



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

MOT Vehicle Testing Services: Ministerial
Update

4 March 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)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Ms Liz Kimmins
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Ms Mallon	Minister for Infrastructure
Ms Julie Thompson	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome to the Committee the Minister, Nichola Mallon, and Julie Thompson, deputy secretary of planning. We were issued with a very comprehensive statement last Thursday, and I thank the Minister for that and for her briefing. If members are content and the Minister is in agreement, we will go straight to questions.

We welcome the statement and the fact that this is moving towards a solution and bringing the saga to a conclusion. There is still an issue with drivers who have temporary exemption certificates (TECs), and it is likely that some of those certificates will expire before lifts are in place. What plans do you have for those motorists?

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to be here. Yes, even though the 52 lifts have been purchased under an accelerated programme, which means that they will be installed from April, with all new lifts fully installed by mid-July, the situation will have a continued impact on motorists. I have asked officials to provide me with a detailed work programme on the installation and location of lifts, and information on how many motorists will continue to be affected. It is very likely that I will have to extend the TEC period for those who have already been issued with one, but I have asked officials to document all of that and to timeline it for me, because I am conscious of the need to communicate clearly with the public and not to add any further confusion. Once I have that detailed work programme, I will make an announcement about the extension of the TEC time frame and for the group of motorists that will be affected.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There is clearly a maximum period that you can extend TECs for.

Ms Mallon: We could extend them for a further two months, which would give a TEC period of six months. I have requested Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) legal advice in the event that it is necessary to give a further extension. I am looking at issues around consultation, which might be required. I continue to make sure that I am going through all the options in detail so that we are fully prepared for whatever we need to do and so that I can communicate that to the public at the earliest opportunity.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Given the timescale for delivery and installation, as you say, a further backlog will accrue during that period. At this stage, have you considered how long it will take for the backlog to be addressed and for normal service to resume?

Ms Mallon: I do not have definitive figures. As part of the detailed work programme, I have asked officials to provide me with that. We are weighing up, as the lifts are being installed, whether we then start to call people whose tests are due at that time, which would almost ring-fence the people who have already been provided with TECs so that we are just furthering the continuation of that and are not affecting a new group of motorists. That would be my preferred option in trying to minimise disruption. I am asking officials to get me all that information. My objectives all along have been to ensure the safety of Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) staff and customers, to do what I can to minimise disruption to staff and to get our MOT centres fully and safely operable as quickly as possible. That will still determine my approach going forward.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): The statement mentions, on a couple of occasions, "protracted legal action". On what basis were you considering that?

Ms Mallon: In exploring all the options. I explored repairing the lifts, replacement of the lifts and getting new lifts. I examined the legal option. I looked at sourcing the lifts from an alternative supplier. I took legal advice from expert procurement and DSO, and I took QC advice. All that advice, in addition to the audit advice — even though I do not have the completed report — was that the most timely and cost-effective option was to purchase the equipment from MAHA under the existing contract. The legal advice to me was that, yes, you could pursue a legal option but that it would be a very protracted and costly process with no guarantee of resolution for the public. If I boil all this down to the information and advice that I have received to date, it seems to me that this situation arose because of two things: an inadequate inspection regime and overuse of machinery. Based on all the information and advice that I have received, it does not appear that there is a difficulty — I certainly have been advised that there is no difficulty — in procuring the equipment from MAHA, which is a world-leading supplier.

In the South, where there were cracks in the lifts, they are now purchasing equipment off MAHA. I have put in place additional measures for a new and approved maintenance regime contract between MAHA and DVA, a more robust inspection and maintenance regime, and an additional layer of regular independent assessment of the machinery for an extra level of protection. I have also instructed DVA to put in place a new and improved equipment recycling and replacement plan.

Those measures are important in addressing some of the reasons why we have got here. I cannot preclude everything because I am still awaiting the final audit report. That will help me to understand how this situation arose, who knew what and when, and what action was or was not taken.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What will that mean for the scheduling and frequency of inspection compared with what was in place?

