



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Driving Tests: Ms Nichola Mallon MLA,
Minister for Infrastructure

3 September 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Ms Mallon	Minister for Infrastructure
Mr Jeremy Logan	Driver and Vehicle Agency

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome the Minister, Nichola Mallon, and Jeremy Logan, the acting chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). Minister and Jeremy, you are very welcome. Thank you very much for attending today, primarily to discuss the issue of driver testing. It is obviously a topic that has been raised with you on several occasions throughout the lockdown period. With testing resuming only this week and the challenges associated with that, including a protest by driving instructors in Craigavon, I and other members felt that it was necessary that we hear from you. I understand that you only have 45 minutes with us and that you wish to make a short opening statement. After that, members will follow up with some questions.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you very much, Chair. I have an Executive meeting at 11.00 am, which has curtailed my time with you. Before I begin, I send my deepest sympathies to the families of those who lost their lives yesterday through COVID-related deaths. It is a poignant reminder that the virus is still very much with us and that we must all remain vigilant and act to keep each other safe.

I very much welcome the opportunity to come to the Committee to clearly set out the facts and position on driving tests and ensure that all members of the Committee are fully informed about the current position and the plans ahead. I will be brief, as I know that time is short and members will have questions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted and continues to impact on all our lives and all public-facing services, be they health services, dental services, retail or restaurants. The range of necessary mitigations that we need to put in place to keep each other safe in this new normal has reduced capacity, increased waiting times and caused disruption. The resumption of driving tests has not been immune from that impact. From the decision to suspend the service to its resumption, the priority remains the health and safety of staff and customers.

Members will be aware that the reinstatement of driving tests began back in July. Motorbike driving testing resumed from 6 July, and tests for drivers of buses and tractors, as well as module 4 certificate of professional competence (CPC) tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers, were reinstated from 20 July. Driver theory tests were also reintroduced from 6 July, with safe social distancing in place. On 28 July, I announced that the DVA was planning to resume some practical car and lorry driving tests from 1 September. In preparation for that, working with the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), staff and unions, DVA management have developed an acceptable risk assessment for driving tests. Standard operating procedures and templates have also been revised, a driving instructor pack has been issued to the industry and uploaded to nidirect, and social media has been updated. As planned, DVA examiners commenced tests from 1 September.

On numerous occasions, I have set out the plan for the next few weeks. From 1 September, around 200 key workers, including doctors, nurses and front-line workers, will be tested first. They will be followed by the customers, most of whom are young people, who had their tests cancelled, which will ensure that they are not further inconvenienced. The DVA has started to contact those customers, of whom there are approximately 3,800, to arrange the scheduling of their tests, starting from 1 September. The remainder will be contacted shortly to get a suitable appointment. The DVA estimates that it will take six to eight weeks from 1 September to clear the backlog of cancelled tests and tests for key workers. Therefore, we anticipate a resumption of normal service by October/November. A further update will be provided by the DVA to advise when it is opening its booking system for all other new customers, who will be given appointments as soon as possible.

The health and safety of staff and customers is our priority, and, in the middle of a pandemic, there will undoubtedly be delay and disruption. However, the DVA is working as quickly as possible to restore services. Driving tests have commenced at all DVA sites, including Belfast and Newtownards, with the current exception of Craigavon. While it is possible to conduct MOT testing inside the Craigavon test centre, the DVA cannot safely conduct driving tests from it at this time. The reason for that is that the grounds of the Craigavon test centre are currently being used by the Department of Health to conduct COVID-19 testing, and the Department is understandably seeing a higher level of demand for testing, given the increased R rate and the clusters emerging in that area. While we understand that the centre will no longer be needed by the Department of Health from mid October, I have asked officials to work urgently with driving instructors, examiners and the Department of Health to explore options to find an accommodation locally that will allow the resumption of driving tests earlier than that while allowing vital local COVID testing to be carried out for people living in the area. The head of DVA standards and the deputy chief driving examiner have met some of the driving instructors based in Craigavon. Options for conducting driving tests in the Craigavon area and commencing the test at the roadside outside the test centre are being explored. The DVA has agreed to explore alternative sites in the area and provide a further update to local driving instructors next week.

I am conscious of the disruption being caused to DVA customers, and that is why, on 8 July, I announced plans to amend the driving licence regulations to allow an eight-month extension to the validity of theory test pass certificates that expire between 1 March and 31 October 2020 and a six-month extension to the validity of off-road motorcycle test pass certificates that expire between 1 March and 31 August. That legislation came into effect on 1 September and applies to theory test certificates and off-road motorcycle test pass certificates that have expired from 1 March. That step was taken to help minimise inconvenience to those needing a practical test while the DVA works through the inevitable backlog resulting from the pandemic.

