



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Overview Briefing:  
Department for Infrastructure

28 January 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Roy Beggs  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Keith Buchanan  
Ms Liz Kimmins  
Mr Raymond McCartney  
Mr Andrew Muir

**Witnesses:**

Mr John McGrath	Department for Infrastructure
Dr Andrew Murray	Department for Infrastructure
Ms Julie Thompson	Department for Infrastructure

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I welcome the witnesses from the Department for Infrastructure: Mr John McGrath, deputy secretary of transport and resources; Dr Andrew Murray, deputy secretary of roads and rivers; and Ms Julie Thompson, deputy secretary of planning, water and the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). The three of you are welcome to our meeting.

At the outset, I want to say that I am slightly disappointed that the papers were so late yesterday. It meant that members did not really have a proper chance to spend the time on them that they would have liked. I know that a request for the papers went in on 16 January. It is regrettable that they were so late.

**Mr John McGrath (Department for Infrastructure):** Chair, obviously, we are sorry that the papers were late. I am not too sure that I recognise the sixteenth for the request, but, obviously, we would like to give the Committee the best service we can. If there were learning points on that, we will pick them up.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** OK. We very much appreciate that.

Obviously, you are here to discuss broadly what the Department does. Members will come to those questions in due course. The MOT situation is critical, and it would be remiss of the Committee not to spend a little time on that before we go to general questions. At lunchtime yesterday, we had a statement from the Minister that gave the impression that the situation was in hand: by early evening, Paul Duffy had cancelled all MOT tests. It escalated quite quickly during the day. This morning, he says that it could take weeks if not months to resolve the situation. You may then have to replace all the lifts, obviously at quite a cost, I imagine, to the public purse, although, perhaps, you might want to

clarify that, particularly at a time when we are under severe budget constraints. It is obviously a situation that was unforeseen. That said, can you give us more information on how we have found ourselves in what has turned out to be quite a shambolic situation and how we move from on here?

**Ms Julie Thompson (Department for Infrastructure):** Yes, I am happy to do that, Chair. Maybe the lead-in to this and being clear about how it happened is the place to start, and then I am happy to pick up on and talk about the recent developments of yesterday evening. Obviously, it is not a situation that anybody wants to find themselves in at all. We are particularly concerned about the disruption for customers and what it means for them, and I will touch on that as well.

Generally, all the lifts in DVA centres are inspected and monitored on an ongoing basis. There are minor inspections every eight weeks and major inspections every six months. Going back to last year, the six-monthly inspections were started in July. Those went through till November. By that stage, nine MOT centres had had clean bills of health and no cracks on those lifts had been lodged by the supplier. In November, the supplier identified cracks at the tenth centre, which was Larne test centre, but had no concerns about the safety of the lift and set off then to test and continue doing inspections at the remaining five centres. That work continued to January. On 15 January, we got the report that said that there were signs of cracking to varying degrees. Those cracks are at varying degrees: some are particularly wide and others much narrower. There are cracks to varying degrees on 48 of the 55 lifts in operation. Again, however, no safety concerns had been logged at that point.

DVA then asked for a full inspection to be carried out on all lifts, going back over the ones that had been given, if you like, a clean bill of health earlier in the process. Following that and further inspections of lifts, on 22 January, we effectively took the cautionary step to take the lifts down until they had been inspected, repaired and reinspected. All the way through this, we have been working with the suppliers and clarifying with them what the position is on each lift and ensuring that the safety of customers and staff is given priority.

That was the process, and that is where we were. You know that the Minister was obviously very concerned about that and acted quickly. As of Friday and coming into the weekend, we put in place temporary exemption certificates that effectively give four extra months on an MOT certificate to all cars and light vehicles apart from those that are four years old, because there is no MOT certificate to actually extend for them, and taxis, because they operate under different legislation. We are also taking steps to prioritise them. That was the position we were in yesterday morning and coming into the afternoon.

Yesterday afternoon, then, through a meeting with the supplier, we found that they were not able to give us sufficient assurances about the effectiveness of the repairs that had been put in place. On hearing that, the DVA had, obviously, no option and absolutely took the right step to suspend testing under those lifts until the issue was resolved. Testing of heavy goods vehicles and buses continues for now. We are obviously very concerned about taxis and four-year-old cars, so we are trying to prioritise those and are seeking to put them through. In each MOT centre, there is still a heavy-duty lane that is working. It does not use the lifts and is not affected by this at all. We are seeking to put taxis and four-year-old cars through that, alongside the heavy-duty vehicles that need to go through there, too.

Obviously, communications to customers and staff have been a key priority as well. That is why there have been several engagements and lots of media and statements made on this, from the middle of last week through to yesterday. We will continue to update people today. We appreciate that the situation last week, when each lift was being looked at, was very fluid. That led to some customers turning up, but their MOT ended up being cancelled. That fluidity, I guess, is not so much an issue now, because we are saying, "Don't turn up for your appointment". We will contact directly customers with taxis and four-year-old cars to bring them in. That is a much clearer message for the public, and that is because where we are at now is less fluid.

We are obviously looking at the whole position of how we move this forward, fix it and get it resolved. As far as that is concerned, we are looking to see what the status of each of the lifts is. We will then look at whether the answer to this is replacing parts or whole lifts and how we deal with that. That is being done as a matter of urgency. That is a whole lot of work that needs to be looked at. The options need to be worked through to determine what we need to do and in what time frame. It is being given, obviously, full urgency. The Minister has called urgent meetings and put notes around Executive colleagues and to you. She also made a ministerial statement that was factually correct at the point that we were at yesterday. The position, then, moved on considerably yesterday evening. She called a meeting yesterday evening, and she is calling another one today. We are moving quickly to deal with the issue, and we, obviously, fully apologise to all the customers who have been affected by it. We are

trying to prioritise the right vehicles, so that the ones that have the problems, as in they cannot get the extension, are given priority at the centres.

In terms of standing back from it and saying, "Well, how did we get here and how did this arise?", we are in a position where this has never happened before: the cracks had not been identified. This is very fluid and recent, and we are in a position now where we are dealing with that. We are, obviously, talking to the supplier, the inspectors and the repairs people. All of that is in train. That is a situation that moves almost daily. There are many trains that we are making sure we have in hand here, from communications to supplier management through to talking to our staff, but the priority and the reason for all of that is the health and safety of our staff and customers. There was no choice in the action. That is why the step was taken last night. We have to respond to health and safety, first and foremost. Unfortunately, that is leading to disruption and, then, to the work that we need to do to get this rectified urgently.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I absolutely agree on the issue of health and safety. It is much better that we are in this situation, having this discussion now and not looking backwards because something very serious has happened, trying to put in place measures to enhance safety. How old are the lifts?

**Ms Thompson:** The majority of lifts are from 2011 and 2012, so they are — what is that? — eight or nine years old.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Are inspections carried out in-house or externally? Is it manufacturer-linked? Can you explain that to us?

**Ms Thompson:** It is a contract with the manufacturer, and then there is a subcontract on the inspecting and on the repairs regime; those are both subcontracted out. We are looking at one option of getting an independent assessment again on the lifts and doing that through a separate route, and that is likely to be one of the angles that we will put in place very quickly.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Is it considered that, in the first instance, the lifts were fit for the purpose for which they were being used?

**Ms Thompson:** Given that we got no sign of anything and no safety concerns were raised by those suppliers, this has come out of the blue from a record that does not show any cracks in the system and certainly has not logged those as being immediate safety concerns. The start of this was when the first cracks were logged in November, but, even at that, no concerns were raised at that point. The trail then goes through to 15 January, when we learned more about the extent of those cracks and the DVA asked, understandably, for more inspections to be carried out. All of that then leads to 22 January, around the first step-in and then the step-in of last night.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** There has been an increase in the usage of the lifts over the last number of years with the increased number of vehicles on the roads, and you have admitted that there is a capacity issue anyway with MOT centres. I am mindful that you are putting additional pressure on lifts daily that, perhaps, was not anticipated at the time of installation. It goes back to the question: are they fit for purpose for what we need now?

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, and, if we look to what we need in the future, we will obviously take those demand issues into account. We had put in place the regime to make sure they were checked — the eight-weekly and six-monthly checks — and what they had been working through, up until yesterday, was a programme of inspecting, repairing and reinspecting, and we had also put in a two-week reinspection to confirm that things were still operating OK. On the basis of what we knew at the time, that was what we needed to do, and it has really only come out recently — certainly, last night, in terms of the change of last night, and then in the last few days prior to that — that things needed to be looked at more clearly.

We will need to step back on lots of this. The Minister has asked for a review of how we got here, the contingency planning and our communication with the public. She asked for the temporary exemption certificates to be put in place. There is a step back needed about how we procure, what we procure and how we set up our maintenance contracts. All of that will need to be looked at. We will have to have discussions with the supplier about the current situation and what, if anything, we can do, via them, with that in a contractual manner. That is another part of what we need to do. There are lots of

angles on this. The priority is health and safety first and foremost. Secondly, we need to get communications out to the public. Thirdly, we need to make sure that the public know that we are giving them the protection that they need through the temporary exemption certificates and then working with the taxis and the four-year-old cars. Fourthly, we need to work on understanding the lift side of things and where we go. That has been the order of where we have been, in a very short time, given how this has all transpired.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** There have been discussions in the broader media about dealing with the capacity and whether you need to look at a different method of testing or, in fact, look at the year in which a car should start to be tested, given the improvements in motor vehicles over the last number of years.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. Those are broader questions and certainly not ones for me today. We need to make sure absolutely that we provide a fit-for-purpose service. Today, it is not, and, therefore, we need to take steps to make that a more effective service in the future.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** OK. Quite a number of members have indicated.

**Mr Boylan:** Thanks very much for some of the answers. I agree with you. I know people who have never been to the MOT centre. Customer safety is an issue, and, regardless of whether or not there was a collapse of a lift, as there was according to some reports, you do not sit that far away from the lift when you are in a test centre, especially the Armagh one. I know that from experience. Working on customer safety is a major issue.

I want to go back to the procurement, because it will play a major part in the future. I take it that all the lifts did not go in at the same time. Did they all go in at the same time?

**Ms Thompson:** Not all of them, but a significant number did.

**Mr Boylan:** Right. All of a sudden, now, they have all failed. I agree with the Chair: the increase in the number of vehicles being tested would certainly lead to that.

I welcome the fact that you mentioned procurement, because there are certain questions asked, and the issue for us is the need for checks and balances in the procurement process and the contracts. It seems to me that, come November, bang, everything has happened, and it is all out over the media. We are getting the stories through the press, and I appreciate that the Minister has tried to respond to some of the questions that we have asked. The procurement is definitely important, and I want you to take those comments on board.

You mentioned that you would put the other cars through one of the lanes: what equipment is on those lorry lanes?

**Ms Thompson:** On the lorry lanes, there is not a lift involved; there is, effectively, a pit. Vehicles are driven over the top of the pit. There is no lift involved, and, therefore, it is a completely different system from an MOT test, in which, as you said, a car goes up into the air.

**Mr Boylan:** How then do you do the same checks? There are rollers for testing braking, but what about the hydraulic lift to test the joints and all of that? I am getting technical, but I know it.

I am hearing from constituents that there are loads of people who have booked tests. You say that you will put them all through one lane. That will take considerable time.

**Ms Thompson:** Putting cars through the heavy-duty lane is nothing new. Obviously, the priority and the normality is that buses and heavy goods vehicles go on to those lanes. However, cars have been routinely tested on those heavy-duty lanes. On the Chair's point, given the capacity issues and the volumes and the demands, we have been using those lanes flexibly to enable cars to be looked at. That is normal practice. The centres are well geared to testing cars and can, obviously, test them on those lanes properly.

**Mr Boylan:** So there will be no changes to the test itself.

**Ms Thompson:** It will be the same test. Many people will have had their car tested already, in routine procedure, on those heavy-duty lanes.

**Mr Boylan:** A lot of questions are being asked about the certificate and whether cars are roadworthy and need to be taxed. There is the issue of insurance. Can you explain how we will get through all that? How will we communicate to the public the message about whether they are legally qualified to drive their car on the road and whether their car is roadworthy?

**Ms Thompson:** OK. There are several layers to that. It is the responsibility of all owners to ensure that their car is roadworthy at all times. We all know that an MOT is done at a point in time and then something can break down: a light might break or something like that. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that our cars are roadworthy on an ongoing basis. The MOT certificate is given out annually in support of that.