Ms Mallon: Frequency was not the difficulty. We had an inspection every eight weeks and a thorough inspection every six months. The inspection regime was inadequate. There needs to be a more robust inspection regime with a checklist, and much improved reporting. That is why I have focused on bringing forward new measures to strengthen all that. The frequency will likely remain the same, but it will be a much more robust and extensive inspection regime.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): How often will the regular replacement of lifts be expected to take place, and what impact will that have on the DVA's budget and planning?

Ms Mallon: I will leave the frequency of the recycling and replacement of machinery to experts. The audit report will look at that area. The £1.8 million to purchase the 52 lifts was taken from reserves. Money is set aside in reserves for the replacement of machinery. The frequency of the replacement of

machinery needs to be expert-led. We have to be in a situation where we never see a recurrence of what we experienced.

I understand from the engineering report that we are looking at a lift life cycle of perhaps 22,000 lifts, but that can be much more if you have professional assessment and maintenance. These machines were doing much more lifting than that over their lifespans. I want an equipment replacement programme based on expert advice and timely planning. Disruption should be minimal because we should be planning for the replacement of machinery. It should be a cycle that causes the minimum disruption for staff and customers.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What will be the long-term impact on the DVA budget?

Ms Julie Thompson (Department for Infrastructure): We have £11 million set aside for equipment purchases. As the Minister said, we will work with the experts in the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and MAHA on all that has been identified about what the inspection regime should do, how it can be improved and what that means for the replacement cycle. That work is ongoing using that expertise and advice. How that follows through and what that will mean is part of that agenda.

We are using £1.8 million of the £11 million, so there are still substantial reserves. With regard to how long the lifts last and where they are being worn out, there has been a change to the lift. Additional layers have been put in place in the new models around the area where the issue arose. That will have to be taken into account as well.

Mr Hilditch: The Chair has asked a comprehensive range of questions.

You are very welcome this morning. You and the Department have dealt well with the situation, which is moving over time, and it is what it is. We are probably flogging a dead horse here.

Issues that I raised previously on communication and the safety of staff have been well taken care of. I think that you are on the ball there. The scrutiny area that the Committee should look at is probably the outcome, how it started and what action is being taken on that front. You have partly answered that. The inspections were probably down to human error or potentially no inspections at all being carried out at the relevant time. Where do you think the problem started? How can we make sure that this does not happen again?

Ms Mallon: It is difficult for me to outline categorically at this stage because I have not had sight of the audit report. Before I made the decision to purchase the lifts, I had contact with the lead auditor, because, given that investigation, I wanted reassurance from an auditor's perspective that there were no concerns about purchasing the equipment from MAHA, which the auditors did not. I am awaiting that report. I understand that it is being finalised and should be with me very soon. I am already on record as saying that I will implement all the recommendations in both independent reviews. I have also given an assurance that, just as I put the engineering report on my departmental website, I will do the same with the audit report because openness and transparency are important. As I said, from the information that I have gathered from the engineering, procurement, auditing and legal advice, it seems to me that there is an issue about having more robust inspection regimes, and we should have had a better equipment replacement programme. I await the findings of the report and will take my learning from them.

I met trade union officials because it is a very difficult time for staff. They were almost thrust into the situation, and it is very challenging for them because it was a period of great uncertainty. We are getting better at communicating with the public. I have been very clear that officials must provide much more direct and frequent communication and advice to the public, especially as this situation progresses to full resolution. I ask for the Committee's assistance, and I thank you for your support to date.

There is confusion as some people think that they need to get a call from DVA to advise them that their MOT appointment has been cancelled. That is not the case. An appointment is automatically cancelled, and you will be automatically issued with a TEC. It would be helpful and really useful if, collectively, we could try to get that message out there. From my understanding and my engagement with the public, that seems to be an area where people are still not very clear.

Mr Hilditch: There is still confusion in that area.

Ms Mallon: People are awaiting a call from DVA. The message is the same as it has been to DVA customers: if your MOT is due, please phone up and make your appointment. We will make an announcement when things are resolved. At this stage, they are not, so your appointment will be automatically cancelled. You do not need to contact DVA, it does not need to contact you, and you will be automatically issued with a temporary exemption certificate, which will allow you to tax your vehicle and keep it on the road. Please phone the priority telephone number if your vehicle is four years old or you are a car dealer or taxi driver, and we will get you a priority appointment. All 15 of our MOT centres are operable. We have extended hours and are working on Sundays. Obviously, the centres are not fully operable, but we are working our way through the priority vehicles. Any help that Committee members can give me to encourage that message to get out there will be really helpful.