As I have said again and again, I recognise the disruption being caused to driving instructors and those seeking driving tests, and I am in no way diminishing that. I have put measures in place to help minimise the disruption, but I refute accusations from some politicians that this is a fiasco and a crisis and that we are spectacularly failing young people. There has been a significant amount of work to get to this stage, and examiners and learners are now back on the road, helping to keep people, particularly our key workers, moving and able to get to their work. No one wants the situation to go on any longer than it has to, but we have to recognise that we are in a pandemic and, as with all close-contact activities in this new normal, processes have had to change. It is not, nor can it be, business as usual, but I hope that you can see that there is a clear plan to resume services safely and quickly for everyone. These are challenging times, and I hope that the Committee will support the efforts of DVA staff and the trade unions as we all work to resume services as safely and as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you very much. We absolutely appreciate that there have been health and safety concerns and that you want to ensure that examiners and pupils are as safe as possible, but we have a situation where instructors have been back at work since July; in fact, bizarrely, we were informed that they never had to stop working. They have been back to work since

July and were able to make adjustments to create a safe environment within days. It has taken DVA a further two months to agree. You mentioned the CMO and the CSA and the unions. Essentially, what you have agreed are exactly the same protocols and guidance, so I really do not have an explanation of why it has taken so long to resume testing. In Great Britain, key workers were being tested during the pandemic, but that did not happen here. We are in a situation now, in September, where key workers are being regarded as a priority but it has taken until 1 September to commence that work.

You talk about a backlog and about that being cleared within six to eight weeks: I am not sure whether that is realistic. You are assuming that the backlog is just the 3,800 who have had their test cancelled. There are many more who are waiting to be tested and, at this stage, still have not been able to access an appointment and will not be able to do so until November.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Chair. Yes, there was a lot of confusion for the driving instructors. Unfortunately, they were not included in the Executive Office's regulations, and it came to light only when Members cited driving instructors as being able to resume services when the Executive moved on close contact that we realised that driving instructors had been omitted from the Executive Office's regulations, so I agree that there was confusion there.

The resumption of driving tests has been a challenging situation across these islands. In Wales, they resumed practical driving tests only on 17 August, and, in Scotland, they are not due to commence until 14 September. That is reflective of the challenges. You are right that driving instructors have gone back. The industry has produced guidance, and they are adhering to it. The situation faced by a driving examiner is very different from that of a driving instructor. The driving examiner, for example, has to be in multiple vehicles, and we have to risk-assess an entire process from when the customer comes to the centre and there is the meet-and-greet. Every stage has to be risk-assessed, and that is why we worked closely with the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser, the staff and unions to get those services up and running as quickly as possible.

I am clear that this is not an ideal situation. I wish that we were not in a pandemic; I wish that we were not causing any disruption to driving instructors or to customers. I can assure the Committee that my number-one priority is keeping staff and customers safe from the moment they have to start the process of their driving test to the conclusion, and we will work as quickly as possible to work through that.

You asked about the backlog. We have 3,800 people. That equates to the people with priority appointments — the doctors and nurses — and then we have a number who had their tests cancelled. It is unfair for them to have had their tests cancelled, and that is why I took the decision that we should make sure that they get their tests first to minimise disruption, but you are absolutely right that there are many other people who will wish to get a driving test. Once we have worked through the backlog of the priority groups that we have identified, we will move as quickly as possible to get those people appointments.

I must point out that, pre COVID, driving examiners were carrying out six tests per day: even with the significant risk assessments and all of the mitigations that are in place, they are currently carrying out five tests. That demonstrates that we are doing everything we can to work through as many customers as safely and as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): In reality, when the backlog that you referred is cleared, that will really only take us to the situation where we would have been in June. We are in a standing position in that there are many more thousands who are adding to that backlog, and it will probably take several months to clear the number of tests that will be required. With regard to a plan to address the backlog, you have already mentioned how they are doing one test fewer per day. How will you address the numbers crisis that we will face? Is there an opportunity to bring on additional examiners?