The temporary exemption certificates that we have put in place have been backdated from Monday 20 January, if they needed to be, or are being put in, daily, as existing MOTs expire. They are able to pick up from our systems when an MOT expires. You need to have booked your car in for a test and have that test cancelled by the DVA for us to pick it up from our system. We know that you have booked an appointment and that the DVA has cancelled that appointment. We will pick that up in the system, in the offices, and go into, if you like, the back-office system and give the four-month extension. That is legal from the minute that it changes on our back-office systems. A customer may not get their letter confirming that for maybe a week or 10 days, because an administrative process has to be gone through, but, as soon as those processes are done in an MOT centre, that will be legally changed. There is then an automatic overnight update into the DVLA systems, where the tax is picked up. They can automatically see that your MOT certificate is now at a different date — four months hence — and the tax can operate off the back of that extended temporary exemption certificate. If those are in place, it should allow an insurance provider to confirm that you are legally insured to drive.

I appreciate that there are a lot of steps in that. People may wish to contact their insurance provider and confirm that they are comfortable with all of that, but our understanding is that the very act of putting the temporary exemption certificate in place extends the MOT to a different date. All the systems that talk to each other in the background, including the tax one, know that that has been put in at the extra four-month date, and the insurance, therefore, should be legal, provided that, presumably, you have renewed your insurance and other things like that, which are your responsibility. All of that is for vehicles barring taxis and four-year-old cars. We have used that system before. It is some years now since we did it, but we have done so. Therefore, those are the checks and balances that apply in the background. I appreciate that that is quite complicated for everybody to understand. There is a lot for people to digest, and we recognise that communication is an issue in ensuring that the media, nirect and social media — all those things — pick up the right messages. Insurance providers may be asking questions — that is understandable — but our understanding is that it will definitely resolve the tax issue automatically system by system.

The customer does not need to do anything. As long as they have booked an appointment with the DVA and had that appointment cancelled, the system will pick it up. If you do not make an appointment in the first place, nothing will be picked up. We are still encouraging people to book their appointments, and we do so today. When those reminder letters go out, people should still book appointments, because only through the cancellation of those appointments are we then picking them up and fixing them on the system when their MOT expires.

**Mr Boylan:** Somebody tried to book an appointment last night and could not get on the system. It would not accept it. Can you book an appointment online?

**Ms Thompson:** My understanding is yes, but I can definitely get that clarified.

**Mr Boylan:** That is needed.

I have one quick point, Chair. I know everybody else has questions to ask. It is reported that it will take a certain amount of money to fix all this: have you any indication of what that amount is? I ask in the context of yesterday's monitoring round statement in the Chamber. We have known about this issue for a number of days. We may not have known the amount, but it will come back to the Committee to support a bid to get some moneys to replace the lifts. Was there any discussion about that in the Department or with the Minister?

**Ms Thompson:** On the financing of it, you are absolutely right: it is very early doors. Up until last night, the lifts were being repaired. Purchasing them urgently was not part of where, we thought, we were.

In terms of how it will be funded, DVA has a trading fund. It operates as an agency. It is part of the Department — they are departmental staff — but it operates as a trading fund. Therefore, the first place that any funds on costs of this nature come from is that DVA trading fund. They are still public funds and still need to be absolutely looked after and used appropriately, but it would not be a call on, nor would we be bidding for it in the in-year monitoring process. It is a matter that DVA can resolve and has the reserves to resolve, but it is still a significant amount of money and something that, we need to make sure, we spend appropriately and wisely.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Just on that point, are you aware of what reserves DVA have at this stage?

**Ms Thompson:** I think I am, but I am reluctant to give a number. It is certainly well sufficient to deal with this.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Maybe that is something we can speak about with Paul Duffy when he comes before the Committee next week.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr Boylan:** The issue of procurement and contracts is a vital one for us. It needs to be open and transparent, and the checks and balances need to be put in place to make sure it does not happen again.

I have loads of questions, but I will let other members ask their questions.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** We all do.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I will pick up on the maintenance regime. It is a bit of a background of mine. The eight-week check is, obviously, every eight weeks.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is that by an outsourced company?

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. The supplier outsourced — subcontracts the inspector and the repairing function from the supplier.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is your contract with the supplier, who then subcontracts?

**Ms Thompson:** Absolutely. Our contract is with the supplier, who then subcontracts.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Right. OK. Is that one subcontractor across Northern Ireland?

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, one subcontract across Northern Ireland for the inspection, as I understand it, and one subcontract for the repairs.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. The subcontractor does the eight-week check.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. Who does the six-month check?

**Ms Thompson:** The same subcontractor, as I understand it.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Right. From a LOLER lifting regulation point of view, from my previous life, I know that you do your own maintenance reviewing or you farm it out, but you also get your insurance

company to inspect the equipment to clarify things for them, as they are insuring you. Now, I am not sure what way it works with you, but, certainly, that was the case in the private sector. Does any insurance company inspect that, or does one supplier carry out all the inspections or a subcontractor inspection?

**Ms Thompson:** The subcontracting inspector is through an insurance company. It is an insurance company that does that inspecting, reporting to the supplier, who then reports to us.

**Mr K Buchanan:** It is an insurance inspector every eight weeks.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. Were these issues picked up on the six-month check? That is obviously more of an inspection regime than an eight-week check, because the eight-week check would be a general check. Were they picked up at the six-month or the eight-week check?

**Ms Thompson:** The original issue from November was in the six-month check. There was a series of six-month checks going on in all the MOT centres at that point.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is that an hour check? Is that a day check? What is the period, roughly, in the six-month check?

**Ms Thompson:** I am afraid that I do not know that.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Obviously, it is more in-depth.

**Ms Thompson:** It is more in-depth, absolutely.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Was the fault that was picked up a stress crack or a fracture crack? Do you know the detail?

**Ms Thompson:** I know that the crack is in the scissor arms of the lift. The cracks are varied in size. I am not able to give you an exact technical explanation of the crack.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is the manufacturer from the UK or from Europe? Where were the lifts manufactured?

**Ms Thompson:** They are Irish-based and are a leading supplier of lifts.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Had they any other faults? I presume that they are a world supplier.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, they are a world supplier.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Are these the first faults that they have picked up in Northern Ireland?

**Ms Thompson:** We are not aware of anything of that nature — certainly not in our records. We are still having early-doors conversations with the supplier, and this gets into that sort of territory in terms of what has happened here, the quality of what they have been doing, how they have been getting their assurances and what that means about lifts in general. A lot of those conversations are still happening, and, therefore, they need to be followed through. We will follow them through with the supplier.

**Mr K Buchanan:** As of today, is there a solution, apart from replacing a lift? Is there a part that can be replaced?

**Ms Thompson:** We are having several conversations about options. We are looking at parts and lifts and for a second opinion on the inspections to see whether that would raise the same safety issues and whether those are brought through from a separate and secondary-level inspection.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I know that it is very early, but is there a timeline for all of that, Julie, with regard to getting parts? If this was identified in November, that supplier could say, "Well, it is that part. It is that fracture. We can replace it", or, "We can't". We are now practically in February.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. When I say "November", that was when the first signs of the cracks were reported. It was only on 15 January that it became 48 lifts out of the 55. It was only on last Wednesday — 22 January — when it became a more serious issue. Until that point, we had what looked like an isolated incident in November, which then became a more widespread incident.

We think that we have put in place an inspection, repair and reinspection regime. There are two weeks' extra inspections going on. It was only last night, when the supplier was not able to give us assurances, which led to the decisions that we made last night. It is a really fluid position; one, I suggest, that everybody is struggling to understand. How does that happen out of the blue? We need to follow the trail with the supplier and the inspector about all of that. We need to look at repairs and, leading on from that, we need to look at our options about what to do next in terms of procurement and whatever. While priority has been given, rightly so, to health and safety and customer impact, we are also working with the supplier to understand what is going on. It will be part of our Minister's review to determine how this happened, what the learning is and how we avoid this happening again.

**Mr K Buchanan:** You mentioned the number of lifts. Did you say 55 in total?

**Ms Thompson:** Fifty-five in total.

**Mr K Buchanan:** How many had faults identified in them?

**Ms Thompson:** On 15 January, there were 48 identified. We had 21 up and running yesterday and, obviously, as of today, none.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Are you not in a position to use the seven with which there are no issues?

**Ms Thompson:** We decided that we should take them all down, as a precautionary measure. If we can get a second opinion — a reinspection or whatever — we may be able to bring some of them up, but we took the decision last night that it was safer and better to take them all down.

**Mr Hilditch:** I do not envy you your position. Certainly, there is a lot of work in relation to confidence and trust with the public at this stage, as well as difficulties with communication. This morning, we have covered tax, insurance and, maybe, enforcement and how all that will play out to those affected. Is it the case that there were some welding repairs carried out at some stage? Is it accurate to say that?

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, the repairs are welding repairs. As the cracks were identified, the welding was being done to fix the repair. Yes, that is true.

**Mr Hilditch:** Was it working? No?

**Ms Thompson:** They were then being reinspected before being brought back in. Even during the tail end of last week, welding was going on, lifts were being reinspected and they were being brought into use. As of last night, the supplier could not give us sufficient assurance about the quality of those repairs — hence the decision. However, welding is absolutely part of fixing it.

**Mr Hilditch:** Mr Boylan touched on the danger to the public in some of the centres, but I want to touch on the employees affected. How are you working with the employees? I am sure that their confidence and trust is very low, having had to work in that scenario, potentially.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, you are absolutely right. Obviously, it has been a very fluid position. We know that, at times, making sure that everybody is up to date has been a difficulty and a challenge to us. That said, we have been operating through the test centre managers and deputy test centre managers, if they are there. A lot of it has to be done verbally, because they are not sitting looking at computers; they are in test centres. A lot of the communications are verbal. We have been working with trade union side and keeping them very much in the loop on how things look, as they would be anyway on the health and safety regime generally across DVA but certainly in the past few days. They

are the ones who will be under the lifts and who will be dealing with the angry customers who are unhappy that their appointment is not being scheduled.

We need to ensure that we communicate, and we will continue to take steps to do that. I am sure that we will need to do more in that space to ensure that we get the message out. I am sure that, at times, staff are not fully aware of what has been happening. That may be and is likely to be because of the pace at which some of this has moved, but we are doing our utmost to ensure that staff are kept apprised as the position moves. However, it has moved so fast that, at times, that is a challenge for us. You are absolutely right: their safety and that of the public around the lifts is an absolute priority, and it has led to us taking precautionary steps, including taking out some lifts and taking them down, even though there is nothing wrong with them, as we understand it at this time. We are just taking it away that way.

**Mr Hilditch:** Is it accurate that staff were in danger?

**Ms Thompson:** No. Lifts that were being brought back in were brought back because they had been reinspected by inspectors and we had been told that they could come back into operation; we were only bringing them back into operation. That is why only 21 lifts were operating yesterday — only 21 had that bill of health. As of last night, the supplier confirmed that they could not give sufficient assurances based on the further work that they had done, and that led us to say, "Well, if you can't, the whole lot is coming down". Every lift that we reopened had been reinspected, and we had been told that it was OK to open it. That is, obviously, something that we are concerned about and we will follow up with the supplier and the inspector. It is another avenue of questioning that we will need to undertake with them.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. I think that there is more to develop on that, but not with you today, obviously. Thank you.

**Mr Beggs:** Thanks for the update. From what you have said, my understanding is that someone who has applied for an MOT and has been rejected can go on to DVA in Swansea and get taxed if they have the four-month extension. Is that operational now?

**Ms Thompson:** They do not actually need to do anything. If you have an appointment with DVA and the DVA cancels it — we are doing it, obviously, on a day-by-day basis — on the day that that MOT is due to expire, the staff in the centres — we had them all working over the weekend to keep this moving and make sure that we were operational — process the DVA system to issue the temporary exemption certificate to give the four-month extension to all cars and light vehicles, apart from taxis and four-year-old cars.

Our systems back up automatically overnight into the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) system, which is the tax system, and they will automatically pick up in DVLA that the MOT date that used to say "January" now says "April", "May" or whatever the date may be. That happens automatically in the background. We will not be able to get the customers the actual hard copy — the proof of that, if you want to put it like that — until we can process those and get the letters out and all of that, which will take a week to 10 days, but, from the minute and the day that we put it into our system, all of those are backed up overnight into the tax system. That is an automatic thing; the customer does not need to do anything to make that happen.

**Mr Beggs:** You say that they just need to go to the post office and tax their car, then.

**Ms Thompson:** A lot of it is done online. That is the advantage of having it online. If you are looking to have a paper copy, it will be the wrong one with the wrong date. Most people use the online systems these days. They will pick it up automatically, and you do not need your hard copy any more in the way that you used to. Anybody who tries to do it hard copy will have a different issue, I suspect, but online will work.

**Mr Beggs:** I am familiar with Larne, which is where I go to get an MOT. There are two light vehicle lines and one heavy goods vehicle line. My estimation from that is that you will be down to a third or a quarter of capacity. What capacity currently exists?

