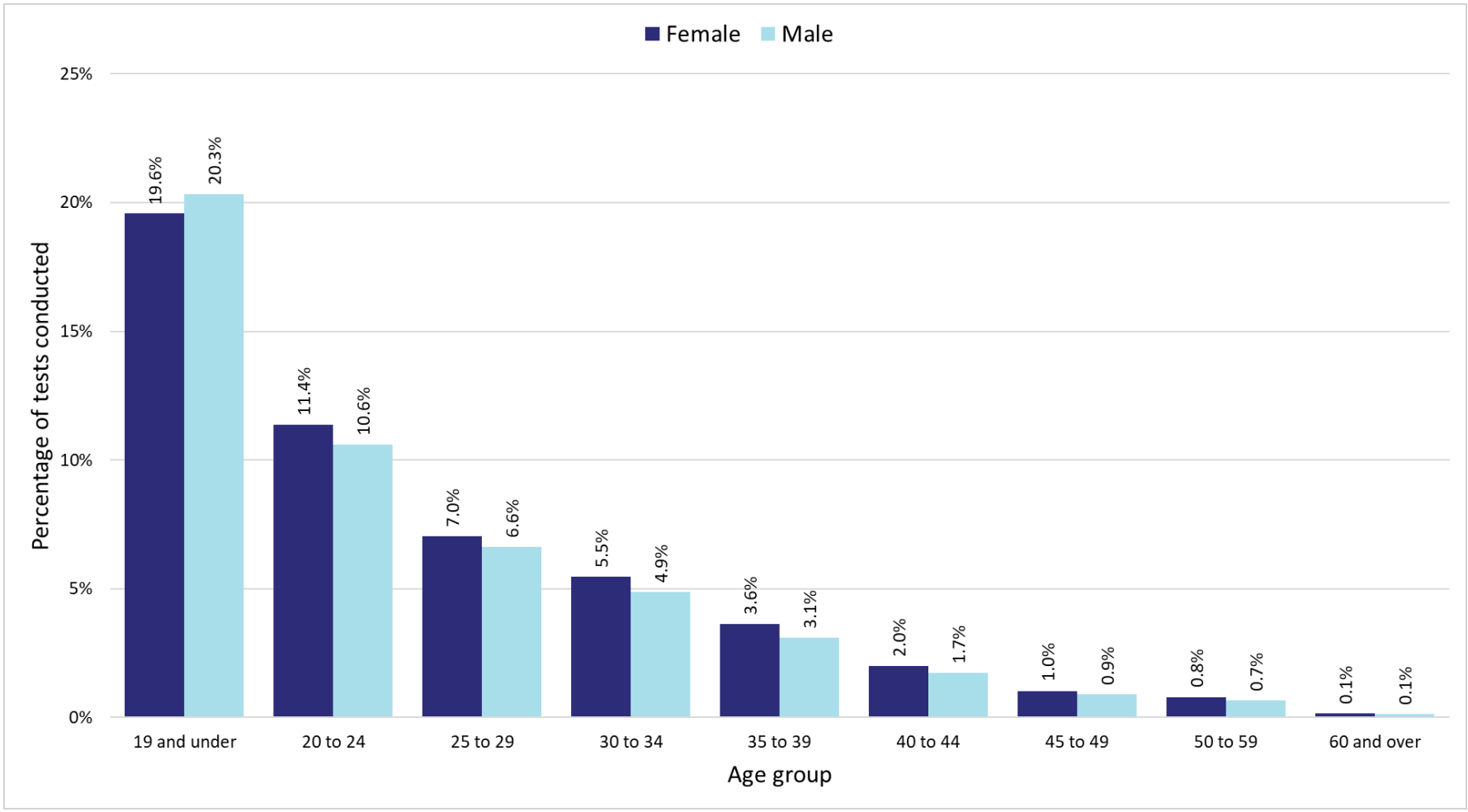

Figure 3: Practical tests conducted by age group and gender over the years 2011–2023 (DRT121C – DVSA published data)

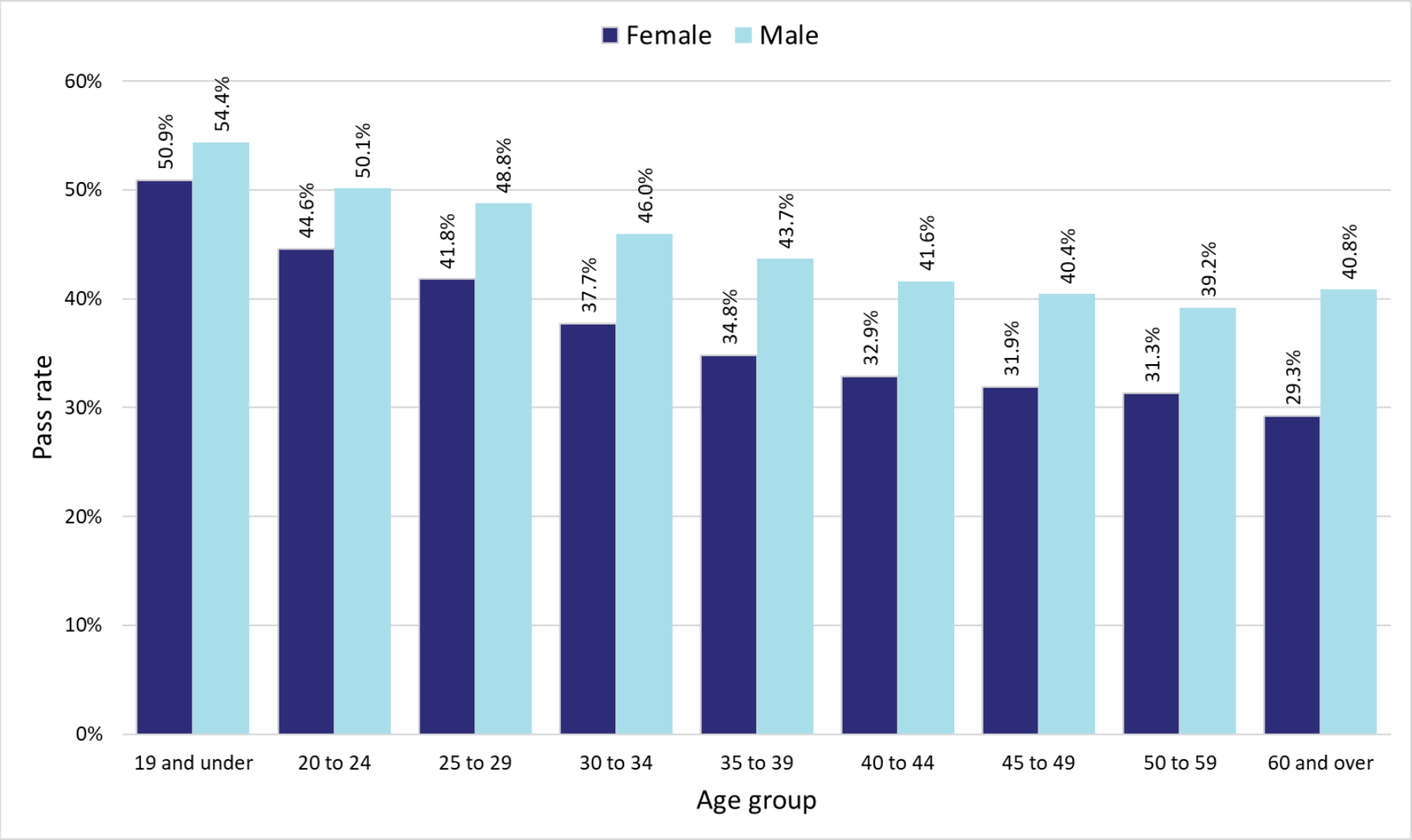

Figure 4: Practical test passes by age group and gender over the years 2011–2023 (DRT121C – DVSA published data)

From Figure 3, approximately 40% of test candidates were aged 19 and under, a further 22% were aged 20 to 24 and 7% were aged 40 or over. In the youngest age group, there was a slightly higher number of male candidates than female candidates, but for age groups 20 and over there was a higher number of female candidates.

From Figure 4, across all age groups male candidates had consistently higher pass rates than female candidates; this trend suggests a gender-based disparity. The difference between the male and female pass rates for each age group is significant (Z-test for proportions $p<0.001$), but the effect size is generally very small ($p<0.2$), except for the age group '60 and over' where the effect size is classed as small ($d=0.24$).

For both genders, pass rates declined with age. The youngest age group, '19 and under', had the highest pass rate for both females (50.9%) and males (54.4%), while the oldest group, '60 and over', had the lowest pass rates for both genders (29.3% for females and 40.8% for males). This trend indicates that younger candidates are more likely to pass than older candidates.

The decline in pass rates with age was more pronounced for females than for males. For instance, female pass rates dropped from 50.9% in the '19 and under' group to 29.3% in the '60 and over' group, while male pass rates dropped from 54.4% to 40.8% over the same age range. This steeper decline could indicate a greater difficulty for older females in passing the practical test.

Some age groups showed particularly large gender disparities. For instance:

- In the '19 and under' group, males had a pass rate that is 3.5 percentage points higher than females.
- The '60 and over' group had a significant gap, with a pass rate for males of 40.8% and females of 29.3%, a difference of over 11 percentage points.

These gaps suggest that gender-based factors impacting pass rates may become more pronounced in certain age groups, especially the oldest; alternatively, this may be due to generational effects.

Figure 5 shows the practical test pass rate by age group and gender for only the most recent three years (2021–2023).

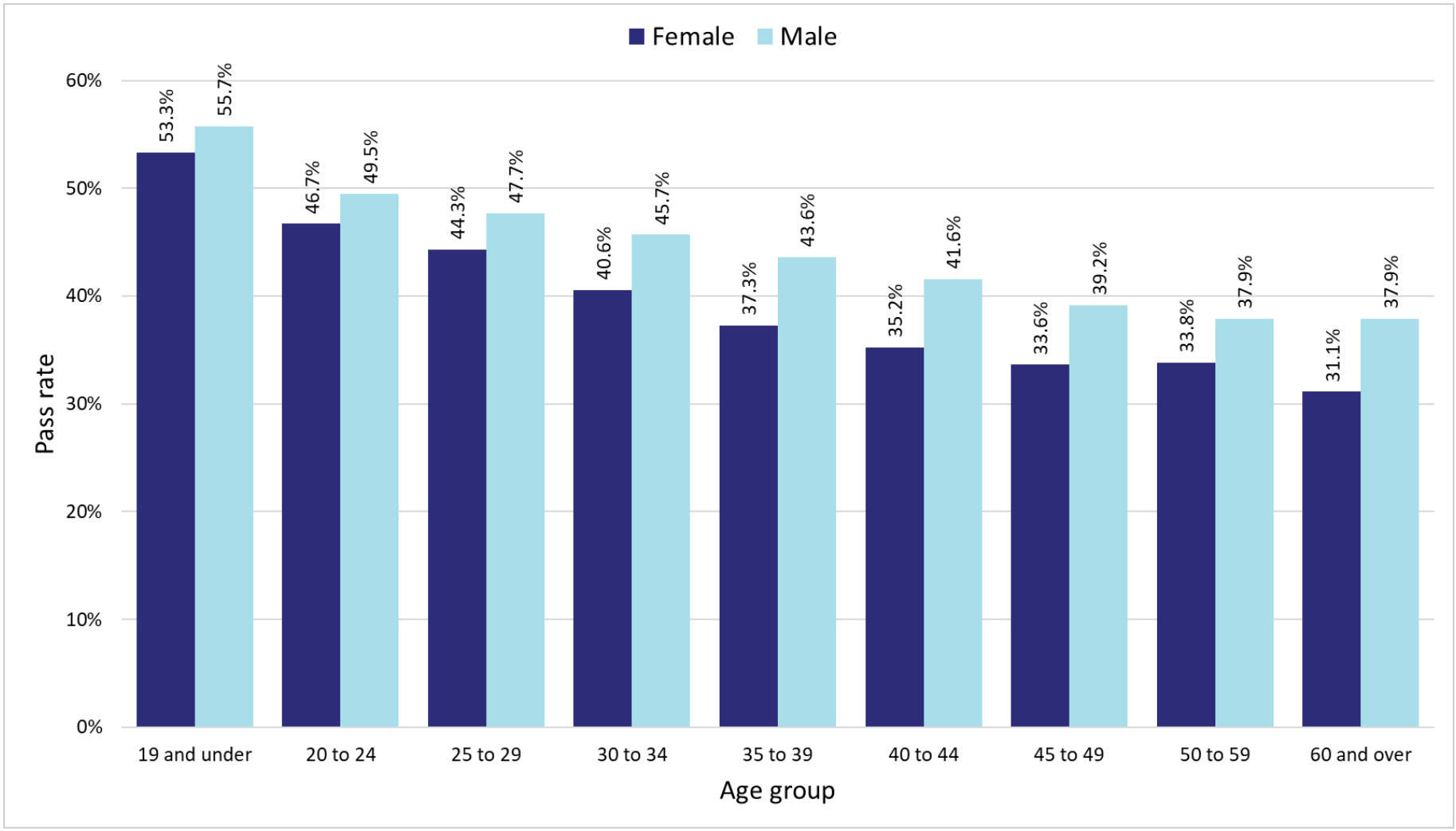

Figure 5: Practical test passes by age group and gender over the years 2021–2023 (DRT121C – DVSA published data)

The 2021–2023 data reveal some differences from the previous 2011–2023 analysis:

- Slightly higher pass rates for young females: In the 2021–2023 data, females in the '19 and under' group showed a higher pass rate (53.3%) than in the 2011–2023 data (50.9%). This suggests a slight improvement for younger female candidates in recent years.
- Narrowed gap for older age groups: For both males and females in the '60 and over' group, the pass rates in 2021–2023 (31.1% for females and 37.9% for males) were closer together than in the period 2011–2023 (29.3% for females and 40.8% for males). This indicates a reduced gender disparity for the oldest age group in the recent data.
- Overall higher pass rates for females in some age groups: Pass rates for females aged '20 to 24', '25 to 29' and '50 to 59' were slightly higher in the 2021–2023 data than in the 2011–2023 data, indicating minor improvements for these age groups.

These differences suggest modest improvements in pass rates for females in certain age groups, potentially narrowing the gender gap slightly, especially for younger and older females. The first two of these findings are consistent with generational changes over time. However, the overall trends of gender and age disparities largely remain consistent.

4.3 Gender and type of test

Table 2 shows the number of tests conducted by gender that were automatic and manual based on DVSA published data tables DRT122E and DRT121C (DVSA, 2025c).

Table 2: Practical car test pass rates by gender (2023/24) (DRT122E and DRT121C – DVSA published data)

Type of test	Gender	Conducted	Pass rate	Male–female pass rate
All tests	Male	1,057,391	49.1%	-
All	Female	887,823	46.5%	-
All	**Total**	**1,945,225**	**47.9%**	**2.6%**
Automatic tests	Male	173,766	44.6%	-
Automatic	Female	281,503	41.7%	-
Automatic	**Total**	**455,276**	**42.8%**	**2.9%**
Manual tests	Male	883,625	49.9%	-
Manual	Female	606,320	48.7%	-
Manual	**Total**	**1,489,949**	**49.4%**	**1.2%**

23% of all tests were automatic tests; however, females were more likely to take an automatic test (32%) than males (16%).

Automatic tests had a lower pass rate overall (42.8%) than manual tests (49.4%), and automatic tests had a slightly larger gender gap (2.9 percentage points) than seen with all

tests (2.6 percentage points). For manual tests the gender gap was smaller (1.2 percentage points). As with all tests, the difference between the male and female pass rates is significant for both automatic and manual tests (Z-test for proportions $p<0.001$), with a very small effect ($d<0.2$).

In recent years, drivers are increasingly choosing to learn in an automatic car. This may be due to an increase in electric cars, which are automatic, or a perception that learning to drive an automatic car is easier. Those who chose to learn in an automatic car, of which many are females, might be those who find driving a difficult task; in the data studied on average they had a lower pass rate.

4.4 Gender and region

Figure 6 shows the minimum, maximum and 25th and 75th quartiles of the pass rate at test centres within each region or country based on data table DRT122A (DVSA, 2025c). Test centres where there were fewer than 100 tests for either gender were excluded.

There was some variation in the pass rate for tests undertaken at each driving test centre, although the interquartile ranges were generally very similar and show overlaps in the chart, suggesting that there is not a statistically significant difference between the pass rates of each region. When aggregated to regions or country, the lowest pass rate was in the West Midlands (43.6%) and highest in Wales (53.0%).

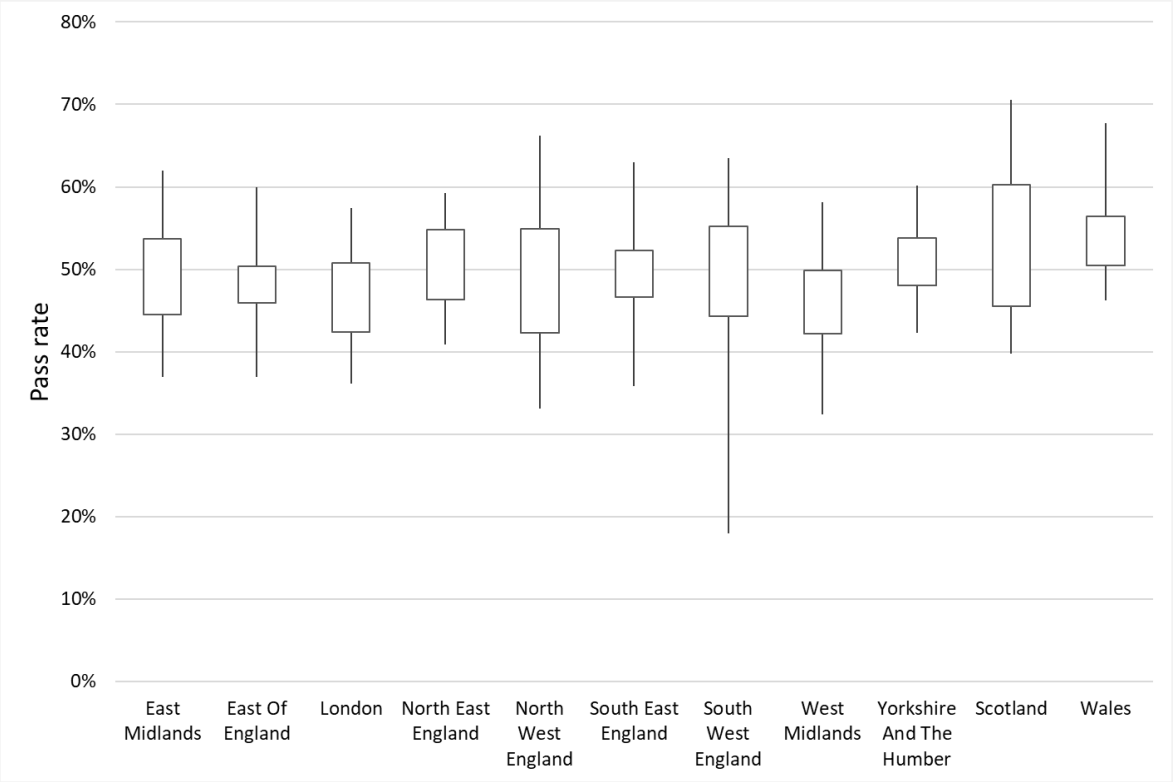

Figure 6: Practical test pass rates by region or country (2023/24) (DRT122A – DVSA published data)

Figure 7 shows the total pass rate and the pass rate for males and females based on the region or country of the driving test centre.

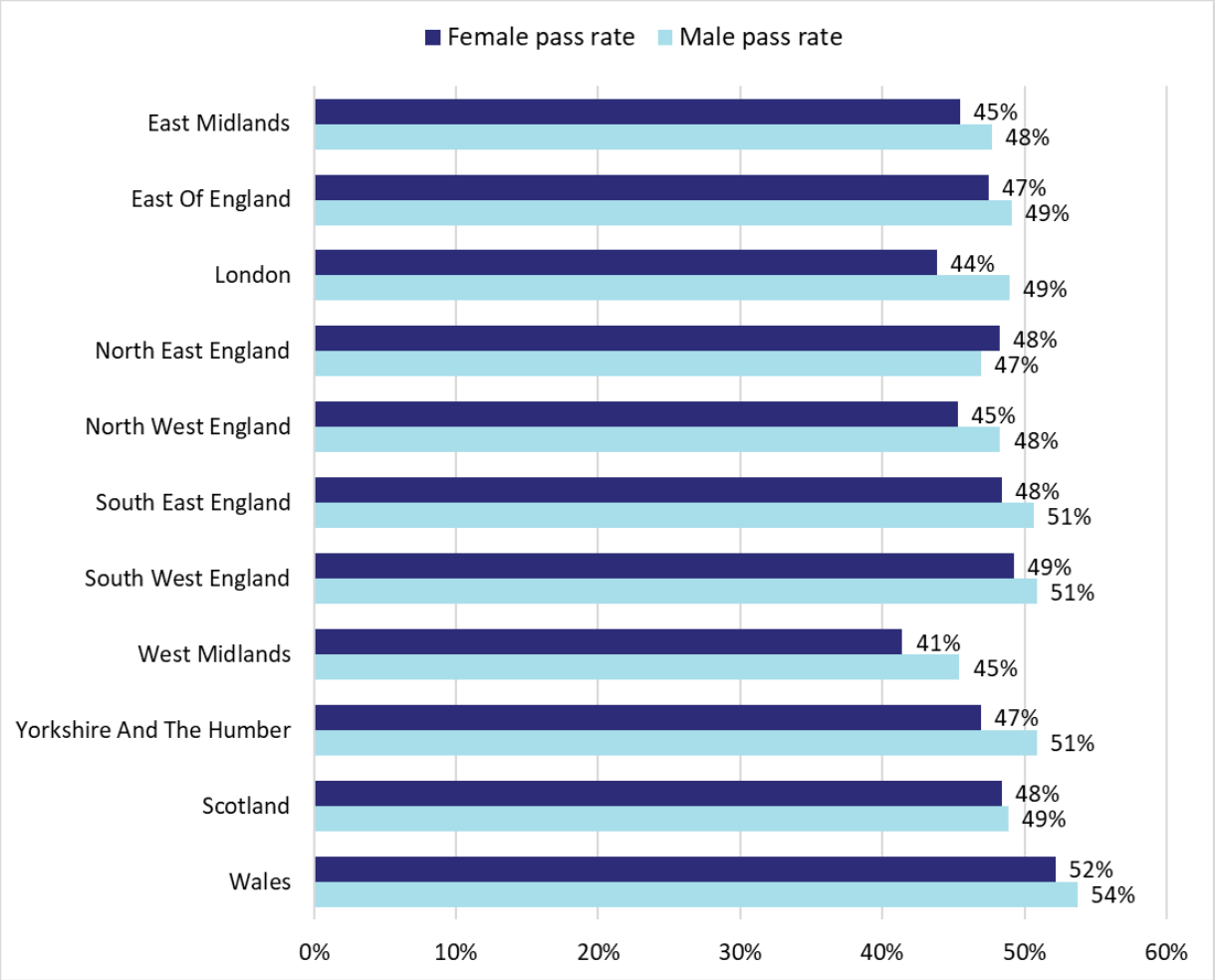

Figure 7: Practical test pass rates by country or region and gender over the years (2023/24) (DRT122A – DVSA published data)

In most of the regions or countries the pass rate followed the national pattern with a higher pass rate for males than for females. The largest difference was in London, where the male pass rate (48.9%) was 5.1 percentage points higher than the female pass rate (43.9%).

Male and female pass rates were most similar in Scotland. North East England was the only region where females had a higher pass rate (48.3%) than males (47.0%), a difference of 1.3 percentage points. It is not known whether this reversal of the pattern is due to noise in the data or reflects a genuine difference in test outcomes for this region.

Figure 8 shows the distribution of percentage points difference between males and females at driving test centres by region or country. This shows that in London all the test centres had a higher pass rate for males than for females. In North East England, although overall females had a higher pass rate, this was not the case for at least 25% of the centres. The largest gender gaps were:

- Alnwick (North East England), which had a 50.7% pass rate for males and 62.4% pass rate for females (gender gap 11.7 percentage points).
- Hawick (Scotland), which had a 73.9% pass rate for males and 61.2% pass rate for females (gender gap 12.7 percentage points).

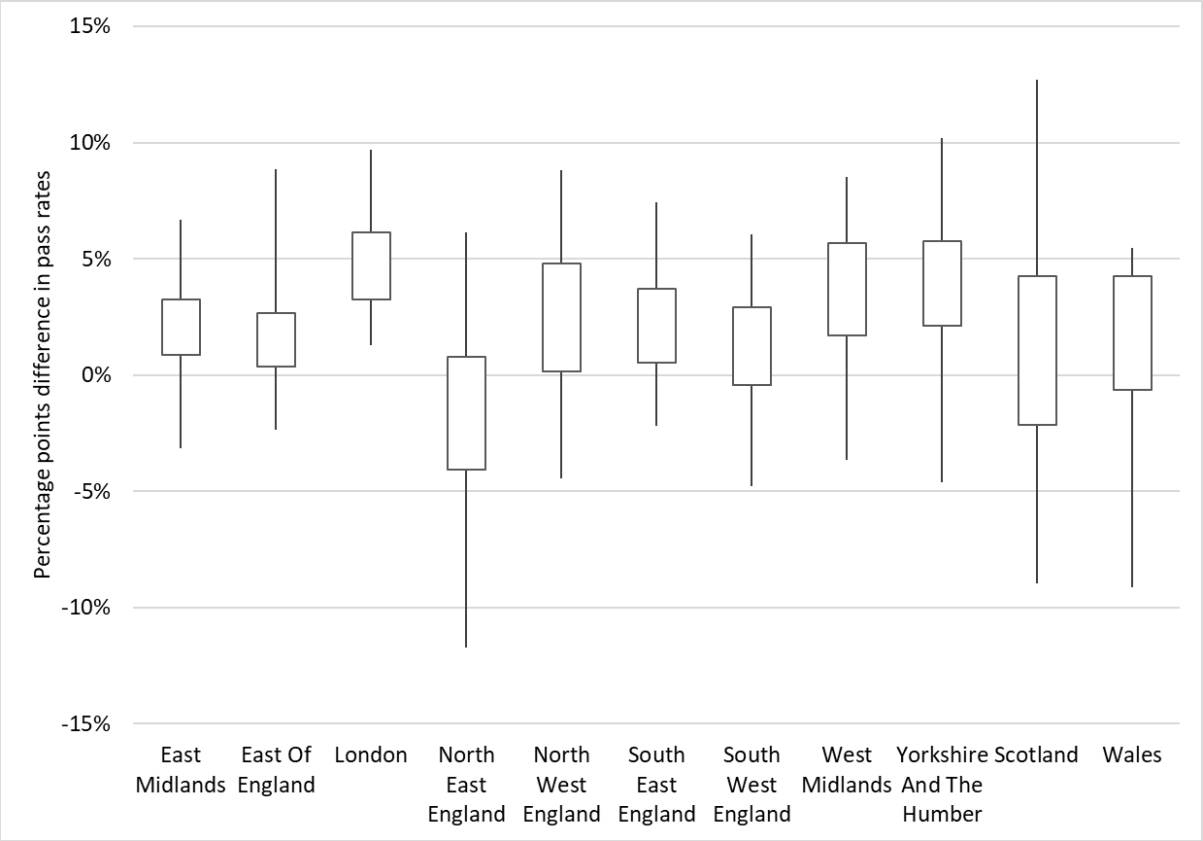

Figure 8: Percentage points difference between male and female practical test pass rates by country or region (2023/24) (DRT122A – DVSA published data)

Out of the 301 driving test centres with at least 100 male and female tests taken (Table 3), 125 centres had a significantly higher pass rate ($p<0.05$) for males than for females. Only 11 had a significantly higher pass rate for females than for males.

Table 3: Summary of practical test pass rates by gender and driving test centre (2023/24) (DRT122A – DVSA published data)

Gender gap	Significant difference (95% confidence)	Not significant	Total
Male pass rate higher than female pass rate	125	106	231
Female pass rate higher than male pass rate	11	59	70
Total	**136**	**165**	**301**

4.5 Gender and type of pass

Table 4 based on DRT122C (DVSA, 2025c) shows that males also had a higher pass rate for their first attempt (49.3%) than females (46.6%), a similar gender gap (2.7 percentage points) to that observed for all tests. This difference is significant ($p<0.001$) with a very small effect size.

Males also had a slightly higher percentage of tests passed with zero faults (2.4% for males compared with 2.2% for females). This difference is significant ($p<0.001$) and considered a very small effect. The types of faults that were recorded for candidates are explored further in Section 4.6.

Table 4: First attempt and zero fault passes by gender (2023/24) (DRT122C – DVSA published data)

Attempt	Male	Female	Total
Total tests	1,057,391	887,823	1,945,225
Number of first attempts	493,215	402,760	895,978
Number of first attempts passed	242,929	187,868	430,799
First attempt pass rate	49.3%	46.6%	48.1%
Number of first attempts passed with zero faults	11,881	8,692	20,573
Zero fault rate on first attempt	2.4%	2.2%	2.3%

4.6 Gender and type of fail

As described in Section 3.1.2, much more detailed data on test performance from the DTR, including all driving faults, were available for candidates who took the test in March 2024. This dataset showed a similar gender difference to that seen in the published annual data: males had a higher pass rate than females, with a difference of 2.5 percentage points (48.1% for males compared with 45.6% for females).

4.6.1 Overview of faults

For those candidates who failed the test, Figure 9 shows the overall reason for failing. Candidates fail the test if they have one or more serious faults, one or more dangerous faults or 16 or more driving faults.

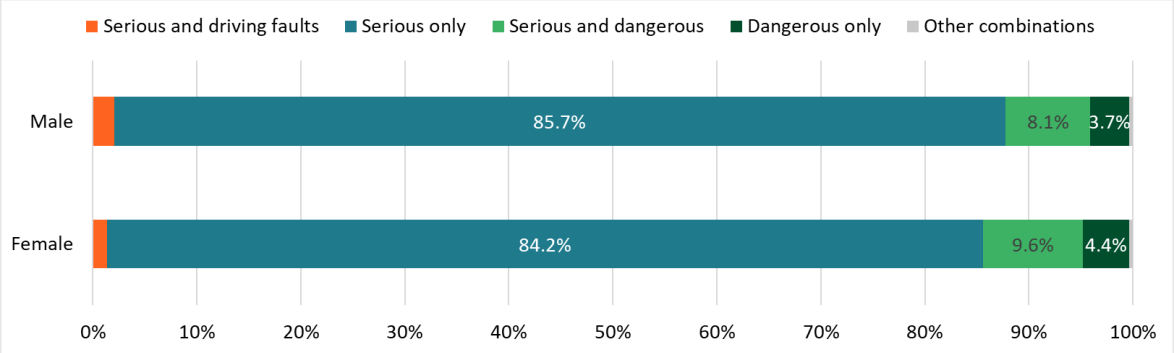

Figure 9: Reason for failing – DTR data (March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

The main reason for failing, for both males and females, was having at least one serious fault (95% of females, 96% of males). There were smaller numbers having at least one dangerous fault (14% for females, 12% for males), with a large proportion of these also having a serious fault. The proportion of those who failed with at least 16 driving faults was relatively small (1.7% of females, 2.3% of males), usually in addition to a serious or dangerous fault.

Although the recorded pattern is similar for males and females, females made relatively fewer serious faults and more dangerous ones.

Despite the difference in pass rates, the total numbers of faults recorded for both genders were similar, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Average number of faults by type of fault and gender (DTR data, March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

Number of faults	Female	Male	Total
Average number of dangerous faults for those with >0 dangerous faults	1.11	1.09	**1.10**
Average number of serious faults for those with >0 serious faults	1.79	1.77	**1.78**
Average number of driving faults – passed	4.32	4.25	**4.28**
Average number of driving faults – failed	6.35	6.53	**6.45**

The majority of those who had a dangerous fault only had one dangerous fault. For those with serious faults, the average was 1.7, with 47% having a single fault, 34% having two faults and 13% having three.

4.6.2 Serious faults

Table 6 shows the most common serious fault types and the proportion of males and females that failed due to each of these faults. Note that candidates might have had more than one fault and therefore the rows in this table should not be summed. The p value based on the difference between the proportions of males and females with each fault is shown. These are mostly significant differences, with all classed as a very small effect.

Table 6: Most common serious fault types (% of all female and male failures) (DTR data, March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

Serious fault	Female	Male	Total	p value
Junctions – observation	18.8%	18.2%	18.5%	p<0.05
Mirrors – change direction	13.9%	14.4%	14.2%	p<0.05
Move off – safety	7.9%	10.7%	9.4%	p<0.001
Junctions – turning right	8.3%	9.1%	8.7%	p<0.001
Response to signs – traffic lights	8.2%	8.4%	8.3%	ns
Response to signs – traffic signs	7.1%	8.3%	7.8%	p<0.001
Response to signs – road mark	7.1%	8.0%	7.6%	p<0.001
Control – steering	8.7%	5.9%	7.2%	p<0.001
Positioning – normal driving	6.8%	7.1%	6.9%	p<0.1
Use of speed	5.9%	7.3%	6.6%	p<0.001
Total failed (100%)	**45,824**	**52,013**	**97,837**	-

The two most common serious fault types were the same for males and females and had similar levels of occurrence among those who failed:

- 'Junctions – observation' (18.8% for females, 18.2% for males).
  - This records a candidate's ability to make effective observations before moving onto a new road and making sure that it is safe before proceeding.
  - This includes faults such as failing to judge the speed of an approaching vehicle, entering a roundabout with a vehicle approaching from the right, and making no effective observations at all.