Mr Hilditch: I appreciate that. Thank you, Minister.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Minister, and thank you for your statement. This is my first opportunity to congratulate you on your position.

Ms Mallon: Thank you.

Ms Anderson: What about potential damage to cars caused by using the HGV lanes for MOT testing? I am told that they are not suitable for some cars. Is this being looked at? Have you looked at the legal guidance for copying the two-year testing regime for cars that are between four and 10 years old in the South of Ireland? As a Committee, we look forward, like you, to scrutinising the audit investigation and report. I am sure that the Committee will pursue that with the rigour that is expected of us.

There have been utterances that this situation was caused by human error. The scale is quite alarming, so I was surprised when you outlined the regularity of the inspections, and yet this was not identified. Those involved in inspections obviously require some training because, given what we are now dealing with, they did not inspect in the way one would have expected in that role.

You said that temporary exemption certificates are issued automatically. I have a constituent — I am sure that he is not alone — who was due to do an MOT in January. He tried to get an exemption. He phoned up and was told that the MOT would not take place until March. He was refused a TEC and told that he could not use his car on the road. The man works and has, I think, six children. The family home depends on a system that they have in place to get children to school and all that. At the beginning of this week, he received notification that he would get a TEC and that he could take the car on the road. That has caused frustration and inconvenience. That is only one case that I am bringing to your attention. There are many more, and it has led to a public outcry. There is frustration because of the backlog, but the Department and those who are involved in issuing TECs did not look down the track and see that the backlog would not be cleared, in this constituent's case, by March. He was told that he could not use his car and is very frustrated by that. I do not believe that that is a single case.

Ms Mallon: OK. I really wish that you had brought that case to my attention straight away. That is highly unusual. I would like to understand the details of that.

Ms Anderson: I will talk to you separately about it.

Ms Mallon: Yes, I would like you to furnish me with that because it seems to be a rare exception. A number of individual cases have been brought to my attention, and that is certainly an exception to all of those.

I will deal with the biennial testing. I have been very clear that my job is to resolve the problem. My job is also to make sure that I put in place measures to prevent such a situation ever recurring. It has also brought to light the need to improve our MOT system and network. I have already expressed to the Committee that I am actively considering a range of options, one of which is biennial testing. I am seeking DSO legal advice on that. Once I have considered the range —

Ms Anderson: Sorry to interrupt you, but will that be shared with the Committee?

Ms Mallon: Absolutely. I am due to write to the Committee to set out a legislative programme. We are looking at the timetabling of that. Obviously, I need to explore all options. The decision will impact hugely on members of the public, DVA staff and so forth, so I want to make sure that I have carefully considered everything before I come to the Committee in order to give the Committee its place. As

soon as I am in a position to get to the outcome of a much improved MOT system and network, I will bring it to the Committee.

Your first question was about —

Ms Anderson: The HGV lanes.

Ms Mallon: The HGV lanes. Yes.

Ms Thompson: I am happy to take that. The HGV lanes have been used for quite some time for testing cars, but the volume of cars going through those lanes has obviously been higher than would previously have been the case. We have been looking at that closely and are aware of the issue. However, we are aware of only two cases where damage was caused to cars out of the significant volume going through those lanes. The lanes have also been subject to further risk assessment to confirm that they are safe to be used and that they can be handled, for staff and customers. That has been put in place in recent weeks as an extra layer and precaution measure, even though they had been used previously. Further advice has been put on nidirect about anything that is hanging low from a vehicle that could get in the way of the tracks on that HGV lane, which are slightly different to the tracks on a light-car lift.

Ms Anderson: Have the centres been informed about what cars should not go down that HGV lane and what cars should? Again, Minister, that is causing further frustration for people who get to the point of thinking that they are at least in the queue to get their MOT done, and then the car is damaged. They are not the kind of stories that we want coming out of here.