**Ms Thompson:** That is the normal *[Interruption]* between the lanes in each test centre. Some of them are bigger; Newtownards is considerably bigger. When it comes to capacity and whether we can get

all the taxis and four-year-old cars through, which is the important issue, we are looking at that. All that may have been looked at while I have been sitting here. We are looking at today's taxis and four-year-old cars that need to be pulled through, and we are getting in contact with the customers to try to bring them through.

The heavy-duty lane normally stops at 5:00 pm, but we are looking to extend that into the evening. Generally, the MOT centres are open into the evening, but, normally, the heavy-duty one will stop and the other light ones will continue. We have extra capacity that we can automatically bring in, because we will have the staff and the availability of appointments in each centre to fill bookings each evening. However, we need to fill them with the right cars. Rather than people turning up to those, we will contact the customers to arrange appointments with them for the cars and taxis that need to be prioritised. Everybody else will be put in to the temporary exemption category.

**Mr Beggs:** Last summer, when there was quite a backlog, I looked at Enniskillen, Armagh and Coleraine at one stage to get my car through the MOT.

**Mr Hilditch:** Declare an interest, Roy.

**Mr Beggs:** People will accept inconvenience to get their vehicle on the road. To what extent are you extending the shift system so that as many opportunities as possible will be available? Are you running a three- or four-shift system? What are you planning to do?

**Ms Thompson:** We run a two-shift system. You are absolutely right: one of the things that we are looking at with our staff and trade union side is how we extend capacity on the lanes. Currently, MOT centres have a set number of hours, and, because of the demand issues, we have trained extra testers and opened on Sundays. All those things are in place. You are absolutely right: we are now looking at how we extend that particular lane and get maximum capacity on it. We need to work with our staff and with trade union side to ensure that that is something we can do. It is being looked at as we speak.

**Mr Beggs:** The four-month MOT extension is creating a huge pressure for four months' time, when it will be doubling up.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Frankly, this is a huge problem facing the whole country. It could result in a lot of vehicles not legally on our roads and huge inconvenience. What emergency legislation is required to extend the first year in which an MOT is required, and can that be moved quickly?

Finally, I want to ask about the nature of the contracts. It was a PFI-type agreement that put all the equipment in. What was the life guarantee with that PFI contract? Repetitive movements form part of the testing process in areas such as testing ball joints, track rod ends and all sorts of things. There is repetitive vibrational movement that creates the stress and is likely to have contributed to the failure and cracks in the equipment. Is it clear whether the fault lies with the manufacturer, or is it a fault caused by not replacing those heavily used components?

**Ms Thompson:** Obviously, I expect there to be a conversation with the supplier about the equipment, how we use the lifts, what their maintenance regime was doing and all of that. I do not have the lifespan of the existing lifts with me, although we can get that.

On your point about the legislation and about extending, you will appreciate that, up until last night, we had a four-month extension in place. During that four-month extension, we had been saying, in order to manage demand, we could pull people earlier. The thought process was to get the situation under control, put the four-month temporary exemptions in place, and, if we can, in order to manage demand, bring people in earlier than the four months on a staggered basis. You are absolutely right: we need to avoid a spike in demand in four months' time, and the DVA would have been putting in steps to do that. Obviously, as of yesterday evening, it has escalated into a much larger volume issue, and we need to look at what exactly that means. At the moment, the priority is with drivers whose vehicle MOTs expire today. In resolving that problem, we need to look at a lot of what you describe. I do not disagree with you about the things that we need to look at, but you will appreciate that, between last night and this morning, we have not quite got on top of it all.

There is no doubt that this is an unacceptable position. There are many layers to be worked through to find the options for moving this forward and getting it back under control, which is exactly where the Minister wants us to be. Yes, review how this happened, but, equally, ensure that this does not happen again. We also need to take urgent steps to get us safely back into a normal operational mode, which will include dealing with capacity issues.

If I refer to the points made earlier, we have the capacity. Demand is high and will continue to be high until the summertime, which is the issue that we faced last year. We had put in place lots of steps to manage that situation and, generally, to increase capacity in the network. Obviously, we need to reflect on all our plans to look at what that means when you add in the forecast for demand for the rest of the year.

**Mr Muir:** I welcome the assurances on the reserves that DVA holds; that is reassuring. For me, it is important to ask whether there will be an exploration of compensation from the supplier. Using the reserves to effect the repairs and all the replacements will mean that the reserves will have to be topped up. From the line of discussion that has taken place, it seems that the way to do that is to pass the charge on to the motorist, if we are not to have a charge to the public purse. Will there be an exploration about seeking compensation from the supplier?

I also agree with Mr Hilditch on health and safety. The health and safety of staff and customers must be of paramount concern in all of this; that must be the dominant factor. Whatever we do has to be about ensuring that the health and safety of staff and customers is of paramount concern.

The other issue is related to that. We were talking about eight-weekly and six-monthly inspections: did those inspections take place throughout the life of the contract, or did they just start recently?

**Ms Thompson:** They have been, as I understand it, throughout the life of the contract. There has been no change in the maintenance regimes in recent times. That has been standard.

I could not agree more with the health and safety point: that is why we have taken all the lifts down rather than continuing to operate some of them. We may be able to take a view on that, if we get more assurances, but, as of last night, we took them all down. That is all about health and safety. We are completely in that space.

On discussions with the supplier, nearly all of you have raised the issues of what they did, whether they were doing their job right, who is responsible for the problem and whether we were doing our jobs right. All those are highly valid questions, and I expect those conversations to continue. We will be on those conversations absolutely. With something like this, you immediately turn to the contract with your supplier and establish whether they are fulfilling their duties within it. You follow the train of thought there. We will absolutely do that, but, obviously, we have not had the opportunity to follow it through.

**Mr Muir:** That is welcome, but it is important that there is an exploration of compensation, not just for the cost of the repairs or replacements but for the inconvenience to motorists around Northern Ireland. That is important. If that was not successful, there has been talk about using the reserves to cover the cost. If that had to occur, how would we bring the reserves back to a sufficient level?

**Ms Thompson:** We would initially look within DVA to establish what that would mean. I do not want to overplay that, because the lifts would have had to be replaced at some point; they weren't going to last for ever. At some point, they were going to have to be bought; this has just brought it into a very cold and urgent position. The reserves would have been used to buy lifts at some point. It just might mean that they are bought earlier than would have been the case.

**Mr Muir:** Do you have an idea of when we can envisage —?

**Ms Thompson:** No, I do not. Whether the reserves are used or not, it will still be public funds. It still needs to be done appropriately. Procurements have to be done properly, and public expenditure needs to be protected at the same time as ensuring that we have a fit-for-purpose service and that we protect our employees and our customers. That is what we are trying to work through quickly and urgently.

**Mr Muir:** I have just one last question. A four-month extension has been granted. We talked about the capacity of DVA last summer, and the concern is that the longer this goes on — days, weeks and,

potentially, months — the number of people who need an MOT certificate will increase. Can that be extended through legislation? I have a concern about doing so, because, although it is a motorist's responsibility to ensure that their vehicle is roadworthy, the more extensions, the higher the risk to road safety. The issue is whether there is an ability to extend the extension and the risk to road safety.

**Ms Thompson:** You are absolutely right. The road safety point cannot be lost in the middle of all this; we need to ensure that our cars on the road are safe. We have to balance the right and most appropriate solution and how quickly that solution can be put in place. Then we need to figure out what that means for capacity and demand and what we need to do, using any levers that we have, to deal with a spike in demand at particular points. That will become clearer as we work through those steps, which we will need to do quickly and urgently to establish that, when we are operational, we will have confidence that we can meet the demand. In one way, after the events of last summer, we have already taken considerable steps to put extra testers in place for the Sunday openings, which are now pretty routine. We understand our forecasting and demand models better. Some of that stands us in good stead about understanding, on the basis of a period of time, what will happen further down the track. However, we need to do the work to enable us to figure out what that means for customers, how we should manage demand and what our options are for doing that. All that work is kicking off.

**Mr Muir:** Can the four months be extended?

**Ms Thompson:** I do not want to answer that. My logic says, "I presume that it can", but I do not want to promise that. That will be legislation-driven, so I do not want to promise something that is not possible. I assure the Committee that we will look at all sorts of options. Your point is still valid: there is a road safety point, too, so you do not want to extend for a long period. I assure the Committee that we will look at that.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Mr Boylan, do you want to come in on one of those points?

**Mr Boylan:** Just a wee quick one, Chair, because it is something that the Committee will have to look at. I appreciate the various mentions of the four-year rule, which the Chair also mentioned. For one year only, maybe we could look at legislating for five years. We could consider that. You are trying to address all this in a four-month period.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr Boylan:** The Committee might support extending the period for a first MOT for one more year. As part of that argument, there will be a financial impact. That would need to be brought to the table if we were to support it. Looking at it, I think that it is a way out for the Department, for all of us; to give a one-year extension to get over even the four-month rule. We could seriously look at the impact on safety of all that.

**Ms Kimmins:** Thanks, Julie. That has been helpful for a lot of us. We have all been hit on tax and insurance. If we are able to communicate that information as quickly as possible, it will really help. I do not think that anything has gone out that clearly lets people know where they stand.

I have a couple of quick points that lead on from what Mr Buchanan and Mr Muir said about a manufacturing fault. My concern is that, because the issue has occurred in such a short period, there is a high possibility that it has been an issue with the equipment itself. However, we do not know that yet. Going forward, will there be an investigation of the standards of inspections? There will be a procurement process for replacements and things like that, but that is not to say that we will not face something like this again. Should we look at the frequency of inspections to ensure that things are picked up much more quickly so that we are not hit with it all at once and it will be dealt with a wee bit more easily?

**Ms Thompson:** We need to understand all of this a lot better, absolutely: how you set up a new contract; whom you procure from; how you run that procurement; what you do about maintenance and inspections; who should carry them out; and whether you need secondary checks. All that will need to be looked at. The Minister is very keen that we have a review to understand what has happened here, which will include considering the supplier angle but will obviously include the DVA as well. She wants to ensure that we have the right arrangements in place to prevent this happening again. That is the course of action that we are on, and we need to work our way through the various steps.

**Mr McCartney:** I do not want to dwell on practical issues when you are working through them, but it strikes me that there could be a 20-year-old vehicle getting a four-month exemption, whereas, for a four-year-old vehicle, it seems a bit imponderable that you cannot go for one year. However, I understand your reasons and do not want to go into that.

What strikes me is that the first fault was discovered in November. You said that, on 15 January, there were 48 faults. I take it that the other 47 did not happen on 14 January. Is there a direct trail of when the faults were detected? I am sure that an inspector would say, "It was on 13 November at 10.45. I was inspecting and found these issues". There will be a timeline between the first and the fortieth.

**Ms Thompson:** There absolutely will be. That period, I guess, is from November into the early part of January. As the cracks were being identified, the supplier was still saying that there were no safety concerns, so the points raised about employees and protection and all that were well understood and being worked through. Equally, repairs were being put in place, and, in any operational environment, equipment having faults and needing to be repaired or whatever is all part of the business. This has ended up at a point where it has escalated in a way that we have had no history of, and, when our supplier is telling us, as of last night, "We cannot give you sufficient assurances", that is where we have ended up. In terms of inspection regimes, they were on inspections; they were being repaired; they were being reinspected. All those things were being worked through, but it escalated exceptionally quickly in a very short time, and we need to understand why.

**Mr McCartney:** Yes, I understand that, but there were 48, and it strikes me that, somewhere along the line, there was a tipping point. It is the same lift, the same manufacturer and the same supplier. Forty-eight seems to be a high number for you to declare it, if you like, an emergency. Was a question asked at any time about whether there was a fault in the same machine elsewhere that the supplier had given to some other industry or to some equivalent agency?

**Ms Thompson:** We would need to look at that with the supplier.

**Mr McCartney:** I know that we have to look at it, but I am asking, "Has it been looked at?". This happened in November; that is 15 January. To say, "We have to look at it", in my opinion, is not the answer that I am looking for. I want someone to say, "Yes, we did", because, if you bought a new car and there were 48 faults within a short period, you would be back to the supplier saying, "That is not the car I bought, and it is under warranty". That is why I ask that question.

**Ms Thompson:** I completely understand the question. I just personally cannot answer it, but we can absolutely get you an answer about whether it has been asked to date.

**Mr McCartney:** This might sound like a silly question, but, in terms of the legal status, who owns the lifts? Is it the DVA?

**Ms Thompson:** We bought them, so they are our lifts.

**Mr McCartney:** They are your lifts. Right, OK. Does the supplier or the DVA provide the inspector?

**Ms Thompson:** The supplier subcontracts the maintenance and the inspection. Our contract is with the supplier, and it subcontracts the repairs and the inspection. The inspection is through an insurance company.

