Headway
the brain injury association

Driving
after brain injury

This publication explains how the skill of driving can be affected by brain injury. It explains the legal requirements of driving after brain injury, what to do whether you can or cannot drive after brain injury and what kind of financial assistance is available.

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Introduction

Driving is a skill that many people rely on for independence, socialising and daily tasks. Unfortunately, the various skills needed for driving can often be affected by brain injury.

Fortunately, many brain injury survivors can eventually return to driving. However, there are legal requirements when driving with a medical condition such as brain injury, and these must always be followed to keep the driver and others safe.

There are also sensible precautions that should be taken, even if you feel that your driving skills are intact after brain injury.

Brain injury survivors may need to take tests to show that they can continue driving safely. Vehicle changes may need to be made to improve safety and comfort of driving. In some cases, a survivor may no longer be able to drive, and different transport systems will need to be considered. Emotional and practical support may be needed to cope with this adjustment.

This publication is written to help you…

- understand how brain injury affects driving skills;
- understand the legal requirements of driving after brain injury;
- learn ways to drive carefully with brain injury;
- learn ways to cope with being unable to drive after brain injury;
- learn how to get emotional support if you are struggling with being unable to drive after brain injury;
- identify who your licensing authority is.

Words in **bold and underlined** are defined in a glossary at the end.

The information in this publication does not replace clinical guidance from medical professionals. You should always get advice from your GP or other suitably qualified

professional for help with managing the effects of brain injury.

Can I drive after brain injury?

A common driving-related question asked by brain injury survivors and their loved ones is whether or not the survivor can drive after their injury.

There is no single answer for this. Brain injury affects people differently, so whether someone can continue to drive will depend on their personal circumstances, such as:

- the effects of brain injury they personally experience;
- the outcomes of assessments they undergo;
- the type of vehicle they drive - the required standards of health and driving ability are higher for Group 2 licence holders (large lorries and buses) than Group 1 licence holders (cars and motorcycles).

Ultimately, only relevant licensing authorities can decide whether someone can continue driving after brain injury. It is therefore a legal requirement to inform your licensing authority if you drive and have had a brain injury, so that they can assess your fitness to drive.

You can find out who your licensing authority is in the section Who is my licensing authority? More guidance on informing licensing authorities is available in the section *Legal requirements and informing licensing authorities.*

It can be reassuring to know that many people can return to driving eventually, even after a moderate or severe brain injury. For those who are not able to return to driving, different transport systems may need to be considered. Guidance on

both of these outcomes is available further on in this publication.

How can a brain injury affect driving?

Driving is a complicated activity, requiring various skills as well as the ability to co-ordinate them. Unfortunately, these skills can often be affected by brain injury. There may be physical, **cognitive**, emotional or behavioural effects of the injury that interfere with the ability to drive safely, comfortably or confidently.

Physical effects

Physical effects of brain injury affect the physical functioning of the body.

Common physical effects of brain injury that can affect driving include:

- Problems with movement, such as being unable to use feet to operate pedals, manoeuvre the body to sit inside a car, or turn the head to fully see potential hazards from both sides;
- problems with dizziness or balance, such as **vertigo**;
- **fatigue**, which often comes on seemingly out of the blue so may be difficult to plan for;
- problems with hearing;
- sleep problems, which may affect concentration and cause day-time drowsiness;

- headaches or pain elsewhere in the body, which may be distracting.

These physical effects may be overcome by making **adaptations** to the vehicle, or by taking sensible precautions when driving, such as taking a break from driving when needed, or taking medication.

The following physical effects need to be taken into particular account, as they can have a serious impact on fitness-to-drive.

- Seizures - there is a higher than average risk of epilepsy after certain types of brain injury. Seizures are dealt with on an individual basis by licensing authorities. The decision of whether someone can drive or not will depend on the type of seizure experienced.

- Visual problems - there are many possible types of visual problems after brain injury. These may affect the ability to judge speed, distance and depth, as well as observation skills such as spotting hazards on the road. Some people may experience double vision.

It is important to take the advice of your doctor if these effects are experienced.