Ms Mallon: First of all, we do not know the number of people who will seek a driving test. I do not think that we can, with 100% accuracy, extrapolate from the year previous to COVID and just assume that all of those numbers will transfer across. People were not able to avail themselves of driving tests or theory tests for some time. As an Executive, we encourage people to work from home where they can. Circumstances have changed significantly in the new normal. That is not to say that we are not anticipating a surge in demand: we are, and we have been working through potential options. We have been examining the potential for recruiting additional driving examiners. The Committee will appreciate that a recruitment and training process is quite lengthy, so we have to ask ourselves, given that it will be a short-term surge in demand, whether that is a viable option, but it is being explored. We

are also looking at increasing testing capacity into the evenings and Sundays, but I am sure that Jeremy will come in on that. There are risks with that around road traffic levels and whether that is a fair assessment of a driving test to ensure that someone is safe to take to the roads. We have been working through practical options. I want to make it clear that, if anyone thinks — I am not saying that anyone on the Committee would think this — that I or the DVA are sitting twiddling our thumbs in the face of the situation, I assure you that we are absolutely not.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We have evidence from the situation on the mainland that, when they opened their booking system, it crashed and they have had problems. Are you content that the system that you have in place will be fit for purpose?

Ms Mallon: As you say and because it is unprecedented times and things are hugely challenging, the system in England did crash. We are in contact with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA). We are looking at IT as well, because it will be a challenge and there will be difficulties with it. There is no doubt about that, but we are trying to anticipate that and trying to work through those in advance. Jeremy, do you wish to come in and add anything?

Mr Jeremy Logan (Driver and Vehicle Agency): Yes. We have been in contact with DVSA and are well aware of the problems that it faced with its booking system. To be fair, it was dealing with proportionately a huge number of driving test applications throughout the UK. Before we open our booking service to the general public we will want to make sure, as far as we can, that it is robust and can cope with what will be an increased demand. We will do that as early as we can, once we deal with the priority groups. We are working well through the 3,800 that the Minister mentioned, and a lot of those appointments have already been allocated. We hope to open that booking service in October so that the next group of customers can book their tests over the coming months.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK.

Mr Logan: Over the next couple of weeks, we will take forward the controls and measures that we have to make to make sure that our IT system and our online booking service is robust, to try to avoid finding ourselves in the same position as they did in the UK.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Finally, DVA obviously regulates and tests instructors, and I understand that there are a number of trainee instructors who are unable to be examined and complete their Approved Driving Instructor (ADI) training. When is that service likely to resume?

Mr Logan: At this stage, I would have to come back to you with the definitive plans on that, Chair. At the minute, our focus has been on getting our practical driving tests back up and running. From September 1, we have delivered a number of practical driving tests. We know that there are services that we need to reinstate, and we need to work through those carefully. The focus has been to deal with the driving tests this year at this point in time.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. If you do not have the figures with you on that, could you also supply to the Committee the number of tests that were carried out from March to September last year? Thank you.

Mr K Buchanan: Can you hear me OK?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Minister and Jeremy. I have a couple of quick questions. Minister, you referred to carrying out six tests per day: reducing that to five would mean, roughly, a 15% to 20% reduction. If you look at your quota from 2008-09 right up to 2019-2020, you see that you were roughly doing 1,000 a week, so you will have a reduction from that 1,000 a week. Those people will still be there. They are technically not in the system now, but, as my colleague referred to, how do you catch up with that? You have the key workers and you have the backlog of 3,800, which, you said, would take about six to eight weeks. How will you get through the massive number of people who want to book a test? The minute you open it up online, there will be thousands of people trying to book a test. How will you cover that backlog?

Ms Mallon: Because we had to close the service for a number of months, in line with public health advice, we will face a difficult situation, and that is being felt across society. What we are trying to do,

as, hopefully, I set out with the Chair, is to look at options for recruitment or bringing in additional capacity in the sense that we would carry out tests into the evenings and on Sundays. We have to be mindful that this is about road safety as well. We are working through options to ensure that we can test as many people as possible. I will not pretend that, once we open the booking system, every person will get a test within six to eight weeks; in fact, prior to COVID, on average, people were waiting about six to eight weeks. That is the reality. I do not want to see people having to wait an inordinate amount of time. I want to make sure that we have proper procedures in place so that we can give people their driving tests but in a safe way, not just mitigating the risks of COVID but ensuring road safety and that the conditions in which they are tested are the right conditions.

Mr K Buchanan: How many examiners do you have operating? Is that number still the same today as it was prior to COVID?

Ms Mallon: We have 36 driving examiners and 40 in dual role whom we would use with a degree of flexibility. That has not changed since COVID, and that is why I said that, of course, we are looking into recruitment. As you will appreciate, Keith, a recruitment process is not a quick fix that can be implemented tomorrow or within 2 to 3, 4 or 5 weeks.