**Mr McCartney:** Without prejudice, we could look at that in the context of the inspection.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr McCartney:** I am not sure what the Minister will say about it, but I notice that this was not flagged up in the first-day brief. Is that a mistake?

**Ms Thompson:** The first-day brief was done around —

**Mr McCartney:** 11 January.

**Ms Thompson:** — 11 January or somewhere around then. The report on the 48 of the 55 comes in on 15 January.

**Mr McCartney:** That is why it is critical, and the Committee will come back to that. I would like to see the timeline, because, I have to say, I would be incredulous that you found all these on 14 January. If there is a steady timeline from November into December and into January, more questions will be asked as to why this was not flagged up and did not become an issue earlier.

**Ms Thompson:** I absolutely accept that point, and it will obviously need to be looked at. Even on 15 January, the supplier was saying that there were no concerns about those lifts, but I appreciate that the timeline needs to be looked at.

**Mr McCartney:** I do not know who the supplier is, so I say this without prejudice, but they would say that, wouldn't they? If there are other instances of this, it adds to it, and we are asking questions somewhat blind, but, given that 48 lifts are cracked, there must be a design fault or something, and, if you have a timeline running from November into January, people will ask why it was not flagged up earlier.

**Mr Hilditch:** Thanks, Chair, for letting me in again. On another aspect of the communication that I mentioned, do you feel that the Department and the DVA acted in haste yesterday in trying to get a good news story out for the Minister, hence causing her some embarrassment, considering that further and very serious questions were to be asked later in the day?

**Ms Thompson:** As we knew it, that is where we were. We wanted to make sure that people knew that we had got the temporary exemption certificate process that she had asked us to look at working. It was really important for people to know that that procedure would give them protection and allow them to drive. We wanted to get that out to the public, and we wanted to give respect to the Assembly process and make sure that Assembly colleagues were notified about it.

**Mr Hilditch:** So, the afternoon news came as somewhat of a shock to you.

**Ms Thompson:** Yesterday evening came as a big shock.

**Mr Hilditch:** Right.

**Mr McCartney:** What came as a shock?

**Ms Thompson:** The fact that the supplier said that they did not have sufficient assurance over the repairs that were in place.

**Mr Hilditch:** It took them long enough.

**Mr McCartney:** Did it say anything about the nature of that? Are you saying that the lifts cannot be repaired?

**Ms Thompson:** We do not know that. That is part of the process. I suspect that, even as we speak, it is about getting another assessment — an independent assessment — of the position so that we understand exactly what we need to do next.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Obviously, the supplier is dealing with the 48 lifts in Northern Ireland for you. You told me that it is a worldwide supplier. The worldwide industry will say, "There is a problem with these lifts". Do you have any concerns that that supplier could be in trouble? Does it have enough resources to work on your 48 lifts? If there are lifts in England, Wales and Scotland, whether they be in private garages or centres, or worldwide, will the company be under any pressure? Is there a plan B? If lifts across the world now suddenly have a problem, that company could have a problem. Are you confident that it has enough resources to work on our 48 lifts?

**Ms Thompson:** Our concentration is, obviously, on finding a solution that works for the DVA. You are absolutely right: are there wider ramifications that the supplier may have to work through? That is for them to deal with. The important thing is that we understand what the options are for our lifts. What can we do about them? Is repair the answer? Is the replacement of parts the answer? Is the purchase

of new lifts the answer? That is the process that we need to work through. Where does the supplier then fit in, both backwards, in terms of what has happened to date, and forwards, in terms of where we need to go for the future? I could not agree more: all that needs to be looked at and very much worked through with the supplier, with our interests and those of our customers and employees at the heart of it.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Julie, you are talking about weeks, not days.

**Ms Thompson:** That was in the media this morning. If we find that we have to buy new lifts, those will have to be put in place. It would be wrong for me to speculate on exactly what will happen, because we just need to do the work, and it is appropriate that we do that. I completely and absolutely understand all the Committee's questions. We have to do the work now to get the answers for you, us and the Minister. Having put steps in place to keep the operational side going, we need to put steps in place around how we got here, what it means for the supplier, who pays for it and all the questions that you asked. That is the course of action. Multiple channels of work need to be moved forward very quickly, and they will be.

**Mr Beggs:** Is it the same component or the same small number of components that have failed repeatedly over the whole list? As such, is it a matter of potentially replacing individual components rather than going through a six-month procurement exercise for a new supply of lifts? Will you ensure that we will look for short- as well as long-term solutions?

**Ms Thompson:** We will look at all options. Absolutely. However, we do not want to do something that does not last; we need to find something that is workable, is a good use of public funds and provides an effective service. We will look at the short term and the long term and see what emerges.

**Mr Beggs:** You are saying that it is the same component that has failed.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. The cracks are on the scissor arms of the lift.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Do any members wish to ask further questions at this stage?

**Mr Boylan:** Just to remember that it is public money, and they are public lifts. I appreciate contracting and subcontracting, but, at the end of the day, they are our lifts. We have a responsibility to make sure that every pound being spent is to make it safe for workers and everybody else.

**Mr Muir:** Yes, safety.

**Mr Boylan:** That is the most important thing. I appreciate the issue, and there will be questions about subcontracting and procurement.

**Ms Thompson:** Totally. I could not agree more.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** We will, obviously, return to this many times over the next weeks and, perhaps, months until it is brought to a conclusion. Thank you very much, Julie, for taking questions on that item. It is incredibly topical.

We will go back, then, to what we had intended the session to be, which was an overview of the Department. I am not sure whether each of you wants to give a synopsis of your areas of work and then, perhaps, move into further questions.

**Mr McGrath:** I will open with an overview and then talk about my group, followed by Andrew. We will talk as long as possible to give Julie a break and then take questions.

**Mr Boylan:** I apologise. I have to nip out.

**Mr McGrath:** As I said, we are happy to be back with the Committee. We operate under the direction and control of the Minister, but we aim, in going forward, to support the Committee as much as possible in its work, and we look forward to future exchanges. It was strange being in the Building last week, not having been here for two and a half years. Our colleagues were up with you last week.

We are conscious that DFI had been in existence for only nine months before the hiatus in the institutions. It brought together Department for Regional Development, significant elements of the Department of the Environment and some functions from Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the former Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Since the Department was established, we have worked to move to a greater focus across the Department beyond hard infrastructure, whether water, road, rail or public transport. The infrastructure, in a sense, is a means to an end. The end is to improve the well-being of this place and the people of this place, so we see the Department's purpose now very much as connecting people safely, supporting opportunities and creating sustainable living places. We think that fits well in a world where we have an outcome-based Programme for Government and we are looking for collaboration across Departments. It also chimes well with our Minister's views on her role and that of the Department. In the Programme for Government, where we lead in indicators around outcome 11, we see ourselves as potentially contributing to a number of other outcomes, particularly outcome 2 around the environment. We will come back to that.

As I said, I propose to do a run-ahead on what my group does and then allow Andy to pick up on his. We will describe what we have done and, to a certain extent, how we have got to here. Where we go in the future will be for the Minister to talk about — she is here next week — if you are happy enough.

My group is transport and resources. I own some of the corporate functions, which I will talk about. I am also responsible for overall transport in the widest sense: policy, planning and strategy. The first-day brief identifies the directors in charge of each group, so I will not go into the detail of that.

We have a corporate policy and planning unit whose core role is to support the Minister and the service we provide to the Assembly for Assembly questions and support for dialogue with the Committee. Support for the Minister is a key role. We are tooling back up again, having been in mothballs for the best part of three years, and that is proving to be challenging in some cases. There are other corporate functions in that operation, including statistics and communications. We also have a public appointments unit. We had a number of public appointments to public bodies, and we like to think that we run a fairly professional operation in terms of appointments to those bodies. There will be a pickup of appointments now with the return of a Minister and a switch back from some appointments that had been going to the Secretary of State, the former owner.

Finance falls within my patch and is a pivotal responsibility in the Department. We are a big direct-spending Department in road sites and others and have large NDPBs. We have the biggest capital spend in the block and a number of major projects, including flagship projects, so we churn through a lot of money. We have been operating within severe budget constraints since about 2015, which has meant that tight financial management has been to the fore. We have been in that regime for five-odd years now. I would like to think that we make the best of our money. We tend not to surrender any money unless there are some slips in flagship projects, but we can always take that money back, and we tend to spend our full in resource and capital. Over the years, the block has benefited from the former DRD and now DFI being able to soak up capital spend towards the end of the year. We simply could not do it on direct drive, particularly in Andrew's area. Finance will be a continuing feature of our engagement with the Committee. Chair, I think that you are familiar with some of those financial issues from some of your former roles.

There is also the transport policy and planning directorate. At the minute, we are working on the next suite of transport plans, which have been highlighted. A regional strategic transport network plan will be the first of those and will come along this year. There will also be a new Belfast metropolitan transport plan, a north-west transport plan and, in a sense, a subregional transport plan. Those four plans will be put out for public consultation over the period ahead and will shape investment, particularly the first plan. Part of the work is also in supporting local government in their local development plan (LDP) processes. We provide evidence to all the councils to take account of as they take forward their LDP processes. That is key work that we do with our planning colleagues in the Department and local government. Obviously, it is complex, because each council has its own LDP timetable and it stretches out. Therefore, producing a Belfast metropolitan plan that covers five or six local government areas that are all at different stages of their LDP processes will be complex.

We also have a role in transport legislation, both at a strategic level and in the raft of subordinate legislation that we bring forward for changes in by-laws and stuff like that on Andrew's side. That division also takes the lead in the Department's work on climate change. We took a view last year that we had a huge potential to make a contribution on climate change but we needed to organise ourselves a bit better. We see ourselves as a major contributor to climate change on issues such as clean air. We work closely with DAERA colleagues on the clean air strategy and Economy colleagues

on the energy strategy, and we will want to expand that work as we go forward. I know that it is close to the Minister's heart. Obviously, moving, for example, to low-emission public transport fleets and issues like that will be key, as will investment.

We have three or four key roles in public transport. We sponsor Translink, which is a major public body that provides the expansive public transport network that we have. Clearly, there are issues with our funding of Translink that have gone on for a number of years and will be critical in the next budget process. We are working on the process to deal with applications for permits from private-sector operators. That is proving complex and time-consuming and is a major issue that will go to the Minister before long. Our agreement with Translink is a public service agreement that was required under EU regulations, and it needs to be renewed in two years' time. I know that we will work up a proposition on what that agreement looks like; what measures and metrics will be in it; and what the ambitions should be for what Translink should contribute by way of public transport to the wider local government initiatives. We will want to have dialogue with the Committee on that over the next couple of years. In our view, it offers a way of rebooting what we think about public transport and what potentially the role of the private sector will be.

We also run the concessionary fare scheme, which members will be familiar with. It is the most generous scheme of its nature in these islands but will face challenges in affordability as we go forward. As the population lives longer and gets older, the trajectory of spend on that scheme will rapidly increase. Unless the block can find the funding for it, Ministers will have to look at some curtailment of eligibility. We provide the funding for community transport in Belfast and beyond. Again, we have had funding issues in recent years. We also fund and oversee the contract for the Rathlin ferry. That is the bundle of issues on public transport.

Since last September, we have had a relatively new directorate that deals with gateways and EU relations. We have been a very busy Department with Brexit in the past two or three years. It was not evident in the initial work, but the fact that there is so much focus on how goods move, east-west and North/South, the speed of that and issues like that has meant that, in our responsibility for regulation of drivers, driver licences and issues like that and responsibility for the Enterprise, we have become a Brexit-heavy Department, once you get over the major Departments, such as Economy and DAERA. This directorate leads on that, but work on Brexit is spread across the Department, particularly on the policy side. The division also has responsibility for relations with gateways, principally the trust ports, for which the Minister has rights of appointment, and the airports, for which we have some legislative responsibilities. We also have responsibility for inland waterway that we took over from the former DCAL, and we offer oversight of Waterways Ireland. Finally but, certainly, not least in that directorate is the initiative around active travel — cycling and walking. In the last few years, we have done as much of a push on walking as a mode of transport as we have on cycling, and we have been doing quite a lot of work with the Public Health Agency to promote that. It is a mixed and diverse directorate.

The final policy area is safe and sustainable travel, where we have a lot of responsibility for the regulation, for example, of buses, taxis, freight itself, driving licences, insurance, driver behaviour — that could be drink-driving, use of mobile phones and all that sort of behaviour — and road safety. The road safety strategy will come to an end before long. One thing we will work on with the new Minister is what the new road safety strategy will look like. It will be debated often. Maybe it should look different. We are doing a lot of work at the minute in a couple of divisions on how, in particular, Belfast city centre works. Perhaps we need to look at a world with fewer cars in the city centre and it is a nicer place to move. The fewer cars there are, the easier it will be to tackle road safety issues. Our agendas blend on that.