Ms Thompson: Risk assessments have been done across all centres in recent weeks to confirm to staff how they should operate those lanes safely. As I said, on the customer side, more advice has gone onto the nidirect website about looking for anything that is hanging low on their vehicles and the potential of those needing to be removed before they go into a testing centre.

Ms Anderson: The onus is on those in the centre to make sure that certain cars that are not suitable to go down HGV lanes are not put on those lanes.

Ms Thompson: They know how to operate those lifts.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you very much, Minister and Julie, for your answers so far. My question relates to the report from White Young Green, which, obviously, is good. We have an executive summary here. It makes reference to a "standard version", so I assume that the lifts in our MOT centres are a standard version. They are designed for 22,000 load lifts, based on doing 20,000 lifts annually. The summary also refers to "fatigue". If the lifts that you are purchasing are different from a standard version, are they stronger? In other words, will they do more lifts than load cycles? Is the fatigue based on a vertical fatigue or a horizontal fatigue caused by the shaker plates? Is it correct that the current lifts are standard and that the lifts that we are purchasing are non-standard and stronger, based on the shaker plate issue?

Ms Mallon: I will take the first of your question. The new lifts that we are purchasing have a design modification, so the pivot plate has been reinforced. MAHA has taken the decision to enhance the design so that should positively contribute to the life cycle of the machinery. Julie can talk about horizontal and vertical stress.

Ms Thompson: We have been discussing the stress issue with CPD, which employs structural engineers, and with White Young Green. It goes back to an earlier answer to a question from the Chair. We will consider all the issues about how long a lift can operate, and there are other issues about the weight of a car. These are standard at 4.2 tons, whereas the average car is only 1.5 tons, so there are a lot of complications. We operate cycles annually, and they are the equivalent of the 22,000 that is the life cycle of a lift. Lifts will not be replaced annually, so it is important that we get an understanding of the life cycle and how long we want to use them for, what the replacement looks like and the volume. Part of the issue is that we have not looked closely enough at what the cycles actually are, and we need to be able to pick all of that up, whether through cycle counters on the lifts or using DVA information about the number of cycles.

Shaker plates were mentioned in terms of creating an additional pressure on the scissor legs and the pivots and all that. That is all being looked at as well. We will lean heavily on advice from the engineering side about what is appropriate. These are all subject to lift regulations — they have to be — and that is all relevant. The standard of an inspection and what that looks like has to be part of a very regimented regime.

Mr K Buchanan: Thanks for that. Do you see MAHA now putting a time limit on these lifts, considering the issues that it has had across Europe, the South of Ireland and here? Do you see MAHA putting in a specific number of lift cycles, after which the lifts will be changed? I appreciate that you can maintain and inspect them regularly to satisfy yourselves, but whose advice will you lean towards? MAHA could say, in three years' time, that it reckons that you should change the lifts for commercial reasons and lots of other reasons.

Ms Mallon: I appreciate that. In the engineering report, at the item that you have highlighted, it outlines the MAHA DUO operating instructions. They specify that the product is designed for 22,000 load cycles but that the:

"life expectancy shall be evaluated and scheduled by a qualified person during the annual safety inspection".

That is key for us. We will need to see whether there is an extension or a reduction. It is unlikely, but the key for me are the counters, strength and design, and a more robust inspection regime. That is to do with the inspection checklist in order to make sure that it covers many more items than it did before. Without pre-empting the audit report, I also want to consider the skills of those who are carrying out the repairs. We have also said that we will add an additional layer of regular independent assessment. That represents a new and extensive approach that has a number of checks and balances that had not existed up to this point.

Mr K Buchanan: I have one final question on a different topic. What discussions have you had with Translink on the issues that it is experiencing, and have you any plans to solve those problems?

Ms Mallon: Do you mean the funding problems in Translink?

Mr K Buchanan: Yes.