- 'Mirrors – change direction' (13.9% for females, 14.4% for males).
  - This records a candidate's ability to make effective use of all the mirrors, check the mirrors before signalling, changing direction or changing speed or using the 'mirror – signal – manoeuvre' routine effectively.
  - This includes faults such as not using mirrors when exiting a roundabout and causing a vehicle to slow when changing lanes on a dual carriageway.

When considering the most common serious fault types, the three with the largest difference between males and females are given below.

'Control – steering' had a higher frequency among females who failed (8.7%) than for males (5.9%). This includes faults such as steering late or not enough on the approach at junctions or going round a bend, mounting the pavement when pulling up on the left or steering late when moving out to pass parked vehicles.

Males had a higher frequency of serious faults for 'Move off – safety' (10.7%) than females (7.9%). This includes:

- Moving off from behind a parked vehicle into the path of an approaching vehicle.
- Repeatedly moving off from the side of the road with no blind spot checks.
- Pulling off from the right-hand side of the road, causing an oncoming vehicle to slow or stop.
- Not making any rear observation when moving off following an emergency stop.

Males also had a higher frequency for 'Use of speed' (7.3%) than females (5.9%). This includes both travelling above the speed limit and not adjusting speed to the road conditions, such as along a busy high street, in bad weather or at bends on roads with national speed limits.

To explore differences in the lesser-reported serious fault types, the percentage of serious fault failures that included each fault type was calculated for both males and females. The percentage differences between male and female were then calculated for each and the results ranked to identify those with the largest differences.

Figure 10 shows the percentage of test failures involving each fault type for the ten serious fault types with the largest differences between male and female. The percentage difference was calculated as the difference between the percentages for male and female divided by the larger of the two. All serious fault types with a fault count below 2,000 were excluded. The full list of the number of serious faults for each fault type is shown in Table 24 in Appendix B.

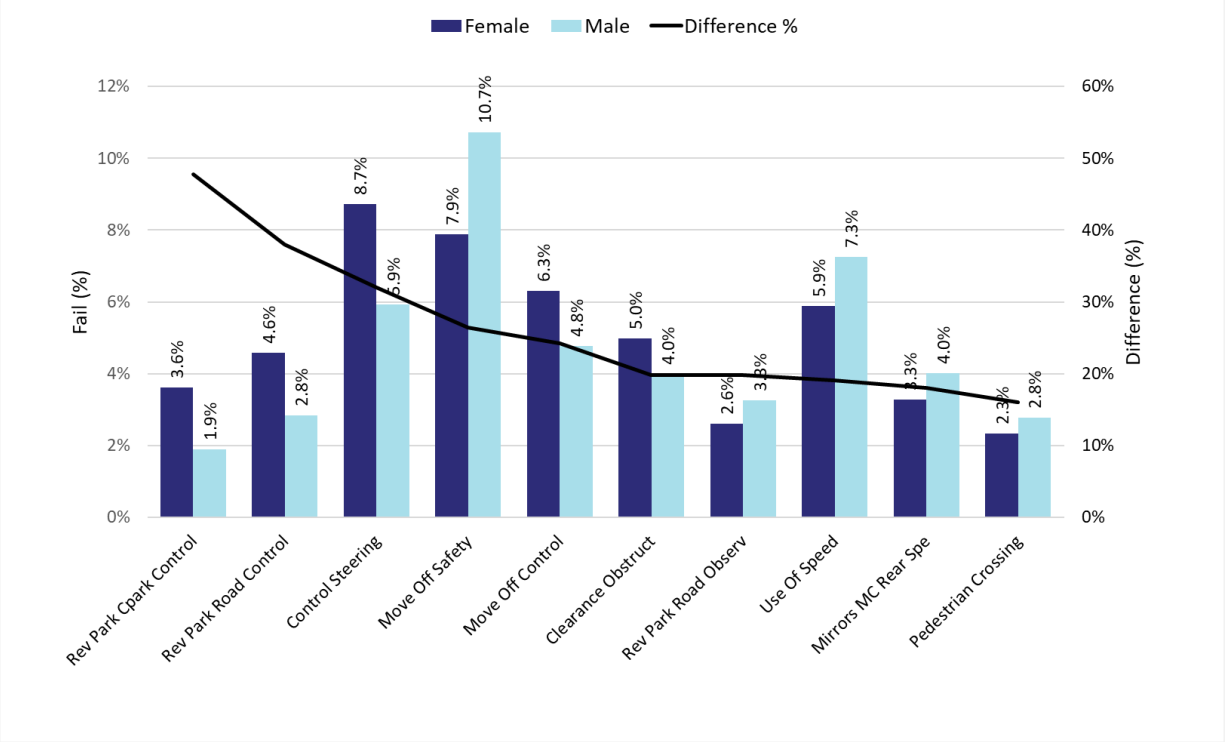

Figure 10: Percentage of test failures involving each fault type, serious faults only, for the fault types with the largest differences between male and female, >2,000 total (DTR data, March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

The largest differences when comparing males and females within each serious fault type were:

- Reverse park in a car park – control, 47.8% difference (female higher)
- Reverse park on road – control, 38.0% difference (female higher)
- Control of steering, 32.0% difference (female higher)
- Moving off – safety, 26.5% difference (male higher)

The same process was then carried out for the fault types grouped into related categories, based on those used in the DTR (Figure 1). Figure 11 shows the differences between male and female for each serious fault category. As with the individual items, groups are only shown if there were at least 2,000 faults. This excluded ancillary controls, eyesight, precautions, position normal stop, controlled stop and following distance, which had fewer than 2,000 serious faults.

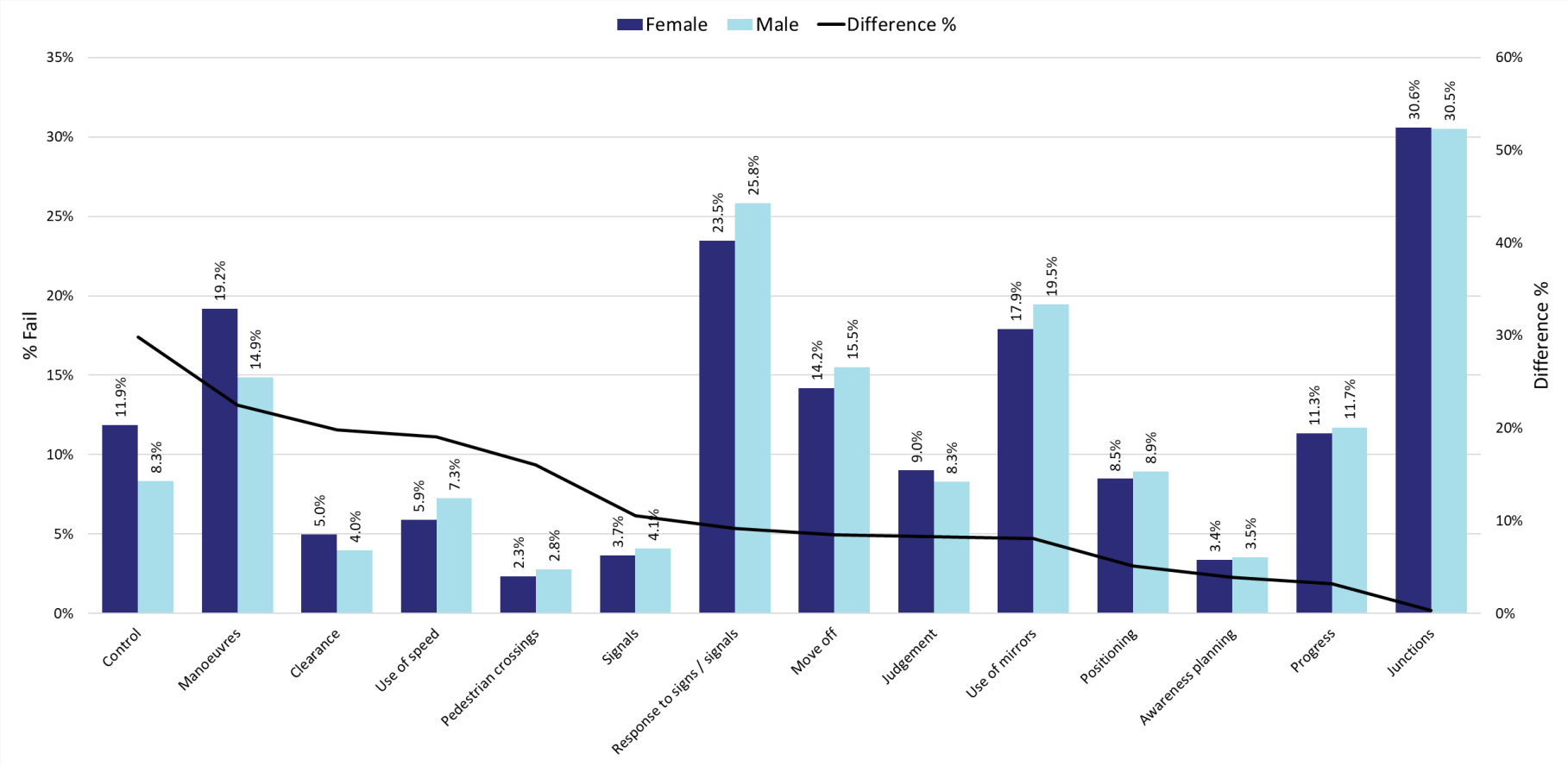

Figure 11: Percentage of test failures involving each fault category (categories with at least 2,000 faults), serious faults only, for the fault categories with the largest differences between male and female (DTR data, March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

The categories with the largest difference and a relatively high count were:

- Control, 29.8% difference (female higher)
  - Controlling the gears
  - Control while parking
  - Control of steering
  - Control of footbrake, clutch and accelerator
- Manoeuvres, 22.5% difference (female higher)
  - Reversing in a car park
  - Reversing on the road
  - Forward park
- Clearance, 19.8% difference (female higher)
  - Keeping a safe distance from stationary and moving vehicles and objects
- Use of speed, 19.0% difference (male higher)
  - Use of speed in an unsafe manner
- Pedestrian crossings, 16.0% difference (male higher)
  - The ability to recognise the different types of pedestrians crossing and show courtesy and consideration towards pedestrians
  - Slowing down on approach to crossings if pedestrians are crossing
  - Slowing down and being prepared to stop if anyone is waiting to cross at zebra crossings

The categories in which the percentage for females was higher could be those more associated with the physical control of driving, whereas those where males were higher could be those more associated with judgement. This may imply that there is a difference in the type of elements that each gender generally finds more difficult to learn or are more prone to errors on in the test.

4.6.3 Dangerous faults

For each fault type, the percentage of failures including a dangerous fault of that type was calculated (out of all failures) for both male and female candidates. These percentages were then compared with the difference calculated. The differences were then ranked to identify the fault types with the largest difference.

Figure 12 shows the percentage of test failures involving each fault type for the ten dangerous fault types with the largest differences between male and female. Dangerous faults occurred far less often than serious faults, and as a result the total count filter value was reduced to 200.

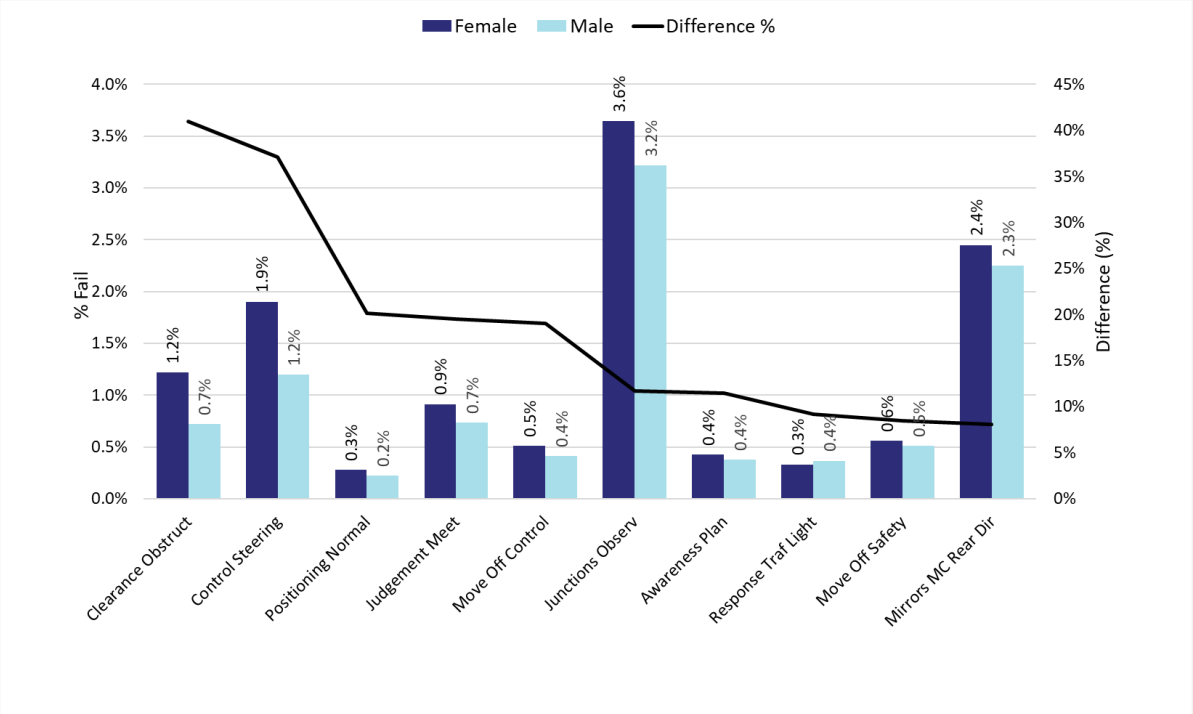

Figure 12: Percentage of test failures involving each fault type, dangerous faults only, for the fault types with the largest differences between male and female, >200 total (DTR data, March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

The largest differences when comparing males and females within each dangerous fault type were:

- Clearance of an obstruction, 41.0% difference (female higher)
- Steering control, 37.1% difference (female higher)
- Positioning normal driving, 20.2% difference (female higher)
- Judgement – meeting, 19.5% difference (female higher)
- Move off control, 19.1% (female higher)

For all these largest differences, apart from response to traffic lights, females had a higher percentage of fails than males with each fault.

Again, the fault types were grouped into categories and the same process undertaken. Figure 13 shows the differences between males and females for each dangerous fault category for categories where there were at least 200 faults.

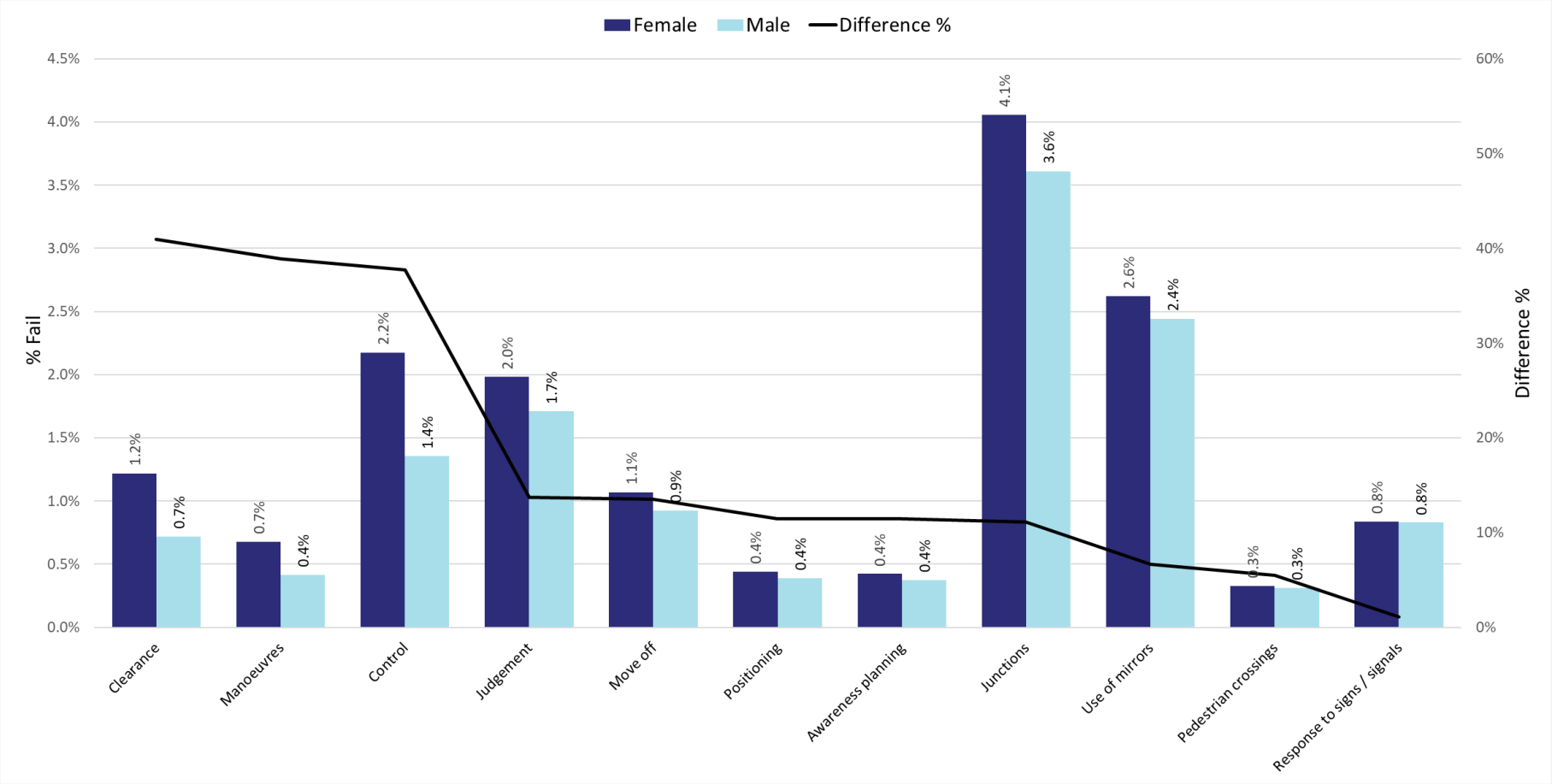

Figure 13: Percentage of test failures involving each fault category (categories with at least 200 faults), dangerous faults only, for the fault categories with the largest differences between male and female (DTR data, March 2024 – DVSA detailed data)

The categories that had the largest percentage difference were:

- Clearance, 41.0% (female higher)
  - Not maintaining a safe distance from other stationary and moving vehicles
- Manoeuvres, 38.9% (female higher)
- Control, 37.7% (female higher)
  - Using the throttle, clutch, gears, brakes and steering

All other categories had a percentage difference lower than 15%.

4.7 Ethnicity

Data on ethnicity are not collected or provided in the published or detailed DVSA datasets; therefore, it is not possible to investigate differences in test performance to the same extent as for gender. However, the DVSA test preparation survey includes questions relating to a respondent's ethnicity. As discussed in Section 3.1.3 this dataset can provide insight but is not representative of the wider test-taking population as it is biased towards test passers (75% of respondents to the test preparation survey passed the test compared with 47% of all candidates); hence, care must be taken with drawing conclusions.

The question asked is 'What is your ethnic group?' with the following possible responses: White; Mixed or multiple ethnic groups; Asian or Asian British; Black, Black British, Caribbean or African; Other ethnic group.

The number of responses and the pass rates relative to the average pass rate for all survey respondents for each ethnic group are shown in Table 7. Relative pass rates higher than 1 indicate a higher pass rate than average and less than 1 indicate a lower pass rate than average.

Table 7: Practical pass rates by ethnic group (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Q54. What is your ethnic group?	Pass	Fail	No response	Total	Pass rate relative to survey response average
Asian or Asian British	15,146	6,446	-	21,592	0.94
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	6,941	2,935	-	9,876	0.94
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	2,511	729	-	3,240	1.03
White	39,428	10,917	-	50,345	1.04
Other ethnic group	1,777	685	-	2,462	0.96
Prefer not to say	1,874	892	-	2,766	0.90
No response	3	-	8	11	0.00
Total	**67,680**	**22,604**	**8**	**90,292**	**1.00**

Table 7 shows that respondents who described their ethnicity as 'white' or 'mixed or multiple ethnic groups' had a higher pass rate than those who described their ethnicity as 'Asian or Asian British' or 'Black, Black British, Caribbean or African'.

4.8 Health conditions

The respondents to the DVSA test preparation survey were also asked about health conditions; as previously, this dataset can provide insight but is not representative of the wider test-taking population as it is biased towards test passers; hence, care must be taken with drawing conclusions.

The question asked and the possible responses were:

- Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more?
  - Yes; No; Don't know; Prefer not to say; None of the above; Other (please specify).

Table 8 shows the number of practical tests by results and by the self-reported health conditions for the survey data supplied. The pass rate relative to the survey response average is also shown.

Table 8: Practical test pass rates by self-reported health conditions (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for 12 months or more?	Fail	Pass	Total	% of all respondents	Pass rate relative to survey response average
Yes	2,238	5,050	7,288	8.1%	0.92
No	18,957	59,455	78,412	86.8%	1.01
Don't know	341	688	1,029	1.1%	0.89
Prefer not to say	819	1,976	2,795	3.1%	0.94
None of the above	-	1	1	0.0%	1.33
Other (please specify)	146	272	418	0.5%	0.87
No response	103	238	341	0.4%	0.91
Total	**22,604**	**67,680**	**90,284**	**100.0%**	**1.00**

This shows that 8% of respondents indicated that they considered themselves to have a health condition. Overall, those who responded 'Yes' to this question had a lower pass rate than all respondents.

Free-text data provided as part of the 'Other (please specify)' response for health conditions was searched to identify the most common responses. Roots of words were used as search

terms such that related descriptions would be combined; for example 'anxi' picked up both anxious and anxiety. Note, however, there may have been spelling mistakes in responses, and health conditions might have been described as part of a broader context.

There were eight health conditions that were most commonly reported in this free-text data. Table 9 shows the number of respondents and pass rate relative to all survey respondents for these health conditions. Note that some respondents reported more than one health condition and therefore rows in this table should not be summed. Some of these are based on relatively small numbers of respondents and therefore general conclusions about people with these conditions cannot be drawn.

Table 9: Free-text health conditions noted by respondents (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Commonly reported health conditions	Pass	Fail	Total	% of all respondents	Pass rate relative to survey response average
Anxiety	181	101	282	0.31%	0.86
ADHD	77	51	128	0.14%	0.80
Autism	73	40	113	0.13%	0.86
Depression	68	33	101	0.11%	0.90
Dyslexia	59	30	89	0.10%	0.88
Diabetes	30	10	40	0.04%	1.00
Asthma	29	5	34	0.04%	1.14
Pregnancy	16	10	26	0.03%	0.82

The most commonly reported condition was anxiety, reported by 0.31% of all respondents (approximately 1 in 300 respondents). The pass rate for these respondents was 14% lower than all survey respondents. Respondents whose response included ADHD or autism also had lower pass rates compared with all respondents.

No health or disability data are collected as part of the published datasets for the practical test. The only data on health or disability collected as part of the DTR are from a record of whether the candidate had 'special needs' for the test. This is a yes/no question and no further detail is provided. From the 184,341 candidates in the dataset for March 2024, only 156 (0.08%) were recorded as having special needs for the test. This subset is too small to allow for further investigation.

4.9 Summary of differences in practical test performance

Gender-based disparities have been a persistent feature of practical driving test outcomes over the years for which data are available. Male candidates consistently achieved higher pass rates than females, with males' rates fluctuating between 50% and 55%, while females'

rates fluctuated between 41% and 47%. The gender gap, averaging 6–10 percentage points, could reflect broader inequalities in training or preparation, or could reflect some genuine differences in the abilities being tested. This gap narrowed slightly after 2023, as male pass rates experienced steeper declines than female rates. The COVID-19 pandemic further influenced outcomes, temporarily boosting pass rates for both genders. In 2021, males peaked at 55.1%, and females reached 47.6%, possibly due to fewer test-takers, less traffic and adjusted testing procedures during the pandemic.

Age also played a significant role in pass rates, with younger candidates consistently performing better. Those aged 19 and under achieved the highest pass rates (50.9% for females, 54.4% for males), while the 60 and over group showed the lowest success (29.3% for females, 40.8% for males). The decline with age was more pronounced for females, suggesting additional challenges in later years. The gender gap was most significant in older age groups, particularly among candidates aged 60 and over, where the disparity exceeded 11 percentage points.

Vehicle transmission type introduces another layer of disparity. Females were more likely to take automatic vehicle tests, with 32% opting for this category compared with 16% of males. However, automatic tests had lower pass rates overall (42.8%) than manual tests (49.4%). Despite this, the gender gap remained consistent across both test types, underscoring broader inequalities beyond vehicle transmission.

Regional differences in pass rates further illustrate the complexities of driving test outcomes. Pass rates varied significantly, with Wales boasting the highest regional success rate at 53.0%, while the West Midlands recorded the lowest at 43.6%. Pass rates for male candidates were higher than for females in most regions, with London showing the largest disparity (5.1 percentage points). However, North East England bucked the trend, where the female pass rate was slightly higher than for males in aggregate.

Although the recorded pattern is similar for males and females, with the majority failing due to at least one serious fault, females made relatively fewer serious faults and more dangerous ones. Despite the difference in pass rates, the total numbers of faults recorded for both genders were similar.

Concentrating on the serious faults, which were the most common reason for failing, the two most common serious fault types were the same for males and females and had similar levels of occurrence among those who failed. They were ‘junctions – observation’ (18% of those who failed) and ‘mirrors – change direction’ (14%).

There were some faults that were reported less frequently but had a higher incidence for females (reverse parking in a car park or road, steering control, move off control) and some that had a higher incidence for males (moving off safely, use of speed). This may suggest that females could be more prone to errors that are related to physical control of the vehicle or spatial awareness, whereas males could be more prone to errors where judgement is required. However, see Section 12 for a discussion of limitations in the extent to which fault categories can be used to explain why particular differences occur between the genders.

Health and ethnicity factors also reveal disparities. Candidates with health conditions such as anxiety, ADHD or autism tended to have lower pass rates compared with the overall average. Similarly, ethnicity impacted outcomes, with white candidates achieving higher pass rates than Asian or Black candidates. These findings need to be interpreted with caution as they are based on those candidates completing the test preparation survey (a subsample with a much higher pass rate overall). However, they are consistent with potential structural and societal barriers faced by specific groups.

5 Practical test preparation

In this section, further data from the DVSA test preparation survey are considered; this includes preparedness, learning experiences and perceived reasons for failure. As for ethnicity and health conditions, this dataset can provide insight but is not representative of the wider test-taking population as it is biased towards test passers; hence care must be taken with drawing conclusions.

5.1 Preparedness

Figure 14 shows the responses to the question 'To what extent did you feel prepared for your most recent practical driving test' by gender and test result. This survey was taken after the driving test so the responses may be biased based on the test result.

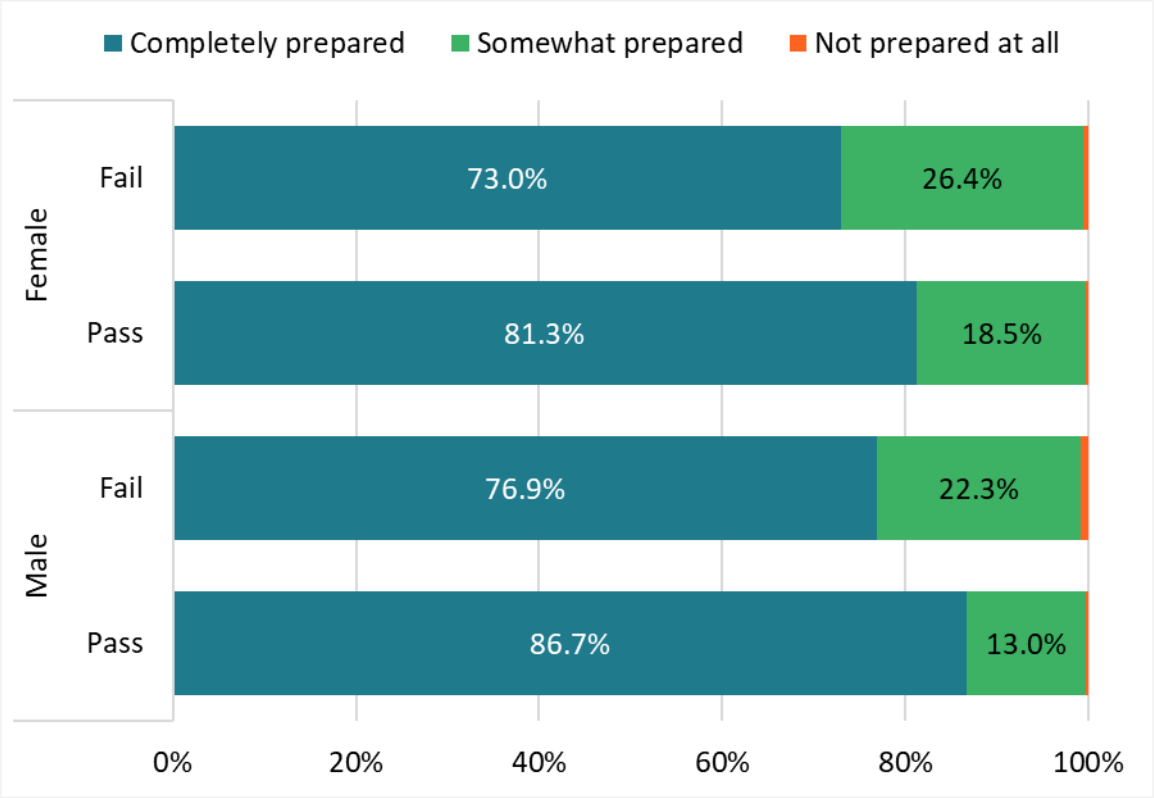

Figure 14: Self-reported preparedness for the practical driving test by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Among all candidates, those who passed had a higher percentage of respondents who said they were completely prepared (84.0% of passers compared with 74.8% of those who failed); there was a corresponding difference in those who were somewhat prepared (15.7% of passers and 24.5% of those who failed). There was a slightly higher percentage of male respondents who said they were completely prepared than females, for both those who passed and those who failed.

The survey also asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with various statements relating to readiness for the driving test.

The majority of respondents, regardless of gender or test result, agreed or strongly agreed that 'I would only ever take my driving test if I felt that I was completely safe to drive without any prompting from my instructor or supervising driver' (Figure 15). There was slightly stronger agreement from females, with more males neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This suggests that most respondents of this survey thought that they were ready for their test and could drive competently.

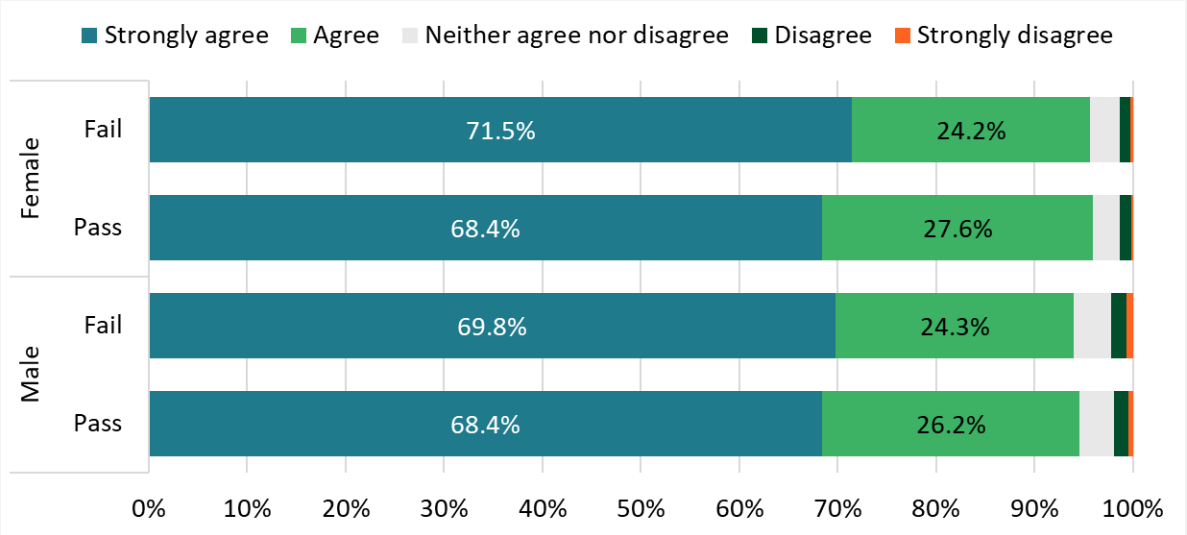

Figure 15: 'I would only ever take my driving test if I felt that I was completely safe to drive without any prompting from my instructor or supervising driver' by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

There was more agreement with the statement 'People should only take their driving test after they have passed a mock test with a driving instructor' from those who failed (both males and females) than those who passed (Figure 16).

