

‘I could have killed someone’ says learner driver taking lessons for YEARS with sight too poor to get behind the wheel

Retail worker among nearly 3 MILLION UK licence-holders feared to be driving illegally due to sub-standard sight, reveals Vision Express research

A 32-year-old who has been learning to drive since he was 18 made a shock discovery - his vision was so poor that he was getting behind the wheel illegally – and the danger posed by his sight impairment had been overlooked by his instructor.

Gavin Paxton, from Whitley Bay, had been suffering from headaches and was struggling to read road signs during his lessons, yet was never advised to have his eyes checked. In fact, self-confessed nervous driver Gavin had no idea that a 20m number plate check would be a mandatory practical element of his test.



Optometrist Chris tests Gavin's sight at the Vision Express South Shields store.

He is now backing the Vision Express ‘Eye Tests Save Lives’ campaign, which is calling for the controversial 20m check to be scrapped and replaced with mandatory sight checks for all UK motorists every ten years.

By chance, Gavin had an eye test on the Vision Express Vision Van when it toured the North East in October 2018.

Chris Froment, the optometrist who conducted his eye test, said: “Gavin was unable to read a number plate at 20m, which was very worrying because he is a learner driver. When tested, he couldn’t read the chart to a good enough standard, even with his glasses on. He was wearing a prescription of +2, but thorough testing suggested he should be a +4, which is a dramatic change.”

Gavin said: “I’ve been learning to drive on and off since I was 18, and now I know that I’ve been behind the wheel illegally for a long time – two years, maybe more. Who knows what could have happened if I had carried on driving. I could have killed someone.

“I’m a nervous driver as it is. During my lessons, reading road signs has been difficult. The instructor would tell me to follow the signs and I’d have to say, ‘wait, I need to get a little closer to read it’. It was never suggested that I should get my eyes tested, so I think there should be better training for driving instructors, to make sure they’re making students aware that a good standard of vision is crucial, right from day one of lessons.”

Gavin’s story echos new Vision Express data, collected from over 1,000 UK eye tests onboard its high tech, mobile Vision Van. It found that:

- 2 in 3 (65%) people were wearing an incorrect prescription
- 52% of motorists confessed to not always wearing their vision correction while driving
- 7% - that’s 2.8 million licence-holders - are putting lives at risk by getting behind the wheel because their vision unaided was either below the legal standard to drive, or borderline.

However, unlike 81% of people, who neglect to have a regular eye test, Gavin had visited an optician two years earlier. He said: “I was getting headaches and straining to read, but I kept wearing the glasses I had, thinking it was normal and something I just had to live with.

“I definitely support Vision Express making eye tests a requirement for drivers. I didn’t realise that after passing your test there is no law that says you need to get your eyes checked by an optician. It makes me feel really unsafe that people are putting the lives of others at risk every day, when a simple test could make all the difference. You get your car checked for issues, but not the driver. You’re in control of the car, not the other way around. It should be essential to check the driver is fit to use the vehicle.”

ENDS

Background information:

- Vision Express is calling on the Government to explore ways to make the driver eyesight testing regime in the UK more effective by:
 - introducing a full eyesight test (including peripheral vision) for all new drivers
 - introducing a mandatory eye test requirement for all drivers every 10 years to coincide with the renewal of the photo card driving licence
 - exploring how the eye testing regime can better reflect eyesight deterioration as drivers age
 - spearheading awareness-raising initiatives emphasising the importance of good driver eye health.
- The legal minimum standard for driving in the UK is to read a standard number plate from a distance of 20 metres (or 20.5m for an old style number plate) wearing corrective lenses if required. Visual acuity must be at least Snellen 6/12 with both eyes open. Any driver unable to meet these standards must not drive and must notify the DVLA, which will refuse or revoke a licence.
- The number plate test was originally introduced over 80 years ago in 1937 at a distance of 75ft (23m) before the Second World War. In 1971, to reflect a change in number plate size, the distance was amended to 67 feet (20.5m). The requirement to read a number plate at a distance of 20m came into force in 2003, the result of the font size on the new number plate.
- The UK driver eye sight-testing regime is far behind many other countries in Europe. The UK was one of only five countries out of 29 in Europe assessed by the European Council of Optometry and Optics (ECOO) to use the number plate test for new drivers. The Council states that the 20m number plate test “is not a measure of visual acuity”. In 22 of the 29 countries assessed by the ECOO, a doctor or an ophthalmologist is required to undertake the eye testing. In the UK this is done by a driving instructor.
- In 2017, a total of 6,954 drivers had their (Group 1) licences revoked for eyesight-related conditions. Over 40% of these were aged under 70.
- The UK has a worsening outlook for eye health: over 2 million people are living with sight loss, 50% of which is preventable, and forecasters predict a further half a million could

lose their sight by 2020. For 53% of these, a simple sight test and new glasses could make a huge difference.

- Deterioration of eyesight is often gradual, yet regular sight checks can pick up subtle changes in visual fields. Early treatment is essential to safeguard vision for life.
- The College of Optometrists surveyed 3,000 drivers and found that one in five admitted driving knowing their vision was poor. This is echoed by a Brake survey in which 19% of drivers put off visiting an optician when noticing vision problems.

Notes for editors

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About Vision Express

Vision Express is one of the largest optical retailers in the UK and part of [GrandVision](#), the global leader in optical retail operating in more than 40 countries, spanning over 6,500 stores and online.

With almost 600 stores nationwide, Vision Express first opened its doors in Newcastle in 1988. Built on a passion for the profession, it has gone from strength to strength, driven by a commitment to unparalleled customer service and providing the best individual optical care, the right product and great value. Customers can select from a vast range of genuine designer brands and the latest technology lenses, through to complete glasses from £39.

With around 6,000 employees, Vision Express makes a significant difference to the communities it operates within, and the organisations it chooses to support. As part of its commitment to Vision. Taken Seriously, and as a responsible and caring retailer, Vision Express is proud to partner with a range of healthcare charities, which have touched the lives of customers and teams. These companies provide vital support to people affected by vision-related conditions. They are part of the [Vision Express Charity Project](#) and include:

1. Childhood Eye Cancer Trust (CHECT)
2. International Glaucoma Association
3. Macular Society
4. Stroke Association
5. Temple Street University Hospital
6. Brake