Ms Mallon: Obviously, there have been critical pressures on Translink's budget. Those are eating into its reserves because there were significant budget cuts to the Department from 2015-16. A vibrant public transport network is critical. It is not just an issue for my Department. It is critical to the delivery of the Programme for Government outcomes for every Department. I have made representations on a number of occasions to the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues, and I hope that they recognise the importance of our public transport network to our Programme for Government, particularly for connecting communities and tackling the climate emergency. I understand that Translink representatives are coming to the Committee today.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): They are. Members, we are very restricted in our time with the Minister, so I would appreciate it if questions were kept very much on the MOT situation rather than deviating from that.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you, Minister, for your report. It is good to get an update, and we have progressed quite a bit since Julie was first in front of the Committee regarding this.

Keith has touched on a few points that I was going to raise about the shelf life of the new lifts. In the report, it said — you have mentioned it in your brief — that 22,000 load cycles were the expected usage of the lifts. That is the standard version; these are obviously a non-standard version, with the shaker plates. It is a wee bit concerning that they have seen maybe 150,000 or 160,000 lifting cycles in their lifetime so far. Obviously, we do not want to be in this situation again. Do we have a clear life expectancy or shelf life — whatever you want to call it — for the new lifts? How many lifting cycles will they be able to complete?

You said that there is a design modification, so they are reinforced and, hopefully, stronger. We need to be clear on that. When we first asked those questions, when this issue first arose, we were not clear on what the shelf life was. Now that we have an indication, it is important that we know that figure.

I have a small point regarding the TECs. It was raised with me was that motorists can miss the date for their MOT. It is my understanding that, when they go to book, they then have difficulties doing so because the date has passed, and they are not able to get a TEC. Is that the case? What way is it? I ask just to be able to put out advice, because, as you have said, there are some issues around clarity and what will happen there.

Ms Mallon: Julie will take the lifts. The responsibility is still on you to make your appointment for your MOT test. However, if people do not make that and then try and get another appointment, and are told, "No, you cannot get it, and you cannot get a TEC", please advise them, through your office, to contact DVA or my office. I am keen to resolve that. If you are aware of any of those cases, please feed them through and we will work hard to resolve them.

Ms Thompson: The shelf life point is similar to what we have discussed with Mr Buchanan. We must look to see how long, the weight of the cars, and how many counts they are going through. Both us and MAHA will want to look at those aspects of the contract, with CPD advice, and we will try to find something that works for everybody. They will have their view of that and we will have ours. We will use the advice of CPD to bring that together into a new contract, which we expect to have in place from 1 April.

Ms Kimmins: Just to be clear, then: at the minute we do not know and do not have a clear idea of the number of lifting cycles that they are designed to take?

Ms Thompson: Well, because it is a new model of the lift, we will have to work all that out.

Ms Kimmins: That is fair enough. That is grand. Thank you.

Ms Mallon: I want to reassure Committee members that I am clear that there needs to be a much enhanced contract regime between DVA and MAHA, and for that to contain a much more robust inspection regime. That will be scrutinised through DSO and others. We need to get into a much better place for all concerned, for MAHA, as a company with a world-leading reputation, and also I want to be absolutely satisfied. Those things will be scrutinised, and I will be acting on the best procurement and legal advice that my Department can provide.

Ms Kimmins: I suppose that, before the lifts are installed and functioning, we will have that idea? That would have to be part of the design specification.

Ms Mallon: Yes. When the machines are installed, they will be checked before they are fully operable. There will be a clear contract in place, mentioning life cycles, the maintenance regime and the additional enhancements that I am bringing forward. I will provide the Committee with all that, and the Committee will have full access to the two independent reports that I have commissioned.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister and Julie, and previously Paul, for coming along and providing that information. I appreciate the work that has been done to date. I know the Minister can only be here for a short period, so here are just a few quick things. What impact does this have upon the wider capital project? Is this indicative of the reasons why we need to proceed with that project, to seek funding to be able to do that? I also want to ask about the situation in the Republic of Ireland. Will you give us an outline of what it is? Are there similarities with what we have experienced in the North? My last point is that there was a desire to have this completed by July. How confident are we that that will be the deadline for having this completed?