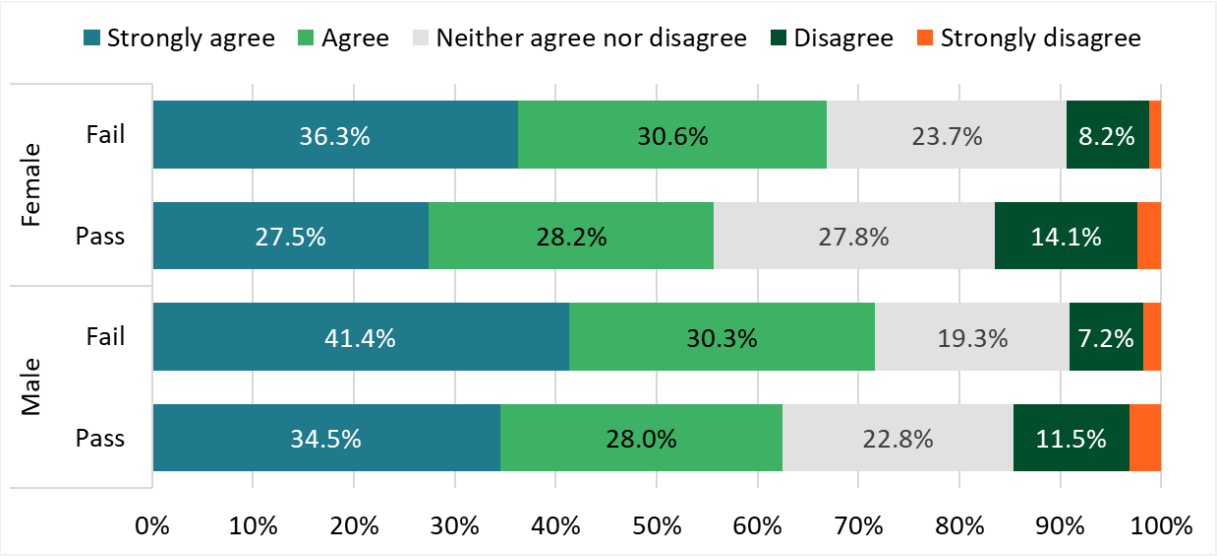

Figure 16: 'People should only take their driving test after they have passed a mock test with a driving instructor' by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

There was more agreement with the statement 'People should only take their driving test after they have practised ways of managing their nerves' from those who failed (both male and female) than those who passed (Figure 17).

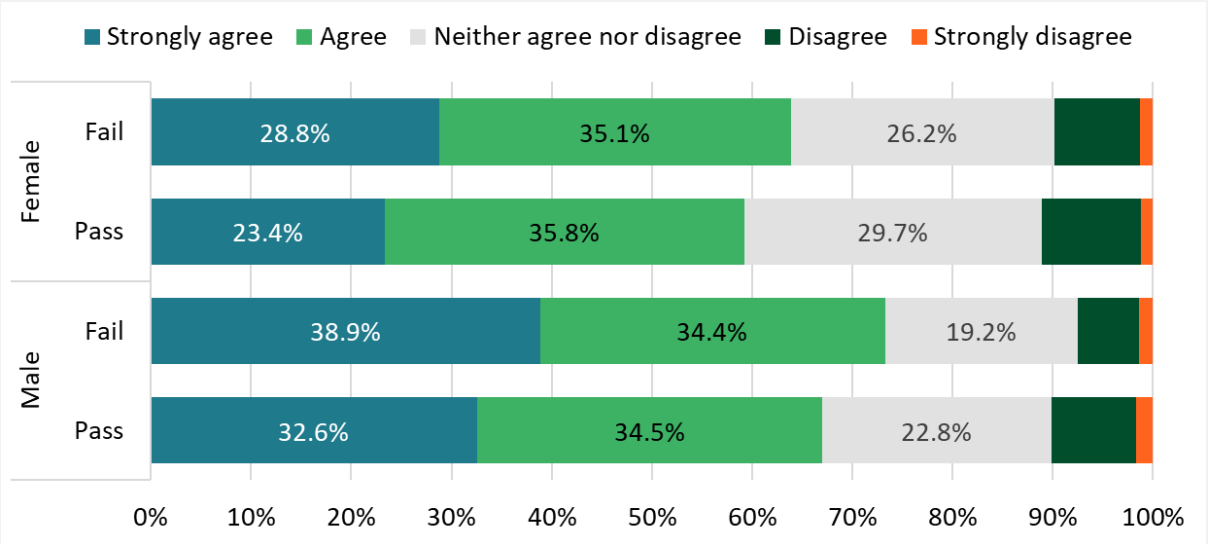

Figure 17: 'People should only take their driving test after they have practised ways of managing their nerves' by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

5.2 Learning practice

The survey also asked respondents whether they had had driving practice with a driving instructor and/or friends and family.

Figure 18 shows the split of practice with a driving instructor and/or friends and family by gender and test result. This shows that, for both males and females, those who passed more commonly practised with both a driving instructor and friends and family. Compared with females, males more commonly only practised with a friend or family member or did not practice as they had an international driving licence; this was true for both those who passed and those who failed. Note that the number of driving tests that were for international driving licence conversion is not known from the datasets used in this study.

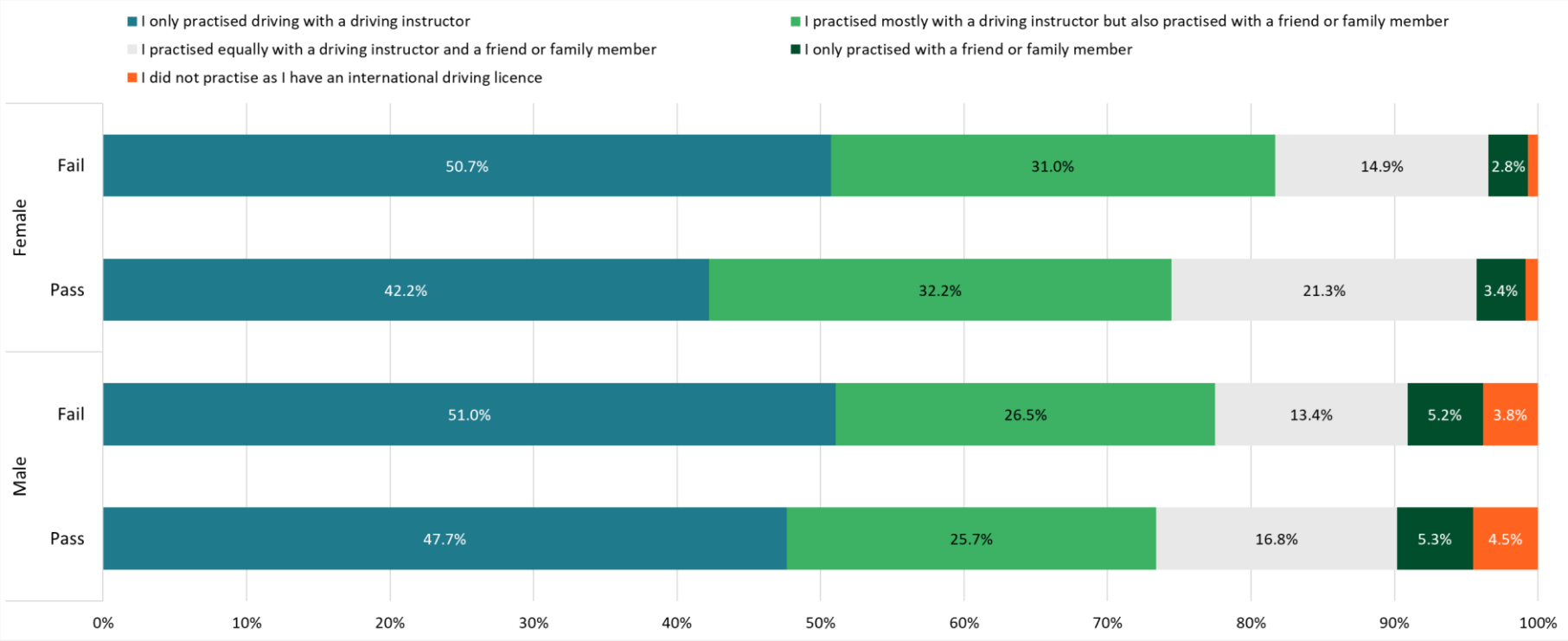

Figure 18: Driving lessons and practice by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Figure 19 shows the number of self-reported hours of practice with a driving instructor during the learning process.

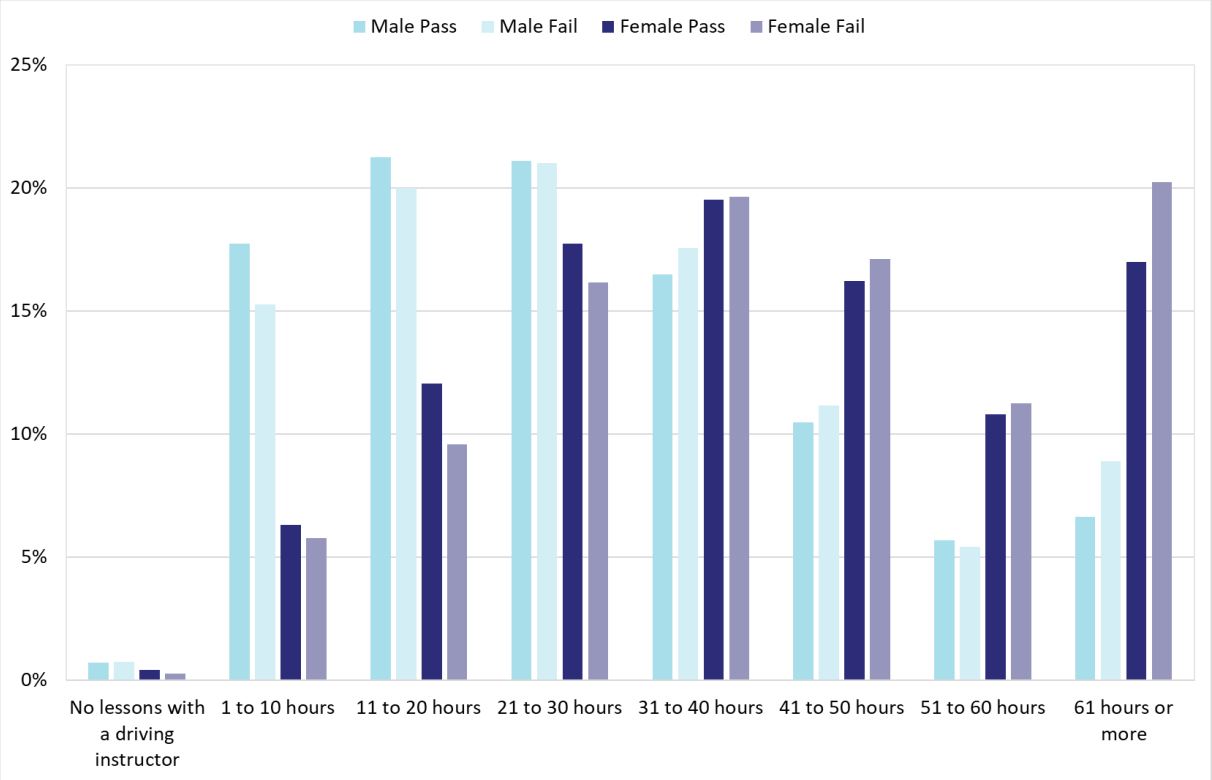

Figure 19: Number of hours of lessons with a driving instructor by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Males more commonly had fewer lessons with a driving instructor, with 39% having fewer than 20 hours compared with 18% of females. In contrast, females more commonly had more than 40 hours with a driving instructor (45% of females compared with 23% of males).

Figure 20 shows the number of self-reported hours of practice with friends or family during the learning process.

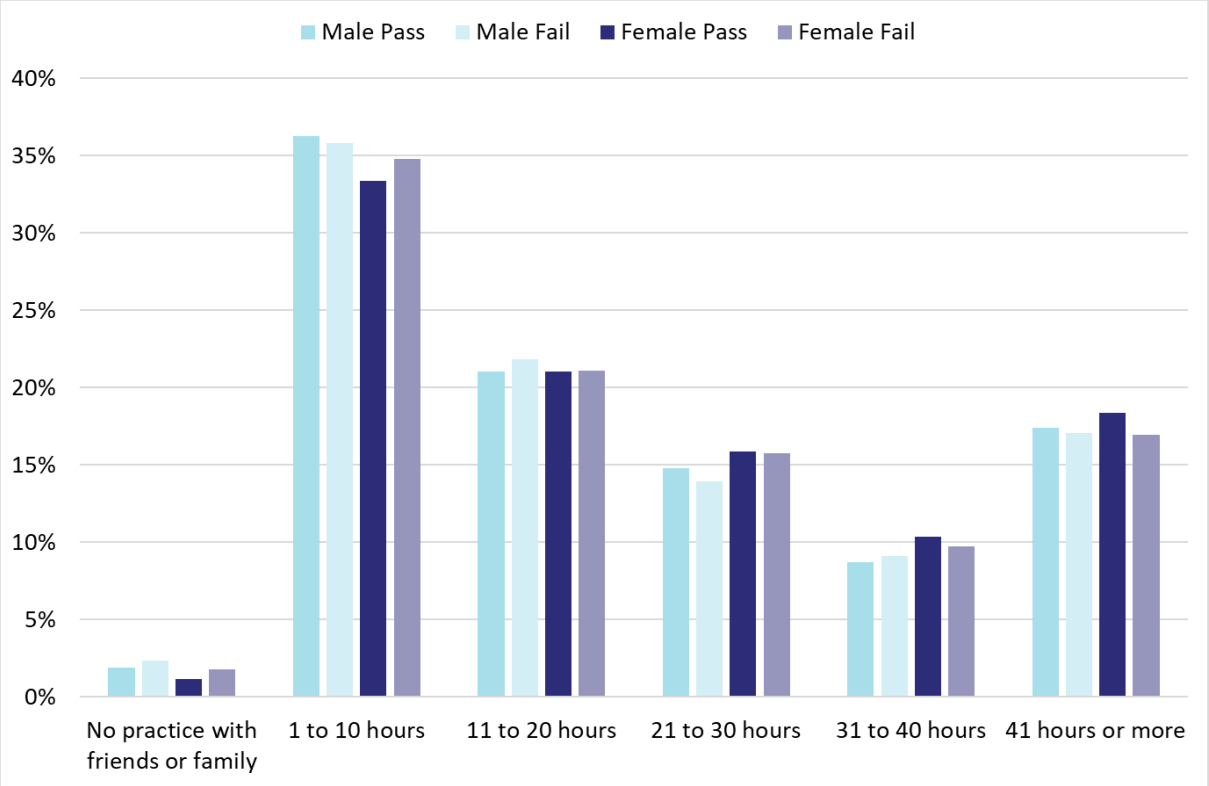

Figure 20: Number of hours of practice with friends or family by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

The most common response for both males and females, and for those who passed and those who failed, was '1 to 10 hours'. Having this relatively small number of hours, and having no practice, was slightly more common for males than for females. There were slightly higher proportions of females having between 21 and 40 hours of practice.

5.3 Perceived cause of failure

The survey also asked respondents who failed their test what they believed was the main reason for the failure (selected from a list of pre-defined reasons). Figure 21 shows the responses to this question by gender.

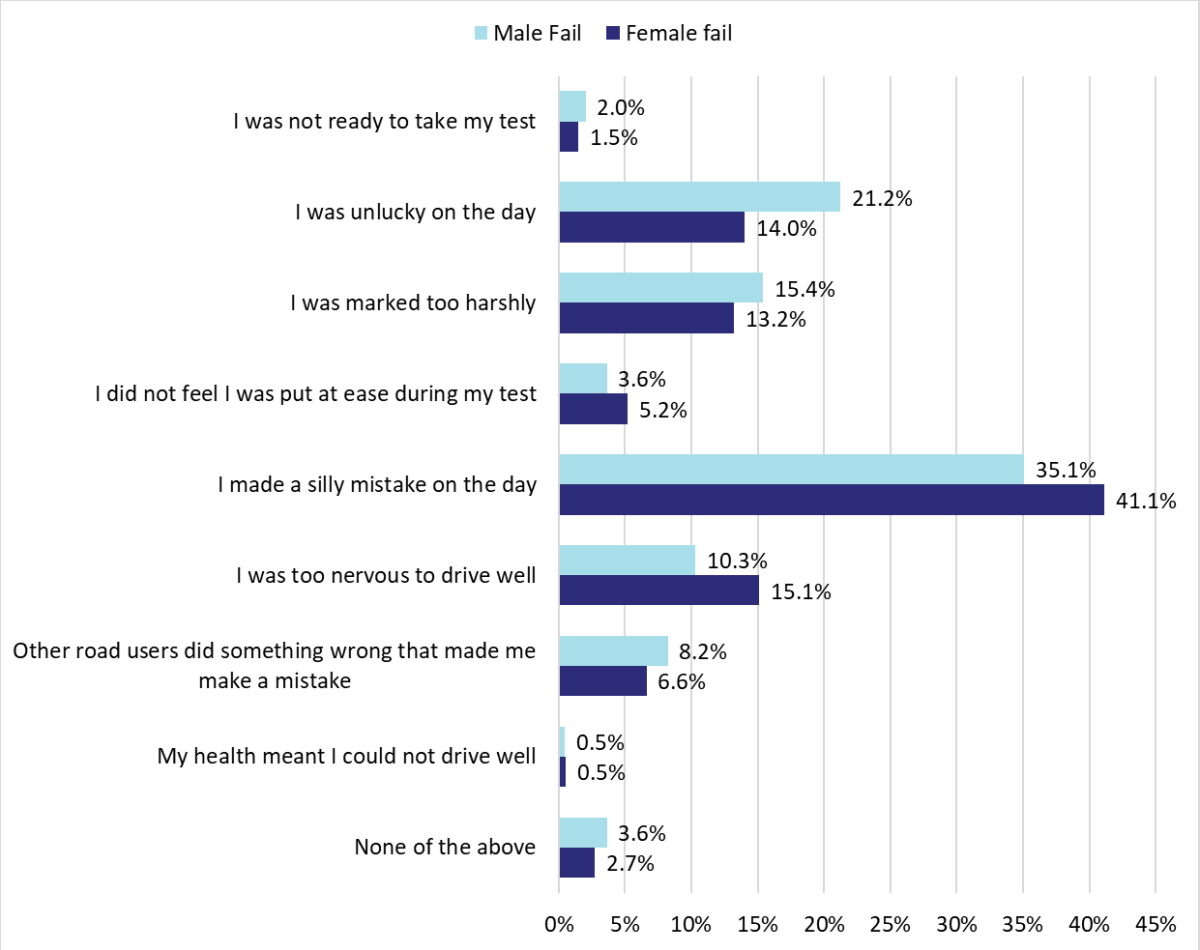

Figure 21: 'What do you think was the main thing that caused you to fail your driving test?' by gender and test results (DVSA test preparation survey data)

Overall, the most common reasons were 'I made a silly mistake on the day' (38.3%) and 'I was unlucky on the day' (17.4%). There were some significant differences in the reasons that males and females gave for failing their tests including:

- A higher percentage of males thought that they were 'unlucky on the day' (21.2% of males compared with 14.0% of females).
- A higher percentage of females thought they 'made a silly mistake on the day' (41.1% of females compared with 35.1% of males).
- A higher percentage of females thought that they were 'too nervous to drive well' (15.1% of females compared with 10.3% of males).

6 Theory test performance

This section explores performance in the theory test in terms of gender, age and region, and by part of test. It also explores the data available about special requirements that have been requested by candidates, which may provide insight into health conditions or disabilities.

6.1 Gender – overall

The theory test pass rates, based on data table DRT111B (DVSA, 2025c) by gender from 2007 to 2024, are shown in Figure 22.

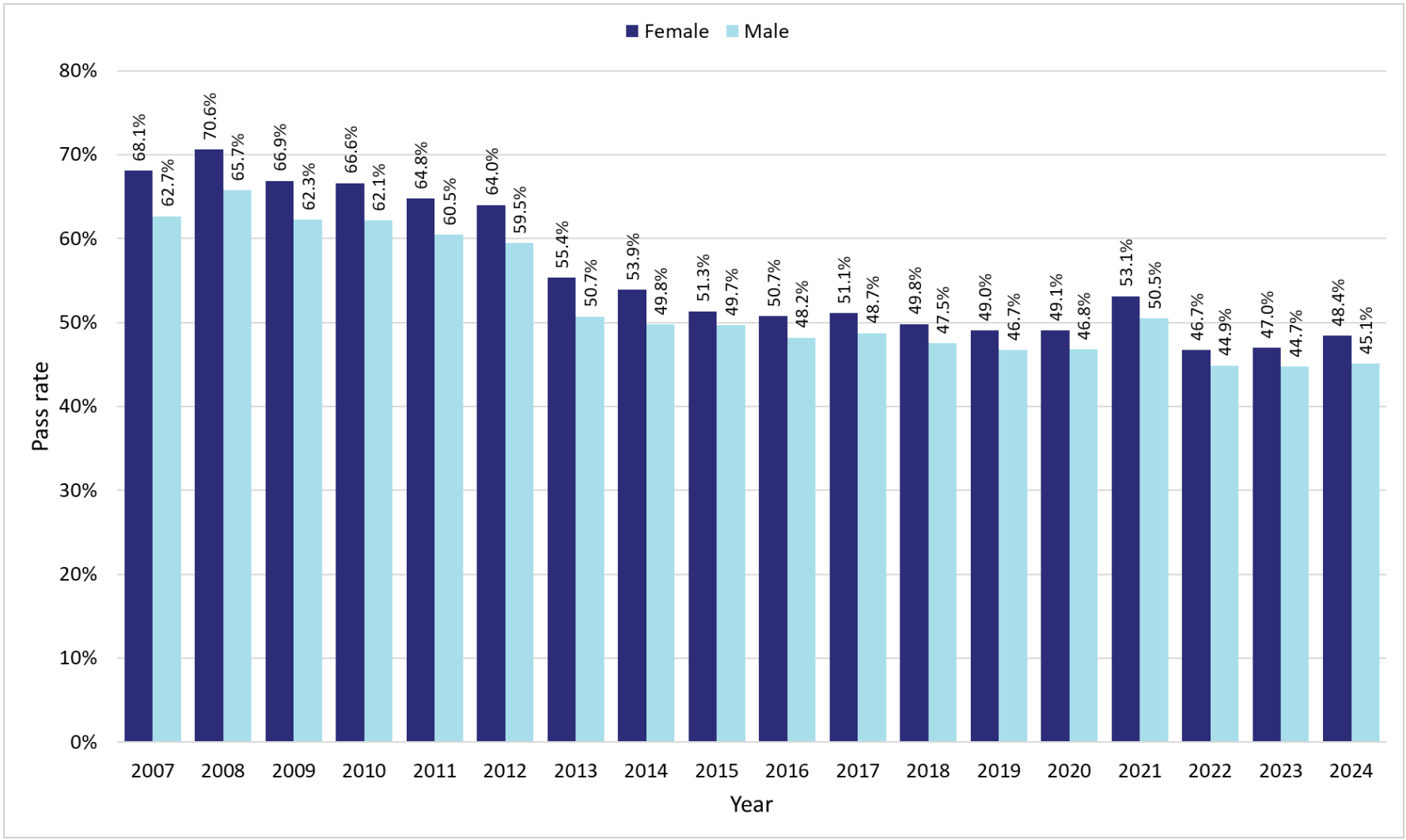

Figure 22: Theory test passes by gender and year (DVSA, 2025c) (DRT111B – DVSA published data)

Female pass rates were generally higher than male pass rates, unlike for the practical driving test. The difference for all years is statistically significant ($p<0.001$) and classed as a very small effect. This suggests that females are more likely to pass the theory test than males. Female pass rates started high, around 68–70% in 2007/08, and gradually declined over time to around 47%–48% in recent years. Male pass rates followed a similar pattern but were consistently lower than female rates, starting around 63–65% and dropping to around 45% in recent years.

Both genders experienced a spike in pass rates in 2021, as with the practical test, with females reaching 53.1% and males reaching 50.5%. This may be due to reduced testing volumes and possible adjustments in the testing process during the pandemic.

6.2 Gender and age

Figure 23, based on data table DRT111C (DVSA, 2025c), shows the theory test pass rate by age group and gender between 2011 and 2023.

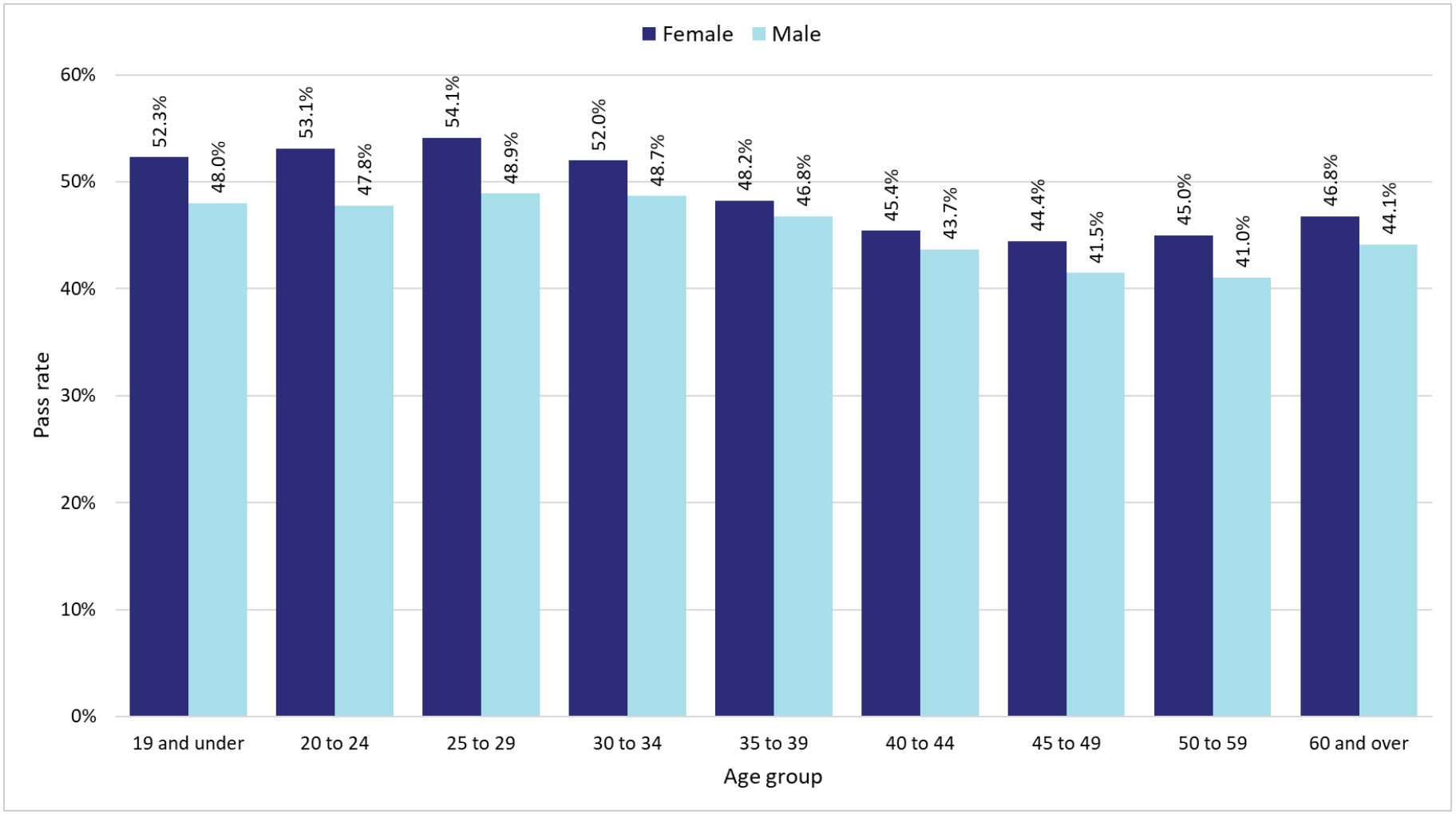

Figure 23: Theory test passes by age group and gender over the years 2011–2023 (DRT111C – DVSA published data)

The pass rate for females was consistently higher than for males in theory tests across all age groups. For all age groups the difference is statistically significantly different ($p<0.001$) and the effect size classed as very small. The largest gender gap was for those aged under 30, which accounted for 79% of all test-takers and had a gender gap of approximately 5 percentage points, perhaps showing better preparation or learning strategies or suggesting they may excel in theoretical knowledge during the early stages of learning.

For both males and females younger ages also had the highest pass rates.

Figure 24 shows the theory test pass rate by age group and gender for the most recent three years only (2021–2023).

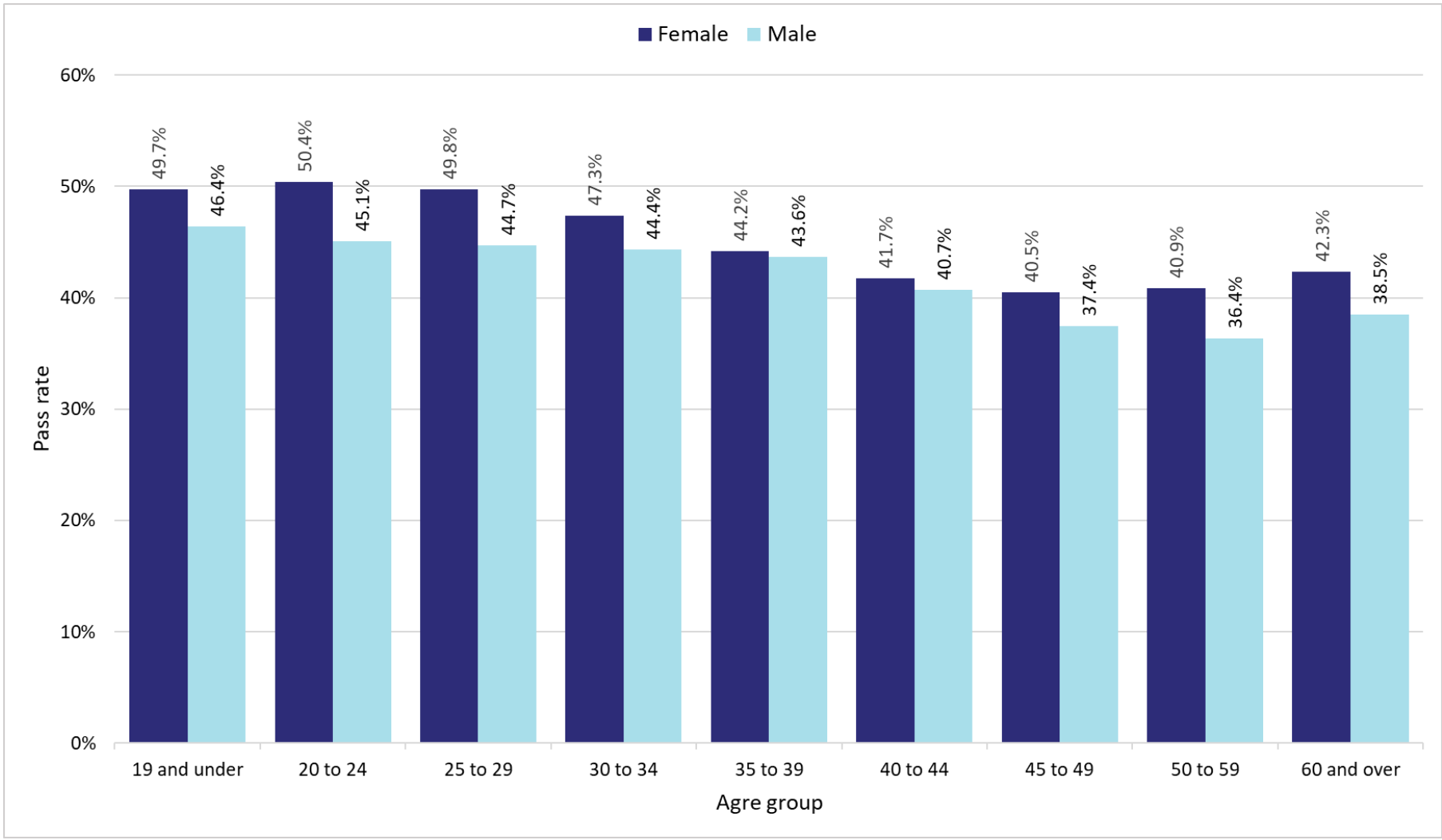

Figure 24: Theory test passes by age group and gender over the years 2021–2023 (DRT111C – DVSA published data)

Compared with the data for all years, the pass rates for all ages and genders have reduced in the most recent three years. This could be due to the changes made to the theory test in this time, or changes to learning to drive and revising for the theory test.