The final directorate I have deals with digital services. We have a big digital agenda. I know it is slightly paradoxical, but, with regard to the DVA and a lot of the *[Inaudible]* on Andy's side, we are one of the biggest digital delivery Departments in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. We are moving to increase that and improve the service to customers. Our digital services branch is one of the most innovative in the NICS. We are also in charge of information management and security, with cybersecurity becoming a really big issue. We do a fairly good job on that end.

That just about covers a brief canter through my bit. I am just conscious of time. I am happy to take any questions once Andrew and Julie have covered their area, if you are happy enough.

**Dr Andrew Murray (Department for Infrastructure):** I will move swiftly on to the roads and rivers group. I know that, round the table, some people will be familiar with the roads part in particular. The roads and rivers group was formed in May 2016 when DFI was formed. It is a big group of people: more than half the Department, staff-wise, is in the roads and rivers group. It is generally the biggest

spending area. The roads part is the biggest highway authority in the UK and Ireland. There is a big drainage authority in the rivers part as well. It is a big area. It does a lot of front-line activity that will, I am sure, be of interest as we go forward. A lot of the work we do is fairly invisible when it goes well. It is a bit like DVA: it is pretty invisible when it goes well, but, when something goes wrong, it is very high-profile.

Roads and rivers is around 1,800-people strong. It is managed into four directorates. The directorate duties were actually adjusted in August last year, so this is the first time we have had a chance to present the new director structure. You will see that in the belatedly delivered first-day brief. There are pictures of the directors and a brief outline of their responsibilities. It is probably best if I go through the four directorates briefly and what their duties are. It will give you an opportunity to see the range of things we carry out.

First, Conor Loughrey looks after the network services directorate. That is one of three directorates on the roads side of the organisation. Network services looks after the maintenance of the road network. The road network is, financially, Northern Ireland's most valuable asset. It is worth about £30 billion. We need to spend quite a bit of money each year. We should spend about £140 million a year to maintain it in its current condition. The maintenance work Conor undertakes is, partly, resurfacing and structural maintenance work that is required every so often, depending on the type of road. He also looks after reactive maintenance, which includes pothole repairs, grass cutting, gully cleaning, traffic signs, road markings, traffic signals, street lights and the maintenance of bridges and structures. The Department has a big maintenance burden to undertake there. The biggest issue in past years has been the lack of funding, and we have generally started off the year with a restricted maintenance service. We have been delivering that since 2014-15. In many years, including this year, our allocation at the start of the year has not been sufficient to deliver those services for the full year.

Conor also looks after the management of the road network, so that is traffic management. We have a traffic control centre in Belfast that looks after all the traffic signals, including their maintenance and setting. He looks after development control and private streets. In the planning process, roads is a statutory consultee, so we comment on traffic progression, safety and parking issues for any new development. We look after the private street process, so, when a development has been completed, we look after the process of how that is adopted and becomes part of the adopted road network for maintenance purposes. We also set regulations for things like parking and residents' parking schemes. Conor looks after some development but not the biggest road schemes. He looks after all the other developments on the road network, which we call "local transport and safety measures". They range from things like new roundabouts, new pedestrian crossings, new footways, new bus priority schemes and new car parks for park-and-rides, although he does not do park-and-rides. We also look after the winter service, and Conor looks after the client part of that. He is the one who makes the call and makes sure that we follow departmental policy on the winter service. Winter service is one of the areas for which we did not get enough money at the start of this year to deliver the service for the full year. We are watching the weather conditions and, indeed, the monitoring round carefully to see how we will be fixed for the rest of the year. Conor also looks after street lighting. Street lighting is another area for which we did not get enough money at the beginning of this year to run the full service. In fact, most street lighting repairs had to be stopped in November, and a very restricted service is being carried out on street lighting. Finally, Conor is the departmental lead on flags and bonfires, which raise their head at various times in the year for quite a long part of the year.

I will move on, then, to the director of engineering, Deidre Mackle. Deidre is head of the profession of civil engineers in the Department, and she, therefore, looks after recruitment, staff progression and staff development and makes sure we have enough chartered engineers in the organisation, which is becoming quite challenging. Deidre's responsibilities include looking after the internal consultant organisation. We have our own technical civil engineering expertise that delivers a lot of the functions we carry out in roads and rivers. She also looks at the internal contractor on the roads side. Those are the people who do the pothole repairs, a lot of the grass cutting and are delivering the winter service. Other functions in the engineering directorate include the enforcement of parking regulations and moving traffic regulations, public liability claims, and lands, which are often required for road schemes. She looks after engineering policy, health and safety, the Strangford ferry and the issuing of blue badges, so there is quite a range and mixture of engineering and administrative functions in the engineering directorate. The director of major projects and procurement is John Irvine. I said that a lot of the things we do are invisible when they run well; major projects are certainly not invisible when they are running well. John looks after the delivery of our Executive flagship projects. Those are the A5, the A6 and Belfast rapid transport 1 (BRT1). BRT1 has been delivered, and we are working on BRT2 through John's team. The A6 is being delivered. As you know, there are two contracts under

way in the A6. When those are finished, they will completely transform the journey from Belfast up to Derry.

**Mr McCartney:** God bless them.

**Dr Murray:** Yes. You are already benefiting from the first part of the Randalstown/Castledawson contract, which was opened last year.

We are working away on getting the A5 through to public inquiry shortly.

John also looks after city deal projects that have come the Department's way. That is a developing picture, but, so far, in the Belfast region city deal, we are delivering the BRT2, Lagan Bridge and the Newry southern relief road. They are all subject to decisions by the Minister and the Executive, but those three schemes are in the heads of terms and will require confirmation. If they are confirmed, we will deliver them.

John is also progressing schemes on the strategic road network. The York Street interchange is probably the most high-profile of those. There was a recent legal case, and we are now considering the way ahead. There are other schemes that are also high-profile and have been long-awaited by various people. Those are the likes of the Ballynahinch scheme, the A1 safety measures and Enniskillen. Other schemes are going through the development stage that could be delivered, if money is allocated to them.

Finally, John is also responsible for procurement across roads and rivers. That is an increasingly difficult area for us. In relation to procurement, Northern Ireland is by far the most litigious part of the UK. That is probably down to the shortage of major contracts that are going out. Almost everything is challenged. It is a work area that is difficult for us and where we need to concentrate a lot of expertise.

The final area of roads and rivers is rivers. It was the old Rivers Agency, which some of you will be familiar with. The director there is Jonathan McKee, who was appointed last August. Rivers is the drainage authority for Northern Ireland. It looks after flood risk management under the EU floods directive. Basically, rivers provides, maintains and operates a network of flood defences across the Province. The biggest of those is the Belfast tidal flood protection scheme, which will offer increased protection to the central area of Belfast. That is an important scheme that we are now delivering. Like many of our areas, rivers is normally quite low-profile, except when there is a flooding event; then, of course, it is the highest-profile part of the Department. When there is not a flooding event, rivers is basically preparing. It is trying to make communities more resilient, trying to ensure we have a better range of flood protection measures in place and is maintaining our flood protection measures.

The other significant area of rivers work relates to the 180 controlled reservoirs in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the legal position on controlled reservoirs is that the owner is responsible. That is basically it; it is the common law responsibility of the owner to keep people safe. However, the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 is coming into force subject to the Minister's wishes and so on. When that Act comes into force, there will be a need to set up a reservoirs authority, and there will be a range of controlled measures and guarantees about the safety of reservoirs that are not currently in place. We are in a bit of a transition phase at the minute, and rivers is carefully managing that transition from the common law responsibility to what will be the case under a reservoirs authority. I imagine that will be something the Committee will want to hear about in more detail in the future.

That was a quick run through the responsibilities of roads and rivers.

**Ms Thompson:** OK. I will set DVA aside just for now and deal with my other two areas of responsibility, which are planning and water.

Turning to planning first, you are, obviously, aware of the transfer of planning functions to councils in 2015. We are now very much operating a two-tier model in planning, and, therefore, the majority of local and major planning applications are determined and decided at council level. The Department's strategic planning directorate, led by Alistair Beggs, looks at the regionally significant applications, which are those above certain thresholds, and/or called-in applications, where a decision has been made that the Department will make the determination on an application through whatever means, be it a legislative requirement, a request by a third party or a decision by a Minister. Alistair's directorate will look at those schemes and take them through to recommendation for a final determination.

The local development plan process also lies in Alistair's area. I am sure many of you will be familiar with that. It is the new two-stage process that involves the publication of a draft plan strategy and a local policies plan. It is the way in which the framework for development in councils is now done, and, obviously, as a Department, we have to have an appropriate role in that in two ways. A bit like what Andrew described, one is as a statutory consultee as part of that process, whether it be for roads, transport, rivers or water policy, but there is also an oversight role to engage with councils to ensure that those plans are appropriate and will be put forward for the test of soundness. That is done through the independent examiner process; that is not a departmental role. That, ultimately, will come back to the Department for a final decision. In terms of where has that got to, all 11 councils have published their preferred options papers, and seven councils have published their draft plan strategies. The Belfast plan went forward recently, which caused an independent examination.

The second area in planning is led by Angus Kerr, and that is where the development of policy, legislation and guidance is looked after, as is supporting the planning system in a wide number of ways. Obviously, we will be keen to work with the new Minister to understand her priorities in those areas to see where we will go in future. Angus's group also looks at the oversight and governance of councils, including their performance monitoring framework, improving environmental governance and a range of issues around that, albeit that all the other actions I talked about, like the LDP process and the called-in applications, are part of providing oversight to that council arrangement. Angus's group looks at those call-in applications and makes recommendations about whether they should be determined by the Department. That is kept separate from Alistair's directorate.

The final three areas in planning are Crumlin Road Gaol, St Lucia in Omagh and policy on Rathlin Island.

The second area under my responsibility is water and drainage policy, led by Linda MacHugh. There are several key roles there. The major one, obviously, is that of being a shareholder in Northern Ireland Water, which is a non-departmental public body. It is the provider of our water and sewerage services across Northern Ireland, and it provides a vital service to us all. I am sure members are very aware of the funding difficulties for Northern Ireland Water, particularly for waste water. We are giving considerable attention to that area because of the funding issues and the shortfall in funding for waste water. That is leading to constraints on development across Northern Ireland, impacting on the economy and housing, and it has potential environmental implications, so it is something we really need to resolve. Everybody is very concerned about that and is keen to see that happen.

The Living with Water programme sits in that area and is the investment that is needed in the water and waste water infrastructure in the greater Belfast area. It is because that needs such investment that we have pulled it out into a separate programme. The Living with Water programme is headed by Simon Richardson. It will look at options for the Belfast area in particular and try to deal not only with the hard infrastructure of the tunnels, pipes and waste water treatment works but — this is related to climate change — with how to manage our water. What are we, as consumers, doing about it? Are we using it effectively, and do we value the water we have? Secondly, are we managing things upstream in more sustainable and greener ways in order to make sure that we are not building those tunnels and then have to deal with things downstream that could effectively have been dealt with further upstream?

The funding of Northern Ireland Water is regulated, so it is very much a regulated industry. It is called the "price control process". I could talk forever on that, but I will not. We are at the critical phase in it, in that, for the PC21 period, which is from 2021 through to 2027, Northern Ireland Water is putting its business plan together for the end of January to give it to the regulator. It is based on social and environmental guidance produced by the Department, and the Minister will need to take a view on all that in due course. The regulator will then make their draft determination. That is where they will take a view on the capital and operational requirements for Northern Ireland Water for the next six years. That is done independently. They will figure out what efficiencies can be put in place, and they will look at the impact on the consumers and whether it is legitimate and viable. That draft determination is due in June, and then we will go out to public consultation over the summer and will come back later in the year. The timing here is helpful, from the Committee's perspective, because we are just entering that process, some of which the Department is heavily involved in, and some of which is completely outwith the Department and is run by the regulator. I am sure it is a process you will want to understand more about. That is also true of the funding issues and how we resolve them and all that, which, given that the body is an NDPB, is subject to all the competing priorities John and Andrew talked about.

Linda's area also deals with a range of water policy and legislation issues that, again, are subject to the Minister's views, and it works closely with Andrew on the likes of flood risk management. We also work on coastal erosion,

Those, I think, if I set aside DVA, if you will forgive me, are the three areas. I am happy to take questions on any of them.

**Mr McCartney:** Chair, my apologies. The Justice Committee is sitting as well, and I have other business.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** No problem.