Ms Mallon: On the financial impact, the £1.8 million that is being spent on these lifts is coming from within DVA reserves that are set aside for equipment replacement. In essence, there will be no impact on wider work by DVA. I think that everyone recognises that we need to improve our MOT centres. We need to make them fit for purpose. They need to be capable of diesel emissions testing. That is why I have said that I am keen that the next phase for me — and I am already working on it — is looking to see how we improve and modernise our MOT systems and centres. It will cost a significant sum of money. We have plans for a new MOT centre in Belfast to try to begin to address diesel emissions testing. I am very clear that, in the difficulties that this situation has presented, there is an opportunity to do much better with our MOT centres and testing for DVA staff and customers. That is why I am considering a range of things, including biennial testing.

In the South, as in Europe, the situation emerged with cracks in the lifts, but again, in the South, they are purchasing new lifts from MAHA. That is a reflection that MAHA is a world leader, and the issue is not so much the supply of the equipment. I can speak with greater authority on the situation in Northern Ireland. It was to do with use and with the inspection regime. That is why we are correcting that going forward.

In terms of confidence around installation by mid-July, we were very clear when I made the decision to buy the new lifts that it had to be under an accelerated production programme, which MAHA agreed to, and it has given us assurances that all 52 lifts will be produced and delivered by mid-July. We have made it very clear that that is an important commitment. It is a commitment that I have passed on to the public, and the one thing that I do not want to do is add any further confusion to the public. We are very clear that that commitment needs to be honoured.

Ms Thompson: That will continue to be very closely monitored with MAHA over the coming weeks.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Purchasing new lifts and the possibility of moving to biennial testing will obviously have a further impact on the reserves in DVA. Are we likely to see an increase in the cost of MOTs and, therefore, pass that cost on to the customer?

Ms Mallon: I am reluctant to make any kind of announcements, but I want to be open with people about what I am actively considering. I am actively considering the biennial testing, and I have to consider all the ramifications of that. It could possibly release capacity in MOT centres. It could allow us to improve and address the emissions testing, but I need to weigh up the cost of that. Are the benefits to customers of certain vehicles not having to go on an annual basis weighed up by any changes to fees and so forth? I have not made a definitive decision on that. I will consider everything in the round before I make a decision on it.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister and thank her. Some of my colleagues have outlined that there are still a few communication problems, but, on the whole, a lot of things have been dealt with since the first meeting. I just want to go to the report. We got an executive summary. Can we have the full report at some point?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am happy to provide the full report to the Committee.

Mr Boylan: No problem. I refer you to the key observations. I am slightly concerned by point 2 and point 4. I will just read them out for the record. At point 2, it says:

"In some instances, the cracking described in point 1 was observed to propagate into the underside of the RHS scissor legs. It was not possible to quantify the number of legs affected due to the presence of steel plates noted in point 4."

If you go down to point 4, it says that because of the plates being welded on, you could not exactly quantify or inspect the cracking properly. That is slightly concerning because it does not give an overall view of the issue. What is your assessment of that in relation to that report? I understand that they undertook some remedial work to try and address some of the issues, but the report is saying that plates were welded on so they could not observe exactly what was going wrong. That does not give a full assessment of exactly what did go wrong.

Ms Mallon: There was some remedial work being carried out on the lifts. Very early on, though, an independent assessor said that they could not give a full guarantee of the quality assurance of those repairs, which is why we took the decision to take all the lifts with cracks out of operation on 21 January. It is clear to me when we look at the inspection regime that we also have to look the repair work, and we need to make sure that both elements are robust and that it all is being carried out by people with proper qualifications. Again, the audit report will look at governance systems around all of that, which will be important for informing the way forward.

Mr Boylan: That was my follow-up question, Chair. Clearly, the audit report will look at that specifically. If you read the report that way, it looks as if the plates were welded over just to cover up the cracks, as opposed to being part of remedial work. That is just the way the report reads.

Ms Mallon: It is not fair to say, and I do not want to imply, that there was remedial work carried out to cover up cracks. There was welding work that took place, and, upon independent assessment, a

decision was taken by the DVA that it could not get enough assurances, which is why it took the precautionary measure of taking the lifts out of operation. That was the right decision. It is about having a much more robust inspection and maintenance regime and having greater confidence in the repair regime. The important element, as I have mentioned a number of times, is equipment replacement and having a very clear cycle and plan in place.