In the youngest age group, which accounts for approximately 40% of tests, the pass rate reduced by 2.6 percentage points for females and 1.6 percentage points for males, leading to a reduction in the gender gap. The gender gap was similar in 2021–2023, and for all years the main difference is that for ages 19 and under the gender gap reduced from 4.3% average in all years to 3.3% in 2021–2023.

6.3 Gender and region

There was variation in the pass rates at different test centres and between regions. The region with the lowest average pass rate (44.5%) was the West Midlands and the highest pass rate (49.3%) was the South West. The test centre with the lowest pass rate (where there were at least 100 male and female candidates) was Uxbridge in London at 38.7% and the highest was 62.3% at Clydebank in Scotland.

Note that the theory test is the same test and conditions across all centres, whereas the practical test has different roads and traffic and different examiners. Therefore, these differences in the theory test pass rates could be more likely due to differences in the characteristics of candidates.

Figure 25 shows the average gender gap (male pass rate to female pass rate) for theory test centres within each region or country based on data table DRT122A (DVSA, 2025c).

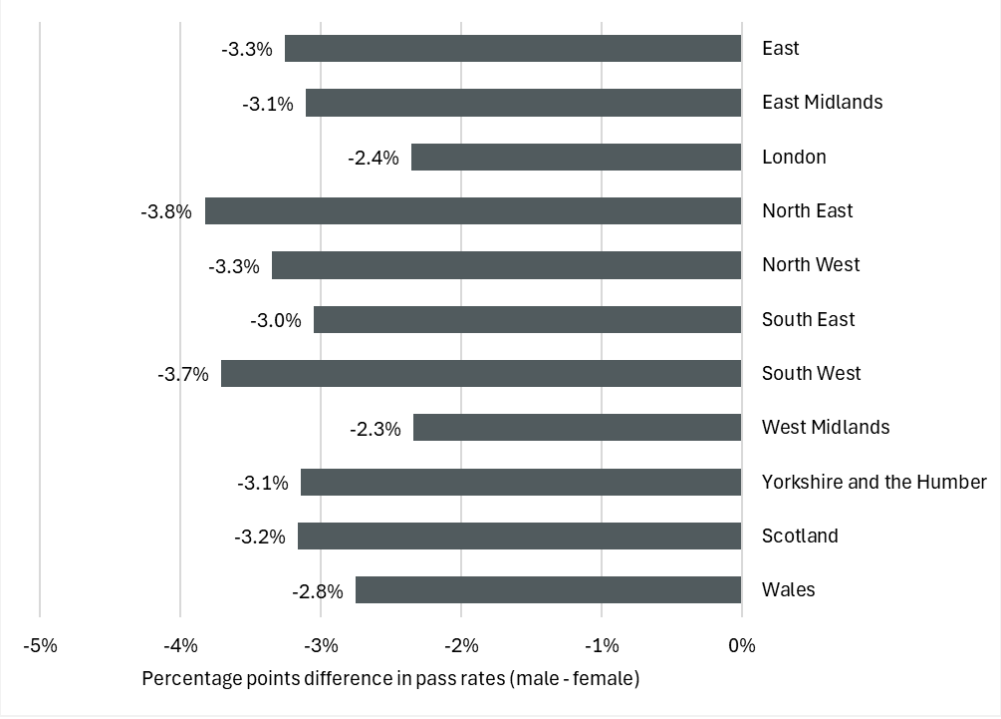

Figure 25: Theory test: male pass rate – female pass rate by country and region (2021/22–2023/24) (DRT112A – DVSA published data)

All the regions or countries showed a gender gap, with the female pass rate on the theory test being higher than the male pass rate. The largest gap was in the North East (3.8 percentage points) and the smallest gap was in the West Midlands (2.3 percentage points).

Figure 26 shows the distribution of percentage points difference between males and females at driving test centres by region or country (where there were at least 100 male and female candidates).

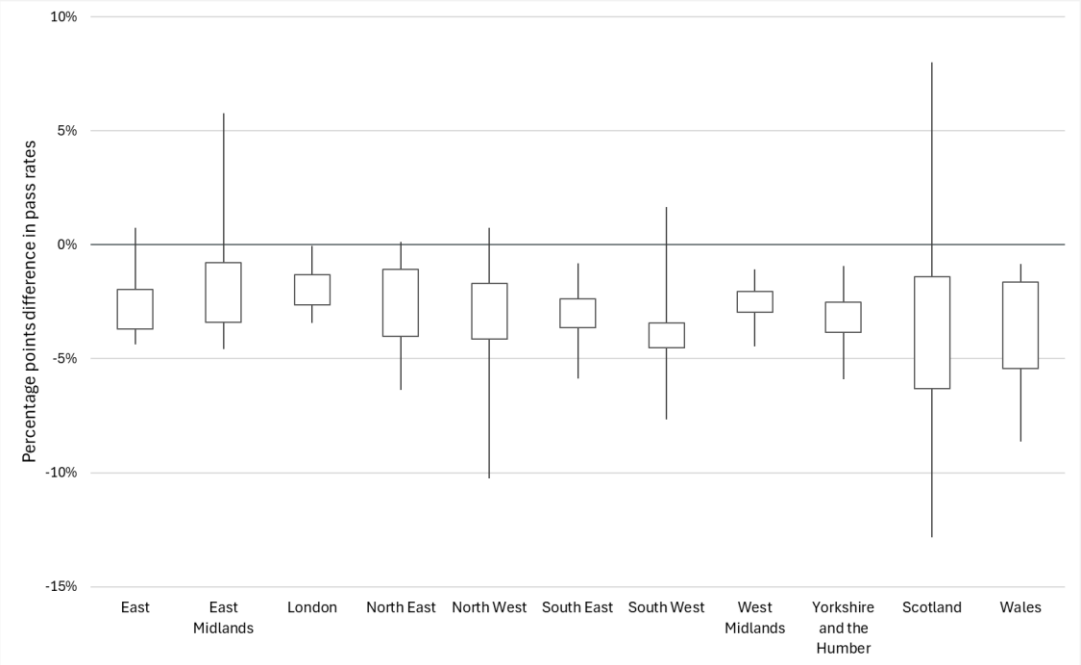

Figure 26: Theory test: male pass rate to female pass rate by country and region (2021/22–2023/24) (DRT112A – DVSA published data)

The largest gender gaps were at North Berwick (Scotland), where the female pass rate (63%) was 13 percentage points higher than the male pass rate (50%), and at Stranraer (Scotland), where 39% of males passed compared with 51% of females (12 percentage points difference). Differences in individual test centres may be due to different populations attending each centre; for example, differences in ages.

Table 10 shows the number of test centres with at least 100 male and female candidates where there was a gender gap and whether it is significant ($p<0.05$).

Table 10: Summary of gender gaps at individual test centres (2023/24) (DRT112A – DVSA published data)

Gender gap	Significant (p<0.05)	Not significant (p>0.05)	Total
Females higher pass rate than males	139	35	174
Males higher pass rate than females	0	13	13
Less than 100 male and female candidates	-	-	47
Total	**139**	**48**	**234**

At 139 out of the 178 centres with at least 100 male and female candidates, females had a significantly higher pass rate ($p<0.05$; note statistical significance was calculated based on the two-proportion Z-test; a p-value of 0.05 was described as significant). There were only 13 centres where the gender gap was reversed, but these differences are not significant ($p>0.05$).

6.4 Gender and theory test section

As described in Section 2.2, the theory test consists of a multiple-choice question section (MC) and a hazard perception section (HP). Candidates need to pass both sections to pass. Figure 27 shows the test fails by gender split into hazard perception and multiple-choice sections for candidates taking the test in March 2024.

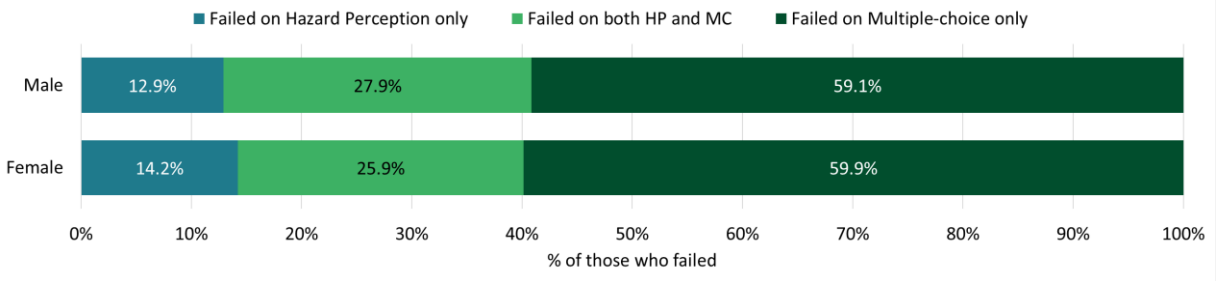

Figure 27: Theory test results by test section and gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

For both males and females, the most common reason for failing the theory test was failing the multiple-choice part. Overall, 87% of those who did not pass failed the multiple-choice part and 41% failed the hazard perception part (including 27% who failed both parts).

The percentage of those who failed on the multiple-choice section only was similar for males and females, at approximately 59%. Females more commonly failed on hazard perception only (14.2% of females who failed compared with 12.9% of males who failed) and males more commonly failed on both parts of the test (27.9% of males who failed compared with 25.9% of females who failed).

Table 11 shows the average test scores for the hazard perception and multiple-choice sections for candidates taking the test in March 2024.

Table 11: Average theory test scores by test section and gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

Section	Female	Male	Total
Multiple-choice average score Pass mark = 43/50	42.7	42.0	42.3
Hazard perception average score Pass mark = 44/75	52.1	51.5	51.8

The pass mark for the multiple-choice section is 43, out of 50 points available. The mean score for females was 42.7 and for males 42.0. This difference of 0.7 points, although statistically significant ($p<0.001$), is considered a small effect.

The hazard perception part of the test has 75 points available, with a pass mark of 44. The mean score was 52.1 for females and 51.5 for males. This difference of 0.6 points, although statistically significant ($p<0.001$), is considered a very small effect.

The distribution of multiple-choice section scores for males and females is shown in Figure 28.

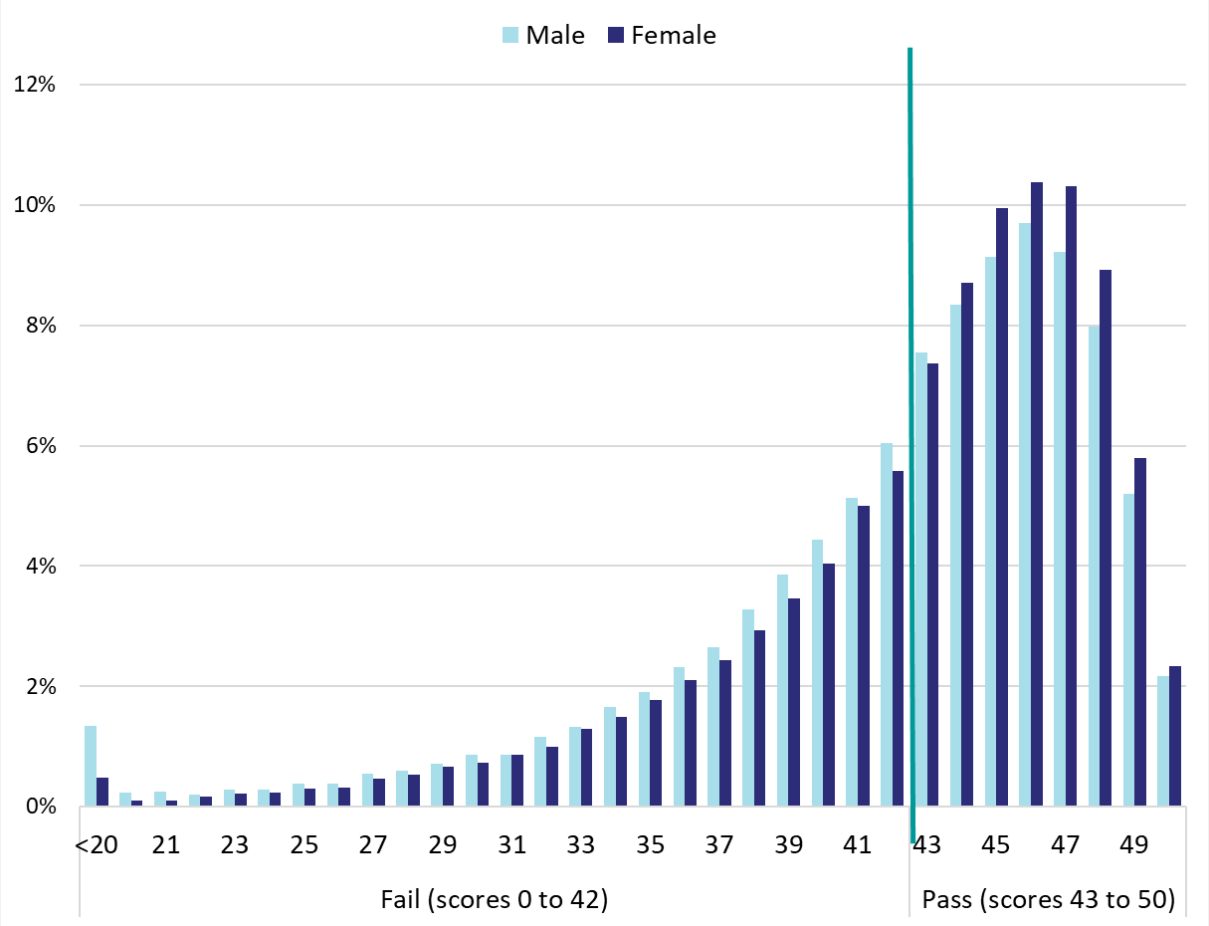

Figure 28: Distribution of theory test multiple-choice test scores by gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

There was a higher proportion of males scoring less than 20 and for all scores up to 42 (the highest score that is a fail). For most of the scores that are a pass (43 or greater) there was a higher proportion of females with each score.

Figure 29 shows the distribution of hazard perception section scores for males and females.

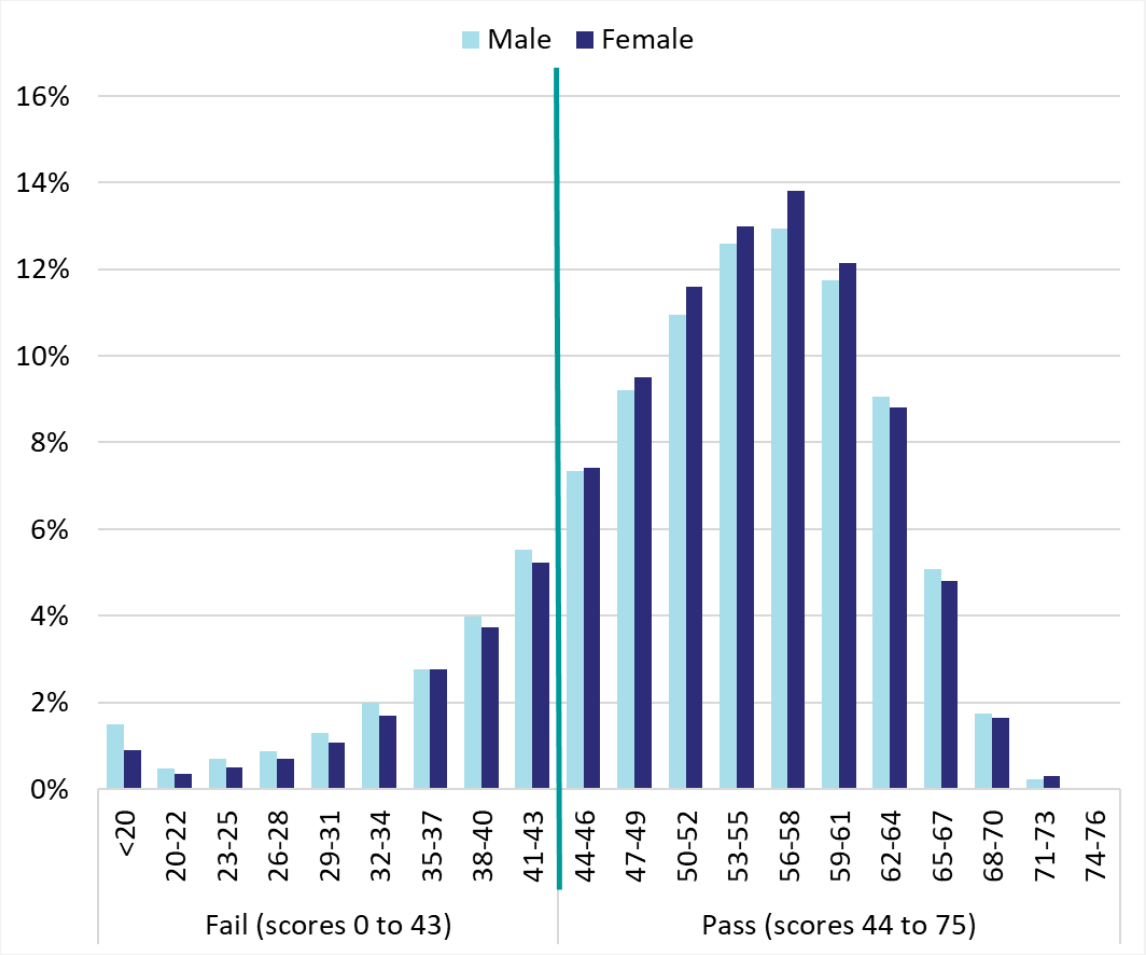

Figure 29: Distribution of theory test hazard perception test scores by gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

Males had a higher proportion scoring less than 20 and all scores less than the pass mark. Females generally had higher proportions of candidates with each mark above the pass mark than males.

6.5 Gender and age and theory test section

Figure 30 shows the percentage (of fails) that failed the multiple-choice part of the theory test by age and gender.

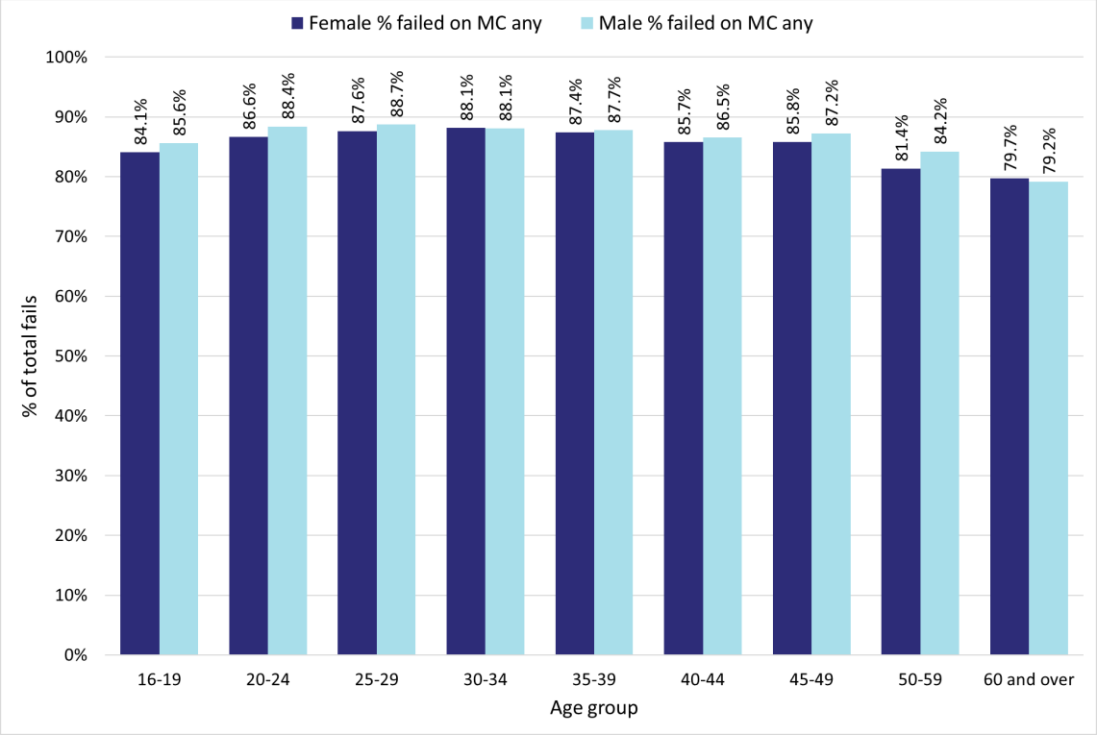

Figure 30: Percentage of fails that failed theory test multiple-choice by age and gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

For all ages and genders, failing the multiple-choice section was a more common reason for failing than the hazard perception section.

For all age groups there was a slightly higher proportion of males who failed due to the multiple-choice section. This is a significant difference for the youngest age groups (16–19 and 20–24, $p<0.05$).

Figure 31 shows the average multiple-choice score by age group and gender.

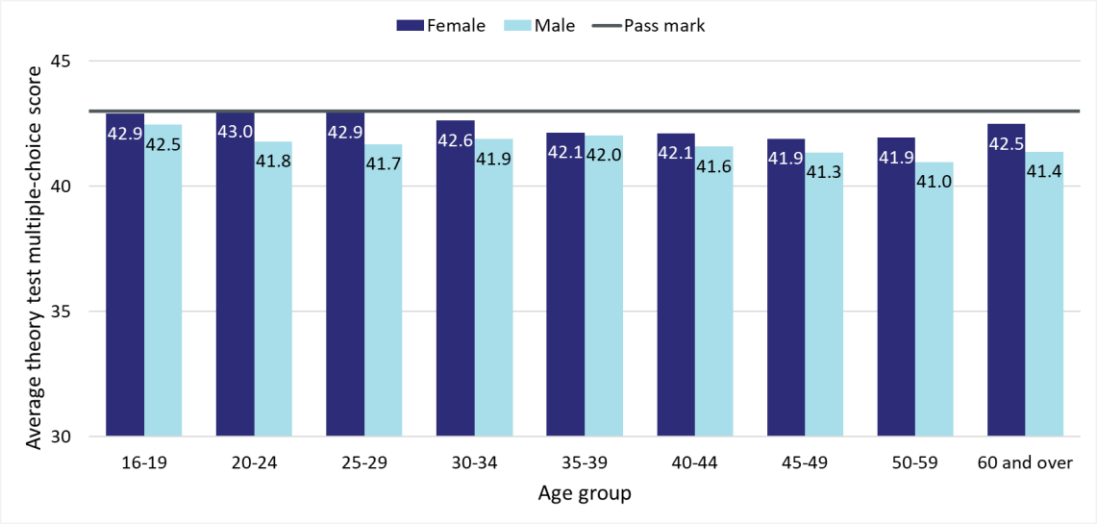

Figure 31: Average theory test multiple-choice test scores by age and gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

In all ages and genders the average multiple-choice score was at or below the pass mark (43). The average multiple-choice score was higher in all age groups for females than males. For ages 20 to 29 this difference is significant (two-sample t-test $p<0.001$), greater than one point and considered a very small effect. The other differences are considered 'very small'.

Figure 32 shows the percentage of fails that failed the hazard perception part of the theory test by age and gender.

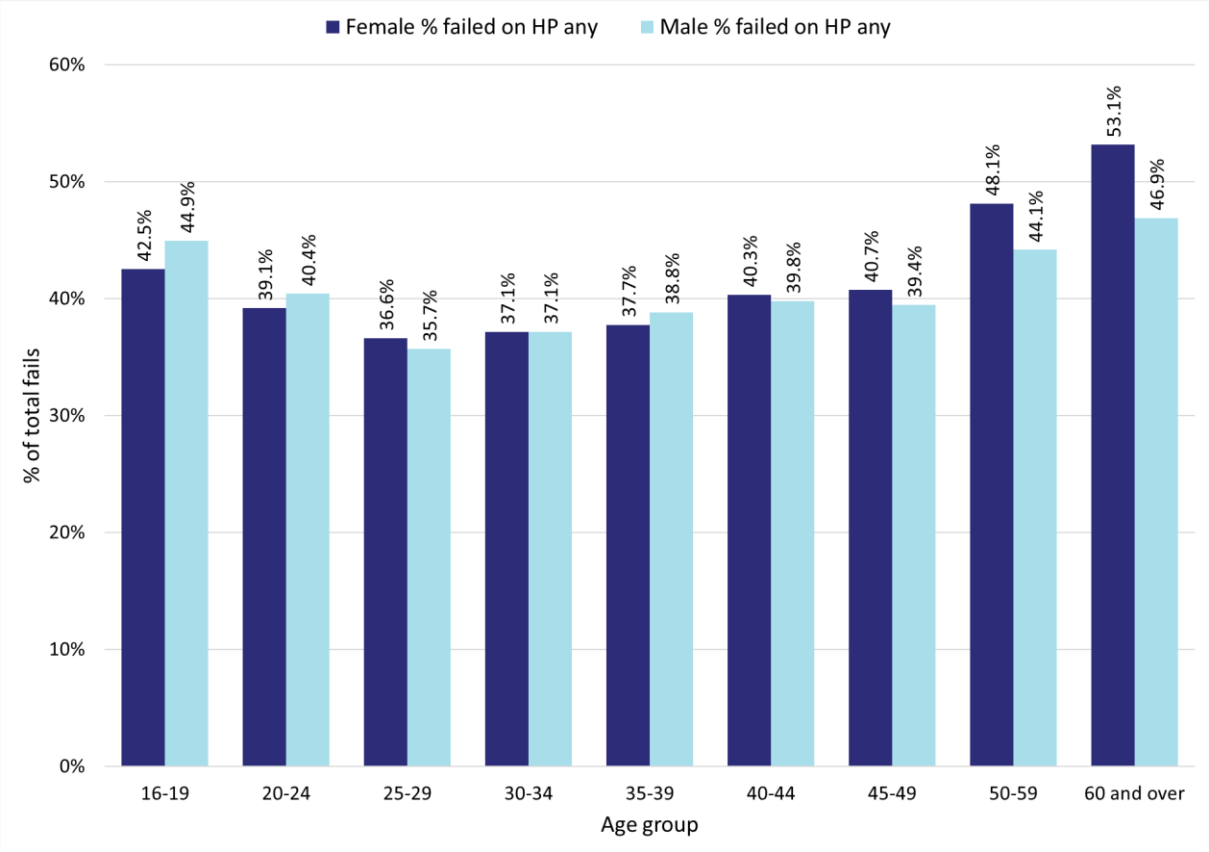

Figure 32: Percentage of fails that failed theory test hazard perception by age and gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

In both males and females, the percentage of fails due to the hazard perception section decreased over the first three age groups and increased from ages 30 upwards.

For the 16–19 age group (which accounts for 38% of all those who failed) males had a higher percentage of those who failed due to hazard perception (44.9% of males compared with 42.5% of females); this difference of 2.4 percentage points is statistically significant ($p<0.05$), and it is the only age group with a significant difference.

Figure 33 shows the average hazard perception scores by age group and gender.

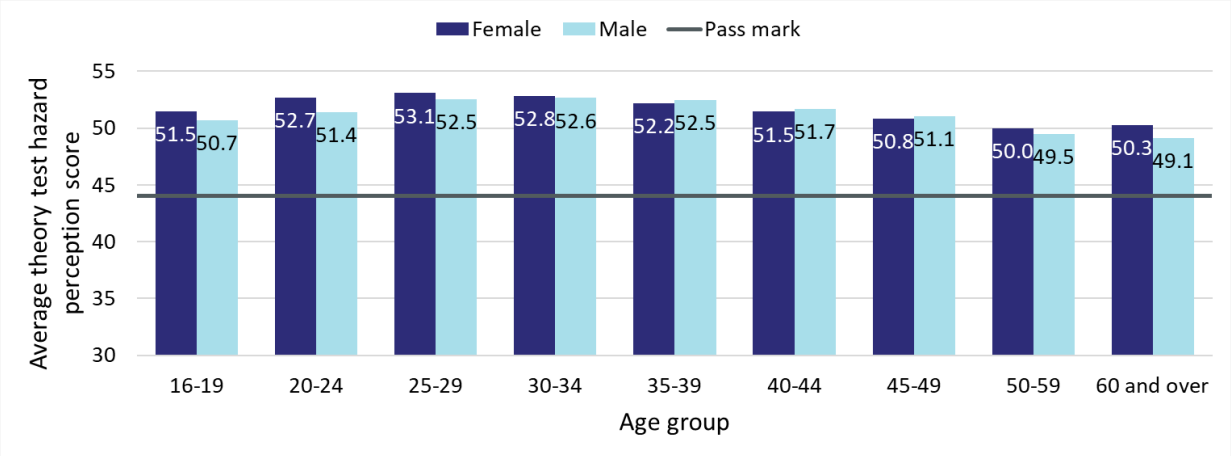

Figure 33: Average theory test hazard perception test scores by age and gender (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

The average score for all ages and genders was above the pass mark (44). Females had significantly higher average scores than males for ages 16 to 29 (two-sample t-test p<001) The largest difference was among ages 20–24 where females scored an average 1.3 points higher than males.

6.6 Special requirements

The detailed data for candidates in March 2024 included data on special requirements. When booking a theory test, candidates can state whether they have any special requirements when taking the test that may require accommodation. Table 12 shows the pass rates for those with and without stated special requirements.

Table 12: Theory test pass rates by special requirements (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

Special requirements	Fail	Incomplete	Negated	Pass	Total	Pass rate
No	45,782	33	22	56,829	102,666	55.4%
Yes	430	-	-	350	780	44.9%
Total	**46,212**	**33**	**22**	**57,179**	**103,446**	**55.3%**

Approximately 0.8% of candidates had special requirements for completing the theory test. Special requirements were more common for females (0.9%) than males (0.6%). The most common requirements were requiring extra time (92% of candidates with special requirements) or a separate room (50%) and having a reader (39%).

Table 13 shows the pass rates for the theory test by whether the candidates had any special requirements and gender.

Table 13: Theory test results by gender and special requirements (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

Values	Number/rate	No special requirements	Special requirements	Total
Female	Number of candidates	46,797	418	46,797
Female	Pass rate	57.8%	48.3%	57.4%
Male	Number of candidates	55,869	362	55,869
Male	Pass rate	53.4%	40.9%	53.0%
Total	**Number of candidates**	**102,666**	**780**	**103,446**
Total	**Pass rate**	**55.4%**	**44.9%**	**55.3%**

The average pass rate for those with special requirements was significantly ($p<0.001$) lower (44.9%) than those without (55.4%), classed as a small effect. This difference was evident for both males and females, with males with special requirements having 12 percentage points lower pass rate than males without special requirements.

Table 14 shows the percentage of those who failed on each section of the theory test, by special requirements. Note that some candidates failed on both sections and hence the rows should not be summed.

Table 14: Theory test results by test section and special requirements (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

Values	No special requirements	Special requirements	Total
Total fails (100%)	45,782	430	46,212
Failed hazard perception	40.5%	47.2%	40.6%
Failed multiple-choice	86.5%	86.7%	86.5%

Similar percentages of those with and without special requirements failed on the multiple-choice section (87%). Males with special requirements had a slightly higher percentage of fails of the multiple-choice section (90%) whereas females with special requirements had a slightly lower percentage of fails due to the multiple-choice section (83%).

For the hazard perception part of the test, a significantly higher ($p<0.001$) percentage of those with special requirements did not pass (47.2% compared with 40.5% with no requirements). This difference was also similar for both males and females.

Figure 34 shows the average scores for the multiple-choice and hazard perception sections of the theory test by special requirements.