Cognitive effects

Cognitive effects of brain injury affect thinking and learning skills. Common **cognitive** effects of brain injury that can affect driving include:

- problems with concentration;

- problems with switching or dividing attention;

- memory problems;
- slower reaction times due to taking longer with processing information;
- problems with thinking ahead or interpreting situations, affecting the ability to notice hazards in advance;
- problems with making decisions, for example decisions on how to react to situations on the road.

Impaired **insight** might affect a brain injury survivor's ability to recognise the impact of brain injury on their driving skills. A survivor with impaired insight may insist they are safe to continue driving, while family and friends think otherwise. Guidance on what to do if you are concerned about a survivor's fitness to drive is available in the section Informing a licensing authority on a survivor's behalf.

Emotional and behavioural effects

Emotional effects of brain injury affect how survivors feel, which can in turn affect behaviour. Alternatively, behaviour may also be affected following injury to parts of the brain that are directly responsible for monitoring behaviour. Common emotional and behavioural effects of brain injury that may affect driving include:

- anxiety, affecting a survivor's confidence with driving;
- post-traumatic stress disorder, for instance if the brain injury was caused by a road traffic collision;
- impulsivity;

- disinhibition;
- problems with controlling anger, especially in situations such as traffic delays, or with other inconsiderate drivers.

Legal requirements and informing licensing authorities

If you drive and have had a brain injury, you may choose to voluntarily give up your licence (for example if your GP has advised this). You might be able to get your licence back later, and you can reapply for a new one in the future.

If you do not voluntarily give up your licence, **you must still inform your licensing authority about your brain injury**. This is a legal requirement.

Failure to inform authorities could result in a fine of up to £1,000, or prosecution if you have an accident. It would also mean that your licence is not valid and that you would be uninsured in the event of an accident. Mostly, it could mean that you are putting both yourself and others at serious risk.

You will need to make contact with your licensing authority to notify them of your injury. Guidance on your licensing authority is available in the section *Who is my licensing authority?* Contact details are also available in *Useful organisations*.

You may be asked to complete a form or questionnaire, or to provide a letter containing details of your brain injury. For survivors in England, Wales or Scotland, this will be the DVLA form B1. A full link to this form is available in *Useful organisations*.

You could ask someone close to you to help with completing the forms. You might also be asked to provide any relevant hospital notes. Your licensing agency may need to contact your

hospital consultant, **occupational therapist** or other professionals for further information.

How long does it take to hear back from my licensing authority?

It can take several weeks or months to hear back from a licensing authority. Your licensing authority will aim to make a decision as quickly as possible, but they will also be relying on information from doctors or other health professionals, which can make the process take longer.

Please be patient while they are making a decision, as they will probably not be able to provide updates. In the meantime, you may find advice in the section *Coping without a driving licence* helpful.

Can I drive while waiting to hear back from my licensing authority?

Your GP or other healthcare professional will be able to advise on whether you can drive while waiting to hear from your licensing authority.

Doctors and healthcare professionals who need guidance on safety to drive may find the following resources helpful.

- UK government guidance *Assessing fitness to drive - a guide for medical professionals*;
- UK government guidance *Neurological disorders: assessing fitness to drive*;
- Drivers in England, Scotland or Wales may find the DVLA's leaflet *Can I drive while my application is with DVLA?* helpful for further information.

What decision might my licensing authority make about my fitness to drive?

When you hear back from your licensing authority, there are a number of possible decisions they might have arrived at.

You may be allowed to keep your licence
You may be allowed to keep your licence or get a new one. For more guidance, see the section *What to do if you can keep your licence.*

Your licence may be withdrawn
Your licence may be withdrawn, or your application turned down. If so, the reason for this decision will be explained to you, and you will be told when you can reapply. This will likely be very disappointing and concerning news, but there are ways to cope in the meantime. For more guidance, see the section *What to do if you can't keep your licence.*

You may be given a time-limited licence
You may be given a time-limited licence, which is valid for a specified number of years. After this, your fitness to continue driving will be reassessed.

You may be asked to take a test
You may be asked to take a test, such as a driving assessment or an eye test before a final decision can be made about your fitness to drive. For more guidance, see the section *What should I do if I need a driving assessment?*

You may be told to make changes to your vehicle
You may be told to make changes to your vehicle to make it safer for you to drive, such as fitting special controls. Your local disabled driving centre can help by conducting an assessment of your adaptation needs and making recommendations. Use

the contact details for Driving Mobility in *Useful organisations* to find out more and locate your nearest driving centre.