Mr Boylan: I was not implying that. I am only saying —.

Ms Mallon: No, I know.

Mr Boylan: The point is that that now gives full clarity to the report and the inspection team, because if they are going to remedy the issue, that is where the problems all lay; in the scissors. So it is actually an engineering issue. You have already answered the question.

Ms Thompson: The engineers, obviously, have looked at it. By the time that they looked at it, the lifts were not in operation. The welding had been done, and the quality of that welding was called out on 27 January, which is why all they all went down. Making sure that we have the right regimes in place for the future that will enable a similar situation to be avoided is the important thing.

Mr Boylan: Hopefully, the audit report will reflect that.

One final question about taxis. Obviously I could —.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Mr Boylan: the DVA.

Mr Boylan: No, it is the MOTs.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK.

Mr Boylan: I know, Chair. Do not record that, by the way. I know, Chair, completely. Is there an issue with taxis getting their MOT tests?

Ms Mallon: I have not heard about any issues with taxis not being able to access PSV tests. Accessing those tests is different. If you are aware of any taxi drivers who are not able to access the test, please contact me, because I recognise that it is their livelihood. That is why I identified them very quickly as a priority group. We have put out the helpline number, so, please, if you are aware of any taxi drivers who have not been able to get their PSV test — I am not — let me know.

Mr Boylan: We will talk about taxi regulations another day. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's commitment to openness and transparency. I hope that that is a principle that will be established across all Departments.

Following the difficulties and the initial concerns from the public, the complaints seem to have tapered off substantially. Is there any sort of analysis of the number of complaints and whether there were geographical hotspots in which the issue was not dealt with as well as it ought to have been?

Ms Thompson: We certainly know the number of phone calls, and you are absolutely right; the number of phone calls has dropped dramatically from the very early days when everybody was in a lot of confusion about exactly how this was operating. On geographical analysis, I do not think that the phone systems will give us that. We know where correspondence has come from and various things like that, coming into email boxes, but we have not examined exactly where the hotspots are.

If we have the details, we can sort the cars out really quickly. The capacity is there to put the priority vehicles through. The priority line being open since the middle of February has also helped immensely, because it gives people a place to make phone calls and get speaking to people who can get them sorted out.

As the Minister said, we are in a much better place, and we are not aware of a whole host of people who are having difficulties. The TEC has become an automated process — it was manual at the start — which is also helping people to get more, better and earlier sight of those TECs. People at home

were anxious when they had not received a TEC through the post and were having to trust that it would come through. Now, because that process is automated, we are getting them out much earlier.

Mrs D Kelly: That is very helpful. The improvement in the communication will allay a lot of public concern and anxiety.

Mr K Buchanan: Just a quick question: were the two lifts that were previously fitted upgraded to withstand heavier loads? I appreciate that they were maybe bought in a bit of a hurry to get the thing operational. What are you doing with the two existing lifts?

Ms Mallon: They are referred to in the engineering report, in the paragraph above the recommendations. They were inspected, and they have exceeded the 22,000-lift life cycle. The expert engineer report says that they are fine to continue working but that the inspection regime needs to keep an eye on them and that they need to be scheduled for replacement, along with the others, at a future date. They were fully inspected by White Young Green and were found to be operable. It had no concerns about them.

Mr K Buchanan: Is MAHA going to upgrade those?

Ms Thompson: The two brand new lifts?

Mr K Buchanan: Yes.

Ms Thompson: They also have the extra plates in them.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. Fair enough.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you. No one else has indicated that they want to ask a question. Thank you very much for attending this morning. The Committee will obviously still want to continue to be briefed on this, particularly around TECs and any changes or slippage in the timescales for installation.

Ms Mallon: Thank you. I want to place on record my appreciation for the support of the Committee. It has been a difficult time when you think about the number of people who have MOT tests daily. I thank you all for your support. I also put on record my appreciation for DVA staff, who have worked very hard. The people in our test centres are going over and beyond at a difficult and stressful time. I also place on record my thanks for the patience of members of the public in allowing us to deal with this situation.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you very much.