Thank you very much for your presentation. In setting out, John, you made it clear that Infrastructure was a big-spending Department. There are obviously some very big-ticket projects that have been highlighted through various agreements and so on. What is critical for people to understand is the impact that infrastructure makes on their daily life. We all take it very much for granted, be it turning on our taps, flushing our toilet, the footpaths we walk on or the roads we drive on and so on. It is taken for granted, but it impacts on every citizen across Northern Ireland.

You made a point that spend can be visible but is, again, taken for granted. It is when those processes break down and you do not carry out routine maintenance and so on that it becomes a problem. The January monitoring round was probably very timely yesterday, in that it drew Members' attention to some of the financial pressures that the Department has, given what you asked for and what you received. Just on January monitoring and particularly on the ask for Translink, road maintenance and street lighting, given that you did not receive what you asked for, what will be the immediate impact?

**Mr McGrath:** Andrew alluded to that. On winter service, we did not get what we bid for. Therefore, at this stage, we cannot guarantee we will have sufficient money to get us to the end of the financial year if the weather does not turn out. We have colleagues literally counting what has been spent — Andrew can give detail — but we are £1 million short of what we thought we needed, based on the projection from last year for this year. That may sound a bit odd. It is nearly the start of February, but, depending on how the weather goes, we could go through a lot of money. We are not betting we will get through without either having to not do some gritting or finding money from elsewhere, but that is extremely unlikely at this stage of the year. We have exhausted everything.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Perhaps you can give the Committee members who are not familiar with the winter service some detail. We see tweets that state that the gritters have gone out, but can you give members an idea of how much that costs?

**Mr McGrath:** Andrew can —

**Dr Murray:** Yes.

**Mr McGrath:** — give you that.

**Dr Murray:** I can. It is over £80,000. A single 20 g standard salt spread over the salted network costs about £80,000. Therefore, the £1 million that we got from the monitoring round will buy us about 12 outings. Twelve outings can make the salt last a month if the weather is not terribly bad. We had snow in some parts of the Province last night, but if we had snow throughout the Province, we would be doing at least four salting operations a day, so your £1 million would go in a very short period. That is why we are very closely watching the weather. We are more or less at the end of our initial allocation. We were relying on the monitoring round and anything else that we could find in the Department.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Over the past four or five years, you have been operating a skeleton service, particularly around road maintenance, for gullies, and so on. Patching is also an issue. There have been a number of reports done, including the Audit Office report and the report by Jim Barton that the Department commissioned. The latter suggests that somewhere in the region of £143 million is required each year. What are you currently operating with, just to put that figure in context for members?

**Dr Murray:** For the past two years, we have started at £75 million for structural maintenance, and we have added to that during the year. I think that we are at a bit over £100 million.

**Mr McGrath:** Just over £100 million.

**Dr Murray:** Therefore, we are about £40 million short of the target figure to keep the network in its current condition. The network is deteriorating. For each year that we spend less than the amount specified in the structural maintenance funding plan, the network gets a bit worse. We are underspending by about £40 million this year.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** That does not take into consideration grass cutting, patching and whatever.

**Dr Murray:** No. Structural maintenance has both a capital element and a resource element to it. The capital element is for resurfacing and surface-dressing schemes, while the resource element is for patching. Patching, surface dressing and resurfacing are all part of structural maintenance, for which there is the £143 million figure. Structural maintenance, however, does not take account of work such as gully emptying, the frequency of which we have had to reduce from twice a year to once a year, or grass cutting, which we used to do five times a year in urban areas but now do twice a year. It does not allow for those things.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** What discussions have you had with the Department of Finance on perhaps baselining structural maintenance?

**Mr McGrath:** To be clear, the Barton report restates for us what we need to spend every year. As Julie said, the regulator will tell us what we need to spend on NIW assets in order to look after them. We have done more work recently with Translink. For example, we need to spend over £50 million a year on the permanent way in order to look after that. We have a huge number of physical assets, so we need probably north of £400 million a year just to keep them being looked after.

Considering that this year we got £470 million as an opening allocation, you can see the tension. As we have highlighted in the past couple of years, there is a tension between doing the big development schemes that are important — in this case, flagship projects — and looking after the assets that we have. Therefore, unless we get an awful lot more capital, we cannot square that circle. We need nearly double what we have been receiving. That does not take into account any expectations in 'New Decade, New Approach'. We are the biggest capital-spending Department, but we are not near the level that we need to be at to look after the assets of which we have custodianship.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Members will attend Translink's launch tomorrow of —

**Mr McGrath:** Hydrogen.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** — hydrogen buses, which are an incredibly innovative idea. Translink is working very hard in order to maintain fleet, and so on. In yesterday's monitoring round, it did not receive the money that it requested. I am aware from the papers that Translink is in a critical financial situation. What should we be doing to move that situation forward?

**Mr McGrath:** The Translink situation has been a number of years in the making, although it is not of Translink's making. When we suffered a bad Budget four or five years ago, the money for Translink was reduced by about £13 million a year. That meant that Translink ran up a deficit, because it maintained the network without being dealt a subsidy. To run a deficit, it had to pay for it, so the money came out of its reserves. Translink has successively raided its reserves for four or five years. If it then takes the hit this year, because in-year monitoring was unable to do anything, the reserves at the start of next year will be beneath the level of working capital that Translink needs to run its business. If it starts the year and it is not clear that it is in balance, there will be a whole range of issues around the judgement of Translink as a going concern. The auditors would be on them. You could be running into difficulties over the confidence with which suppliers view them.

We managed this because there were sufficient reserves, but there are not sufficient reserves any more. An additional £20-odd million needs to be put into Translink's baseline to rebase it and get it into a proper position, after which it can perhaps begin to increase its working capital. It is the most critical issue that we are facing.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Without that money, there no mechanism for managing it.

**Mr McGrath:** There is no mechanism for managing it, in the sense that we cannot make enough savings to find £20 million without utterly decimating the public transport network, and the public transport network is fundamentally important to the operation of this place, whether it be school transport or taking people to hospitals or work. There is no easy solution without additional funding. Significant additional funding is needed to enable Translink to maintain the public transport network.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I am sure that you have made the Department of Finance aware of the issue in your discussions on the Budget.

**Mr McGrath:** Over successive years, we have talked a lot to our Department of Finance colleagues, who do not disagree with the nature of any of the issues or disagree that there is a problem. It comes down to affordability.

**Mr Hilditch:** Julie, DVA. Sorry. *[Laughter.]* My question is about the licensing aspect. Some people who drive for a living have become unwell at some stage. Having spent some time in my constituency office recently, I know that that has become a constant theme. People are cleared to return to work by their GP or their local hospital, and then all the paperwork goes, I believe, to Coleraine. Is that right?

**Ms Thompson:** Yes.

**Mr Hilditch:** There then seems to be a three-month delay and, in a couple of cases, a five-month delay with the turnaround. Those people are relying on their licence for their living and to earn. Is that normal or is there a blockage at the minute? As I say, their medical people have already cleared them to return to work.

**Ms Thompson:** The paperwork has to go through our processes to be confirmed, and the occupational health service works alongside us to give us medical advice. That process sometimes takes longer. If that is the case, it causes real difficulties for individuals. There are various aspects involved, such as ensuring that all the paperwork is there and whether a second opinion is needed. All those things need to be worked through. We are looking at how we can speed up the process, and particularly at how we can get the medical side done more quickly. That is main thing that we need to do to make the service more fleet of foot.

**Mr Hilditch:** Do you agree that three to five months is unacceptable as a waiting time? Bills are mounting.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. We need to ensure that it is safe for people to drive on the roads. Assuming that that is the case, however, we should be processing paperwork as quickly as we possibly can.

**Mr Hilditch:** Why the dual approach? If a doctor or hospital has given clearance, is that not the early part of the process cleared at that stage?

**Ms Thompson:** It depends on the nature of the illness or difficulty and on what the doctor is saying. We certainly rely on occupational health services to give us further advice. It also depends on how it is that people want to use their car, be it for work or just for personal use.

**Mr Hilditch:** Taxi drivers and lorry drivers come to us.

**Ms Thompson:** Various processes must be worked through. Equally, however, can we do it and are we looking at trying to make things more effective? We are. That part of DVA is separate from the MOT centres. You are right: it is based in Coleraine.

**Mr Hilditch:** I am dealing with a very serious case at the minute that, for obvious reasons, I cannot speak about here, but, on the subject of illegal taxis and rogue taxi drivers, does the agency still carry out investigations or late-evening-type investigations on the ground? There is a growing trend of people who might look like legitimate taxi drivers but are not.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. We have an enforcement arm that goes out.

**Mr Hilditch:** That still happens.

**Ms Thompson:** Absolutely.

Enforcement protects all of us who are using the roads. Staff ensure that everybody has all the right paperwork in place to demonstrate the legitimacy of their work. That is very much part of the business.

**Mr Hilditch:** I have one last question, which is on Casement Park. Is that major project under John Irvine? I know that it is development-led. Is this to you again, Julie?

**Ms Thompson:** It is me again.

**Mr McGrath:** It is a planning application. It is not a DFI project.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. The Department has to work in conjunction and partnership with those dealing with planning applications. Will all the roadworks around the stadium be paid for by the developer? There was talk of slip roads coming off the M1 and various other things.

**Ms Thompson:** Andrew and I probably both talk at this point. The bit that I have is overseeing and the recommendation around the decision. It is a regionally significant project, so, for that reason, my planning service will be looking at it. The project then requires input from all the statutory consultees, a significant one of which is Roads, which is in our Department. One of the remaining issues with Casement is to resolve roads issues. I do not know whether you want to comment any further, Andrew. On the planning side, we are working as quickly as we can to get the processes in place, but we need the roads issues to be resolved. Everybody is working on them.

**Mr Hilditch:** Therefore, the cost will fall to the developer. Is that right?

**Dr Murray:** Yes. That is right. One of Conor Loughrey's functions is development and control. That means that he looks after the statutory consultee role of the Department for road safety, road progression and parking.

We have received three different versions of the transport assessment from the Casement Park developers. Each time, we have gone back to them, because we have had a number of concerns. Those are progressively being dealt with. I think that there were only a fairly small number of concerns raised with the last assessment that we sent back. *[Inaudible]* extensive issues. We think that those are resolvable by the developer. They will be done at the developer's expense, however.

**Mr Beggs:** Thanks for your presentation. First, I go back to winter gritting. You said that you may not be able to continue doing it to the end of this financial year. Do you have the salt stocks to enable you to grit? Is this purely about having the cash to pay staff to do it? What is the pressure point?

**Dr Murray:** It is purely about budget. We will prepare a submission to go to the Minister to let her know what the position is and what *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Beggs:** My question concerned whether you have the salt stocks. It takes time to get them. If it is purely about paying staff, that is a separate issue.

**Dr Murray:** We have plenty of staff and drivers. They are in place. All the procedures are in place. The issue with the salt is that it hits our budget line only when it is spread. When the salt is in the barns, it is considered to be materials and is thus regarded as an asset. It is only when the salt is spread that it hits our budget. The salt is there, but we do not have the budget cover to spread it.

**Mr Beggs:** There is an issue with your major capital schemes when it comes to striking a balance between huge road schemes and minor road improvements, such as small roundabouts and sets of traffic lights to improve road safety, and, for that matter, maintenance. Are we out of kilter with elsewhere? What is our balance at present? What percentage are we spending in each area?

**Dr Murray:** That is really a transport planning issue. We are not out of kilter. We are progressing flagship schemes at present. The issue is that we are spending so much of our limited budget on flagship schemes that it is not leaving us enough for road maintenance or the smaller local transport and safety issues.

**Mr Beggs:** Everybody likes cutting the ribbon when a new road scheme is opened. You said that we are not spending enough on other measures. If we are spending too much on flagship schemes, what proportion are we spending on other measures? What proportion is normal in other regions?

**Dr Murray:** It would be normal to be spending well over the £100 million on structural maintenance that we are spending now. We really should be spending the suggested £140 million. We are down to spending a couple of million pounds on local transport and safety measures. That area includes bus priority measures, improving walking links and cycling. We should be spending more there. I am not saying that we should be spending less on strategic road improvement schemes, because we certainly have gaps in the strategic road network, and there are benefits in improving it. If we had, say, a bypass at Ballynahinch, its town centre would be a much more liveable place. It would also become a safer place to live, and traffic would progress more efficiently.

The problem for me is that the pot is not big enough to allow me to do the strategic road improvements, road maintenance, and local transport and safety measures that I would like.

**Mr Beggs:** On the issue of contracts, I picked up on one of your earlier comments that Northern Ireland is more litigious than other parts. You blamed that on the number of local contractors making here very competitive. Presumably, if a contractor is unsuccessful, it will look for reasons to try to make a tender award null and void.