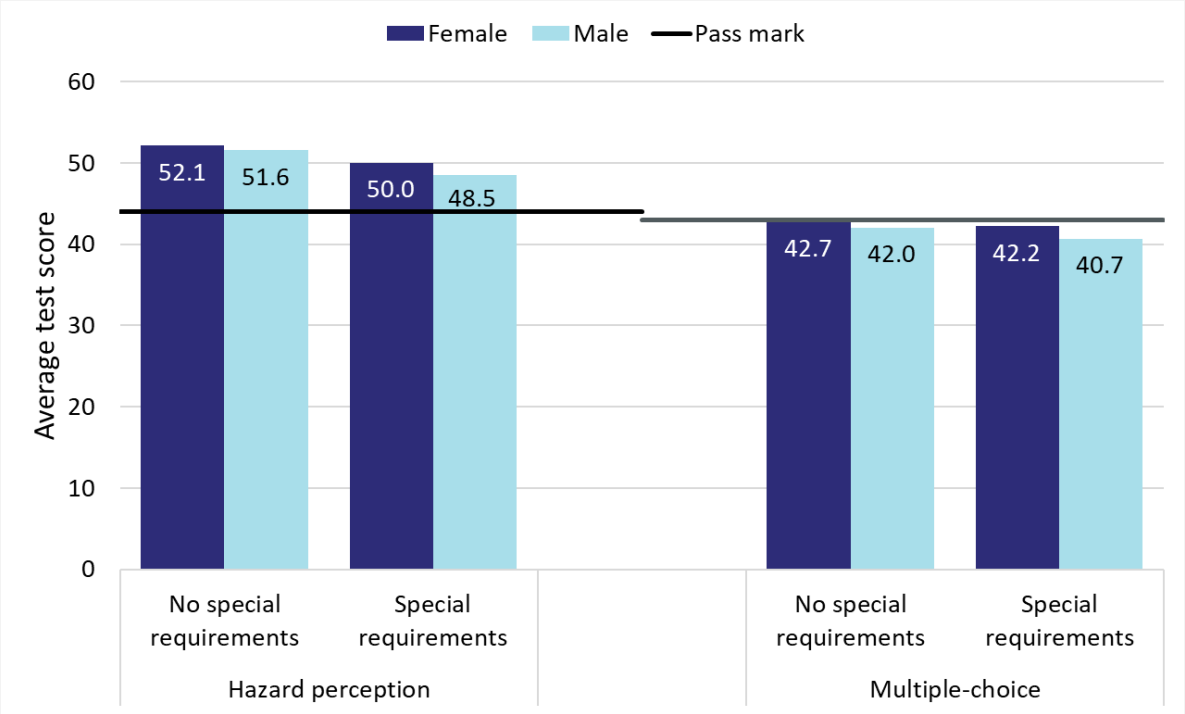

Figure 34: Average theory test multiple-choice and hazard perception test scores by gender and special requirements (DVSA detailed data, March 2024)

The average multiple-choice score was 0.8 points lower for those with special requirements (significant difference ($p<0.05$) and considered a very small effect size). There was a bigger difference for males (1.3) than for females (0.5).

On average, people with special requirements scored 2.5 points lower on hazard perception than those without special requirements. This difference is significant ($p<0.001$) and considered a small effect. As with the multiple-choice, there was a larger difference for males (3.1) than for females (2.1).

6.7 Summary of differences in theory test

6.7.1 Gender

Females showed a higher pass rate for the theory test than males. This trend is evident for all years from 2007 to 2024. This trend is the opposite of the practical test, suggesting that females might be better prepared for or more comfortable with the theory test than the practical test. The gender gap was driven by age groups from 17 to 34. Older age groups accounted for relatively fewer theory test takes but show that males had a higher pass rate than females.

Both genders showed a steady decline in pass rates from 2007 onward, suggesting that the theory test may have become more challenging, or candidates may be less prepared. Although the female pass rate was consistently higher than the male pass rate, the gap

narrowed in recent years as both genders' pass rates declined. By 2024, the difference in pass rates between genders was about 3%, compared with around 5–10% in earlier years.

Declining pass rates with age for both genders could point to challenges for older learners, such as difficulties adapting to newer testing formats.

Gender gaps were evident on average for all regions, and at the majority of test centres the gender gap is significant. There was some variation between test centres, which may be due to differences in demographics of candidates attending each centre.

For both males and females, the most common reason for failing the theory test was failing the multiple-choice section. Overall, 87% of those who did not pass failed on the multiple-choice section and 41% failed on the hazard perception section (including 27% who failed both sections).

The average scores for males were 0.7 points and 0.6 points lower than those for females for the multiple-choice and hazard perception sections respectively. There was a greater proportion of males with very low scores for multiple-choice or hazard perception (fewer than 20 points).

6.7.2 Special requirements for theory test

Approximately 0.8% of candidates stated special requirements for completing the theory test. Those who had special requirements had a lower pass rate (44.9%) than those who did not (55.4%). There were similar levels of failure due to the multiple-choice section and similar scores on the multiple-choice section for those with and without special requirements. However, candidates with special requirements on average were more likely to fail due to the hazard perception section (46% compared with 40%) and had a score on the hazard perception section 2.5 percentage points lower than those without requirements. This could suggest that the candidates with special requirements need additional help or training in hazard perception skills.

7 Licence holders

This section aims to understand if there are differences between those people who have a driving licence and those who do not, and if so, whether these differences provide any insight into the observed differences in the driving tests.

Note that the data in this section are from England only.

7.1 Sex and age

Table 15 and Figure 35, based on DfT's published analysis of National Travel Survey (NTS) data (Department for Transport, 2024c), show the percentage of adults aged 17 and over holding a full car driving licence in 2023 by age and sex. The full table, including the sample size for each age group, is shown in Table 19 in Appendix A.

Table 15: Proportion of adults holding a full car driving licence by age and sex, aged 17 and over: NTS0201a, NTS data – England, 2023 (Department for Transport, 2024c)

Age group	All adults	Females	Males
All aged 17 and over (%)	74.5%	69.7%	79.6%
17 to 20 (%)	28.7%	28.3%	29.1%
21 to 29 (%)	59.5%	57.6%	61.4%
30 to 39 (%)	75.2%	70.5%	80.3%
40 to 49 (%)	83.3%	79.3%	87.4%
50 to 59 (%)	86.2%	82.2%	90.3%
60 to 69 (%)	82.6%	76.5%	89.1%
70 and over (%)	72.8%	63.3%	84.2%
Unweighted sample size: individuals aged 17 and over (number)	13,725	7,152	6,573

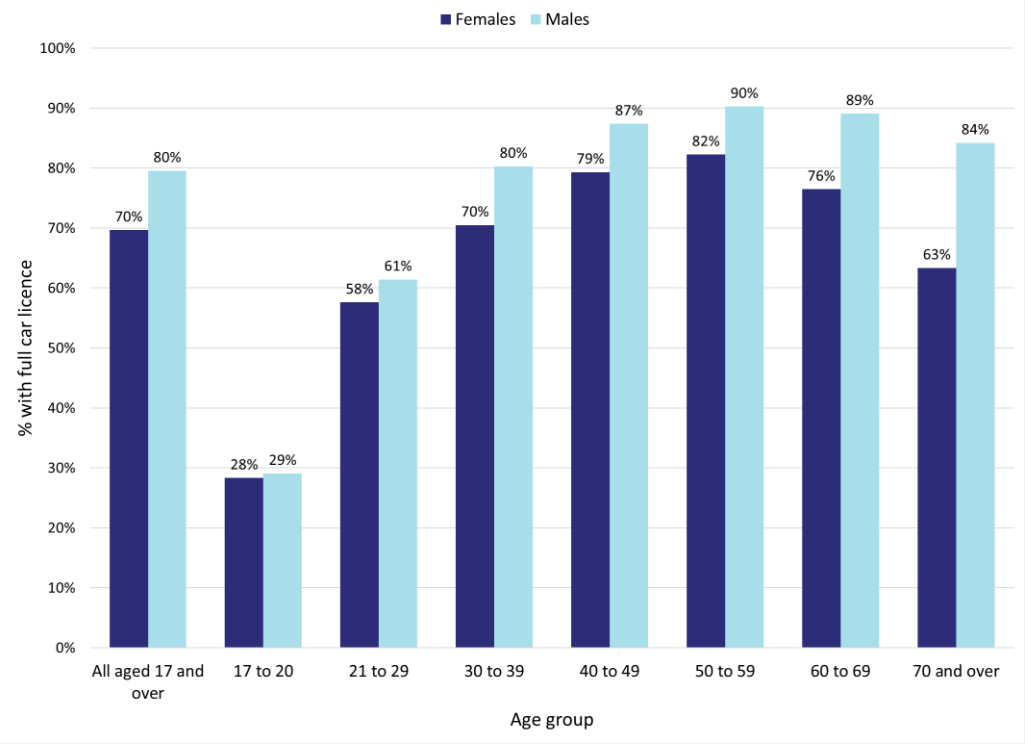

Figure 35: Proportion of adults holding a full car driving licence by age and sex, aged 17 and over: NTS data – England, 2023 (Department for Transport, 2024c)

Among all adults, a higher percentage of males had a licence (80%) than females (70%). This difference is most notable in the older age groups. For ages 17 to 20 the rates were similar (29% for males, 28% for females) and there was a small difference for ages 21 to 29 (61% for males, 58% for females).

The percentage with a licence increased for both males and females from the lowest value at 17–20 years up to 50–59 years.

7.2 Sex and region

This section is based on the detailed NTS data accessed via the UK data service (Department for Transport, 2024b). In this section, the results are based on 2021–2023 data so that the analysis includes a larger number of respondents. The household weights were used so that the data are representative of England.

The following results (Sections 7.2 to 7.6) are shown for ages 17 to 29 only to avoid confusion due to age effects, as this group makes up almost three-quarters of test-takers.

Figure 36 shows the percentage of the population aged 17–29 who had a full driving licence in 2021–2023. In most of the regions in England there was a slightly higher percentage of males aged 17–29 with a full driving licence, except for the North West and South West regions. The percentage of drivers with a licence was lowest in London. The full table, including the sample size for each region, is shown in Table 20 in Appendix B.

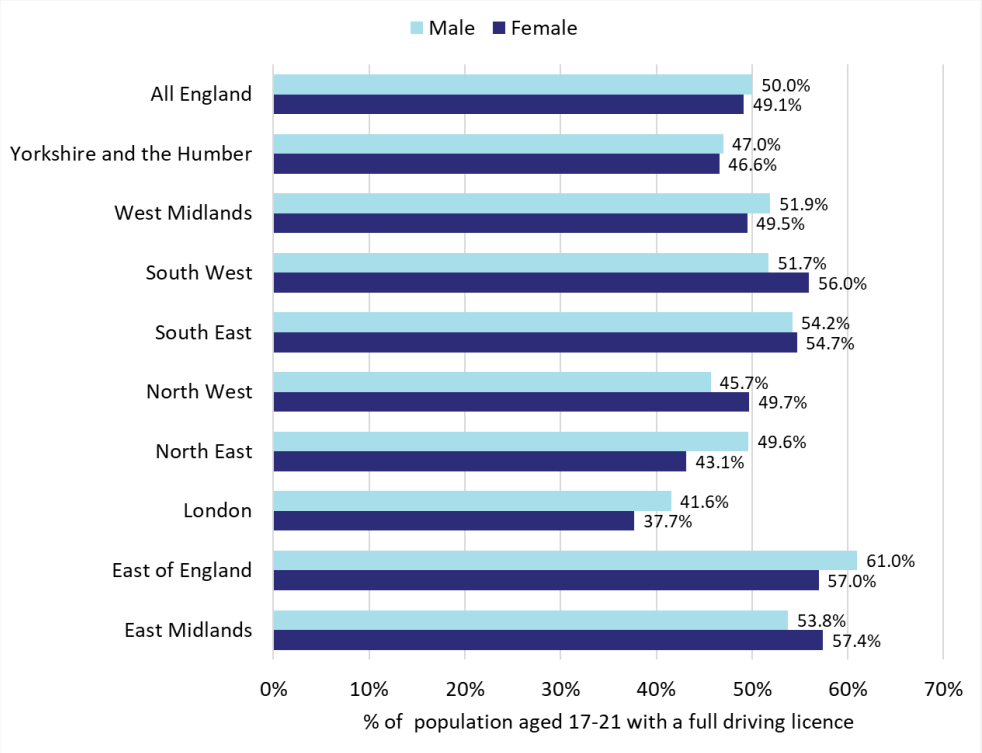

Figure 36: Proportion of adults aged 17–29 holding a full car driving licence by region: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

7.3 Sex and economic status

Table 16 shows the percentage of males and females aged 17–29 with a driving licence by employment status. The full table including the sample sizes is shown in Table 21 in Appendix B.

Table 16: Percentage of males and females in England aged 17–29 with a full driving licence by economic status: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Economic status	Females with full driving licence	Males with full driving licence	Total with full driving licence
Full-time	68.0%	72.2%	70.3%
Part-time	46.1%	34.1%	41.7%
Economically inactive: Student	19.8%	15.7%	17.7%
Economically inactive: Permanent (retired, sick, disabled)	15.9%	6.5%	10.1%
Economically inactive: Other	37.3%	20.5%	31.3%
Unemployed	20.9%	26.2%	23.8%
Did not answer	81.2%	-	46.7%
Total	**49.1%**	**50.0%**	**49.6%**

Approximately 47% of females aged 17–29 were in full-time employment, and 68% of these had a full driving licence. Males were more commonly in full-time employment (55%) and had a higher proportion with a driving licence (72%).

The next largest economic group was students, accounting for just less than one-quarter of individuals. In this group there was a slightly higher proportion of females with a driving licence (20%) than males (16%).

The third largest economic group was part-time workers. This accounted for 19% of females and 11% of males. In this group there was a higher proportion of females with a driving licence (46%) than males (34%).

7.4 Sex and individual income

Table 17 shows the percentage of males and females with a full driving licence for three individual income bands. The full table including the sample sizes is shown in Table 22 in Appendix B.

Table 17: Percentage of males and females in England aged 17–29 with a full driving licence by individual income: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Individual income	Female with full driving licence	Male with full driving licence	Total with full driving licence
Less than £25,000	41%	36%	38%
£25,000 to £49,999	74%	81%	78%
£50,000 and over	65%	78%	73%
Not applicable	100%	-	51%
Total	**49%**	**50%**	**50%**

The most common income band was less than £25,000. As might be expected, a higher proportion of those earning greater than this had a full driving licence. There may also be some age effects in this; for example, those with higher earnings may be older, who have a higher rate of licence holding (see Figure 35).

7.5 Ethnicity

The NTS dataset categorised the data into ethnicities of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’, shown in Figure 37. Any further breakdown was not possible due to the sample sizes involved. The full table including the sample sizes is shown in Table 23 in Appendix B.

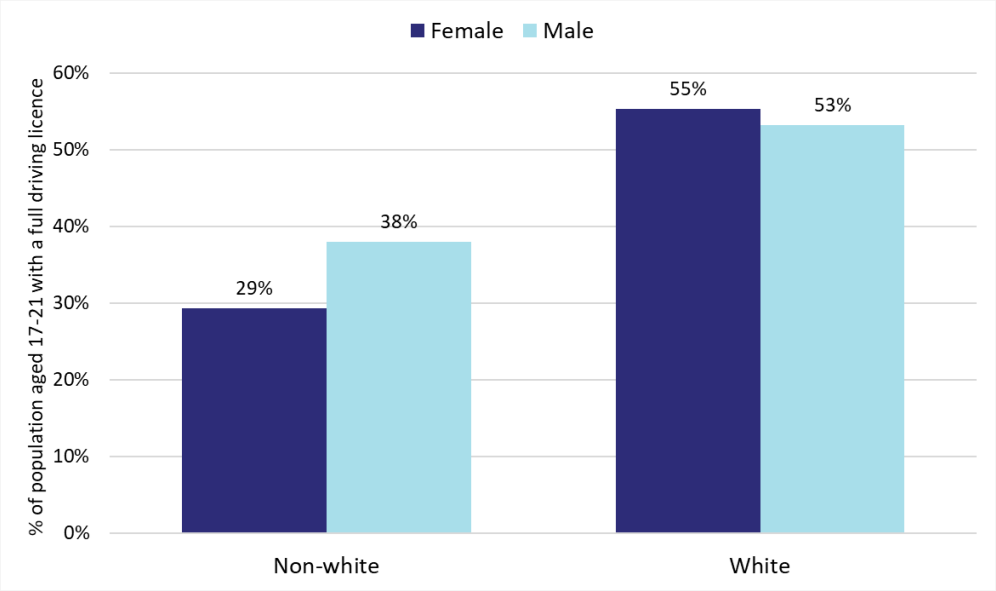

Figure 37: Proportion of adults in England aged 17–29 holding a full car driving licence by ethnicity: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Over three-quarters of the respondents described themselves as white (77% of females and 80% of males). For the white ethnicity category there was a higher proportion of females with a full driving licence (55%) than males (53%).

For the non-white ethnicity category the pattern was reversed, with a larger percentage of males with a licence (38%) than females (29%).

7.6 Reasons for not learning to drive

The NTS also asks for a reason for not learning to drive from individuals aged 17 and over who do not hold a full or provisional driving licence and are not currently learning to drive; from 2019 these questions were asked in odd years only.

Results published by DfT (Department for Transport, 2024c) showed that the most common reasons given by all ages for not learning to drive were related to cost of learning to drive, insurance and a vehicle; these reasons were also the most common when considering only the younger age groups. 'Not interested in driving', 'friends and family can drive me when necessary' and 'other forms of transport available' were also commonly given reasons overall, and more common for older age groups.

Analysis of all reasons for not driving for 17 to 29 year olds by sex (Figure 38) showed:

- The cost of learning to drive was the most given reason.
- Other costs ('cost of buying a car' and 'cost of insurance') were also commonly reported, with similar percentages for males and females.
- A higher percentage of females stated 'safety concerns/nervous about driving' (15% of females compared with 11% of males).
- 8% of females and 6% of males said 'put off by theory/practical test'.

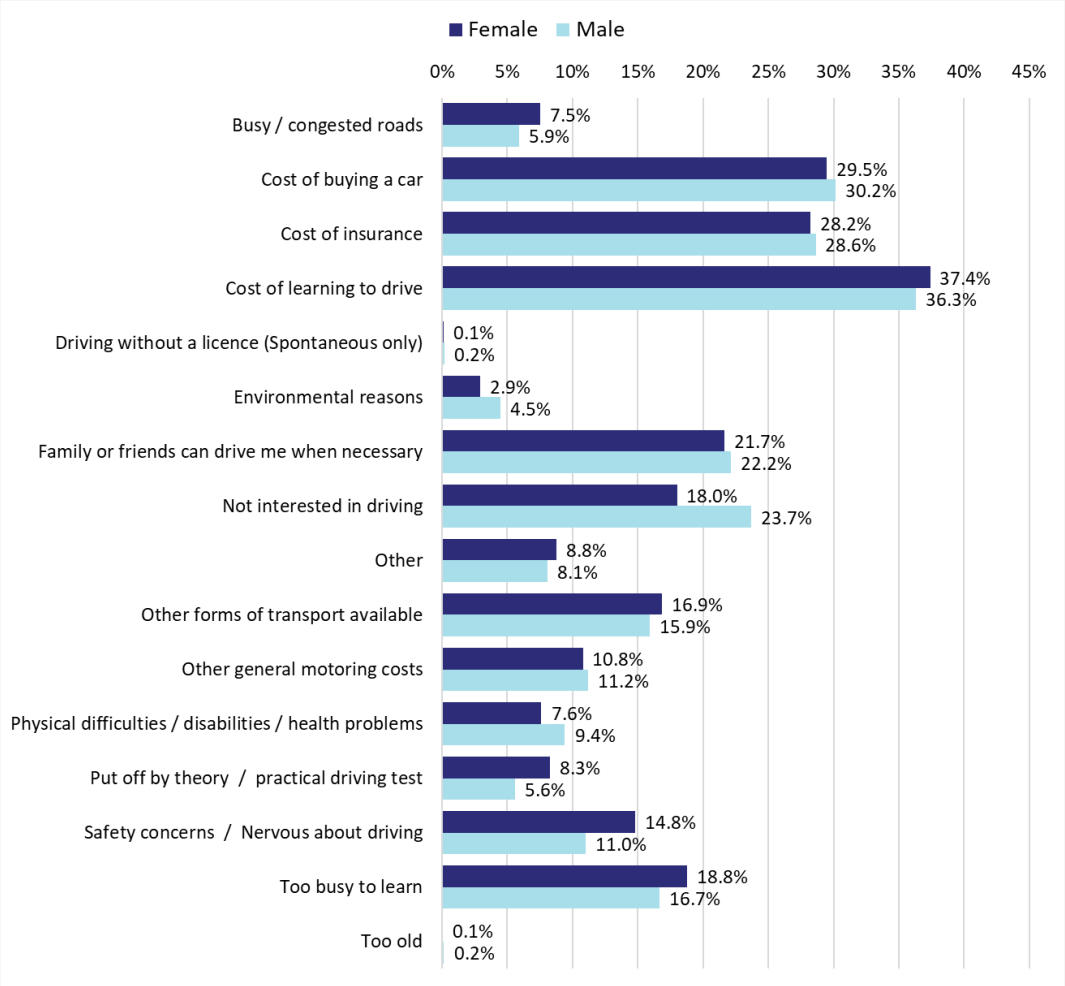

Figure 38: All reasons for not driving for males (N=841) and females (N=935): NTS data – 2019, 2021, 2023, ages 17–29 in England without a driving licence or learning (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Similar analysis for 17- to 29-year-old non-licence holders by ethnicity (Figure 39) showed:

- White respondents more commonly stated that all three measures of costs were reasons for not driving (31% to 43%) than non-white respondents (20% to 22%).
- White respondents also more commonly stated 'safety concerns/nervous about driving' (15%) than non-white respondents (8%).

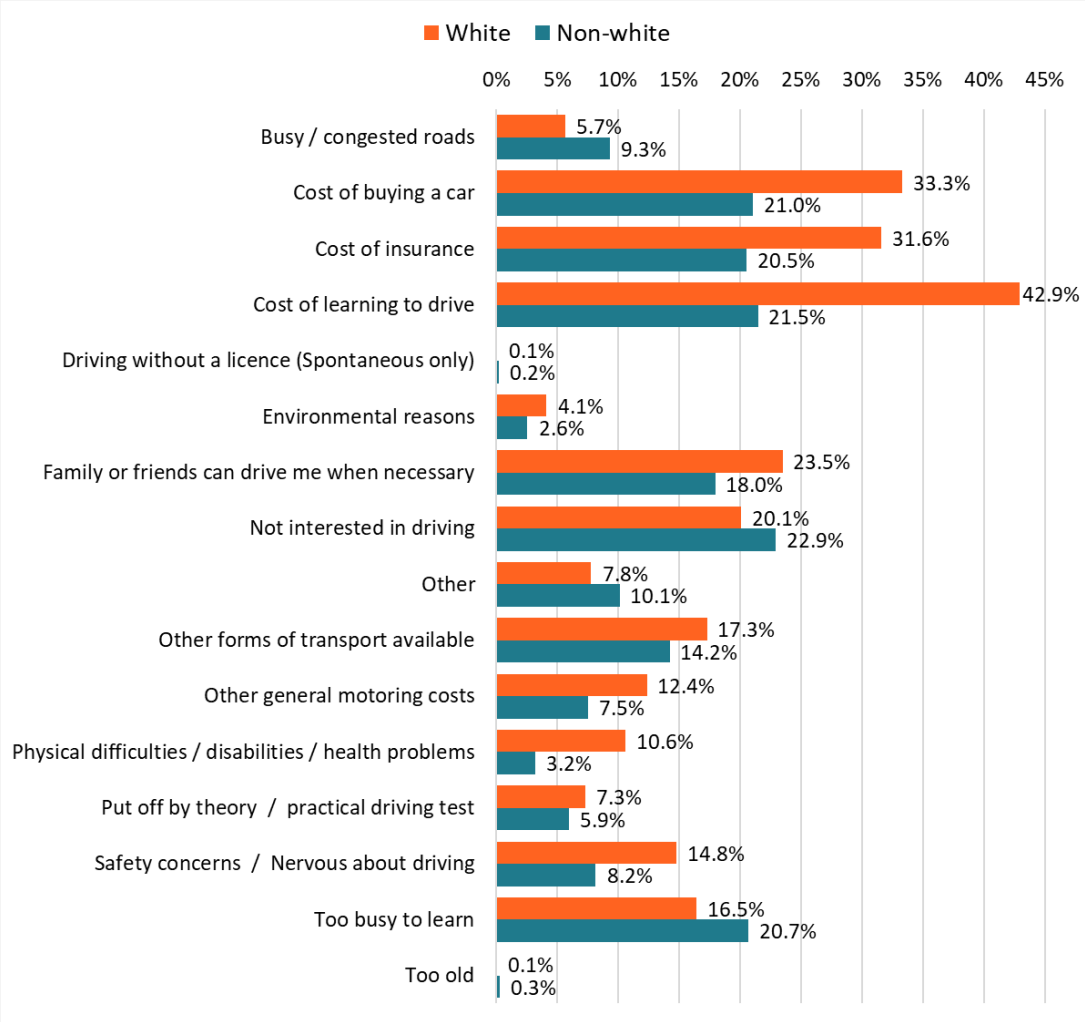

Figure 39: All reasons for not driving for respondents stating ethnicity as white (N=1,288) and non-white (N=486): NTS data – 2019, 2021, 2023, ages 17–29 without a driving licence or learning (Department for Transport, 2024b)

7.7 Summary of licence holders

Across all adults, 75% had a full driving licence. This figure was higher for males (80%) than for females (70%). This difference is most apparent in the older age groups. For ages 17 to 20, 28% of females had a full licence, compared with 29% of males, whereas for ages 70 and over, 84% of males had a full licence compared with 63% of females.

Focusing on ages 17–29, who make up the majority of driving test candidates, approximately 50% of the population were estimated to hold a full driving licence. Those in London less commonly had a licence, and in the North West and South West regions, the overall trend was reversed in that a slightly higher proportion of females had licences.

Those with ethnicity recorded as white more commonly had a licence than those who were non-white. For the white ethnicity group, females were slightly more likely than males to have a licence. For non-white ethnicity the gender gap between licence holders was reversed and greater (38% of males and 29% of females had a licence).

Both males and females aged 17–29 who were in full-time or part-time work were more likely to have a full driving licence, as were those who earned higher salaries.

For those aged 17–29 without a licence, the most common reasons for not having a licence were the costs of learning, buying or insurance for a vehicle. Males had a higher response than females for 'not interested in driving', while females more commonly stated 'safety concerns/nervous about driving'. Respondents who stated they were white more commonly gave costs as reasons for not having a driving licence than those who identified as non-white.

8 Data gap analysis

Throughout the data analysis we identified gaps in the data currently collected. The main reason these gaps were noted is that originally the scope of the work included different characteristics of inequality (for example disability and ethnicity) in the qualitative work. However, it was noted that these characteristics were not well covered in the data currently collected.

Below is a list of suggested improvements purely to data collection based on the data analysis done in the study. In Section 12 we also comment on other improvements that could be made around data, arising from our attempts to test the hypothesis generated from the qualitative work on gender, working back to the data to understand whether these hypotheses were supported.

Potential data gaps include:

- Currently information on disability is only captured in the test preparation survey and presumably in some records of requested reasonable adjustments, to which we did not have access in this project. In the test preparation survey, and in any future data collection, it would be useful if DVSA could use standard survey questions on disabilities. Currently the test preparation survey asks about 'health conditions or illnesses' and reasonable adjustments. Not everyone with a disability will consider it a health condition or illness. A standard terminology – such as asking people whether they are registered as disabled – would assist in getting more consistent data on disabilities.
- Data should also be collected on ethnicity, should DVSA wish to examine any potential inequalities related to this characteristic.
- There are also gaps around assessing any links between instructor or examiner gender and candidate outcomes, even for gender. For example, there are data available on the gender of examiners and instructors, but this does not automatically link with pass rates or genders of candidates. Male and female pass rates for individual examiners and instructors would help DVSA to understand any inequalities associated with bias in these groups.
- A final point is that in the National Travel Survey (NTS) reasons stated for not driving, 8% of females and 6% of males said that they were put off by the 'theory or practical test'. It would be useful if these two things were coded separately given the different performance levels of the genders on the practical and theory tests, although we note that DVSA does not have direct control over NTS methods.

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Literature review

9 Brief review of literature

This chapter discusses some available evidence exploring inequalities (mainly relating to gender) in driver testing regimes, preparation and wider outcomes. This includes international literature covering driving tests, learner experiences and overall test performance. No formal literature review was undertaken; instead, the project team undertook web searches of easily accessible literature on the topic. The focus was on gender as, after the data analysis, it had been decided that the qualitative work would focus on gender. The findings from this review fed into the planning of the qualitative work (for example interview topic guides) and therefore the review focuses on gender differences related to test preparation and performance, and wider differences between genders that may help to explain these.

9.1 Gender inequalities in driver testing

The gender difference in driving test pass rates is not unique to Great Britain. An online article from France, for example, shows a gender gap of nearly 10% in the pass rate of the practical driving test (Anne *et al.*, 2024). Based on 2018 data, 53.4% of females passed their practical test compared with 62.7% of males. This gap was marginally smaller than it was in 2009 (11.6% difference). The same article also highlights that despite the considerable gap on the practical test, performance on the driving theory test between genders was largely the same.

The pattern of the male pass rate being higher than the female pass rate for driver testing has also been observed in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, official test data from the last quarter of 2022/23 show males had a pass rate of 54.6% while the rate for females was 52.7%.; this was a smaller gap than in previous years (McCracken, 2023). This gender gap was found to vary by location, with some test centres across Northern Ireland showing a gap in favour of females. Female pass rates have continued to be higher than male pass rates for the driving theory test in Northern Ireland, a pattern which is replicated in Great Britain, albeit the gap is small (41.2% vs 40.2%).

In the case of the Republic of Ireland, in 2019 males had an overall pass rate of 57% (N=98,493), while the female pass rate was 51% (N=87,886) (news article – 'Women have lower driving test pass rate than men – but are still safer drivers', 2021). This was also observed in data from 2013 to 2018.

Research from Sweden (Wiberg, 2006) has shown that females are more likely to pass the theory test than males. However, other research has shown no gender difference in the practical driving test in Sweden (Nyberg and Gregersen, 2007).

Official data drawn from Norway in 2017 explored differences in gender and age; older drivers and males were significantly more likely to require multiple attempts to pass the driving theory test (Simsekoglu and Suzen, 2021). In The Netherlands, a study from 2008 showed no gender difference in official theory test scores (de Winter and Wieringa, 2008).

In short, the observation of test performance differences between the genders is not unique to Great Britain. We could find no research that had attempted to take the approach of the current study, by using mixed methods to explore the issue.

9.2 Gender inequalities in driving test preparation

Males and females have been found to show differences in their driving tuition and practice behaviours. Among Swedish 18- to 24-year-olds, questionnaire responses from a random sample of 1,716 drivers who had been issued with a licence in September 2005 showed that females engaged in more studying for theory tests, adopted a more structured routine for practical driving experience, demonstrated more extensive participation in driving school instruction and practised more elements of driving across several different environments (Nyberg and Gregersen, 2007). The authors of this research study suggest that more consideration should be given to the organisation and content of driver education, on top of the amount of time spent on training.

Recent evidence from France has also shown that driving schools in the country expect females to undertake a greater maximum number of hours preparing for the practical driving test than males (Anne *et al.*, 2024). Specifically, 290 driving schools in France were presented with two fictitious young candidate profiles – similar in all aspects aside from gender – and asked to outline requirements for them to pass their driving test. The schools estimated the 'female' candidate would require 1.5 more hours of training than the 'male' candidate (a statistically significant difference). This suggests that there may be an expectation within driving test systems that the genders require different preparation.

Finally, Wu *et al.* (2021) examined the trajectories taken by young people through the driver licensing process in the UK, using NTS data. They found that gender did not show any significant association with licence holding, while living in a higher population density area, living in London or other urban areas and living with adults a generation older or children a generation younger all predicted lower licence holding. The fact there was no gender difference suggests that whatever differences in preparation are seen between genders, they do not affect the final outcome as much as some of these other factors; this issue – the potential for other factors to play a bigger role in inequality of test outcomes than gender – is returned to in the discussion.

9.3 Wider individual differences

9.3.1 Cognitive abilities

It is possible that there are gender differences in cognitive abilities that could affect driving test performance or preparation. In a narrative review of the literature, Kheloui *et al.* (2023) reviewed sex and gender differences and concluded that factors associated with biological sex (for example birth-assigned sex and sex hormones), socio-cultural gender (for example gender identities, gender roles) and sexual orientation all uniquely shaped the cognitive

abilities reviewed; they also noted there is a lack of research looking at the combined effects of such factors.

In terms of specific cognitive abilities showing differences between genders, those from the Kheloui *et al.* review that are likely most relevant to the current work are:

- **Visuospatial abilities** such as mental rotation tasks, which show a consistent male advantage with a medium to large effect size. Although there is no formal literature on visuospatial abilities as measured by these tasks and driving performance, there is at least a plausible link between this ability and some parts of the practical driving test (for example reversing).
- **Attention**, which shows less obvious differences, with the exception that females seem to be more sensitive than males to so-called 'symbolic cues' that signal the location of a target in a detection task; importantly, females are more likely to orient their attention to the symbolic cue regardless of whether it is right or wrong in its signalling of target location. It is plausible that in a driving test on which they are often needing to orient their attention to instructions from the examiner, females may experience different attentional demands than males.
- **Verbal abilities**, which show a slight female advantage, and **episodic memory** (memory for specific events from the past), which shows a slight female advantage, especially for verbal materials. Both might plausibly confer an advantage in the multiple-choice element of the theory test.

A finding from the driving literature that supports the speculation that cognitive abilities may be related to test performance is from Özkan and Lajunen (2006). Their study of 217 young Turkish drivers (131 males, 86 females) measured 'masculinity' and 'femininity' using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, and 'perceptual and motor skills' and 'safety skills' aspects of driving skill using the Driver Skill Inventory. The findings showed that masculinity was associated with a higher score in the perceptual and motor skills element of driving skill, while femininity was associated with a higher safety skills element.