Informing a licensing authority on a survivor's behalf

If a survivor cannot inform their licensing authority about their injury, or will not do so themselves, and you have concerns about their ability to drive safely, you can inform a licensing authority on their behalf.

You can do this by contacting their licensing authority. See the section Who is my licensing authority? to find out who the survivor's licensing authority is, and *Useful organisations* to access contact details.

Remember that while you may feel guilty about informing a licensing authority, especially against the survivor's wishes, this may be necessary to prevent the survivor from being at risk of harming themselves or others if they continue to drive unsafely.

What to do if you can keep your licence

You will probably feel pleased and relieved to be told that you are fit to drive and can keep your licence. However, you must inform your licensing authority if your condition gets worse, if you develop any other condition, or if anything else happens that affects your ability to drive.

Keep the following tips in mind for safer, less stressful driving:

- Never drink and drive. Alcohol will probably affect you more than it did before your injury. Because of this, it is generally advised that people stop drinking alcohol after brain injury. More guidance on this is available in our publication *Alcohol after brain injury*.

- Keep the first few journeys after your injury short, if possible, and consider having another adult in the car with you.

- Discuss any possible medication side effects that may affect your driving with your GP, especially if you have recently started new medication or your medication dosage has been changed.

- Plan your journey before you set off, including identifying places to stop for breaks on long journeys.

- Use a satellite navigation device and set your route before you start driving.

- **Fatigue** might cause you to feel more tired than usual and at unexpected times. Do not drive when you are fatigued. Plan any driving journeys for when you are least likely to feel fatigued (you might be able to plan for this by recognising patterns or 'triggers' to your fatigue). Be prepared to change your plans if you do not feel well or alert enough to drive that day. Try to avoid long journeys and take breaks if you need them. More guidance on coping with fatigue is available in our publication *Fatigue after brain injury*.

- Inform your car insurance company about your brain injury. You should also inform them of any **adaptations** made to your vehicle and make sure that you have adequate breakdown cover.

- Consider checking your eligibility for a **Blue Badge**, which can help you to park close to your destination. More information on eligibility for Blue Badges and how to apply

is available on the UK government website. A full link to this page is available in *Useful organisations*.

What to do if you can't keep your licence

If your licensing authority decides that it would not be safe for you to drive, they will withdraw your licence. This can feel very upsetting, concerning or frustrating, but remember that this decision has been made to keep yourself and others safe.

You do have the right to appeal against this decision. Your licensing authority will tell you how to do this.

Remember that being refused a licence does not necessarily mean that it will be refused forever. With time, re-learning of skills and vehicle adaptations, it may be possible to regain a licence.

Guidance to help you cope without your licence is available in the section *Coping without a driving licence*.

If my licence is withdrawn, how do I get it back?

If your licence is withdrawn for medical reasons, you can reapply when your doctor says that you meet the medical standards for driving, for example if the effects of your brain injury improve over time.

You might be required to take a driving assessment to show that you meet the medical standards. For more information on this, see the section *What should I do if I need a driving assessment?*

Further guidance is available on the UK government website under Reapply for a driving licence following a medical condition. A full link to this is available under *Useful organisations*.

Coping without a driving licence

We understand how difficult it can be to have your driving licence withdrawn. Do try to remember that this decision has been made to keep yourself and others safe.

There will probably be practical and emotional consequences to cope with. For instance, you might need to rely on others for transport, and this may cause you to feel a loss in your sense of independence.

You might also be at risk of becoming socially isolated if you can no longer conveniently travel to social gatherings.

Vehicles can be an important part of some people's lifestyles, either as a hobby or for work. Identity or sense of self-esteem may therefore be affected.

There may also be financial consequences if you relied on your vehicle for work, for example if you were a lorry, taxi or bus driver before your injury.

Feelings such as sadness, depression, anxiety or frustration can develop as a result of these changes.

In this section, we share some practical tips to help you cope without your licence.

