

What is in the UK Citizenship Test and Why is it Failing?

OVERVIEW

The Life in the UK citizenship test is unfit for purpose and in need of urgent reforms. Since it launched in 2005 with the purpose of ensuring that individuals who wish to become UK citizens grasp fundamental British values and have enough knowledge to become active citizens, there have been three different test editions and over two million people have sat the tests. However, there has not been any public consultation to gauge whether a test for British citizenship that few UK citizens can pass achieves the test's original aim.

My research has exposed serious failings in all test editions. These include that some of the test's "correct" answers are factually incorrect; that key practical information, like how to report a crime or register with a GP, is missing, while impractical trivia like knowing the height of the London Eye or how the founder of the first curry house married his wife means that the test is politically partisan and gender imbalanced.

A new test is required that corrects its errors, is fit for purpose and enjoys wider public support for what is expected of new citizens.

CONTEXT

My new research has found serious failings in the Life in the UK test. It is the only citizenship test in the world that does not require anyone to know who the head of state is, how many elected legislators there are in Parliament, or what is the law court with the highest jurisdiction. Yet, all new citizens must swear allegiance to the head of state.

Following first-hand experience backed by over 200 interviews, the findings uncover that the test is seen as more of a barrier to becoming British that can undermine integration, in contrast to the original aim and purpose which has never been tested. The research findings support the work of the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee in its Life in the UK test Inquiry in 2022.



Reforming the UK's Citizenship Test: Building Bridges, Not Barriers by Thom Brooks is published by Bristol University Press, August 2022

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Thom Brooks is a Professor of Law and Government.

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FINDINGS

- Omissions include no requirement to know the head of state, the number of MPs or the court with the highest jurisdiction.
- Other omissions include no requirement to know how to contact the police, report a crime or register with a GP.
- Trivial information that is required include the need to know the number of elected representatives in the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont.
- Other trivial information includes questions around the height of the London Eye, approximate age of Big Ben's clock tower and the name of the UK's first curry house.
- Incorrect information includes that former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is still alive, that Cnut was the first Viking king (instead of his father Sven I) in what is now England and that the highest value monetary note in circulation is £50 (not £100).
- Partisan information includes the requirement to know that former Prime Minister Winston Churchill was voted the 'greatest Briton', but not that it was in a one-off television competition where viewers had to pay to vote.
- And there are odd inclusions, such as the recent requirement that new applicants must know the exact dates when Theresa May and Boris Johnson became Prime Minister and no one else in British history.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The implications of this research are:

- Establish a new Citizenship Advisory Group to conduct the first public consultation since the test was introduced into how it can gain greater public support.
- Fact-check the test contents and make it politically neutral.
- Refocus the test on its original aims and purpose of supporting integration.
- Launch official citizenship test classes.
- Update the test annually with a new edition each year.
- Incorporate the test into the citizenship curriculum for schools so citizens old and new are informed.