Kheloui *et al.* also discussed the concept of stereotype threat, a theory that argues that negative stereotypes associated with sex or gender-typical cognitive performance could lead to task-related anxiety in members of that sex or gender, which ultimately diminishes their performance on the task (Steele, 1997b; cited in Kheloui *et al.*, 2023). This theory has been corroborated in some tasks such as spatial processing and mathematics (Levine *et al.*, 2016; Shih *et al.*, 1999; both cited in Kheloui *et al.*, 2023), and it is not difficult to imagine it having an effect on the task of driving, which arguably has male stereotypes associated with it. Moè, Cadinu and Maass (2015) researched this with 81 female drivers in a simulated driving task. The research showed that if the 'women are poorer drivers' stereotype was made more salient, female participants made more mistakes. Thus stereotype threat is another thing that may affect the performance of females on the practical driving test.

9.3.2 Educational attainment

A recent review of educational attainment of males and females in England (Carroll, 2023) concluded that in almost all subjects (the most notable exception being mathematics, but only at the very highest levels of attainment) females had higher attainment, from early years foundation all the way through to undergraduate degree levels. Females were also more likely to choose some subjects at GCSE, A-level and degree level (languages, social sciences, arts) and males others (physical sciences, technology, business).

This persistent pattern of data may help to explain why females are more likely to pass the theory test than males; the theory test may be thought of as at least partly a more 'academic' subject; whatever is providing females with any advantage in educational attainment may help with their theory test preparation.

9.3.3 Test anxiety

Another potentially relevant factor is test anxiety. Self-reported test anxiety among British secondary school students has been found to be significantly higher among females (22.5%) than among males (10.3%) (Putwain and Daly, 2014). Test anxiety has also been found to be a significant predictor of failure on the practical driving test in Britain (Fairclough *et al.*, 2006). Females being more prone to test anxiety might lead to a greater risk of failure on the driving test, although it does not explain why they are more likely to pass than males on the theory test element. It is possible, given the findings reported above from Carroll (2023) on educational attainment, that test anxiety is holding females back from their full potential more so than it does for males, albeit they are still able to outperform males on more 'educational' subjects.

9.4 Implications from literature

The brief review of evidence confirms that gender differences in driving tests are not unique to Great Britain. It also suggests several ways in which female and male driving test candidates may bring different approaches and abilities to the test in terms of their preparation and performance.

The review helped to inform the development of the topic guides for interviews, notably in their focus on both potential preparation and performance issues, and on topics such as confidence and anxiety, as ones to be explored.

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Interviews

10 Method

10.1 Participants

TRL conducted semi-structured one-to-one interviews with key actors in the UK's driving training and testing process: learners and recently passed drivers, Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) and examiners.

The online interviews took place between 22 January and 7 March 2025 via MS Teams. Interviews were around 45 minutes long for learners and recent passers, and one hour long for instructors and examiners. Sample size was 37: five learners, 11 recent passers, 14 instructors and seven examiners. Each group had a balanced gender representation.

10.2 Materials

The interviews were designed to explore participants' perspectives on factors that might explain the observed gender-based differences in pass rates and post-test collisions, and potential implications these might have for approaches to training, testing and licensing.

For all audiences, the first part of the interview was a broad exploration of the interviewee's experiences of the training and testing system, including perceptions of what is being learned, what is being assessed and what factors can make a difference on whether candidates pass or fail (including factors that *should* make a difference, such as around skills and behaviour). Examiners and instructors were also asked about the key differences they saw between learners, what bearing these may have on pass rates and/or driving and how (if at all) they sought to accommodate these differences.

Participants were not prompted to consider gender differences in this first part of the interview. Unprompted references to gender differences in this first part of the interview were explored alongside other ideas.

In the second part of the interview, participants were asked for their interpretations of key findings around pass rates and subsequent collision risks. Participants were first told that there is some evidence of consistent differences in pass rates in relation to demographic groups and asked if they had any views on what those might be (again, without prompting on gender). Participants were then asked to consider in turn these findings:

- Females have a consistently higher pass rate than males on the theory test.
- Males have a consistently higher pass rate than females on the practical test.
- Males have a consistently higher collision risk after passing the test.

For each finding, participants were asked to consider what if anything they thought might explain the pattern. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to comment on what implications, if any, this might have for approaches to driver training and testing.

Topic guides following this structure were developed reflecting each group's distinct knowledge and experience of the driving training and testing process. These guides were further refined after initial interviews where participants' responses suggested they were not fully understanding what was being asked of them.

For more information on the full interview schedule, including the final version of the topic guides, see Appendix C.

10.3 Recruitment

The recruitment strategies for each group are outlined in more detail below.

Current learners and recent test passers – the target joint learners and test passers sample was 15 learner drivers or those who had passed their test within the previous six months, aged 17–24, with a balanced gender representation. This age group was selected because it represents around two-thirds of test candidates, and it was felt that addressing gender within a smaller age range (rather than considering age differences alongside gender ones) would help to keep the research focused. Participants were incentivised with Amazon vouchers worth £30. Learners were primarily recruited via social media; test passers were recruited with the assistance of DVSA, which sent targeted invitations via email to recent test passers.

Driving instructors – the target sample was 8–10 instructors, gender-mixed and of varied experience levels. Recruitment was via communication from DVSA to driving instructor organisations, highlighting the opportunity to participate and influence future training policies. Participants were further incentivised with Amazon vouchers worth £30.

Driving examiners – the target sample was 8–10 examiners with a balanced gender representation. TRL worked with DVSA to request participation via internal communication channels, emphasising the study's relevance to improving equity in testing practices. TRL offered flexibility in interview scheduling, such as shorter online sessions if needed.

The invitations outlined the research aims and what taking part in the study would involve. In the communications, individuals were directed to read the information sheet for the study, giving them the opportunity to consent to participate and provide their relevant driving history, demographic information and contact details. The researchers then contacted these individuals to arrange the interviews. Throughout the recruitment process, individuals were reassured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential.

10.4 Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. All transcripts were anonymised before analysis. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically, using an iterative, inductive approach to develop the themes. An initial review of transcripts was conducted to identify an unstructured longlist of provisional topics,

observations and patterns that provided a starting point for analysis. This provisional list was then reviewed by the research team (SC, BG, AN) to develop propositional findings statements on factors that contributed to the gender disparity in driving test outcomes. This included a review of affirmative and contradicting evidence of a provisional topic, observations and patterns. Where relevant, connections between statements were noted. A second review of the transcripts was conducted to validate and refine propositional statements and connections. The final statements are presented in Section 11.

Review of interview transcripts considered what the participants said, as well as how they said it and in response to which question. Care was taken to take quotations from the context the comment was made in to ensure that the narrative is valid. Quotes taken from transcripts have been presented using anonymised IDs in the following format: instructor (IN_XX), examiner (EX_XX), current learner (CL_XX) and recent passer (RP_XX).

11 Findings

In this chapter we explore the views of participants in our qualitative research on factors that may contribute to gender differences in theory test outcomes, practical test outcomes and post-test collision risk.

Even if participants had expressed these views with confidence, they would of course represent nothing more than hypotheses to be tested with other kinds of data. In fact, participants themselves frequently expressed doubts about their observations, noting that they were based on limited experience and that they might reflect stereotypes rather than actual differences. In the interests of brevity, we have not always included participants' qualifications and expressions of doubt in quotations presented in this section. All the findings in this section should be taken as hypotheses, rather than facts.

There was broad consensus on the perceived reasons why females have a higher pass rate for the theory test, as discussed in Section 11.1: the perception is that females do better on tests because they are prepared, and they are better prepared because they make the effort to prepare.

By contrast, there were clear differences of opinion about males having a higher pass rate for the practical test – with a small number of participants questioning whether a significant difference exists. Four broad hypotheses for males having a higher pass rate for the practical test are considered:

Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test.

Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test.

Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress.

Hypothesis 4: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by the examiner.

These are covered in Sections 11.2, 11.3, 11.4 and 11.5. In Section 11.6 we turn to gender differences in post-test collision risks, and whether – if at all – these might relate to patterns suggested in previous sections. In particular, we revisit the theme of confidence. Finally, in Section 11.7, we consider the possibility that patterns of individual difference between males and females discussed in the previous sections may reflect broader cultural assumptions about driving, drivers and gender.

11.1 Why do females have a higher pass rate for the theory test?

Participants tended not to be surprised by the fact that females have a higher pass rate for the theory test, and most thought that this was likely to reflect a more general pattern: females do better on tests because they are prepared, and they are better prepared because they make the effort to prepare.

> *Girls work hard at learning and they will do their homework and they will do the work on the whole. [EX06]*

Females would typically be a bit more disciplined in their study than males. I think that's quite a natural thing in most forms of study, isn't it? [IN09]

Probably [men] not revising as much or looking into what's actually going to be on the test. [CL03]

Two related themes were apparent in participants' views on *why* females put more work into preparing for the test. The first of these is that males were seen as more likely in general to give things a go.

Probably [women are] just better at concentrating. I'd say men are more likely to rush ahead and try and do something before they're ready to pass it. [RP06]

I think girls put more effort in with the theory side. Definitely girls work harder. Boys just hope for a bit of luck and just do a bit and hope they'll get through. [IN01]

While no one expressed the point in this way, it does not seem fanciful to link the point here to risk-taking more broadly: males are either less aware of or more comfortable with the risk of 'rushing ahead and trying'. One participant noted that this might be linked to females maturing earlier – although another noted that the ease of retaking the theory test also lowers the stakes.

Girls mature slightly earlier. They're already in the process of knowing that if they apply themselves and put work in they will get the result back and that's not a male mentality. [IN05]

Some people think: oh, it's only theory, I'm just going to wing it. I'm just going to see how I get on. And they can take it a huge number of times. [EX04]

The perception that males are more likely to give things a go is also linked to the second theme: a perceived tendency for males to be more confident in their own abilities, and not think they need to revise.

Lads think they know it all. Girls will more likely study more and lads haven't got time. [IN11]

I feel like maybe they [males] are overconfident. They feel like they know everything. They tend not to revise a lot. [EX05]

Some of the young lads, they've told me they thought: oh, I can pass that. And so they don't put any work in. [IN02]

In the case of the theory test, the confidence interviewees mentioned could specifically be linked to the topic of the test: driving.

It could be that teenage boys feel that they don't need to learn something like that. They may generally have higher confidence about being able to drive, so they don't practise the theory as much as maybe girls do. [RP03]

The idea that females are more likely to pass the theory test because they are prepared, and are better prepared because they make the effort to prepare, invites a question: why does the same pattern not apply to the practical test? What is the difference that makes a difference? None of our participants asked this question explicitly, but their views on why males are more likely to pass the practical test suggest some possible answers. These are considered in the sections that follow.

11.2 Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test

As we saw in Section 11.1, many of our participants thought that females are more likely to pass the theory test because they are prepared, and are better prepared because they make the effort to prepare. Could these patterns be reversed for the practical test?

Candidates for the test clearly do vary in how well prepared they are, independently of their gender, and participants noted several variables that could have an impact on this – such as financial circumstances, or the opportunity for supervised practice with a family member.

Some instructors highlighted the importance of motivation and interest in how much effort and value learners put into and get out of their lessons, independently of their gender.

> *How much they want to drive. If they want to, they put more effort in. [IN06]*

> *I find that those that come with a positive attitude and an open mind learn far better than those that come with… Maybe they've been told to go and learn to drive and they don't really want to. They aren't motivated. [IN04]*

> *If they don't want to be there and they're not committed and they really don't care, it's very hard to get the best out of them and for me to produce what I term a good lesson. [IN10]*

> *There's a great difference between them wanting to drive and them just being told they've got to drive. [IN03]*

Learners also differ in how much prior experience they bring – again, independently of gender.

> *I've been driving since I was about 12 because I live on a farm. [RP06]*

> *If they've ridden on the road, riding a motorbike, therefore they're more confident, they're up on that road knowledge. [IN09]*

These prior experiences may also reflect, to some extent, motivation and interest. In fact, even if they don't have access to a tractor or a motorbike, an interested young person may be gaining useful experience from paying attention to adults driving or asking questions.

> *Boys are better drivers than some of the girls. […] They're more natural because they do things with cars, they do computer games with cars, so they have a little*

bit more interest than the girls. For girls it's just a means to an end, really, to promote whatever job they're going for or have a better life. [IN01]

Several participants suggested that these patterns of motivation might be gendered, and that this might explain why – in contrast to the theory test – males tend to be better prepared for the practical test.

Guys are more into cars as well, so it's more of their thing. So they practise more when they're interested in them more. [RP08]

It is just their ability to just pick it up and just understand how it works. It could have been the fact that they've had driving history in the past: that they're, you know, driving agricultural vehicles. Or they were just really keen and picked up what their parents are doing and things like that. [EX02]

I think males just get a grip of things when it comes to performance and how to drive. I think they're just more eager to get on the road. I think females take their time. Men are more eager to get onto the road and just get into a car and drive. [CL05]

I think [men have] more exposure to things relating to cars, or driving games, seeing signs more and knowing what they mean. [RP06]

11.3 Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test

Rather than being better prepared, some participants explored the possibility that males might have a natural advantage on the practical test that they lack on the theory test.

Most of my girls are very academic. I'm not saying my male students aren't, but men are a lot more practical. So their brains, when it comes to practical stuff, they pick things up quicker than the girls. And vice versa when it comes to the theory test, I've noticed. My female students are the ones that are passing [the theory test] first attempt, but my male students, they might be passing second attempt. [IN08]

The suggestion in this quotation – that females are just *better* at the theory test – did not feature strongly in our participants' explanations of the higher pass rate for females. By contrast, there were quite a few references of this kind in participants' explanations of the higher pass rate for males on the practical test.

Males are more practical than females. [IN11]

I guess it's just like a natural inclination of how good you are with a car. [RP08]

The boys are more adept at practical work, doing things practically, whereas females are probably more on using the thought process. […] Where I do have

male students, in the main they have a better mechanical understanding in terms of like what a car does, what a clutch does, how to select the gears. [IN03]

Maybe it's more practical, isn't it? […] When I was at school, I remember that the boys, they hated sitting in a classroom and writing things down and things like that and remembering things and doing tests. But as soon as it was PE or things like that, something physical, or like an experiment or things like that, they normally got better, because […] they just found it easier and it's less kind of restrictive, I guess. [RP13]

I don't like saying it, but boys have better spatial awareness. [IN13]

11.3.1 Confidence

The most common theme in participants' responses was that the difference between males and females is perceived to be one of confidence.

I think that the practical task, [females] probably struggle slightly more than the males. I think the males are more confident, and once they get going in the car with the examiner, they probably feel a bit more confident. [IN09]

Generally, males come across more confident, they give you a confident drive and females sometimes can be a little bit on the cautious side. [EX04]

Participants raised the importance of confidence in driving, independently of gender. Care is needed here, as the term 'confidence' was used by our participants with more than one meaning (see Section 11.4 for another). For example, confidence can refer to confidence in one's own ability to manage certain tasks – and in this sense is the opposite of fearfulness or timidity. A common example of confidence in this sense in learning to drive is the confidence to drive at higher speeds; confidence of this kind is closely linked to making progress.

I've been scared, timid to drive properly and safely. So following the speed limit, not going really slow, not interrupting other people. [CL03]

She would be driving on a 30 mph road and she's doing 18. I'm saying to her: what's going on? She's: oh, no, nothing's wrong. And it was a confidence thing. She just felt like if she was going to get faster, she would not have control of the car. [IN08]

However, confidence can also refer to confidence in one's own judgements – and in this sense is the opposite of hesitation or 'overthinking'.

I think some of the cleverer people overthink things too much. You can't overthink driving because it's in the moment. You have to react quickly. You don't have time to think. [IN02]

Usually people who do practical things well are better. The super-intelligent sometimes struggle because they think too deeply into teaching. [IN06]

A common example of confidence in this sense when learning to drive is the confidence to go at a roundabout.

> *For example, at a roundabout: can I go? And I say: no, you make the decision, and if I'm not happy, I'll use a brake. And I know that they make good decisions, but they continually ask for reinforcement that what they're thinking and what they're going to do is correct. [IN03]*

> *She will do tasks very nicely and she'll tell me she's got no confidence in it. So I need to reassure her that: look what you've just done, this is the way that I wanted it done. [IN04]*

As these examples illustrate, confidence in this sense is linked to not having to ask for confirmation – and as such is closely linked to independent driving.

> *The pupils that have more confidence ask less questions, even on a mock test. Some pupils will want me to give them information because they're unsure about a speed limit or just a technical point. Even though they know themselves that actually they're probably right about the decision they're going to make. Whereas the ones who believe in their own ability won't be doing that as much. [IN05]*

The perception that males are more confident than females, and that this gives them an advantage in the practical test, may relate to confidence in either or both these meanings of the word. Where participants were explicit, however, they tended to single out the second meaning: confidence in one's own judgements.

> *The girls will look right and left, and they will check three or four times before they say: I'm going to go. And then they'll say: I could have gone in that gap. The boys will just look, some of them, and go. [IN13]*

> *Generally girls overthink things. [IN11]*

Confidence of this kind, it was noted, can be an obstacle earlier on in the learning process, when a learner will benefit from asking questions.

> *The best pupils very often are the female pupils, because they don't come with all these preconceptions that the blokes do. When boys arrive, they've been talking to their mates and they know everything. They've not been in a car before and driven one, but they know exactly what they think they're going to be doing and they know what to do. Whereas females tend to come with the attitude of: I don't really know much about it, so I just need as much information as possible and hopefully we'll learn as we go along. And very often end up being better, safer drivers than the males do. You know at the first stage they don't appear they're going to be like that. They very often end up being like that. [IN05]*

By the time it gets to the practical test, however, it was suggested that a lack of confidence in one's own judgements may put females at a disadvantage.

In fact, there are even grounds for thinking that the characteristics that were seen as explaining why females are more likely to pass the theory test are the same as those that were seen as explaining why they are less likely to pass the practical test. For example, consider this suggestion from an instructor as to why females may have a higher pass rate on the theory test – very much in line with the explanations considered in Section 11.1.

> *The girls are very step-by-step, do it methodically, tick the boxes. Boys are a bit like: let's just give it a go. I don't mind teaching people that want to give it a go, but I think they probably adopt that same attitude towards taking their theory test: It's like, well, we'll give it a go, and if I fail, I'll do it again and I'll eventually pass. [IN10]*

Later in the interview, the instructor uses similar language to explain why males may have a higher pass rate on the practical test.

> *Girls generally need a little more coaching with how to stay calm and practise staying calm. [Boys] will give it a go. They're generally a bit more gung-ho and more confident. […] Girls are very much more methodical and worry about things and overthink things. [IN10]*

On this account, the tendencies to give things a go and to be confident in one's own abilities – the tendencies that may lead males to do worse on the theory test – are the very tendencies that underpin the confidence that puts males at an advantage in the practical test.

11.3.2 Overconfidence and performing for the test

In the last section we have explored the possibility that a lack of confidence could put females at a disadvantage in the practical test. But there is an obvious objection to this hypothesis: being too cautious – being timid, being hesitant – may indeed be an obstacle to good driving, but so too is being too confident.

> *You can be over-cautious, you can get hesitation faults, you can get lack of progress faults. But a cautious person to me would be more likely to pass because they're taking their time looking properly, you know, assessing the situation, where someone's a bit more confident or may just go into that situation without really thinking it through. [EX04]*

Even if it were true that females are put at a disadvantage in the practical test by a tendency to be over-cautious, should not males be put at a similar disadvantage by a tendency to be overconfident? This possibility is apparent in the following quotation from a recent passer, who was asked which gender she would expect to tend to do better on the practical test.

I could see it going either way, but for different reasons. Girls have a stereotype of being a lot slower, more cautious, but not as good. Whereas boys' stereotype is going a lot quicker, just the opposite, I guess. But I don't know which would lend itself to a different result. […] Cautious to the point of like almost more indecisive, you know, not taking opportunities or holding cars up. They might be more hesitant, rather than cautious. [RP12]

It is instructive to contrast this with a description by an examiner of the kinds of diversity they see in the test.

I would have one test where they're really good at keeping up the speed of the road. They're not slow. And then the next test I could have someone that's too cautious, well below the speed of the road, taking everything way too slowly. Obviously it's just causing a hold-up with traffic behind. [EX05]

Candidates who are going too fast are notably absent from this picture, and the reason for that may lie in a simple reality: people (independently of gender) are on their best behaviour in the practical test.

They're always going to be that bit more extra perfect for the test. They know, one, how hard it is to get another test. They want to pass it. It's expensive, so they're doing their best to make sure they're passing. [IN08]

The examiner has got to make a decision on that drive. And a lot of them will put on their best behaviour for that 40, 45 minutes. But beyond that, you're not in control of that. [IN03]

You get this feeling with some people that they are trying their very best to control their speed to be on their best behaviour for those 40 minutes and their driving tests. And, you know, as soon as you've given them their pass certificate, they've got their licence, they're just going to go off speed. […] We can only assess what we see in those 40 minutes. [EX04]

While such a tendency to be on one's best behaviour on the test may benefit those who would otherwise be overconfident, some participants suggested that it may trip up those who have a more appropriate balance of confidence and caution.

They spend lessons with their instructor doing everything they should be doing, and then they change their approach slightly because they think an examiner wants to see something a certain way. They're not confident enough just to drive the way they always have on lessons. [IN07]

I find some people are not very confident on their driving tests. I think even if they drove confidently in their lesson beforehand, they'll drive quite cautiously on their test. And I'll say to them at the end: do you normally drive this slowly or this cautiously. And they're going: no, I was just being careful because I'm on my test. [EX04]

Our observation, however, is that there may be a more fundamental asymmetry here. Reining in one's overconfidence for the duration of a test is a relatively easy thing to do. Trying to overcome a lack of confidence, by contrast, may cause significant emotional stress – as in the following example, where an individual's lack of confidence led to them refusing to follow an instruction from an examiner.

> *The examiner asked him to pull up on the left on a 40 mph. He deemed it to be dangerous. He said: I'm not doing it. His anxiety is just horrifically bad. He refused to do it. [IN09]*

The above example is perhaps an extreme one: few candidates are likely to refuse to comply with an instruction from an examiner. But less confident candidates may nevertheless face an emotional penalty in trying to compensate for their lack of confidence, which overconfident candidates do not face. To the extent that confidence is gendered, this could in part explain why females are less likely to pass the practical test.

11.4 Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress

Tests are inherently stressful, and this unavoidably puts some people at a disadvantage, independently of gender.

> *I always think if you're a very nervous person, like a nervous disposition, especially around tests and stuff, it's going to be like much harder to pass because you're nervous. [CL04]*

For example, one instructor noted how difficult the test can be for candidates (of either gender) with a pre-existing condition involving higher levels of anxiety.

> *Obviously we've got to go for a test eventually. And that's going to be an anxiety-provoking situation in itself. [IN09]*

People differ in how much stress they experience in the practical test, independently of gender. They also differ in their capacity to manage this stress and control its impact on their behaviour.

> *A lot of them get a huge amount of nerves. Some of them can control it quite decently well and then not let it overtake them while they're doing the test. And some of them they really show it during the test. […] Nerves is a big factor that can contribute to whether they're going to pass a test or not pass it. [EX05]*

The perception is that, if not effectively managed, the stress of the test can lead to candidates of either gender driving differently from how they would normally – including making errors they would not normally make.

It doesn't matter what we do as driving instructors: when they go on test, when the nerves kick in […] whatever we taught them that all goes out the window. [IN02]

Although they can drive in lessons, when it comes to the test, they completely forgot how to do something. [IN11]

There's a disconnect there somewhere between their performance of what they're trying to achieve and the reality of what they're actually doing. [IN09]

As noted in Section 11.3.1, the word 'confidence' is used with more than one meaning. In some cases, confidence can refer simply to a tendency not to experience negative emotional arousal – and in this sense is the opposite not of timidity or hesitation, but of anxiety. This has important behavioural consequences: whereas a lack of confidence in those other senses leads to over-caution, a lack of confidence in this third sense can lead to the opposite.

I think one of the common things that seems to happen when people aren't confident is, strangely, they go faster and they rush things. Instinct would tell me that if you're feeling nervous about a roundabout or something you would slow down. Whereas my experience is adrenaline kicks in and they do the exact opposite, and rush things to go quicker, and maybe make more attacking decisions on the road rather than defensive decisions when they're stressed. [IN07]

It affects their judgement. Because they want to get out of the situation or some of them misjudge the situation and obviously go into it dangerously. [EX05]

Some participants in our research suggested that confidence in this third sense may also differ between males and females, and that the tendency of females to do worse in the practical test may reflect lower confidence in this sense: females either experience more stress in the test or are less able to manage that stress and control its impact on their behaviour.

As much as we'd like to be equal, male and female, we deal with different situations in different ways. You know, women tend to be more emotional about things and they'll get nervous and they'll let that take control of them during the driving test sometimes, whereas some males may be able to control their nerves a bit better. Or, or just not be nervous in the first place. [EX04]

Boys are more confident, definitely. Girls are more anxious. [IN01]

A lot of the females will cry at the end of the test. I've had it with a few men as well, but mainly females will be very emotional. [IN09]

I find with male students [when I sit in on the test] they drive confident throughout the whole test, and they're less likely to make mistakes: they're less

likely to miss an exit on a roundabout or miss an instruction from an examiner. Whereas with a female student, I've had students, they were supposed to take the third exit and they've done the second exit. [IN08]

The last instructor quoted above suggested that there could be gendered differences in quite small things, such as how a candidate reacts to an unfamiliar voice on a satnav.

[The females] just kind of panic with an instruction from a satnav. So the voice is different and they kind of panic. Whereas with my male students are like: OK, I can differentiate with the two and I'm fine with it. [IN08]

Another instructor wondered whether different patterns in motivation to take the test (see Section 11.2) could also play a role.

Whether they're under pressure from the family, and it's pressurising them to try and get through it. Or they're expecting just to go there and fail because that's what everyone else in the family has always done. You know, they can all play a part in their performance and that emotion at the end of that test. [IN09]

However, these suggestions raise an obvious question: if females are indeed disadvantaged by a tendency to be more anxious, why does this not also affect their performance on the theory test?

To explain the different patterns in the outcomes of the two tests, we need to identify the difference that makes a difference. It is our view that, while test stress may indeed be a factor, it can only be so if the practical test tends to create more stress for females, or stress of a specific kind that females are less able to manage and control.

We have already suggested, in Section 11.3.2, one way in which this might happen. Less confident candidates in the practical test may face an emotional penalty in trying to compensate for their lack of confidence, which overconfident candidates do not face. To the extent that confidence is gendered, females might therefore tend to experience more stress in the practical test than males, and more stress than they do in the theory test – where no such need for compensation exists.

In Section 11.5, we explore a second way in which females might face higher levels of stress than males in the practical test, and higher levels than they do in the theory test.

11.5 Hypothesis 4: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by the examiner

Several participants noted how the presence of an examiner unavoidably adds to the stress of the practical test, independently of gender.

I think being the word 'test', being on your driving test, is scary enough. Having someone sat next to you that you've never met before, having someone sat next

to you wearing high vis and carrying an iPad and looking very officious. And now we wear body cameras. We look very officious and it's scary. [EX04]

I'm trying to drive the car and I've got someone strange sitting next to me doing an examination of my driving. It's a real combination of things to put together. [IN09]

The pressure of the examiner worries them quite a lot. They are under a lot of scrutiny in such close proximity, which is very intimidating. [IN06]

Both the demeanour and the behaviour of the examiner are perceived to be important variables in the test environment, which examiners therefore need to manage.

It's purely their nerves that are getting in the way and that's making them make mistakes. Now, if they've got someone that's next to them that's even just looking less intimidating or just making them feel more at ease, the mistakes won't be happening. […] I'm not saying it is solely the examiner's fault, but the examiners do play a part in how a student feels and controlling the nerves. [IN08]

We try our best to make sure they are relaxed as much as possible. But there's only so much we can do in order to get them to control the nerve [EX05].

The examiners we spoke to saw the need to help candidates (of either gender) manage their nerves, by providing good customer service, as a key part of their role.

Good customer service makes all the difference to the customer. So when you go in the waiting room – and that is just a tense moment, when you come in, they know that it's on, let's go. So I come in with a smile and try and be friendly. The way I talk to them, the way I relate to them in the test. It's just trying to put them at ease, really. [EX03]

First and foremost you have to have natural good customer service. Making someone feel at ease, relaxed: because when they're relaxed, they give you their best drive. When they're nervous and they've got a lot of pressure on them – you're putting pressure on them – they'll make mistakes. So the best customer is a relaxed customer. So just being naturally friendly, approachable. [EX04]

Providing good customer service can be seen as an example of a broader need to deliver consistent and unbiased test outcomes while at the same time ensuring the test experience accommodates different candidates' needs.

Although you want to kind of approach this whole concept of taking a driving test without any bias, you also need to take into account the fact that people do have extra needs. [EX06]

The examiner just quoted went on to note how one measure of good customer service is precisely the fact that it can be experienced by the customer independently of the outcome.

Even people who haven't passed have been like: thanks, that was fine, that was great, and I hope I get you next time. If someone hasn't passed and they still want you to be there the next time, that must mean that was a good experience for them. That's all we're there to do is to assess their driving and to make sure the experience hasn't been terrifying. [EX06]

However, while all the examiners we spoke to emphasised the importance of good customer service, the accounts of instructors and candidates suggested it may not yet be a universal experience. For example, one candidate described how, far from hoping for the same examiner on her second attempt, seeing the same examiner was enough to cause her stress.

I stalled a few times. My instructor was like: you never stall, that was a you-being-nervous thing. Which I really understood, because I was very nervous on the second one when the same guy came out. [CL04]

Sections 11.5.1 to 11.5.3 explore in more detail the ways in which participants believed that the examiner's demeanour and behaviour can have an impact on test outcomes, independently of gender. In Section 11.5.4 we return to the topic of gender, and participants' views on how and why the dynamics described might help to explain differences in pass rates.

11.5.1 Demeanour and self-judgement

Several participants mentioned the importance of examiners' demeanour – including facial expressions and tone of voice – as variables in the test environment that can have an impact on candidate performance.

I think there needs to be a change with examiners' demeanour when it comes to how they come across to a student. It makes such a big difference. And I've witnessed it, I've seen it first-hand, because I've sat in on tests with an examiner that was easy-going and an examiner that had a really stern face, and that's where it starts. [IN08]

Demeanour appears to have been the key issue for the candidate quoted above who was stressed by seeing she had the same examiner for her second practical test. The following is a description of what she had found stressful about her first test:

He was telling me a bit about what we were going to do in the test. But he was very monotone, and didn't smile once, and didn't feel like a very friendly person. […] Not to be mean about him, but I really did not like that man. He was not very friendly. He was not a calming presence. [CL04]

What matters here, of course, is not just what the examiner does or doesn't do, but how the candidate interprets those things – something the participant herself acknowledges in the following description of what happened during the test.

Every time, like from the corner of my eye, his face just made me feel nervous all over again. He just looked grumpy the whole time. Obviously you're driving, but when you're looking into the mirror you can see the passenger next to you, can't you? And he wasn't the most expressive of people, but every time I looked – it might have just been his normal resting face, but he didn't look happy. And it made me feel like: oh, I'm making mistakes. I'm doing really bad. [CL04]

The fact that there is anything to interpret at all is, of course, a fundamental difference between the practical test and the theory test. At another point in the same interview, the interviewer asked this participant if the practical test had been any more stressful than all the other exams she, as a young person, was sitting. The participant immediately drew attention to the presence of the person who is judging your performance.

Because the examiner was actually there watching me do it, it made me more nervous. Whereas when I was doing my GCSEs and A-levels and university exams, I was really nervous going into them, but all you can do is do your best and then you just have to wait for the judgement. And you have that in between, where you can just think: I know I tried my hardest. You don't really have that in between with the driving test where you can think positively about how you did. It's immediate, this is the result. [CL04]

To probe this statement, the interviewer asked if this would be resolved by an imaginary set-up where the examiner was replaced by video cameras, with the footage being reviewed separately.

Yeah, that would be like so much better because you can't see their face to know what they're thinking in the moment or try to guess what they're thinking. [CL04]

It is hard to avoid the possibility that part of what is going on here is the projection of the candidate's own self-judgement onto the examiner. The participant suggests as much when she describes the experience of invigilators walking past her in an exam hall.

I think that was the worst part of A-levels, when the invigilators were walking up and down the aisles and you think: oh, what if they're reading this and think I'm stupid? […] Obviously they're not actually reading it, so it was very momentary, as they just walked past. [CL04]

There were suggestions that this tendency to resort to self-judgement can be worsened by perfectionism.

It doesn't have to be perfect. But that's a real problem. They think because they're in a test situation they must drive perfectly rather than safely, responsibly and sensibly. […] If they go into the test feeling really nervous and talking about failing if I do this – will I fail if I do that? – they'll almost certainly fail. Because they've talked themselves into failing. [IN10]

Candidates vary, however. While some may have strong tendencies to perfectionism and self-judgement, and to notice and interpret the examiner's facial expression and tone of voice, others may be unaffected.