Do you accept that our purchasing arrangements contribute to that as well? I have heard it said that the legislation has changed in other parts of the United Kingdom, meaning that if an unsuccessful tenderer objects to a contract being awarded, and it is proven that it did not use a valid delay or blocking mechanism, it could be made to suffer some of the costs associated with the delays. That has had a great effect on reducing the instances of legal action taken that have delayed the awarding of contracts. Are you aware of that? What action are you taking to ensure that our legislation here is updated?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes. I am aware of that. Some of our delays have been caused by judicial reviews, and the bar for getting a judicial review in Northern Ireland is set quite low, and the costs are low. That is one thing. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) did an investigation into major project delivery in Northern Ireland, and one of the issues that it wants to look at is the judicial review process.

**Mr Beggs:** Translink has operated at a loss for the past number of years and its capital reserves have come down. As I understand it, Translink is a limited company.

**Mr McGrath:** It is a public corporation.

**Mr Beggs:** It is a public corporation, but its directors have responsibilities as to how it operates.

**Mr McGrath:** Absolutely.

**Mr Beggs:** How are we ensuring that it can continue to function and provide a service?

**Mr McGrath:** That is the issue. If we do not get sufficient funding, there can be no guarantee that it will be able to continue to provide the public transport network, which is quite expansive compared with elsewhere on these islands. There is no guarantee that we would be able to continue to do that.

You make a very good point: the position of directors, as I said earlier, is something of which we need to be cognisant. We also need there to be exposure of people, including board members.

**Mr Beggs:** That is a real risk that needs to be addressed.

**Mr McGrath:** That is a red risk — it is serious — because we are running out of time. We have managed in recent years because there was the sufficient cushion of Translink's level of reserves. Those are not there any more. Essentially, if the Government do not restore the funding needed for the public transport network, there is no expectation that it can continue in such an expansive way.

**Mr Beggs:** I move on to Northern Ireland Water and its structure. It has huge pressures as well. It is unable to borrow outside of public borrowing requirements. Is that issue being actively considered?

What other formats can it move to to enable significant improvements to be made and to allow us to meet our environmental obligations?

**Ms Thompson:** At the moment, it is an NDPB. You are absolutely right about the borrowing. It can borrow, but it is a bit like what Andrew was saying about the salt. For NIW to spend that money and put it out there and undertake projects, it requires cover from the budget, and that is where the constraint comes in.

We are absolutely looking at what models and classifications might be used for the purpose of financial flexibility. There are no easy answers, and we will need to take the view of the Minister when we know what the options look like and what the best way ahead is.

Everybody accepts that doing nothing is not an option. We need to do something to fund our waste-water infrastructure. The questions are these: how do we do that and what does that look like? That is something that we are looking at.

**Mr Beggs:** Do you accept that, without addressing the problem, the entire Northern Ireland economy is at risk? At present, in parts of my constituency such as Larne and many outlying villages, there are no current planning permissions for housing developments. There are not any potential new employers who require connection to the sewerage system. The whole economy is slowing down and being inhibited by the failure to take any decision on the matter.

**Ms Thompson:** There are around 100 development areas constrained at the minute, and the impact is widespread. To go back to the Chair's point, we view water very much as something that impacts on everybody's daily life. It absolutely does. It also impacts on the various elements of the Programme for Government, whether they be economic, environmental or health and wellbeing. All those elements are supported by, and need to have, a functioning water and waste-water infrastructure service.

Northern Ireland Water had, up to this point, been funding its water infrastructure. Understandably, we need to have good-quality drinking water. That has meant that the waste-water side has not had adequate investment, and we need to do something about that.

To go back to the global point, however, that money currently has to come out of the block. It therefore competes alongside all the other areas that we have debated today, never mind all the other capital priorities across other Departments.

Looking at models to identify whether NIW can get more financial flexibility to be able to utilise borrowing is part of the jigsaw puzzle, but I would say that there is no easy answer. It is something that we will need to look at.

**Mr Muir:** First, I will declare some interests. I am a former employee of Translink. I am also a former councillor on Ards and North Down Borough Council. Those roles have a bearing on some of today's discussions. Moreover, for Mr McCartney's benefit, my stepdad is the quality manager for the A6.

**Mr McCartney:** There you are. A good man.

**Mr Muir:** He is working hard.

It is really beneficial to have a first-day brief. It gives us a good overview, but if the Committee is to act as an effective scrutiny mechanism, receipt of the brief at 3.30 pm yesterday is not acceptable. The institutions have been restored, and one of the things that we have to learn lessons about is scrutiny and accountability. Receiving the document at 3.30 pm, giving us only a few hours to review it to be able to have an informed discussion with you, is something that we can perhaps learn lessons from, because it is important that we have the information to have that discussion.

I have a couple of questions. The first concerns Northern Ireland Water, and it has been touched on already. I agree with the Chair that infrastructure affects everyone's life. Water and sewerage infrastructure is absolutely crucial, especially for the economy. The investment issues that we have here have a particular impact on, for example, the planning applications mentioned by Mr Beggs. If you speak to any councillor across Northern Ireland, you will hear about applications not being able to be approved. We really need to be able to address that.

This is about the envisaged timescales for exploring the options. The time for discussing and debating how awful the infrastructure is is gone. It is time for action, because we cannot have people's livelihoods and the economy affected because of the lack of decision-making. Are there any timescales for bringing forward options to the Minister?

**Ms Thompson:** This leads very much on to the Budget process, as well as the price-control process that I talked about. Both are linked.

The price-control process, where the regulator will look at what is needed over the next six years and give us a really good, independent assessment of the capital requirements of Northern Ireland Water, is of huge benefit to the Department, because the external scrutiny means that we have a firm grip on what we require.

That then needs to be considered alongside the Budget processes and time frames, and the desire of the Executive to get to a multi-year Budget, which would really help give a degree of clarity moving ahead. I know that Northern Ireland Water would very much welcome that. Then you are into the question, "What about the options?". To do anything fundamental in there will take time; it is likely to require legislation. In our view at the moment, it is likely that we will need some element of additional capital. Obviously, water was mentioned in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document and specified as one of the areas to be looked at, and it will need to be considered alongside those priorities, so it is also part of that conversation. Then we will have to figure out what the options look like. The short answer to your question is that we will be looking at options very quickly but obviously that is something that we want to take the mind of the Minister on.

**Mr McGrath:** As Julie said, if it has to be funded by the taxpayer, you are talking about large sums of money. The document talks about the A5 and the A6. The A5 alone would be about £1 billion, and there would be further funding for the A6 before you get to water. These are big numbers. If it remains the case that they have to be funded from taxpayers' money, the situation is that the numbers are bigger, almost, than the current Northern Ireland block. It is not just a matter of will; it is a matter of securing the funding.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Are you in a position to give us an update on where the A5 sits? Obviously there is a public inquiry due.

**Dr Murray:** Yes. That is the stage we are at — the public inquiry. If the public inquiry runs its course, and if there is no further legal challenge, I think we could be starting construction late this year or early next year.

**Mr McGrath:** That is 1A, is it?

**Dr Murray:** Yes. That is the first part of it; it is stage 1A of the A5. It is the flagship. The flagship is no longer the full project. We are taking through the statutory processes for the full A5 project, but this is a fairly limited public inquiry on the addendum to the environmental statement.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Have you overcome the issues that led to the legal challenge towards the end of 2017?

**Dr Murray:** We believe we have, yes.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** So we are not in a position where we are going to have to go back to scratch on this?

**Dr Murray:** No. This is not a procurement issue, because we have a contractor in place. However, we still have certain things to do with that contractor before he can start the next phase. This challenge is from the anti-A5 alliance, and there is a high likelihood that there will be another one of those challenges, probably after the public inquiry.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** We will just have to watch this space?

**Dr Murray:** Yes.

**Mr Muir:** I have a couple of other issues. The briefing paper refers to the review of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. This relates to another issue in terms of how the infrastructure affects livelihoods, businesses and the economy. Planning has a major impact on that. Have you any view of timescales for bringing forward the review of the 2011 Act?

**Ms Thompson:** That is obviously something we need to talk to the Minister about; it is on the list of things to be discussed with her. We will need to figure out where that time frame sits alongside other things that she wants to do, so it would be appropriate to leave that for now, if that is OK.

**Mr Muir:** The other one is on the EU exit. As has been referred to, the Department is quite Brexit-heavy in that regard. Reference has been made to the work that has to be done at ports, and stuff like that. How advanced is that? Is the ability to plan and do stuff curtailed by the uncertainty about what will happen after the implementation period?

**Mr McGrath:** Brexit is quite intense. For most of last year, a lot of work was done around contingency planning for a no deal. That was looking at such things as the Enterprise and ensuring that it still ran in the event of a no deal. In the sense that there is now a deal, it is almost reversed, and we are saying, "Well, what are the consequences of that?", so there will be work going on around the ports. When it is clear what "unfettered" means or does not mean, and what checks there might be, the work will look at whether there will need to be facilities provided at some of the ports for checking by different agencies. That is at a very early stage, because clearly it is not clear whether there will be checks, particularly east-west and west-east. So there is a lot of contingency planning going on. It has obviously had to change direction in the past couple of months, but there is still uncertainty. A lot of colleagues are heavily engaged in that, and we need to work closely with our colleagues at the ports and with colleagues across the water. However, it is still pretty uncertain at the minute.

**Mr Muir:** Will that also affect the budgetary position for next year in terms of having the necessary funds to [*Inaudible*] infrastructure?

**Mr McGrath:** In the current year, we were lucky enough to avail ourselves of some Brexit-linked funds, particularly a significant amount of capital, where we got almost half the money and we were able to carry out road improvements near ports and stuff like that, and do some good work. At the moment, we cannot size what would need to be done at the ports. It is not necessarily clear that it would be our spend, as opposed to ports spend. Perhaps it might be DAERA spend. It depends on the nature of the check and who has to provide that. That is not clear at the moment at all.

**Mr Muir:** Just one last question. The brief refers to the whole issue of reservoirs and their poor state of repair. I just want to understand the level of risk that is associated with that. If, God forbid, one of those reservoirs were to fail, the potential loss of life would be quite significant. I just want to understand the level of risk that we are sitting with at present.

**Dr Murray:** That is exactly what we want to understand as well. We have appointed a panel of reservoir engineers to look at those. That is exactly the question, and we are just starting to get those reports through now. However, if a reservoir is in a poor condition it does not mean to say that there is a risk of catastrophic failure; it might just be that it leaks slightly, and that is not a particular risk to anybody. That is what we want to try to find out now.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** At this stage, then, no audit has been completed in relation to reservoirs?

**Dr Murray:** No. We do not have a full picture. This is not a new risk for Northern Ireland; we have never had a full picture before.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** No, I appreciate that.

**Dr Murray:** We have a considerably better picture now than we had before.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** When do you envisage having a fuller picture?

**Dr Murray:** I am talking from memory now, but we are within a few months of that.

**Mr McCartney:** I am sorry; I had to leave, so I apologise in advance if I ask a question that has already been asked. We touched on the A5 and the judicial review, notwithstanding people's rights to mount a legal challenge and the cost etc. In the aftermath of that, has the Department done an analysis of how that perhaps could have been avoided?

**Dr Murray:** Yes. As often happens in legal challenges in Northern Ireland, the area where the court found against the Department is a first; it is the first time it has ever happened. The A5 was the first time that that particular thing had ever happened, but we have closed that gap.

When the initial challenge on the A5 happened, there was a large number of grounds of challenge — 12 or 13, maybe. We assessed our vulnerability on all of those. We only lost on one of them, but there was a certain degree of vulnerability with others as well which we did not lose on, and we have been closing that vulnerability down too. Every time we have had a challenge or a threat of a challenge, we have assessed the vulnerability and, where we have assessed that there was a vulnerability, we have closed it down.

**Mr McCartney:** So that environmental statement would not happen in a future project of this size?

**Dr Murray:** No.

**Mr McCartney:** I suppose that it is hard to say it could not, but you know the gap.

**Dr Murray:** We have delivered schemes since that with those lessons learned, and those schemes got through and were not challenged.

**Mr McCartney:** Although, retrospectively, schemes may have got through in the past that, had they been challenged on those grounds, might not have got through?

**Dr Murray:** Certainly, throughout the country, there were schemes that went through, yes.

**Mr McCartney:** That is the danger; that, sometimes, that happens. You go in on one ground, but another ground is found, and that is something that we have to look out for.

We have talked about the A6. Has any scoping exercise been done? It is very obvious that when you do the two bits that are now being completed, the middle bit will become the focus for people asking whether we are ready to lay down what is necessary for that.

