

## Scottish village fuels debate on driving test pass rates

Level 3 • Advanced

### An easy ride? Scottish village fuels debate on driving test pass rates

*New figures reveal that it is far easier to pass driving test in Highlands than in inner-city Birmingham*

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- There are no proper roundabouts. Complaints of gridlock probably just mean sheep are blocking the road. And traffic lights are few and far between. It may be no surprise, then, that figures have revealed that the isolated Scottish village of Gairloch has the highest rate of driving test passes in the UK, with 86.5% of candidates succeeding against a national average of 45.8%.
- The pass rate in Gairloch is so stratospheric in comparison to urban areas – with a test centre in Birmingham having the lowest at 28.6% – that some city drivers are even said to be deliberately heading for the village in the hope of getting an easier ride. And the figures have prompted a lively discussion among experts about whether there should be concern about variable standards, with some arguing that urban test centres may simply have harder conditions.
- But there is another explanation: the talents of Kenny Tallach, until recently the only driving instructor in the Scottish village. Tallach, 52, believes the vast majority of the 32 people to successfully take their test in the village in the 12 months to March, 2019, were his clients – and he hopes his methods are a part of their success.
- So what's the secret? "I don't teach people to pass their tests. A lot of people come to me and say, 'I want to pass my test.' I tend to teach people to drive as a skill," says Tallach, who explains that he only lets his pupils go for their licence when they are truly ready to hit the road on their own. And he can point to evidence that his tough, no-nonsense approach gets results. A few years ago, Tallach says, he taught an entire class at the local school to pass their tests at the first attempt.
- As for the drivers who he says show up in search of an easier ride, Tallach takes a dim view of their tactics – and of their abilities. "I've turned down people from London, Glasgow, Edinburgh," he says. "They book their test knowing it's a high pass rate, thinking it's easy. I take them out driving, and they can't even change gear."
- The figures show that rural areas tend to have better pass rates than towns and cities. Remote locations in and around the Scottish Highlands and the Hebrides make up nine out of the ten places in the country with the best pass rates. By contrast, among locations with the worst records, Birmingham is joined by other spots in London, Manchester and Liverpool.
- The figures also reveal that nationally there has been a gradual decline in results, with pass rates at their lowest in a decade from a high of 47.1%, and that women tend to have a lower success rate than men – currently 42.4% to 49.6%. There have been previous concerns over variable pass rates, with one report in 2018 revealing that 32% of black women pass, against 56% of white men.
- Though Tallach clearly has a knack for preparing his learners for the road, there are questions over the wider significance of the new figures. Andrew Morris, a professor at Loughborough University who specializes in human factors in transport safety, said: "It could just be they are better drivers and they train them better in Gairloch. That could be the case and, if it is, then well done. The driving instructor must be very proud of his record." However, he added: "It is more difficult to drive in urban areas because there's more going on. You've got lots of distractions, higher concentrations of traffic, lots of decisions to make, you've complex road intersections, lots of pedestrians in urbanized areas."
- Tallach, who charges £28 for lessons in his VW Golf, acknowledges that learning in the countryside can be different and that he can occasionally be teased as a result. "I do get slagged off because, obviously, we don't have roundabouts," he says, although he notes: "we do have traffic lights now when they dig up the road and that type of thing."
- Alongside his day job, Tallach – who successfully taught ten of his nieces and nephews to pass first time – is on call around the clock as the fire station watch manager and also drives the local school bus. And his experience as a firefighter means he is acutely aware of the dangers faced by motorists. "I really push for high standards," he explains. "You can train people and teach people, but once they pass their test, you don't really want to be going to cut them out of cars."

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11 Whatever urban drivers may believe, he adds, the roads of Gairloch also have their own difficulties – a lesson he learned when he moved from the busier Inverness years ago. "It's a totally different mindset to drive out here to a town and a

city," he says. "I found out here that you've got to be a totally different type of driver."

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