> *He said: I don't care who's my examiner. I don't care what they're like. I don't care. I'm just going to do a test and I'm just going to forget they're there and I'm just going to imagine it's you there. And he passed. He just didn't let the nerves of an examiner get to him. [IN08]*

11.5.2 Chattiness

Alongside demeanour, an examiner's willingness to make small talk and chat was highlighted by some participants as helping to reduce candidate stress. The role of small talk was suggested to be particularly apparent at the beginning of a test, where – as in any social interaction – it can help to break the ice. Its absence, by contrast, was perceived as a source of stress for some candidates.

> *From the start it was just very down to business. No pleasantries, just: hi, this is the information, and then just started it and just didn't say anything other than what was required. […] It made me feel just a little bit more intimidated. [RP12]*

Some participants, however, also talked about the potential value of chattiness during the test.

> *They always come out very friendly, and the student is very nervous. They'll say: come with me, I'll look after you. And you know that's really nice. But during a test it can crumble away a little into a bit more of an aggressive: do as I'm telling you to do, rather than a more kind of persuasive manner. [IN09]*

Interestingly, one of the roles chat can play is precisely to distract the candidate from the kinds of anxiety the presence of an examiner might otherwise cause.

> *I'd heard people say there was a couple [of examiners] I could have had that day and some of them were less friendly, apparently. So I got a good one. He was just asking about what I do at college, what I'm planning to do for uni, that kind of thing. The weather. Just like nice small talk to kind of distract from the nerves of the test, which I appreciated. [RP11]*

The same participant went on to praise the way in which their examiner had made the necessary judgement of the test as discreet as possible.

> *I knew what they were doing, like tapping on their iPad and stuff, but he was very discreet about it. I didn't really try to look, but if I did glance over and saw his finger move, it was like a tiny little tap, which actually I found helpful because it wasn't like stressing me out or anything. I wasn't too sure what he was taking note of, but I always feel like that's better because it's less scary. [RP11]*

For those who are prone to perfectionism or self-judgement, chattiness may provide a welcome distraction from the fact that this is a test and so help them to perform at their best. For others, by contrast, chat may risk distracting from the task and so undermine their performance.

> *Although [chat] might have lightened me up, I think it does slightly distract you. And when you're driving on your test you want to be 100% concentrating. [RP08]*

> *I am a very chatty person. I will generally make small talk where I think it's appropriate in a test. But sometimes you'll have someone with Aspergers, for example, that just needs to be focused and concentrated the entire time and cannot cope with any extra conversation. Or we sometimes have people from other cultures who think it's very rude to not look at someone when you're speaking to them. They're looking straight at me because you don't talk to someone without looking at them. And then I realised very quickly: right, I'm going to just stay quiet now. But in my mind: do they think I'm rude? They think I don't want to talk to them? Are they worried about that? [EX06]*

> *I feel like I need to use a calm voice and speak softly and give them plenty of time and make lots of conversations with them – but at the same time, without being distracting. [EX04]*

Examiners face the challenge of adapting – and by extension the risk of getting it wrong.

> *I think a good examiner will adapt to those situations, because that's part of our role, providing a service for customers who come with all sorts of different needs. [EX06]*

> *It's hit and miss. You could have some really chatty examiner who ends up distracting the student. Some examiners are very cold, don't even engage small talk with instructors or students. [IN14]*

11.5.3 Preparing candidates for the exam

The presence of an examiner obviously distinguishes the practical test from the theory test. In a different way, however, it also distinguishes a candidate's experience of the practical test from their previous practical experience – in that the examiner is not the same person as the instructor. (By contrast, we would hypothesise that the experience of doing the theory test is very similar to the experience of practising for the theory test.)

For example, several instructors who highlighted the role that chat could play in helping candidates in the test noted that this matched the experience students had when learning with them.

> *The examiner was laughing and joking throughout the whole exam. And obviously he was being serious when he had to be serious. But he just made her comfortable by giving her a good conversation. And it's almost like she felt*

relaxed because she felt that I was sitting next to her. Because that's what we're like. I'm very talkative. I talk to all my students. And it just made her feel a bit more at ease. [IN08]

I've sat with them afterwards: what went wrong? You can drive without needing me to tell you anything. What went wrong? I got all nervous. He wasn't a nice person. He didn't talk to me like you do. [IN11]

A number described trying to prepare their students for the possibility that examiners might behave in a very different way by roleplaying a silent examiner in a mock test.

I do mock tests for my students. So when I play the role of the examiner, I try to mimic what some examiners can potentially be like. So I don't have conversation. [IN08]

But limitations in this approach were also noted. One instructor, for example, pointed out the risk that this could make learners more anxious about the test.

When I do my mock test I will play the role of worst-case scenario. So I'll play the role of a grumpy examiner. […] I'm trying my hardest to prepare them for what could come, but I also hope I'm not conditioning them into thinking that this is going to be horrible, you know? So it's that difficult balance between the two, isn't it? [IN09]

According to one instructor, the real transition that learners need to make is not the transition from a chatty instructor to a silent examiner, but the transition from both these contexts to independent driving.

I get a lot of people, perhaps because I'm in the car, constantly question: should it be here? Should I do this? A lot of the time I don't actually answer. Because I keep saying to them you should know, but it's almost as though they use you as their sounding board. You know, just a confirmation. I'm doing this, right? So maybe once they can't ask for that confirmation, that's when they go to pot. So I'll try and not answer and get them to make up their own minds on what to do. […] So are they driving really well because they know they can ask me? [IN11]

11.5.4 Gender and reactions to examiners

To what extent could the factors discussed in Sections 11.5.1 to 11.5.3 help to explain the higher pass rate for males for the practical test?

One suggestion was that females are more likely to notice and interpret an examiner's behaviour and demeanour, meaning that they are more at risk of experiencing stress because of these variables.

A lot of females are more sensitive to how they're being emotionally treated than males. So it's possible that the same male examiner who isn't particularly friendly would take someone male on a test and they would think they were a great guy.

> *Top bloke, didn't say a word, but brilliant test. Whereas the girl might perceive it very differently: oh, they didn't talk to me, they probably maybe don't like me or maybe they just think I'm rubbish. Females on the whole will be more emotional in those situations, and a little word of encouragement makes a big difference to them. [EX06]*

For example, the candidate (see Section 11.5.1) who described how closely she had watched and interpreted her examiner's face felt, when asked, that this was probably gendered behaviour.

> *Yeah. I don't know if many boys would do that. [CL04]*

It was also suggested that females may be more prone to self-judgement and perfectionism – to 'do the examiner's job', as one instructor put it.

> *I think with females they tend to be a bit more hard on themselves. They take things to heart a lot more. Where the males are more aggressive towards their learning. […] The females, any little mistake I think they probably fixate on it too much. [IN09]*

> *I'll say to my students: don't do the examiner's job. You might have done something, they might give you a mistake, but don't in your head think: that's it. I failed, I'm done. With the girls, they're more likely to get into the head than my male students. With my male students, it goes over their heads. Whereas with a girl, they're more like: oh, no, I've failed. And start making even more mistakes, and then they have failed. With female students, they overthink everything they're doing. Whereas with male students, they kind of just get on with it: they're just: whatever will happen will happen. [IN08]*

The concept of overthinking is, of course, one we have encountered before as something that some participants thought may be more prevalent in females (Section 11.3.1). Overthinking is the opposite of confidence in one's own judgements: a tendency to question whether what you are doing is right.

> *[Boys] just sort of think: oh yeah, I know how to do this, I can do it well. And girls are more likely to be: I know how to do this, but am I doing it well? And to take the time and hesitate a little bit more. [CL04]*

> *I think with a practical test, a male student is very much a lot more confident in their driving. You know, they feel like: yeah, I know what I'm doing, I'm going to get on with it. And obviously they might go on the test, and they might pass or fail. But with females, the nerves are from the time I'm going to pick them up. [IN08]*

We have already discussed how a lack of confidence in this sense might lead to a tendency to be over-cautious (Section 11.3.1) or to an emotional penalty associated with trying to compensate for this lack of confidence (Section 11.3.2). To these, we can now add the

possibility that a lack of confidence in this sense might make candidates more prone to stress because of the presence of an examiner.

11.5.5 The gender of examiners

Examiners themselves also have a gender, of course. We heard no suggestions that this would have a direct impact on the test experience of a candidate. For example, the candidate who described watching her examiner's face so closely (see Section 11.5.1) was very clear when asked that the gender of the examiner had not made a difference.

> *No, I don't think it does. Because I've done the things where I've had like male teachers or male instructors, and if they're friendly, they're a bit happier and they smile, they can really inspire you and give you loads of confidence. But if you have a female teacher who's really grumpy and really unhappy and just focuses on mistakes, then it doesn't give you a lot of confidence in your abilities. [CL04]*

What appears to matter, as this example makes clear, is not gender but behaviour. Behaviour, however, might itself be gendered, as some other participants suggested.

> *Without being sexist, female examiners tend to be much kinder, and some of the male examiners tend to be a little bit more aggressive towards students, a bit: do as I'm telling you. Which doesn't help someone who's anxious at that time. [IN09]*

> *I've had it said to me that: I'm so glad my examiner's a female, and I'm so glad that I've got someone in car who's willing to talk to me and not sit here in complete silence the whole time. I think that stuff makes a big difference. [EX06]*

To make matters even more complicated, judgements too might be gendered. For example, males and females might tend to differ in their judgements of whether a given behaviour is friendly or not. This could contribute to situations in which examiners and candidates have different perceptions of an interaction.

> *The examiner said: she processed everything fine. She was just driving like normal. […] So I said to the student, and the student said: yeah, he really shouted at me. A lot of times. [IN09]*

As noted at the beginning of this section, examiners must also manage all of these balances in the customer experience of the test while at the same time delivering consistent and unbiased test outcomes.

> *You literally just see what they do. You're like a tape recorder, if that makes any sense. And you're just recording what's going on and you're marking things. You know that person could be a complete wreck sitting next to you, but they might be doing everything absolutely perfectly. They could be really confident but making a complete massive mess of it, probably not even realising it. [EX07]*

11.6 Why do males have a higher collision risk post-test?

Many of our participants suggested that the explanation of the gap between males' higher pass rate for the practical test and their higher risk of collision post-test lay in the limited scope of the practical test itself. In part, this limited scope reflects the fact the test is a specific, short period of time in specific conditions.

> *Thinking back to my test, I don't know how much actual driving you can cover in thirty-odd minutes. [RP12]*

> *You'd have to look at how men take risks compared to women. You've got to look at the times of day that men, particularly young men, will go out driving after they pass their test. [EX07]*

> *There's so many variables that we can't control that could completely change an outcome of one candidate to another candidate, even though we might do exactly the same thing. […] We could literally have two candidates exactly the same: if we take one in the morning, they've got more traffic to deal with. They could potentially fail compared to if you put them in the afternoon, there's less traffic. [EX05]*

As noted in Section 11.3.2, however, the scope of the test may also be limited by the simple fact that candidates may be on their best behaviour in the presence of the examiner.

> *Unless the pupil's actively being particularly obnoxious, the test can't pick up the likely attitude of the pupil once they've passed. Most pupils will deal with [the test] in a respectful way, because they see this person as being somebody they need to respect. So they aren't behaving the way that they would behave if they're with somebody else. So the examiners can't possibly pick that up. [IN05]*

In particular, participants drew attention to the fact that the test cannot assess how candidates will behave when in the car with their friends.

> *[The examiner] can only judge it on that person in the car. You don't judge them on their friends as well being in the car. [RP13]*

Peer pressure and the desire to show off to friends were frequently mentioned as factors likely to explain why males have a higher risk of collision post-test despite having a higher pass rate for the practical test.

> *It could be something to do with being with friends or peer pressure, getting them to drive while not 100%, and therefore driving unsafely and getting into an accident. [CL03]*

> *I definitely think there is an attitude with younger males that have to try and prove themselves to be the best driver. That competitive side of things. I don't see many girls doing that out on the road. [EX02]*

I think the majority of them will get into the accidents when they're showing off in front of the other friends. You know, they want to show that: I can drive, let's get in the car. And they're speeding down and they're doing stupid things. [IN08]

You [as the instructor] can tell them what to do and ways to not have to go fast when the mates are pushing them, but you can't actually stop them from doing it. And it's all mindset, isn't it? Who's more important? My driving instructor that says don't go over the speed limit or my mates that are there? [IN11]

The tendency to show off was reported by many as a clear point of difference between young males and young females.

With males it is a competitive thing. And it may only be somebody's got a louder stereo or somebody's got a bigger exhaust or I don't know. Somebody's had an upgrade to their car, but they're always trying to prove a point and they're always pushing just a little bit further. Females, they don't. [IN05]

With younger males, I think they just want to show off their driving with their mates. I think they've probably got a bit of ego there. […] With women they're naturally just a bit more cautious. [EX05]

Young men are full of testosterone, thinking they are invincible, and show off. Girls are calmer and more sensible and less confident in this age group of 17–24. [IN06]

Alongside this tendency to show off, there were references to a more generalised tendency for risk-taking in young males.

I don't want to say racer boys, but I do see it in boys more than girls. But I think girl drivers are better drivers, they are safer drivers. [IN04]

Women are more sensible, guys are a bit more gung-ho. [RP08]

It could be about boys' brains develop slower, so they are known to take more risks, engage in more risky behaviour. [RP03]

They don't actually see any risk. So you can't change the way they think. Their brain isn't developed enough to understand that actually they are high risk and it will happen to them or their passengers. [IN10]

It was suggested that the tendency of young males to pass the practical test more easily might actually increase their tendency to take risks.

I found that people who did silly things on the road are usually boys. I think it adds to the confidence, now that they have passed, they feel like they are really in control. [RP09]

Because girls have taken more time to pass their test, practically, they're probably a bit more aware of the consequences. […] Whereas guys, if they've passed easily… [RP08]

One way of interpreting this suggestion is that the practical test can provide further confirmation of the confidence felt by male candidates, effectively serving as a confidence-boosting 'feedback loop'.

11.6.1 Collisions, confidence and motivation

It is hard to avoid the implication that males' increased risk of collision post-test may in part be explained by the very same confidence that it was suggested may also explain their tendency to do well on the practical test. One participant explicitly spelled out this possibility.

Maybe you're more likely to pass a test if you're more confident because you're less likely to do mistakes that you wouldn't make. But then maybe that confidence might lead to a false sense of security. You know, if you've passed your test first time and you get it in your head that you're a good driver, a competent driver, then that could flip it the other way, and then you become too confident and almost cocky. [RP12]

In other interviews, the connection is implicit. For example, one instructor suggested that a higher pass rate for males for the practical test could be explained by male 'bravado':

I think the males are probably a bit further ahead [in practical test outcomes] because they have that aggressive male bravado of trying to get it done, with females a bit more laid back in that. [IN09]

Later in the interview, the same instructor cites the possible role of bravado in males' increased collision rates post-test.

Again, is it that bravado? I'm male, I'm dominant, and so forth. […] And this is all played into a male's environment of being inside that metal box. I'm dominant. I'm protected in this little chassis of this car. [IN09]

This bravado, they note, is something that the examiner does not get to see.

The bravado might not be demonstrated to that examiner. It's when they then pass, they get their own car and then they start speeding and showing off and so forth. But then that's males, isn't it? Males like to impress others by doing stupid things, you know? [IN09]

Except, we might add, on this account the examiner does get to see the bravado in at least one sense: in the confident driving that leads to the candidate passing the test.

The other place where a tendency to be overconfident was thought to show up, of course, is in the theory test, as we saw in Section 11.1.

From boys I've spoken to at college, I think a lot of them have a big confidence or ego boost, like: I'll pass my theory without revising. I remember from my theory learning things that I was like: how is this even related to driving? I had to revise quite a lot because there's signs that you'd never even seen before. So if you've got someone that's feeling confident – I don't need to study – and then they see a random sign that they're probably never going to see in real life, then I would say it's probably a bit of a shock. [RP11]

It was suggested that males not only are less likely to pass the theory test, but also tend to forget it more readily afterwards.

I think men are not really careful when it comes to being behind the wheel. They don't think about the theory test points of being safe on the road. […] That's why females are more careful on the road. […] Once they've passed the theory men are just like: right, we just need to get onto the road. At some point they can forget what they've learnt in the theory test. [CL05]

Gendered motivational patterns may also play a part here. In Section 11.2, we noted the view that a greater interest of males in driving may in part account for them being better prepared for the practical test. Unfortunately, that same eagerness to get out on the road could also lead to males being less well prepared for safe driving.

The theory kind of gets forgotten. You don't really need it. I know you do need it, but you don't feel as though you need it as much during the practical. [CL03]

They get so wound up about the practical, I think the theory is long gone. Some of them you ask them a question and they don't know the answer and you say: but you've done your theory. Oh, I've forgotten all that. […] So it's like: I'll get my theory done out of the way, but I wouldn't have to worry about any more theory. [IN02]

It can be very difficult to try and get somebody into thinking about the safety side rather than just the driving side. A lot just want to do lessons, just want to drive, don't want to sit and talk, don't want to do any theory about being safe while they're driving. [IN11]

One instructor suggested that the reasons why males are more interested in driving may in fact be directly connected to the reasons why they then have a higher risk of collisions.

Maybe [males do better on the practical test] because the boys are more mechanically minded. They're a little bit more competent if they get practice. The boys tend to get practice or are more interested in practice, the boys want to achieve or get out and drive it as a toy. The girls don't look at the car as a toy, they look at it as a practical skill that will help them with their lives and careers. The boys, younger men are thinking it's a toy and it's something to play with and to show off with. I've not had one young lady want to show off, but I've had dozens of young males just want to show off. And when we're driving along, if we

get overtaken by a fast, speedy car with a great big bore exhaust, the guys' tongues are like: oh, look at that, I can't wait to get one of them. Whereas the girls will just say, look at that idiot. [IN13]

11.7 Motivation, confidence and cultural assumptions

As we have seen in the previous sections, participants in our research drew attention to several possible differences between males and females in their suggested explanations of gender differences in theory test outcomes, practical test outcomes and post-test collision risks. In this section, we briefly review participants' views on the ways in which these differences between males and females may reflect broader cultural assumptions around driving and drivers.

For example, we have seen suggestions that gendered motivational patterns may play a role both in males being more likely to pass the practical test (Section 11.2) and in their increased collision risk post-test (Section 11.6). There was discussion of how these differences in motivation may be rooted in cultural assumptions.

I was never eager to learn to drive. I think my brothers were more interested, but for me it was something I had to learn because driving will be good for getting around. I think it's partly the way they are socialised about driving. [RP09]

I think it's perhaps a male thing, isn't it? To be the driver and so forth. In families as well, the father's often been the driver of the car. [IN09]

As well as shaping motivation, these cultural assumptions could also shape the opportunities that males and females have for practice, which could in turn have consequences for how well prepared each gender is for the practical test.

A lot of boys, I feel like if they have dads that are quite into driving or even mums, it's probably kind of like a bonding thing to teach your son how to drive. So they'll probably get in more practice. So maybe just like your family situation could have an influence. [RP11]

Alongside motivation and opportunity, however, our participants suggested that capability may be shaped by cultural assumptions. A key theme running through our findings has been the idea that males' and females' different pass rates on the practical test are shaped by differences in confidence in relation to driving – in at least three different senses of that term:

- Confidence in one's own ability – the opposite of fearfulness or timidity (see Section 11.3.1)
- Confidence in one's own judgements – the opposite of hesitation or overthinking (see Section 11.3.1; Section 11.5.4)
- Confidence as a lower tendency to negative emotional arousal – the opposite of anxiety (see Section 11.4)

Some participants drew attention to the cultural context of these differences in confidence. For example, learners may hear stories about the different capabilities of males and females in relation to driving.

> *I've been quoted before by students the family stories of: oh, your mum took ten times to pass, and your aunt took eight times to pass. And this is all like programming these kids to not go there with a really positive frame of passing. [IN09]*

One participant noted how these stories exist alongside a 'boys-will-be-boys' normalisation of very obvious bad driving by young males – leading to the bizarre conclusion that it is female drivers who are more 'culpable' and 'need to be more careful':

> *There is a consensus that young males have friends in the back of their car, boy racer, take risks. There is a sort of acceptance that boys will behave this way, but for female drivers, they are more culpable and hence need to be more careful with driving. Going back to the stereotype that women are bad drivers, so they are told to take extra care whereas the same is probably not extended to boys. [RP04]*

One examiner noted how, in the youngest age groups, female candidates seemed to be unsure about whether they should be on the road at all – in stark contrast to male candidates.

> *17-year-old boys will come up for the test and on the whole they will be pretty confident. Overconfident. They will often have a much more relaxed position as they're sat in the car. They command position on the road. They're not apologetic for being on the roads. 17-year-old girls will be a whole other ball game. They feel very like: oh, I'm not sure if I should join this queue of traffic. I'm not sure if I should be here or not. [EX06]*

This examiner noted an even more pronounced pattern in older females – although she also argued that these differences disappear in the mid-20s.

> *I often think about whether people feel like they deserve to be on the road or not. And older ladies who come up to drive generally are like: oh God, we shouldn't even be here. I'm so silly for thinking about doing this, or for even trying to do this. […] I think it levels out about sort of mid-20s. It seems to level out more with that distinction between girls or boys being better. [EX06]*

Females' and males' confidence in relation to driving may be shaped not only by the stories they hear about driving and gender, but also by the treatment they expect from other drivers. Stories such as those mentioned in the quotation that follows can have an impact whether or not they actually reflect reality.

> *I've now got a camera in my car so that it records. I feel so much safer with it because my mum was always saying that cars, they see a young girl driver and*

they think that they can get away with it. So I have that just as a support my side and it makes me feel more confident when I'm on the roads. [RP13]

Of course, gender differences in confidence in relation to driving may also reflect far broader differences in the experiences and expectations of females and males.

Perhaps the traditional female is put down more than the male gets put down. Generally, girls overthink things. [IN11]

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Discussion and recommendations

12 Discussion

In this section, we first summarise the findings from all the activities in the project related to gender inequality (quantitative data analysis, brief review of the literature, and interviews – Section 12.1). We examine how the different sources of evidence align and note that (see Section 12.2) a major gap in data means that there may currently be a lack of understanding of other sources of inequality.

In Section 12.2 we summarise the research gaps – the lack of data that can explicitly test the hypotheses generated by this research on gender differences, and more seriously the lack of data on other sources of inequality (for example socio-economic status).

Finally, in Section 12.3 we provide five things that DVSA may wish to consider in its attempts to make the practical and theory tests more equitable in the future.

12.1 Summary of gender inequality findings

12.1.1 Practical test

The data held by DVSA confirmed that there are consistent differences between males and female in terms of test performance and preparation. The percentage differences are usually quite small in the data, but with such large numbers of people taking tests each year the differences are meaningful in absolute terms. For example, in Table 4 we saw that 2.4% of males and 2.2% of females passed their practical test first time with zero faults, but this difference of 0.2 percentage points meant over 3,000 fewer females than males (8,692 versus 11,881) achieving this result. Similarly, if the female first attempt pass rate was increased to match the male first attempt pass rate of 49.3% this would increase the number of passes by approximately 10,000 in an annual period. Thus, although the differences are small in percentage terms, they affect many people.

The qualitative findings suggest some reasons why these differences may exist. The key hypotheses derived from the qualitative work are as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Males are better prepared for the practical test (Section 11.2)

Higher levels of motivation to drive and interest in driving may mean males obtain more relevant prior experience or engage more with their practical lessons.

Hypothesis 2: Males' higher confidence gives them an advantage on the practical test (Section 11.3)

Males may be more 'confident' in one of two senses (Section 11.3.1):

- More confident in their ability to manage tasks – as opposed to fearfulness or timidity. This kind of confidence is linked to making progress.

- More confident in their own judgements – as opposed to hesitation or overthinking. This kind of confidence is linked to independent driving.

Compensating for a lack of confidence may also be more stressful than masking overconfidence (Section 11.3.2). This hypothesis could therefore help to explain why females might be disadvantaged by a lack of confidence in the practical test, but males not similarly disadvantaged by overconfidence.

Hypothesis 3: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by stress (Section 11.4)

Males may also be more confident in a third sense, that of being less prone to anxiety, better able to manage anxiety or better able to control its impact on behaviour. Females may be less likely to pass the practical test because they are more anxious.

However, given that females tend to do better on many other tests, including the theory test, there's a need to explain why this is not the case on the practical test. The remaining hypothesis is one possibility.

Hypothesis 4: Males' performance in the practical test is less affected by the examiner (Section 11.5)

Females may be more likely to notice and interpret an examiner's behaviour and demeanour, or more prone to self-judgement and perfectionism. These tendencies may also be linked to the tendency to overthink (as in hypothesis 2 above). The behaviour of examiners – including the ways in which that behaviour is also gendered – may have an impact here.

Suggestions were also made about how all the above patterns, and in particular gendered patterns in relation to the motivation to drive and confidence when driving, may be shaped by broader cultural assumptions (Section 11.7).

It must be noted that these hypotheses are derived from the stated perceptions of the participants interviewed as part of the qualitative work. As noted at the beginning of Section 11, even if participants had expressed these views with confidence, they would represent nothing more than hypotheses to be tested with other kinds of data. In fact, participants themselves frequently expressed doubts about their observations, noting that they were based on limited experience and that they might reflect stereotypes rather than actual differences. It is also important to remember that, while some comments on gender differences were made unprompted, others were made only in response to our asking participants for their views on what might explain gendered patterns in pass rates and post-test collision rates (see Section 10.2). Nonetheless, when prompted, it is interesting to note that all participants readily perceived gender differences as relevant. It does not appear to be the case therefore that a failure to mention gender differences in the unprompted section of the interview signified a perception of there being none. However this research was not designed to test whether our participants themselves were prone to any kind of

unconscious bias, and no inferences on that point should be drawn. Further research would be needed to confirm or deny the hypotheses made above.

A key benefit of the multi-method approach used in the current project is that the hypotheses generated by the qualitative work can, to a limited extent, be compared with the quantitative data analysis work discussed in Sections 0 to 7 of this report.

Caution is needed in making this comparison. Data collection in relation to the test was *not* designed to test the hypotheses outlined above, and it is therefore not surprising if it does not always constitute clear evidence either way in relation to those hypotheses. For example, faults from the practical driving test are arranged into categories that have some resemblance to some of the factors alluded to in the hypotheses (such as confidence possibly relating to hesitancy); however, faults are designed to assess test performance, not to explain it. In the sections that have followed, we have noted ways in which the data that exist may or may not be consistent with the hypotheses; actually testing those hypotheses would require the collection of data designed to that end.

On the hypothesis that males are more prepared for the practical test

Several findings in the quantitative data analysis relate to this hypothesis:

- In the test preparation survey males are more likely than females to report that they were completely prepared for their test. However, this was true for both test passes and test failures. This finding may suggest some overconfidence in males but does not fully support the hypothesis that males are better prepared; although males think they are more prepared, this does not align with their success on the test.
- In the test preparation survey males report fewer hours of practice with an ADI. If we assume that amount of ADI practice is a good proxy for preparation, then if anything this finding suggests that males are less prepared. However, interviewees also talked about what males and females 'got out of' practice in driving lessons, rather than just the total amount. Furthermore, males are less likely than females to say that they practised with both friends and family *and* an ADI, and more likely to say that they only practised with *one of these types* of supervising driver. Overall, these data are hard to interpret, in whether they support the hypothesis that males are better prepared for the practical driving test.

One way in which the driving test in Great Britain exerts an influence on driver behaviour is through the way in which it motivates those learning to drive to prepare. For example, when the satnav component was added to the test in 2017, ADIs changed the way they prepared learners for the test in anticipation of the change, adding the use of a satnav into lessons (Helman *et al.*, 2017). It should be noted that the simple amount of practice is not the only measure of importance here. There is a complex relationship between practice in the learner phase and test performance. For example, the Cohort 2 study (Wells *et al.*, 2008) included a survey of learner and new drivers to understand their time spent learning and their driving test pass rates. The authors suggested those who take a long time to learn might be less likely to pass the practical test because they lack aptitude, or their approach to learning is

ineffective. A report based on the same study (Sexton and Grayson, 2010) suggested that first-time passers are a sub-group of those passing who learn to drive quickly, have good control skills, are confident in their driving ability and adapt to the road system and interactions with other drivers (and who are also more likely to be male).

Given the differences noted above, especially in the test preparation survey data on amount of practice, and this complex relationship with performance and safety, a greater understanding of how learners prepare for the test, and for learning to drive, may help in understanding the extent to which it may lead to inequalities.

On the hypothesis of males being more confident, and this giving them an advantage in the practical test

Several findings in the quantitative data analysis relate to this hypothesis:

- In the test preparation survey, males are more likely to attribute their test failure to being 'unlucky on the day', while females are more likely to attribute it to 'making a silly mistake on the day'. This might be interpreted as showing that males are more confident in their abilities (thus deferring to 'bad luck'), while females, being less confident, are more willing to 'own up'. This is consistent with the hypothesis of males being more confident in their ability, although this is not the only theoretical concept that could explain the finding. For example, it might seem more related to the concept of 'locus of control' (Rotter, 1966); some research (Cooper *et al.*, 1981) has shown that young females demonstrate a greater internal locus of control ('it is my responsibility/my fault what I achieve') than young males in academic settings. Research on locus of control in driving may be warranted.
- The types of faults made by males appear somewhat compatible with the idea that males have a more confident driving style. For example, they're more likely than females to fail due to a serious fault related to inappropriate speed or moving off unsafely. They are also more likely to receive a serious fault for failing to slow down at pedestrian crossings. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that males are more confident – but not with the suggestion that this gives them an advantage in the driving test.

On the hypothesis of males being less affected by stress and anxiety

In the test preparation survey data, females are more likely to report that their test failure was due to nervousness on the day. This lends some support to the hypothesis. No other data relating to this hypothesis were discussed in the quantitative data analysis work.

On the hypothesis of males' performance in the practical test being less affected by the examiner

No data relating to this hypothesis were available for inclusion in the quantitative data analysis work.

12.1.2 Theory test

The quantitative data held by DVSA again confirm the gender differences. There was broad consensus among participants in our qualitative research that females are more likely to pass the theory test because they are prepared, and they are better prepared because they make the effort to prepare. Males' tendency to put less effort into preparing was linked to:

- A tendency for males to 'give things a go' – perhaps based on males being less aware of or more comfortable with the risks of doing so.
- A tendency for males to be more confident in their own abilities, and not think they need to revise.

The one finding in the quantitative data analysis that aligns with this hypothesis is that males were around twice as likely as females to post a very low score (under 20 or blank) on the theory test.

12.2 Research gaps

There are at least two specific questions raised by this work about other potential ways in which driver testing may be leading to inequalities. These relate to the broader road safety context and to other specific potential (non-gender) inequalities in test preparation and performance.

This work was motivated by the enduring gender disparity in UK driving test pass rates. An important context for the work is that there are post-test differences between the genders in the risk of road collision, injury or death, with males being at greater risk. Given the test's purpose to discriminate based on a candidate's driving competence (for which road collision risk is a relevant proxy) the concomitant male advantage in practical test performance raises questions about what outcome would be expected.

The female advantage in the theory test *is* aligned with post-test risk outcomes. However, the theory test is a less onerous and costly part of the licensing process, meaning its ability to discriminate based on the knowledge and skills needed for safe driving is diminished, relative to the practical test.

It was beyond the scope of this work to cover post-test risk outside of its contextual relevance. One useful next step for DVSA (see also Section 12.3) would be to explore links between test performance and the intended outcomes in post-test driving. Linking inequalities in post-test risk with those of test performance, preparation and opportunity would be one way to align policy intention with outcomes.

Another important question raised by the work concerns other disparities that may exist in test performance, but which DVSA might not fully understand due to gaps in the data it holds, or a lack of targeted research to understand them.

Potential inequalities outside of gender, which were noted in the quantitative data analysis part of this research, included the following:

- Age – younger candidates pass the practical test and the theory test more readily, and the effects of gender interact with age, meaning there are even larger differences between genders in test performance for older candidates, and indeed across the age range.
- Those who take the practical test in an automatic transmission car (which is an option more likely to be taken by females) have a lower pass rate.
- Ethnic groups other than white are all similarly less likely than average to pass the practical test, and the white ethnic group is more likely to pass than average.
- People who describe themselves as having a health condition are less likely to pass the practical test.
- Those needing special requirements have a much lower theory test pass rate; for both genders this is over 10 percentage points, with a slightly bigger difference for males. It is mainly associated with the hazard perception element of the test.
- There are large differences between regions of the country in both practical and theory test performance. Interviews mentioned that the concept of customer service may be implemented differently in different test centres, which may help to explain some of these differences.
- Finally, males are more likely to be taking a test when transferring from an overseas licence, and this category of candidate is more likely to pass than the average. It is not clear what impact this variable has, due to very small samples involved.

There may also be other sources of inequality in test preparation and performance that are not fully understood due to a lack of data. One potential additional source highlighted in the interviews is socio-economic disadvantage.

It was noted by several interviewees in the qualitative work that supervised practice during the learning period depends on access to a vehicle and support from a driver (such as a parent) with the time to supervise. These tended to be learners from families with socio-economic advantages, for example with a second family car that could be used for practice. Learners from such backgrounds often gain confidence by observing their parents drive, giving them exposure to various traffic scenarios. In contrast, those without support from drivers (for example, because of parents lacking time) or access to a personal vehicle have less exposure, relying solely on driving lessons.

