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Testing Times - life as a driving examiner

Driving examiner Gary Virgo has made a career out of his interest in driving and safety. His belief in fairness and respect led to him becoming a PCS rep when disputes arose.

How did you get into this job?

This is my 8th year at the DVSA as a driving examiner. I've always had an interest in driving. I used to have my own security businesses, and part of this was looking after people, driving them around. I was away from home a lot. I became a driving instructor to have more time and control of my working life. But I was doing more than ever because I found it hard to say no to people and turn work away.

A test centre manager approached me about becoming an examiner. It was less pay, but the weekday hours and civil service pension were attractive. The difference between the pay levels of examiners and driving instructors was not as substantial then as it is now.

What do you like about it?

I've always enjoyed my job. I like the interaction with the public and get satisfaction from knowing that I play a part in road safety. The majority of people on the front line are very good to work with; they have a similar ethic and belief in the fundamentals of giving good customer service and trying to improve road safety.

What are the challenges?

Some days are worse than others. I've always tried to put myself in the candidate's shoes. We've all been there. It's one of the most nerve[1]wracking things you ever do in life. So you use that memory to be fair and professional, but also to have empathy.

Due to various factors, sometimes the standards of candidates aren't great. When you're having to intervene because they are potentially going to have an accident, and you're doing that test after test, it can be quite mentally draining. With the pass rates being below 50%, half of the time you're giving people disappointing news they don't want to hear, and that puts a toll on you too. And now there's the added pressure of knowing that if they don't pass they might not get another test date for weeks and weeks. I'm not suggesting that many of them are verbally or even physically abusive, but some members do face abuse.

What made you become active in PCS?

In my DVSA career I've always been involved in different working groups and been keen to find positive solutions to some of the problems that we had. During Covid, for example, I was involved in helping with the protocols.

Then when we had the disputes over pay and test schedules, I spoke up about it and I was approached by some PCS reps. I said I wasn't really a union type of person, but I do like people to be treated fairly and with respect. I joined a few meetings and realised then that I could make a positive impact on trying to build a better working relationship between the union and the DVSA.

What was this latest dispute about?

It revolved around a recovery plan to address test backlogs both from the Covid period and before.

The plan involved moving various members from differing roles onto the frontline to conduct tests, in an attempt to reduce the large waiting lists that the public were facing.

This was having an impact on other areas of DVSA. It meant many had to make tough choices to help with the plan. This was not sustainable and a solution had to be found; it was only achieved through open negotiations with PCS.

I'm really pleased that a positive solution was found and that the dispute is resolved.

As a public servant, taking any form of action is a difficult decision to take. I hope the positive attitude that DVSA and PCS adopted to talk through our concerns continues, as only through good communication and a willingness to work together will change be made successfully.