**Dr Murray:** It will be. We have already opened the most urgently needed part of the A6. That is probably my favourite piece of road improvement that we have delivered. It was an embarrassment that that section of road was a single carriageway. It was a very congested part of the network, and it has now been sorted out. The other parts will make big improvements as well. I am hopeful that, when those two contracts are completed, there will not be congestion on any of the other parts. However, you are quite right; it is still something that our transport plans will need to look at.

**Mr McCartney:** As someone once said, there will be no regrets about not seeing Moneynick Primary School every morning. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr Murray:** I am sure they will not regret not seeing traffic every day. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Boylan:** I apologise for missing the start of the briefing. I want to pick up on the NIW issue, because I remember it from when I sat on the Regional Development Committee; now we are up to PC21. You may have clarified some of this, but the brief talks about:

*"100 such areas, with a further 37 under stress."*

With regard to the whole network, in terms of the maintenance, the ongoing works and the projected capital works, which obviously would come in a PC, where are we in percentage terms in all of that?

**Ms Thompson:** There are several layers to what is needed. We provide Northern Ireland Water with about £300 million — just over £300 million — directly from the Department as Government funding. That is a combination of capital and revenue. The number for what they assess they require depends

on whether you have got inflation in and what exactly is included, but for the PC21 period, all inclusive, including inflation and other elements of the Living With Water programme, £2.5 billion will be needed. That compares with the PC15 period, for which £990 million was needed. So, as John has indicated, we will be considerably short if we continue to fund them at their current rate.

We need to find a different solution to get them more money, and there are really only two ways of doing that: you either increase the funding that comes from the public purse, which is the capital funding and all of that in the normal budgetary processes, or you look to identify whether there is another way of doing it, whether that is from borrowing or other revenue streams. All of that is a very difficult area, and the Minister and other Executive colleagues have made their positions very clear about water charges. All I will say is the more you want to increase flexibility and move to a place where Northern Ireland Water can do more themselves — borrow and utilise money themselves — the more you need to push them, as a company, further and further away from Government control. Those two things go hand in hand.

**Mr Boylan:** I appreciate that. I listened to Roy Beggs talk about the needs of housing developments not being met. You said that you have oversight of the area plans that are coming soon, which will include areas zoned for development, sustainability and all of that. Those are the buzzwords in all of the documents, but I would not like to think that over the past 10 years, as part of our infrastructure projects, we have built infrastructure that cannot facilitate some of those towns. I know Belfast got a load of money to do what it needed to do. That is grand, but some areas have built brand new sewage treatment centres — I would say they are built to last for 25 or 30 years — with the projection of the development of those individual areas. That is the point I am making; I take it that we have not done that.

**Ms Thompson:** Northern Ireland Water will have done a lot of modelling work on each of those waste water treatment centres and what they can and cannot do. The Belfast one in particular, which is a significant part of the Living With Water programme, is working at well over capacity. That means that Northern Ireland Water looks at connections and applications on an ongoing basis. I am sure you are picking that up across Northern Ireland, but Belfast is a good example. Northern Ireland Water needs to significantly expand that waste water treatment works, which is a significant requirement that will be expected to be funded and will come through as one of its requirements in PC21.

You multiply that across the rest of Northern Ireland, and there are multiple towns that have the same issue to a much smaller scale. What will be set out in Northern Ireland Water's business plan in a matter of days is the programmes that need to be done. You are right: you can say the numbers, but below that a ton of work has been done by Northern Ireland Water on exactly what is needed and where to model the requirements to understand that, and they are feeding into the local development planning process, so there is a connection there. That will then all go to the regulator, who will then take a view on whether that is the right thing to do, whether it has the right profile and whether it has the right cost, and we will get an independent assessment on it. So a lot of work has been done, led by Northern Ireland Water. It has also gone around councils — I am sure that you probably picked up a lot of that too — informing local councils about what it means, partly so that they know themselves and they get that information, but also to help inform the local development plan process. There is an awful lot of work needed to establish what the capacity needs of each of those treatments are.

**Mr Boylan:** Absolutely, and it should be part of the bigger programme in terms of area development, because the new infrastructure projects should be built for future adaptation. That is fine with me.

I want to talk about roads, Andrew. A number of years ago, in the old DRD, we did a report on the actual structure of the roads. There was a number of years: one in 25, one in 50 and all of that. You say to me that we have got £100 million at the minute and it is taking £140-odd million. I know some of the roads in my constituency; I will not name them to you today. Where are we at in terms of the overall structure of the majority of the rural roads?

**Dr Murray:** That plan that you were talking about is actually a structural maintenance funding plan. That plan looks at the different categories of roads that we have and decides how often they should be either resurfaced or given surface dressing. We are nowhere near the frequencies that we should be. Every year we work it out, and I am not sure what the figure will be for this year, but it may well be that rural roads are only getting a resurfacing every 100 years, instead of every —. They should probably be surface-dressed twice, and then resurfaced after that, so they should probably get it every 40 years. What is happening is that, because of budget restrictions, we are not able to do that. We are surface-dressing them; we cover the cracks, basically. We are patching them, within our reduced

service. But the resilience of the road network is being reduced because we are doing that. So you get layers and layers of surface dressing, and then you get a hot summer and the road loses its shape.

**Mr Boylan:** No, I appreciate that. I actually thought of the monitoring round, because we know, in particular, roads infrastructure, no matter what it is. In a monitoring round towards the end of the financial year, there are shovel-ready projects that can be done in small amounts. I would have thought that we could have got a few pounds there. Maybe we just did not sell it well enough, or the Minister did not like us on the day.

**Mr McGrath:** To be clear, first of all, the bids for January monitoring were lodged in December, so they predated the return of the Executive. We had to lodge them ourselves. We would have bid for more structural maintenance if we had thought that we could spend it. If you only know by the end of January, there is a limit to what you can spend. We always bid for what we think we can spend; in this case, I do not think we could have spent much more.

**Dr Murray:** No. There is an issue there that you have probably highlighted. We are a much smaller organisation than we were five years ago. Within roads and rivers — in the roads part, which you are interested in — we actually had a programme of reducing our size because our budgets were short, and we tried to put more money into the front-line services. We actually cut our staff by 10%, and, immediately on completion of that, there was a voluntary exit scheme that the Executive agreed, which cut us by a further 15%. So we have lost 25% of our staff and we are much smaller. Roads and rivers is now a lot smaller than the roads organisation was five or six years ago. One of the implications of that is that we no longer have the capacity to put large numbers of people out supervising contractors and having schemes ready towards the end of the year. I remember that, at one time in the past, we spent £40 million after Christmas. We cannot spend anything near that amount now.

**Mr Boylan:** And just following on from that, I appreciate that, because 50% of the issues raised with me are definitely rural roads issues. Is there a directive? Some of the councillors have contacted me in relation to it. Is there a directive now that, if councillors ask for a site meeting with the local roads manager or whatever, that decision has to go to the Minister? Is there such a directive?

**Dr Murray:** No. There was a period in which the Minister was keen to know what meetings were happening and we had to feed that up the line, so that did happen for a short period. The Minister has now accepted that meetings with councillors are a normal part of our routine business; we simply feed a report back after the meetings take place.

**Mr Boylan:** OK. Just two quick questions, Chair, if I may. Have you any updates on the North Link, West Link and East Link roads in Armagh? It is not on the programme. These are projects that have been about for a long number of years. For anybody who travels from the south into the city and the west into the city, it is a major, major — I cut away across country to avoid Armagh city in the mornings. Are there any other updates in relation to that?

**Dr Murray:** No. Those roads have been sitting dormant. A certain amount of development has been undertaken. Further development will depend, first, on our transport planning process and then on what the Minister [*Inaudible*].

**Mr Boylan:** OK. I will keep at that. Finally, the interconnector is mentioned in the paper. Who would like to respond?

**Ms Thompson:** That is me.

**Mr Boylan:** Have we got the money to underground it yet?

**Ms Thompson:** I can respond only about the planning application. We are nearly there: I suppose that is the way to describe it. We are just finalising all the elements of that particular application and hope to make a recommendation to the Minister in the not-too-distant future. We do not fund it directly, so that is —.

**Mr Boylan:** It is OK. I am just saying —.

**Ms Thompson:** That is the planning application.

**Mr Boylan:** I appreciate that you do not fund it. Clearly, the application is to run it overhead only anyway. You are saying that it will go to the Minister.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes, shortly.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I will be briefer. A couple of points just on the A6 and A31. Good job — I appreciate Andrew's input. I have heard from numerous farmers — I will not go into the detail — and landowners, who, back four or five years ago, expected to get a, b and c. Landowners and farmers are very much the farming community. They do not go into detail. Now, they are getting the pain of, "No, we did not agree to that; we agreed to this", "You told me this" and "You told me that". Maybe it is not a question, but more a point that, in future new road builds, farmers and landowners are clear about exactly what they are getting; not financially — because I appreciate that that is a process — but with regard to the details of boundary lines and hedgerows. I am dealing with numerous issues that relate purely to the A6 and A31. The A31 Magherafelt bypass has probably been open for, what, three years. It is maybe a point and not so much a question. It is about how you make that process smoother and cleaner.

**Dr Murray:** Yes, and we have a lot of land staff who work on that. Our contractor works on that as well, but you are quite right: until people actually see things on the ground, maybe there will be something that they agreed to in the past that they would not have agreed to if they had known what it would be like. There is a long tail of activity that actually follows a major road scheme's being delivered on the ground. You have seen that the first bit of the A6 has now opened, and it looks as though it is finished, but it is not. I can assure you that staff are still working with landowners on that scheme, and probably will be for several years down the line.

**Mr K Buchanan:** On the monitoring round and the lighting point we discussed yesterday, it was lighting and columns. Will any of that money be used for repair of lights, or just for new columns and lights?

**Dr Murray:** There are three serious issues with street lighting. One is that we still have a large stock that use non-LED lanterns. We want to get LED lanterns in there as quickly as possible to reduce electricity bills. They would save us around half of the electricity bill. The second is that we have a large number of outages at present, and it is growing by about 600 or 700 per week because we are not keeping track with the ones that go out. We need funding to fix those. I am not sure what actually came through in the monitoring round. I am not sure whether there was anything for that.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** There was funding for the replacement of columns.

**Mr K Buchanan:** It just referred to columns and lights.

**Mr McGrath:** There was £1.8 million.

**Dr Murray:** The third area of street lighting that gives me concern is that we have 280,000-odd street lighting columns. They have a certain life, and, at the end of that life, have to be replaced. The design life is around 25 years — sometimes they last 30 to 40 years — but once they get beyond that sort of lifespan, they can fail without notice. They generally corrode below the surface. You can look at it and it looks fine, but, the next thing you know, it is falling down. We have had large numbers of them fall down. I think that 40,000 of them are at the stage where they are beyond their design life — beyond their usable life. We ought to spend £13 million or £14 million a year, I think it is now, just to replace the ones that are coming to that stage. We are not doing that at all. We have spent nothing this year.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Have you experienced any outages with LEDs yet? I know that they are a new phenomenon, but have you experienced any outages with them? What is the timespan for an LED lantern? Are we looking at 15 years?

**Dr Murray:** I think they say 10 to 12 years for an LED lantern, as opposed to three to four years for a conventional lantern. We had some outages with the initial pilot, but they were just fixed under guarantee.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Back to you, Julie, on the topic of today. The brief talks about MOT waiting times, but that was all last year. Is there a good opportunity now to do a root-and-branch review of the entire MOT system? I know we are talking about lifts, but I am talking about waiting times etc. There are only

seven day in a week; ultimately we cannot do any more than that. Yes, there are 24 hours in a day, but that is another problem.

**Ms Thompson:** It goes back to some of the issues we were debating earlier. Whatever model or solution we come to for the lifts, then, going back to the points raised earlier, we need to understand how our capacity and demand can be managed. As I said earlier, the work that we did over the summer actually puts us in a better place to understand some of the dynamics, and we will be working to do that. Whatever solution there is, it has to actually work for the capacity that we have and for the demand of people bringing their cars to us. We need to absolutely understand how those two issues connect.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. Just picking up on the previous point, are you saying that if I wanted to meet an engineer, let us say an engineer based in Cookstown or Magherafelt, regarding a road, can that engineer meet me without authorisation from HQ?

**Dr Murray:** No. If it is a local issue, we will normally check that in advance with the Minister just to make sure that she is content. We do not do it on an individual basis; we do it on a schedule for the week.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Thank you. I am very mindful of the time and obviously the length of time you have been here, which we very much appreciate. There are a number of questions, and lots of areas, that probably require much greater scrutiny. No doubt you will be regular visitors to the Committee in the coming weeks and months. We look forward to that. Once again, thank you very much for your time.