Use public transport

Consider using buses, trains or coaches for travelling. You may be able to get discounts or free travel for yourself and/or a family member, friend or carer.

Bus

- Disabled Person's Bus Pass, or other concessionary bus travel. Further information is available from the UK government website guidance on Disabled Bus Pass.

- Dial-a-Ride scheme, if you cannot use the bus. Contact your local council for further information.

Train

Disabled Person's Railcard, or other concessionary train travel. Visit Railcard for this service in England, Wales and Scotland, and Concessionary Bus and Rail Travel for this service in Northern Ireland.

Coach

Disabled Coachcard, or other concessionary coach travel. Visit National Express for this service in England, Wales and Scotland, and Concessionary Bus and Rail Travel for this service in Northern Ireland.

Taxi

Taxicard scheme. Contact your local council for further information.

Below are some further tips for using public transport after brain injury.

- Contact your travel company in advance to let them know your requirements. Every train and coach company will have a policy outlining how they support disabled passengers, so you could ask for a copy of this to see how they can help.

- Consider keeping a copy of transport timetables with you, or writing key timings of services on a calendar.

- Travel with someone, if possible.
- Plan for journeys in advance where possible, including checking the transport route, timings and making a written plan for what to do if you miss your transport.
- Keep a charged phone and emergency contact numbers with you.
- Importantly, don't be afraid to ask for help! For example, you could inform your bus driver of the stop you need to get off at and ask them to let you know when the bus has arrived. A Headway Brain Injury Identity Card can also help to make sure you get the right support when you need it.

Ask for help from family, friends and colleagues

If family, friends or colleagues are helping out with transport, try to make travel arrangements in advance and write plans down so that everyone remembers. Try to make sure that you are ready on time, for example packing your bag the night before.

Try not to get upset or angry if travel plans change. Instead, try to have a backup plan made in advance.

If possible, travel at times that are convenient for others. For example, if your family go food shopping on a certain day of the week, ask to go along on the same day.

If you are travelling with someone as a passenger, they can use your **Blue Badge** for parking only if it helps you to be closer to your destination. They cannot use it if you are not a passenger, or only being picked up/dropped off.

They also cannot use it to do tasks on your behalf, such as shopping. There are strict rules for the use of Blue Badges;

more guidance on this is available on the UK government website.

Consider support schemes for accessing work

If you are struggling to get to work, talk to your employer about making reasonable adjustments. Employers have a legal duty to consider making reasonable adjustments for employees with a disability.

Adjustments could involve starting or finishing work at different times so that you can use public transport, or being given permission to work from home on days when travelling is difficult. More guidance on this is available in our publication *Returning to work after brain injury*.

In England, Wales and Scotland, you might be eligible for Access to Work, a government grant that can help with the costs of getting to and from work if you have a disability. More information on this is available on the UK government website. A similar scheme is available in Northern Ireland; more information on this is available on the Northern Ireland government website. Full links for both are available in *Useful organisations*.

Talk to others about your feelings

Losing one's driving licence can cause more than just practical travelling difficulties. Many people feel they lose a sense of their independence and identity when they can no longer drive. There may be fears for the future or worries about becoming socially isolated.

Feelings like sadness, anxiety and frustration can be common after losing one's licence. It is important to talk to others about your feelings. You can talk to family, friends or others, or get

professional support from a counsellor or psychologist if your feelings are becoming difficult to manage. Speak to your GP about getting a referral to professional services.

You can also call our nurse-led helpline, use our online communities, or visit your local Headway service to talk about your feelings, or for general support. If you struggle with travelling to a local Headway service, contact them first to find out if they can visit you in your home, or if they have online meetings available.

Driving assessments

If there is any doubt at all about your ability to drive safely, it is important to have an expert driving assessment, even if you feel that your driving skills were excellent before your injury.

There are disabled driving centres across the UK that specialise in offering driving-related assessments to people with disabilities. They can assess how your injury affects your fitness to drive, suggest car adaptations and advise on accessible travelling.

To locate your nearest disabled driving centre, visit www.drivingmobility.org.uk.

There will be a fee for undergoing a driving assessment. This will vary from centre to centre. Contact your nearest centre to find out more and to discuss funding, as there may be financial help available to cover this cost.

