

A photograph of an older man with white hair, smiling, wearing a brown jacket over a blue shirt. He is standing next to a silver car. The background is slightly blurred, showing greenery and another person in the distance.

Older Drivers

Current Government policy

- Current UK policy, including the devolved regions, mandates drivers to renew their driving licence every 3 years from the age of 70. The renewal process requires a self-declaration that the driver meets the required eyesight standards for driving and a disclosure of any medical condition that may affect or impair driving ability.

Background

The UK has an ageing population which, in the context of road safety, invites government and regulatory authorities to reassess licencing requirements as demographics change in line with available road accident statistics. As of 2023, there were 1.65 million licence holders over the age of 80. By 2039, the number of people aged 75 in the UK and over is expected to double from 5 million to nearly 10 million¹. Practical steps should be taken by government to adjust to this change. There are clear social impacts on older drivers that should be considered when evaluating licencing policy. Older drivers opting not to renew their licence earlier than necessary can place undue stress on health and social care, should they no longer be able to access these services independently. It can also impact upon their interactions with family and friends, potentially leading to social isolation.

IAM RoadSmart Research:

IAM RoadSmart's report 'The views of older drivers on road safety interventions', conducted in 2021, surveyed 3,062 drivers and ex-drivers over the age of 60 from across the UK. Seeking to understand current driving habits, driver training, self-regulation in avoiding difficult driving conditions, driver confidence and ability, and to gather their views on giving up driving. 48% of respondents were over the age of 70, with the average age of respondents being 70.4 years.

When assessing their own driving ability:

- Most drivers (79%) rated their driving ability as good to excellent.
- Most drivers (85%) rated their confidence as a driver as good to excellent.
- Most drivers (79%) said that driving was very or extremely important to them.

When evaluating potential reforms to licencing requirements:

- 83% of respondents agreed with the statement "senior drivers should pass an eyesight test every 5 years after licence renewal".
- Almost one-in-four (23%) disagreed with the statement, "The age at which drivers renew their driving licence should be raised from 70 to 75".

A subsequent IAM RoadSmart Survey, for the 2023 'IAM Safety Culture Report', saw similar results when asking about reforms to licencing:

- 83% support amongst the 2,013 respondents (all ages) for over 75's to provide an eye test certificate when they renew their licence.
- Highest support for this measure was amongst those in the 50-69 age bracket with 88% support.
- 80% of respondents supported the proposal for drivers over 85 to take a compulsory practical test to renew their licence, including 60% of those over the age of 70.

External research

'Reported road casualties Great Britain: Older Driver's factsheet 2020' - Published by DfT, 25 May 2022

- Between 2016 and 2020, older people (defined as someone over the age of 70) with a full driving licence in United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland) increased by 23.6% from 4.5 to 5.6 million².
- The number of killed or seriously injured (KSI) casualties in collisions involving at least one older car driver in Great Britain rose slightly between 2011 and 2019, ranging between 3,000 to 3,500 per year. In 2020, there was a large drop in the number of KSI casualties from collisions involving at least one older car driver to 2,116. This drop is in large part attributed to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Overall, 42.6% of contributory factors attributed to older car drivers in collisions relate to "driver failed to look properly", compared to 35.7% for all drivers.
- Between ages 17 and 75, the rate of car or van drivers involved in collisions per billion vehicle miles travelled falls with driver age from 1,384 (drivers aged 17 to 24) to 211 (drivers aged 71 to 75). The rate increases in age between ages 76 to 85, before rising sharply to the highest rate (2,014) for any group for drivers 86 and over.

IAM RoadSmart calls to action:

From evaluation of the available data on older drivers on our roads as well as prevailing attitudes in this group, especially those in the 70-75 bracket, it is clear the current policy of mandating renewal at 70 needs to be reassessed.

- The mandatory renewal age could be raised from 70 to 75, with an eye test from an optician being made mandatory rather than self-reported. A pilot study should be initiated immediately to ensure effective delivery upon enforcement.

Many of today's 70-year-olds are fitter than ever before. Available data shows no statistically significant spike in RTCs attributed to those in the 70-75 bracket, rather a gradual increase between those aged 76 and 85 and a sharp increase thereafter.

- Implementation of a compulsory driving assessment for those over the age of 85 opting to renew their licence with an accompanying reduction in renewal period from 3 to 2 years. Further research is needed into the best approach to ensure effective delivery and design of this assessment.
- Older drivers, specifically those over the age 75 opting to renew their licence, should be made aware of the availability of voluntary driving assessments designed to rate driving skills and give practical advice on coping with the effects of ageing. Such assessments should be made available on prescription from GPs.
- Better information is needed to allow older drivers and their families to continue to drive safely and to make the informed decision to give up and training and awareness of the issues affecting older drivers must be improved among the medical profession.
- Car makers and road designers should take more account of the needs of older drivers in the future. As autonomous vehicles develop and prevalence a further reassessment of licencing should be considered as the UK road network adjusts.

COMMENT

IAM RoadSmart Director of Policy and Standards Nicholas Lyes said:

"It is clear from the available data that as the number of older drivers on the UK roads increases, we need to reassess our licensing regime. From available road accident data, the current requirement for mandatory renewal at 70 is out of step with what we know about older drivers and their competencies. Our recommendations provide an alternative framework for regulatory bodies to consider that recognises the modern challenges of driving at an older age in the UK."