Learners facing socio-economic disadvantages may also be under pressure to complete the learning process more quickly, both because the expense of lessons weighs more heavily on them and because independent driving is a more urgent need (for example, because they need to work, lack access to options for lifts or live in areas with limited public transport options). Test-takers experienced added pressure about passing the test because it meant additional expenses for scheduling another test and taking on supplementary lessons during the interim period to maintain their driving proficiency. People from backgrounds of socio-economic advantage may not feel the same level of pressure as they are less concerned about the financial implications of retaking the tests.

Another useful approach for DVSA to take next would be to try to understand these other potential inequalities, within the broader context linking test performance and post-test

safety (as for gender). It is worth noting, however, that the contextual relationship between test performance and safety outcomes, for some of these other factors (notably social deprivation and some disabilities) is likely to be more complex. In some cases, the direction of the relationship between test performance and safety may be interpreted as being as intended; it might look, in other words, as if the licensing system is doing its job of discriminating between safer and less safe drivers. However, without understanding the reasons for these other potential inequalities in test performance, it will not be clear whether discrimination is happening based on competence (as intended) or some other barrier in the system related to opportunity or capability not related to driving (not as intended).

12.3 Some considerations

From the findings in the current research, we offer the following considerations for future efforts to reduce inequalities in the driving test. Specifically in relation to potential inequalities around gender:

1 First, building on hypothesis 4, DVSA could examine the way customer service is interpreted by examiners on the practical driving test. Feedback from interviewees was that different people can interpret different communication approaches by examiners in different ways. It may be that a simple change to how examiners interact with candidates could help to reduce any inequalities these differences in interpretation may cause. For example, examiners could ask candidates at the beginning of the test what kind of communication ('formal', 'chatty') would put them in the best frame of mind for driving to the best of their ability. Such a change would enable examiners to remain focused on ability and outcomes but do so in such a way that does not introduce potential anxiety that is unrelated to driving competence in candidates. This could be done in line with a review and update (if necessary) of existing DVSA guidance for candidates on managing nervousness during the test.

2 Second, relating to the confidence elements of hypothesis 2, it may be useful for DVSA to explore ways of addressing an asymmetry in the practical test between compensating for a lack of confidence, which is likely to cause anxiety, and compensating for overconfidence, which is not. There are several potential approaches to this.

   a. One option would be to design a new component of the driving test that sits alongside the current practical and theory elements. It would focus on ensuring that those whose overconfidence means they will likely not be safe drivers do not pass. Such an approach would require research to understand how this characteristic could be measured.

   b. Another approach would be to consider rebalancing the relative importance of the theory and practical test elements. The data show clearly that male candidates are more likely to pass than female candidates on the practical test. On the other hand, female candidates are more likely to pass than male candidates on the theory test, and there are indications that this is precisely because overconfidence leads male

candidates to be less well prepared. One way of interpreting the inequality that exists in the current testing system overall is therefore that it is weighted towards a male advantage partly due to the effort in rebooking the two components; males are more likely to need to rebook a theory test, which is a fairly easily process, while females are more likely to need to rebook a practical test, which is a more onerous undertaking with longer wait times. This imbalance could be addressed through, for example, increasing the price and effort required for the theory test, and reducing the price and effort required for the practical test. This change would require widespread consultation to understand the likely impact on access to driving, and the perceived validity of driver testing.

c. A final option, should the first two not be feasible, would be to accept that the driver testing tools that exist currently in Great Britain may not be able to stop different levels of confidence in test candidates affecting outcomes in ways that the test does not intend. Some other approach such as post-test assessments or observations might be required to achieve this aim.

3 A third consideration relates to the wider narrative surrounding what 'good driving' really is – which may, by shaping the motivations, opportunities and therefore capabilities of male and female candidates, underpin inequalities. This narrative can broadly be described as one that misrepresents the driving task in favour of the characteristics of maleness that seem associated with driving in wider cultural references. Several interviewees mentioned variations on the theme of 'boys will be boys' when discussing the approach that males take to preparing for and taking both the practical and theory elements of the driving test. Males were seen as more practical, more confident and less likely to overthink, while females were seen as, and in some cases expected to be, more cautious and more prone to self-judgement. DVSA is in an ideal position to challenge this narrative.

In each of the above cases, there would be value in collecting data that allow the hypotheses identified in this research to be tested. This might be through routine data collection by the DVSA or through additional targeted research. Such research may provide insight that will aid in understanding and addressing biases that exist in those stakeholders within the testing system.

A final point for consideration relates to the data DVSA might need to collect to address other potential inequalities that may exist within the driver licensing process. Data on several characteristics such as socio-economic advantage or disadvantage, ethnicity and disability will help DVSA to understand inequalities in these areas. DVSA should also think carefully about changes that may be needed to the way in which performance data are collected on tests, such that operational data may be used to more effectively understand the reasons why some inequalities exist within the system.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Definitions of recorded faults

Table 18: Definitions of recorded faults on Digital Test Report (DVSA, 2025b)

Fault type	Items to record
Normal stops, angled start, and hill start/designated stop	-
Manoeuvres (reverse right, reverse park [road/car park], forward park:	• control: incorrect use of controls and/or inaccuracy • observation: lack of effective all-round observation
Eco-safe (fuel efficient) driving:	not part of pass/fail criteria • control: starting/moving off, accelerator use, gears • planning: hazard awareness, planning and anticipation, engine braking
Vehicle checks:	incorrect answer and/or demonstration of safety check questions
Controlled stop:	slow reaction, inadequate braking, loss of control
ETA (examiner took action):	verbal/physical (e.g. dual controls/steering)
Control:	• accelerator: uncontrolled or harsh use • clutch: uncontrolled use • gears: Failure to engage appropriate gear for road and traffic conditions. Coasting in neutral or with clutch pedal depressed • footbrake: late and/or harsh use • parking brake: failure to apply or release correctly and when necessary • steering: erratic steering, overshooting the correct turning point when turning right or left, both hands off steering wheel, or hitting the kerb Note: control faults should not be marked in this section if committed during a manoeuvre
Precautions:	failure to take proper precautions before starting the engine
Ancillary controls:	failure to use ancillary controls when necessary
Move off:	• safely: failure to take effective observation before moving off, including correct use of signals • under control: inability to move off smoothly, straight ahead, at an angle, or on a gradient
Use of mirror(s):	failure to make effective use of the mirrors well before: • signalling • changing direction • changing speed
Signals:	• necessary: signal omitted • correctly: incorrect or misleading signal. Failure to cancel direction indicators • properly timed: signal incorrectly timed so it is either misleading or too late to be of value

Fault type	Items to record
Junctions:	• approach speed: approaching junctions at a proper speed, either too fast or too slow, for whatever reason • observations: not taking effective observation before emerging • turning right: late or incorrect positioning before turning right, including failing to move forward into the correct position to turn right at traffic lights • turning left: positioning too close or too far from the kerb before turning left • cutting corners: cutting right-hand corners, particularly where the view is limited
Judgement:	• overtaking: attempting to overtake unsafely or cutting in after overtaking • meeting: failure to show proper judgement when meeting approaching traffic • crossing traffic: turning right across the path of oncoming traffic
Positioning:	• normal driving: incorrect positioning during normal driving, including cutting across the normal road position when going ahead at roundabouts without lane markings • lane discipline: failure to maintain proper lane discipline at roundabouts with lane markings when going ahead and when continuing to drive ahead in designated lanes
Pedestrian crossings:	• failure to give precedence to pedestrians on a pedestrian crossing • non-compliance with lights at pedestrian-controlled crossings
Position/normal stops:	normal stop: not made in a safe position
Awareness/planning:	failure to judge what other road users are going to do and react accordingly
Clearance/obstructions:	not allowing adequate clearance when passing parked vehicles and other obstructions
Following distance:	• keep a proper and safe distance from the vehicle in front when moving • leave a reasonable gap from the vehicle in front when stopping in lines of traffic
Use of speed:	driving too fast for road, traffic, and weather conditions
Progress:	• appropriate speed: driving too slowly for road and traffic conditions • undue hesitation: being over-cautious by stopping or waiting when it is safe and normal to proceed
Response to signs/signals:	failure to comply with or late reaction to: • traffic signs: inappropriate response • road markings: for example, double white lines, box junctions, lane direction arrows • traffic lights: including failure to move off on green when correct and safe to do so • traffic controllers: signals given by a police officer, traffic warden, school crossing warden, or other persons directing traffic • other road users: failure to take appropriate action on signals given by other road users

Appendix B. Detailed data

B.1 Driving licence holding

Table 19: NTS0201a: Proportion of adults holding a full car driving licence by age and sex: England, 2023 (Department for Transport, 2024c)

Age group	Female % with licence	Female unweighted sample size	Male % with licence	Male unweighted sample size	Total % with licence	Total unweighted sample size
11–16 years	-	179	-	208	-	387
17–20 years	26.3%	636	25.8%	669	26.0%	1,305
21–29 years	62.0%	1,606	64.6%	1,534	63.3%	3,140
30–39 years	73.0%	2,479	81.2%	2,211	77.0%	4,690
40–49 years	79.6%	2,341	87.7%	2,166	83.6%	4,507
50–59 years	82.0%	2,694	90.3%	2,524	86.0%	5,218
60 years +	70.4%	6,052	86.8%	5,522	78.1%	11,574
Total	**70.1%**	**15,987**	**78.9%**	**14,834**	**74.3%**	**30,821**

Table 20: Percentage of males and females in England aged 17–29 with a full driving licence by region: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Region	Female % with licence	Female unweighted sample size	Male % with licence	Male unweighted sample size	Total % with licence	Total unweighted sample size
East Midlands	57.4%	153	53.8%	175	55.4%	328
East of England	57.0%	271	61.0%	269	59.0%	540
London	37.7%	517	41.6%	446	39.5%	963
North East	43.1%	160	49.6%	144	46.3%	304
North West	49.7%	267	45.7%	275	47.6%	542
South East	54.7%	404	54.2%	397	54.5%	801
South West	56.0%	216	51.7%	256	53.7%	472
West Midlands	49.5%	236	51.9%	247	50.7%	483
Yorkshire and the Humber	46.6%	197	47.0%	202	46.8%	399
All England	**49.1%**	**2,421**	**50.0%**	**2,411**	**49.6%**	**4,832**

Table 21: Percentage of males and females in England aged 17–29 with a full driving licence by economic status: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Economic status	Female % with licence	Female unweighted sample size	Male % with licence	Male unweighted sample size	Total % with licence	Total unweighted sample size
Economically inactive: Other	37.3%	179	20.5%	100	31.3%	279
Economically inactive: Permanent (retired, sick, disabled)	15.9%	40	6.5%	58	10.1%	98
Economically inactive: Student	19.8%	525	15.7%	570	17.7%	1,095
Full-time	68.0%	1,126	72.2%	1,326	70.3%	2,452
Part-time	46.1%	468	34.1%	257	41.7%	725
Unemployed	20.9%	78	26.2%	96	23.8%	174
Did not answer	81.2%	5	-	4	46.7%	9
Total	**49.1%**	**2,421**	**50.0%**	**2,411**	**49.6%**	**4,832**

Table 22: Percentage of males and females in England aged 17–29 with a full driving licence by individual income: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Individual income	Female % with licence	Female unweighted sample size	Male % with licence	Male unweighted sample size	Total % with licence	Total unweighted sample size
Less than £25,000	41%	1,796	36%	1,676	38%	3,472
£50,000 and over	65%	87	78%	139	73%	226
£25,000 to £49,999	74%	537	81%	595	78%	1,132
Not applicable	100%	1	-	1	51%	2
Total	**49%**	**2,421**	**50%**	**2,411**	**50%**	**4,832**

Table 23: Percentage of males and females in England aged 17–29 with a full driving licence by ethnic group: NTS data – 2021–2023 (Department for Transport, 2024b)

Ethnic group	Female % with licence	Female unweighted sample size	Male % with licence	Male unweighted sample size	Total % with licence	Total unweighted sample size
Non-white	29%	545	38%	468	33%	1,013
White	55%	1,875	53%	1,939	54%	3,814
Not applicable	-	1	-	4	-	5
Total	**49%**	**2,421**	**50%**	**2,411**	**50%**	**4,832**

B.2 Serious and dangerous faults recorded in the driving test

The following tables shows the fault names as recorded by DVSA and stored in its data. These match the names of items on the digital test report (see Figure 1).

Table 24: Test failures involving each serious fault by gender (DTR data, March 2024)

Item	Female	Male	Total	Female % of those who failed	Male % of those who failed	Percentage difference
Rev Right Trail Cont	822	392	1,214	1.79%	0.75%	58.0%
Eyesight	13	31	44	0.03%	0.06%	52.4%
Forward Park Control	707	389	1,096	1.54%	0.75%	51.5%
Rev Park Cpark Control	1,658	983	2,641	3.62%	1.89%	47.8%
Control Acc	20	14	34	0.04%	0.03%	38.3%
Rev Park Road Control	2,101	1,478	3,579	4.58%	2.84%	38.0%
Control Steering	3,993	3,084	7,077	8.71%	5.93%	32.0%
Mirrors MC Rear	323	531	854	0.70%	1.02%	31.0%
Response Traf Cont	29	47	76	0.06%	0.09%	30.0%
Move Off Safety	3,613	5,577	9,190	7.88%	10.72%	26.5%
Control Gears	1,061	897	1,958	2.32%	1.72%	25.5%
Move Off Control	2,886	2,482	5,368	6.30%	4.77%	24.2%
Control Footbrake	174	152	326	0.38%	0.29%	23.0%
Signals Timed	172	249	421	0.38%	0.48%	21.6%
Clearance Obstruct	2,279	2,075	4,354	4.97%	3.99%	19.8%
Rev Park Road Observ	1,196	1,692	2,888	2.61%	3.25%	19.8%
Use Of Speed	2,693	3,776	6,469	5.88%	7.26%	19.0%
Vehicle Checks	395	365	760	0.86%	0.70%	18.6%

Item	Female	Male	Total	Female % of those who failed	Male % of those who failed	Percentage difference
Mirrors MC Rear Spe	1,506	2,084	3,590	3.29%	4.01%	18.0%
Following Distance	639	869	1,508	1.39%	1.67%	16.5%
Forward Park Observ	542	514	1,056	1.18%	0.99%	16.5%
Pedestrian Crossing	1,069	1,445	2,514	2.33%	2.78%	16.0%
Control Park	166	159	325	0.36%	0.31%	15.6%
Rev Right Trail Observ	1,061	1,427	2,488	2.32%	2.74%	15.6%
Junctions Speed	799	768	1,567	1.74%	1.48%	15.3%
Signals Necessary	465	620	1,085	1.01%	1.19%	14.9%
Response Traf Signs	3,267	4,331	7,598	7.13%	8.33%	14.4%
Judgement Meet	2,471	2,407	4,878	5.39%	4.63%	14.2%
Precautions	5	5	10	0.01%	0.01%	11.9%
Response Road Mark	3,265	4,149	7,414	7.13%	7.98%	10.7%
Control Stop Prompt	342	434	776	0.75%	0.83%	10.6%
Ancillary Controls	59	60	119	0.13%	0.12%	10.4%
Positioning Lane	776	979	1,755	1.69%	1.88%	10.0%
Response Other	416	524	940	0.91%	1.01%	9.9%
Maintain Prog Speed	2,786	3,509	6,295	6.08%	6.75%	9.9%
Position Stops	801	821	1,622	1.75%	1.58%	9.7%
Judgement Over	437	448	885	0.95%	0.86%	9.7%
Junctions Turn Right	3,804	4,752	8,556	8.30%	9.14%	9.1%
Control Clutch	22	23	45	0.05%	0.04%	7.9%
Rev Park Cpark Observe	696	852	1,548	1.52%	1.64%	7.3%
Signals Correctly	1,044	1,264	2,308	2.28%	2.43%	6.2%
Maintain Prog Hes	2,408	2,583	4,991	5.25%	4.97%	5.5%
Judgement Cross	1,228	1,452	2,680	2.68%	2.79%	4.0%
Awareness Plan	1,549	1,830	3,379	3.38%	3.52%	3.9%
Junctions Turn Cut	418	456	874	0.91%	0.88%	3.9%
Positioning Normal	3,109	3,670	6,779	6.78%	7.06%	3.8%
Mirrors MC Rear Dir	6,374	7,513	13,887	13.91%	14.44%	3.7%
Junctions Observ	8,629	9,465	18,094	18.83%	18.20%	3.4%
Response Traf Light	3,770	4,377	8,147	8.23%	8.42%	2.2%
Junctions Turn Left	374	428	802	0.82%	0.82%	0.8%

Table 25: Test failures involving each dangerous fault by gender (DTR data, March 2024)

Item	Female	Male	Total	Female % of those who failed	Male % of those who failed	Percentage difference
Control Stop Prompt	2	0	2	<0.005%	0.00%	100.0%
Mirrors MC Rear Sig	0	4	4	0.00%	0.01%	100.0%
Response Traf Cont	2	0	2	<0.005%	0.00%	100.0%
Signals Timed	1	6	7	<0.005%	0.01%	81.1%
Precautions	4	1	5	0.01%	<0.005%	78.0%
Control Acc	13	4	17	0.03%	0.01%	72.9%
Judgement Over	72	42	114	0.16%	0.08%	48.6%
Forward Park Control	88	52	140	0.19%	0.10%	47.9%
Maintain Prog Hes	7	15	22	0.02%	0.03%	47.0%
Control Footbrake	64	39	103	0.14%	0.07%	46.3%
Maintain Prog Speed	6	12	18	0.01%	0.02%	43.2%
Clearance Obstruct	558	374	932	1.22%	0.72%	41.0%
Forward Park Observ	19	13	32	0.04%	0.02%	39.7%
Response Other	67	47	114	0.15%	0.09%	38.2%
Control Steering	871	622	1,493	1.90%	1.20%	37.1%
Position Stops	3	5	8	0.01%	0.01%	31.9%
Control Park	10	8	18	0.02%	0.02%	29.5%
Control Gears	36	29	65	0.08%	0.06%	29.0%
Junctions Turn Cut	7	11	18	0.02%	0.02%	27.8%
Vehicle Checks	71	61	132	0.15%	0.12%	24.3%
Junctions Speed	66	57	123	0.14%	0.11%	23.9%
Use Of Speed	44	38	82	0.10%	0.07%	23.9%
Junctions Turn Left	13	19	32	0.03%	0.04%	22.3%
Positioning Normal	128	116	244	0.28%	0.22%	20.2%
Judgement Meet	418	382	800	0.91%	0.73%	19.5%
Move Off Control	234	215	449	0.51%	0.41%	19.1%
Response Road Mark	78	104	182	0.17%	0.20%	14.9%
Signals Necessary	3	4	7	0.01%	0.01%	14.9%
Ancillary Controls	4	4	8	0.01%	0.01%	11.9%
Control Clutch	2	2	4	<0.005%	<0.005%	11.9%
Junctions Observ	1,670	1,673	3,343	3.64%	3.22%	11.7%

Item	Female	Male	Total	Female % of those who failed	Male % of those who failed	Percentage difference
Awareness Plan	194	195	389	0.42%	0.37%	11.4%
Response Traf Light	152	190	342	0.33%	0.37%	9.2%
Move Off Safety	255	265	520	0.56%	0.51%	8.4%
Mirrors MC Rear Dir	1,122	1,171	2,293	2.45%	2.25%	8.1%
Mirrors MC Rear Spe	78	96	174	0.17%	0.18%	7.8%
Following Distance	37	39	76	0.08%	0.07%	7.1%
Response Traf Signs	85	90	175	0.19%	0.17%	6.7%
Pedestrian Crossing	151	162	313	0.33%	0.31%	5.5%
Positioning Lane	74	87	161	0.16%	0.17%	3.5%
Signals Correctly	10	11	21	0.02%	0.02%	3.1%
Judgement Cross	418	465	883	0.91%	0.89%	2.0%
Junctions Turn Right	104	117	221	0.23%	0.22%	0.9%

Appendix C. Topic guides

C.1 Current learners

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. We are speaking to participants like yourself to better understand your experiences of learning to drive, taking driving tests, and interacting with the driving training and testing process.

In this interview, we will ask questions about your experiences with learning to drive and, where applicable, taking the practical and theory tests. We are interested in hearing about any challenges you faced, what worked well for you, and any suggestions you might have for helping learners be better prepared for the driving tests.

I will take notes during the interview, and if you agree, I will also record the conversation. The recording will be used to ensure accuracy when reviewing my notes and will be deleted once the project is completed. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

Our findings will focus on themes emerging from interviews, but we may use anonymised quotes to highlight key points. Any quotes we use will not be personally attributed to you.

Do you have any questions about this or anything else before we begin? (Yes/No)

Permissions
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided on the Information Sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions and I have had any questions answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any data that I have provided up to that point will be omitted.
3. I agree to the interview being audio recorded (the interview will still take place if not)
4. I agree to the interview being video recorded (the interview will still take place if not)
5. I agree to take part in the study

1 Can you tell me about your experience learning to drive so far?

Aim to understand participant's history around learning to drive.

Probes: How long learning, attempts at theory, if theory passed, previous attempts at practical if any.

2 You're learning to drive – which is clearly about getting better at something. So, what does 'better' mean here? What are the differences between better and worse driving?

a. *Prompt on confidence if not raised anyway:* Does confidence play a role in better driving?

Probes: Does it matter, how and why

3 What are you finding most easy?

For example, staying calm, specific manoeuvres, types of roads.

4 What are you finding most challenging about learning to drive?

For example, staying calm, interacting with other road users, high-speed roads.

a. *Prompt:* How are you getting better? What's making the difference?

5 What is your instructor's role in all this?

Explore both what IS happening with their instructor and what they think SHOULD happen.

a. *Prompt:* How does your instructor guide you/provide you feedback (or any other words/phrases used by participant)?

b. *Prompt:* How do you think they could be guiding/supporting you?

c. *Prompt:* Could you explain the things you have to do to pass the test *[note: which could be things that aren't actually 'real driving']*?

6 This is a tricky question as you only have your own experience to go on, but do you think your instructor adapts their approach to the type of learner you are?

7 We haven't talked about the test yet *[if not raised unprompted by them]*. What's your sense of what the two parts of the test are assessing?

8 We're doing this research because there is some evidence that the learning and testing process produces slightly different outcomes for different demographic groups.

a. Given your own experience and what you've heard from others, do you think there are any aspects of the learning process or the learning environment that influences how prepared or unprepared different groups of people might be for the test?

b. What about other factors outside of the learning environment?

9 Recent test data show that female test-takers performed better than male test-takers on the theory test. Any views on what might be going on?

10 In contrast, the data also show that male test-takers performed better than female test-takers on the practical test. Any views on what might be going on?

11 Lastly, males are statistically more likely to be involved in a collision after passing their driving licence. Any views on what might be going on?

12 Before we end the session today, is there anything around this topic that I should have asked about but did not?

C.2 Recent passers

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. We are speaking to participants like yourself to better understand your experiences of learning to drive, taking driving tests, and interacting with the driving training and testing process.

In this interview, we will ask questions about your experiences with learning to drive and, where applicable, taking the practical and theory tests. We are interested in hearing about any challenges you faced, what worked well for you, and any suggestions you might have for helping learners be better prepared for the driving tests.

I will take notes during the interview, and if you agree, I will also record the conversation. The recording will be used to ensure accuracy when reviewing my notes and will be deleted once the project is completed. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

Our findings will focus on themes emerging from interviews, but we may use anonymised quotes to highlight key points. Any quotes we use will not be personally attributed to you.

Do you have any questions about this or anything else before we begin? (Yes/No)

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3. I agree to the interview being audio recorded (the interview will still take place if not)
4. I agree to the interview being video recorded (the interview will still take place if not)
5. I agree to take part in the study

1 So you recently passed your driving licence test…

Aim to understand participant's history around learning to drive.

Probes: How long did they take, attempts at theory, attempts at practical

Adapt questions 4 and 5 (which for simplicity are written for a single test) to what happened – for example, if they passed the practical test on a second attempt, explore how their answers to these questions differ between attempt 1 and attempt 2.

2 How did you find the experience of learning to drive?

a. Learning to drive is clearly about getting better at something. Looking back, what do you think you needed to get better at?

b. What did you find easy, and what did you find challenging?

c. What was your instructor's role in all this?

d. This is a tricky question as you only have your own experience to go on, but do you think your instructor adapted their approach to you in any way?

3 Talk me through what happened at your practical test.

a. Was it what you were expecting? What if anything was surprising?

b. What happened? Any memorable challenges or successes?

c. How were you feeling – at the beginning, at key points through the test, at the end? What was behind these feelings?

d. Did you think you'd passed or failed? Why?

e. Looking back, how well prepared do you think you were for the test? What could you or your instructor (or anyone else) have done differently?

4 What was the examiner like? What did you think the examiner was trying to do in the practical test?

5 Now that you have your licence…

a. How often do you drive? What kinds of driving?

b. Have your views on what makes a good driver changed? How? Why?

c. Looking back, how do you think the process of learning and testing could be changed for someone like yourself?

6 We're doing this research because there is some evidence that the learning and testing process produces slightly different outcomes for different demographic groups.

a. Given your own experience and what you've heard from others, do you think there are any aspects of the learning process or the learning environment that influences how prepared or unprepared different groups of people might be for the test?

b. What about other factors outside of the learning environment?

7 Recent test data show that female test-takers performed better than male test-takers on the theory test. Any views on what might be going on?

8 In contrast, the data also show that male test-takers performed better than female test-takers on the practical test. Any views on what might be going on?

9 Lastly, males are statistically more likely to be involved in a collision after passing their driving licence. Any views on what might be going on?

10 Before we end the session today, is there anything around this topic that I should have asked about but did not?

C.3 Instructors

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. We are speaking to participants like yourself to better understand your experiences of teaching driving skills and interacting with the driving training and testing process.

In this interview, we will ask questions about your experiences with teaching to drive, challenges commonly faced by learners, and any suggestions you might have for helping learners be better prepared for the driving tests.

I will take notes during the interview, and if you agree, I will also record the conversation. The recording will be used to ensure accuracy when reviewing my notes and will be deleted once the project is completed. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

Our findings will focus on themes emerging from interviews, but we may use anonymised quotes to highlight key points. Any quotes we use will not be personally attributed to you.

Do you have any questions about this or anything else before we begin? (Yes/No)

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2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any data that I have provided up to that point will be omitted.
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5. I agree to take part in the study

1 You see lots of different learners. Some drive well and pass the test; some drive less well and fail. What key differences do you see between those that do well and those that do less well?

Prompts:

a. Do people have different aptitudes for driving – i.e., some people are just naturally better? In what ways?

b. Do preparation and experience make a difference? What difference?

c. Do differences in attitude, mindset or personality make a difference? What difference?

d. Does someone's state of mind in the test make a difference? *[If needed give 'nerves' as an example.]* What difference?

2 How do you adapt what you do to differences between learners?

3 A word that comes up a lot when we talk to people about learning to drive and passing the test is 'confidence'. Talk to me about 'confidence'.

   a. How do you address differences in learner confidence and readiness for tests?

4 We're doing this research because there is some evidence that the learning and testing system as a whole may be delivering different outcomes across different demographic groups. I'll share that evidence shortly, but first have you noticed any patterns or trends in test outcomes across different demographic groups?

   a. If so, what do you think might lead to this?

   b. Do you think there are any aspects of the learning process or the learning environment that influences how prepared or unprepared different groups of people might be for the test?

   c. What about other factors outside of the learning environment or the system (e.g., test routes, examiner behaviour)?

5 Recent test data show that female test-takers performed better than male test-takers on the theory test. Any views on what might be going on?

6 In contrast, the data also show that male test-takers performed better than female test-takers on the practical test. Any views on what might be going on?

7 Lastly, males are statistically more likely to be involved in a collision after passing their driving licence. Any views on what might be going on?

8 Thinking about the bigger picture, what are your thoughts on these contrasting statistics in how prepared different genders are for the driving tests vs how safe they drive after getting their licence?

9 At the beginning I asked about people driving well/less well, and people passing or failing the test. Are these the same thing?

   a. Are there differences between those who drive well and less well that the test does not or cannot pick up?

   b. What are they? Why does/can the test not pick up on them?

10 Before we end the session today, is there anything around this topic that I should have asked about but did not?

C.4 Examiners

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. We are speaking to participants like yourself to better understand your experiences of conducting driving tests and interacting with the driving testing process. Your insights will help us identify areas for improvement and ensure the system works better for everyone.

In this interview, we will ask questions about your process of conducting the practical tests for driving, challenges commonly faced by learners, and any suggestions you might have for helping learners be better prepared for the driving tests.

I will take notes during the interview, and if you agree, I will also record the conversation. The recording will be used to ensure accuracy when reviewing my notes and will be deleted once the project is completed. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

Our findings will focus on themes emerging from interviews, but we may use anonymised quotes to highlight key points. Any quotes we use will not be personally attributed to you.

Do you have any questions about this or anything else before we begin? (Yes/No)

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1 Could you tell me more about how you came to be an examiner?

   a. How long?

2 In your opinion, what does it take to be a good examiner?

   a. How do you ensure fairness and consistency in your assessment?

3 You see lots of very different learners and see a lot of diversity? Everyone's different, but we find people are often able to identify some common patterns or types that they see again and again. Have you noticed any types of learners in your experience?

   a. Are there specific types of learners you find easier or harder to work with?

   b. Do different types of learners face different challenges?

   c. Do they have different areas of strengths?

d. What difference do you see these things making to how well people perform on the practical test?

e. Do you need to adapt what you do in any way to these differences between learners?

4 How prepared are learners when they come for their tests?

a. What do you SEE that indicates whether they are prepared or not?

b. *Probes:*

- Tasks they struggle with.
- Mistakes they make.
- Over- or underconfidence.
- Hesitation.
- Nervousness.

5 We're doing this research because there is some evidence that the learning and testing system as a whole may be delivering different outcomes across different demographic groups. I'll share that evidence shortly, but first have you noticed any patterns or trends in test outcomes across different demographic groups?

a. If so, what do you think might lead to this?

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8 Lastly, males are statistically more likely to be involved in a collision after passing their driving licence. Any views on what might be going on?

9 Thinking about the bigger picture, what are your thoughts on these contrasting statistics in how prepared different genders are for the driving tests vs how safe they drive after getting their licence?

10 Before we end the session today, is there anything around this topic that I should have asked about but did not?

Male candidates have consistently achieved a higher pass rate on the Category B (car) practical driving test in Great Britain than female candidates. Similarly, female candidates have passed the theory component of the test at a higher rate than males. This study took a mixed methods approach to understanding these and other inequalities in the car driving test, with the goal of improving test fairness. Existing DVSA data were analysed, a short literature review was undertaken and interviews were held with examiners, instructors, learners and recent test passers.

The data analysis confirmed the findings observed in headline figures regarding gender and showed several other factors associated with higher and lower pass rates on the practical and theory tests; these included: age, taking the test with an automatic transmission vehicle, ethnicity, health conditions, needing special requirements to accommodate a disability, and region of the country.

The literature showed that there are several other countries with similar differences in gender pass rates for components of the driving test, and it outlined several key areas in which genders may differ from discussion in the interviews (for example confidence, cognitive spatial abilities, stereotype threat).

The interviews began as unprompted discussions around the testing process, and what factors can make a difference on whether candidates pass or fail. The discussion then moved to discuss different demographic groups, and some specific prompted discussion on gender differences. There was a consensus that the higher female pass rate in the theory test reflects the greater preparation by females than males. Four hypotheses were proposed for the male pass rate being higher than the female pass rate in the practical test; these were that males are better prepared, their higher confidence gives them an advantage, they are less affected by stress, and they are less affected by the actions of the examiner.

Several considerations were suggested for further research and for future changes in driving testing that could help improve equality, related to both gender and other factors.

Equality in the driving test

Male candidates have consistently achieved a higher pass rate on the Category B (car) practical driving test in GB than female candidates. Similarly, female candidates have passed the theory component of the test at a higher rate than males. This study took a mixed methods approach to understanding these and other inequalities in the car driving test, with the goal of improving test fairness. Existing DVSA data was analysed, a short literature review was undertaken, and interviews were held with examiners, instructors, learners and recent test passers.

The data analysis confirmed the findings observed in headline figures regarding gender and showed several other factors associated with higher and lower pass rates on the practical and/or theory tests; these included: age, taking the test with an automatic transmission vehicle, ethnicity, health conditions, needing special requirements to accommodate a disability, and region of the country.

The literature showed that there are several other countries with similar differences in gender pass rates for components of the driving test, and outlined several key areas in which genders may differ for discussion in the interviews (for example confidence, cognitive spatial abilities, stereotype threat).

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Several considerations were suggested for both further research and for future changes that could help improve equality, both related to gender, and to other factors.

TRL Limited
Crowthorne House, Nine Mile Ride,
Wokingham, Berkshire, RG40 3GA,
United Kingdom
T: +44 (0) 1344 773131
E: enquiries@trl.co.uk
W: www.trl.co.uk

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