A driving assessment is designed to enable safe driving. It also helps reduce the anxiety that you or your family may have about your ability to drive safely. Advice might be given to help you rebuild your confidence on the road. In other cases, over-confidence may be an issue, and you may need help to be more realistic and develop a safer driving style.

Once you have undergone your assessment, the centre will make recommendations to your licensing authority on your fitness to drive. It is important to note that the centre itself cannot withdraw your licence. Only licensing authorities such as DVLA and DVA can do this.

Learning to drive for the first time

If you have not yet learned to drive, you should check with your doctor if you are recovered enough from your brain injury to start taking driving lessons.

You can apply for a provisional driving licence by contacting your licensing authority, usually by completing an online form. You can also get a provisional driving licence form from your local Post Office, which you can fill in and post to the licensing authority. You will need to inform the licensing authority that you have had a brain injury through their application process. Guidance on your licensing authority is available in the section *Licensing authorities.*

What happens next?

Once you have submitted your application, the licensing authority may decide to issue a provisional licence, ask for further information, contact your doctor and/or consultant, or ask you to attend a medical examination.

The process of medical checking and handling takes time, so if you want to start driving as soon as you are legally able, consider applying for your provisional licence two or three months before your qualifying birthday.

Once you start learning to drive, it is important to inform your driving instructor that you have had a brain injury, so that they can address your needs and provide support if it is needed.

When you take a driving test, this will be the same test as every other candidate, regardless of your brain injury. However, you should notify the licensing agency about any physical requirements you have, you may have time to talk to your examiner about these before your test. You may be given extra time in the test if you need longer to get in and out of the car.

More guidance on driving tests is available at www.gov.uk/driving-test.

If you or your family feel that a brain injury may have affected your ability to learn to drive, it may be useful to have a driving ability assessment first. This may seem expensive, but it can save you money in the long run by telling you whether your injury is likely to affect your ability to learn to drive, before you pay for lessons. It could also provide helpful information to your driving instructor.

More guidance on this is available in the previous section *Driving assessments.*

Motability Scheme

If you are receiving mobility allowance through benefits such as Personal Independence Payment or Disability Living Allowance, you may be entitled to the Motability Scheme. This is a scheme across the UK that allows you to use your allowance to lease a vehicle. It also covers insurance, servicing and MOT, breakdown cover and support with electric vehicles.

Even if you do not drive yourself, you can nominate someone to drive the car for you, as long as they are driving it for your benefit, for example your spouse driving the car to do food shopping for you.

It is very important to be aware of what you can and cannot use your Motability car for, as misuse is treated very seriously. More

guidance on this is available at www.motability.co.uk/whats-available/cars/package/use.

You can use Motability's eligibility checker to see whether you or someone else is eligible to join the Motability Scheme at www.motability.co.uk/how-it-works.

Licensing authorities

The below table lists who your licensing authority is based on where you live in the UK. This is the authority whom you will need to inform if you have had a brain injury. Contact details for these authorities are available in the section Useful organisations.

England, Wales or Scotland	Northern Ireland	Jersey	Guernsey
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)	Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA)	Driver and Vehicle Standards	Driver and Vehicle Licensing (DVL)

Conclusion

A brain injury can cause many life changes, including affecting a survivor's ability to drive safely. It is a legal requirement to report brain injury to the relevant vehicle licensing authority, so that appropriate checks can be made and advice given on the survivor's fitness to drive.

Many survivors do eventually return to driving, while others may need to rely on alternative transport systems.

It is important to seek support for any of the emotional or psychological impacts of losing one's ability to drive, especially

if feelings such as sadness or anxiety are becoming difficult to manage.

We hope that this publication has helped you to better understand the actions you need to take and where to get support from for driving after brain injury. Our nurse-led helpline is available to offer further information and support on all aspects of living with brain injury.

Glossary

Adaptations - tools or equipment that have been modified to make them more suitable and safer for use by people with disabilities.

Blue Badge - a parking permit given to people with a disability to allow them to park closer to their destination.

Cognitive - the processes involved in thinking, learning and information processing.

Disinhibition - being uninhibited with what one says or does, often behaving in a way that is considered to be socially or culturally inappropriate.

Double vision - also called diplopia, causes two images of a single object to be seen at the same time.

Epilepsy - a condition in which there are frequent bursts of abnormal electrical activity in the brain, called seizures.

Fatigue - an overwhelming tiredness that is very commonly felt after brain injury. It is often described as a ‘mental fog’ that

comes out of the blue and can affect the ability to concentrate on and process information.

Impulsivity - behaving without being able to weigh up information before making a decision.

Insight - being self-aware. Impaired insight, or lack of insight, is where someone loses their sense of self-awareness, for example not recognising that they struggle with things due to a brain injury.

Occupational therapist - a professional who helps people with health conditions with living independently and coping with daily activities.

Post-traumatic stress disorder - a severe psychological reaction to a traumatic event, involving a persistent re-experiencing of the trauma, avoidance of things that remind the person of the event, increased arousal and a numbing of emotional responses.

Vertigo - dizziness and spinning sensations.

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Useful organisations

The organisations listed below are provided for information purposes only. Their inclusion does not imply endorsement, recommendation, or approval by Headway. Users should make their own assessment of any organisation or service before engaging with them.

Licensing authorities

Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA)
Licensing agency for Northern Ireland
Web: www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/driver-vehicle-agency-driver-licensing Email: dva@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk
Tel: 0300 200 7861

Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)
Licensing agency for England, Wales and Scotland
Web: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/driver-and-vehicle-licensing-agency
Full link for DVLA form B1 for reporting medical conditions:
www.gov.uk/ government/publications/b1-online-confidential-medical-information

Driver and Vehicle Licensing (DVL)
Licensing agency for Guernsey
Web: www.gov.gg/driving-medical-conditions
Email: dvl@gov.gg
Tel: 01481 221000

Driver and Vehicle Standards
Licensing agency for Jersey
Web:
www.gov.je/Travel/Motoring/DriverLicensing/Pages/MedicalStandards.aspx
Email: dvsinfo@gov.je
Tel: 01534 448600

Other organisations and useful links

Access to work
UK government: www.gov.uk/access-to-work
NI government: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work

Blue Badge guidance:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-blue-badge-scheme-rights-and-responsibilities-in-england/the-blue-badge-scheme-rights-and-responsibilities-in-england

Contact your local council: www.gov.uk/find-local-council

Disability Driving Instructors
Offers people with disabilities advice on driving and helps driving instructors.
Web: www.disabilitydrivinginstructors.com
Email: admin@disabilitydrivinginstructors.com
Tel: 0844 800 7355

Disabled Motoring UK
A UK charity supporting disabled drivers, passengers and Blue Badge holders

Web: www.disabledmotoring.org
Email: info@disabledmotoring.org
Tel: 01508 489 449

Driving Mobility
For further guidance on driving with brain injury, driving assessments and making adaptations to vehicles
Web: www.drivingmobility.org.uk
Email: info@drivingmobility.org.uk
Tel: 0800 559 3636

Motability Foundation
A charity set up to help disabled people with mobility, offering the Motability Scheme for leasing a vehicle.
Web: www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk
Tel: 01279 635999

National Express Coachcard:
www.nationalexpress.com/en/offers/coachcards/disabled

Northern Ireland Concessionary Bus and Rail Travel:
www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/ free-and-concessionary-bus-and-rail-travel

Railcard: www.railcard.co.uk

UK Government Blue Badge eligibility checker:
www.gov.uk/apply-blue-badge

UK Government Disabled Person's Bus Pass:
www.gov.uk/apply-for-disabled-bus-pass

UK Government – reapply for a driving licence following a medical condition: www.gov.uk/reapply-driving-licence-medical-condition/when-you-can-start-driving-again

We hope that this has been a helpful resource. Please consider sharing your feedback with us by scanning the QR code or by visiting our publication feedback survey https://uk.surveymonkey.com/r/hwpublications.

Learn more and support our work at www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

This information was last reviewed in 2023.

We're here to listen.

If you need support, or have a question about brain injury, contact our free nurse-led helpline:

0808 800 2244
helpline@headway.org.uk

0115 924 0800 | enquiries@headway.org.uk
www.headway.org.uk

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Old Basford, Nottingham, NG6 8SF

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