Mr K Buchanan: That is roughly 180 tests a day: am I correct?

Ms Mallon: I will bow to your mathematics, Keith.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. Is there any impact on HGV or lorry testing?

Ms Mallon: Yes. Do you want to take that?

Mr Logan: We will deliver all categories of test. The majority of tests will be in category B — the car-driving test — and we will do lorry tests as well. The Minister's point earlier was that we will not know the demand for testing until we address the 3,800 whom we have talked about and open the booking service. While looking at previous statistics might give you an indication of what we have previously done, the dynamic has probably changed fairly significantly during the COVID crisis, when limited instruction was delivered. There will be a high demand, of that there is no doubt, but we will not know until the booking service opens up.

As the Minister said, we have the existing driving examiners and our dual role staff, who do vehicle inspections as well as driving examinations, and we will use that resource flexibly to meet the demand. Those are decisions that we will continue to take and monitor and review once we know how the booking service plays out in the longer term. We would hope, at that stage, to have all our test centres open for driving examinations, and we would hope to offer a service whereby people can book for up to three months from when the service opens. That will give us a strong indication of the demand.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. Chair, may I deviate slightly into MOT testing? I have a brief question on that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Very brief.

Mr K Buchanan: Minister Mallon, on the issue of HGV and trailer testing, I have been contacted by several companies and the Road Haulage Association in regard to the delays with that. I appreciate that that testing has only opened up, but the delays are causing big issues for the haulage industry. Are there any plans to extend the exemption certificate? I know that that is parked at the minute, but these guys — and ladies, I should say — are not getting their lorries and trailers tested when required.

Ms Mallon: I am happy to pick up on that, if you want to pass on the names of the companies and operators that have been contacting you, Keith. I am happy to take that away to see what more we can do.

Mr K Buchanan: OK, thank you for that. I will not delay you any longer.

Mr Beggs: Thank you, Minister, for coming along. I am concerned at what I see as the approach of "Let's wait and see how it works out". It is very obvious that, if we have a reduction on the number of tests, there will be a growing, not a shortening, backlog. We need to plan to increase the capacity, not wait for two months and then find out that we are swamped. Have you approached the many

experienced driving instructors out there who might be willing to take some sort of temporary contract and go through rigorous short-term training to enable them to do testing? The current cost of taking the driving test is £45.50 an hour or £62.50 an hour, so, at no extra cost to you, you could temporarily employ additional testers, deal with the backlog and meet the needs of the community and of industry. Have you looked at that short-term fix, bypassing the traditional Civil Service long-term recruitment process? This is an emergency that you can see coming.

Ms Mallon: I do not accept that we are sitting back, not doing anything and adopting a wait-and-see approach. As I said, we are looking at options, one of which includes a recruitment drive. There are policies and procedures that you have to go through to do that. I am also mindful that a significant resource would apply to this, so we are working through to see what we can do in the best interests of those who are seeking tests. We have to operate within certain processes and be mindful that, if we recruit extra people and spend time training them, we could get to a point where they are surplus to requirements because we have managed to work through the backlog.

I want to reassure you that it is not the case that we are not looking at anything and adopting a wait-and-see approach; we are practically working through options and trying to see which is viable. If an option is viable and is a solution, we will take it forward. I hope that we have demonstrated that, as a Department. The whole way through the pandemic, we have put in place practical measures to minimise disruption to taxis, hauliers and those who are now seeking their driving tests. This is about trying to identify practical solutions. We are thinking about and working through them, and, if they are viable and we can get them in place, we will do so as quickly as possible.

Mr Beggs: Specifically, are you looking at short-term temporary workers who could be on call to deal with this and get rid of a long-term situation where the norm is that you have to wait for six to eight weeks? That is not a good for customers.

Ms Mallon: We have not approached any driving examiners to recruit them.

Mr Beggs: Will you consider doing so?

Ms Mallon: As I said, we are working through a range of potential practical solutions, and certainly we can look at that. That is not an issue for me.

Mr Beggs: Finally, there is your definition of key workers. I see that, in a departmental statement of 2 September, you talk about directing:

"limited resources towards the provision of essential and 'key-worker' services."

However, in regard to the resumption of driving tests, a new definition has been introduced: "high-priority critical workers". When will all key workers have access to a driving test? I have been contacted by a constituent who provides broadband to isolated rural communities. He is a new engineer who needs a driving test. No one has contacted him. He has tried to get a test. He has highlighted that fact by sending the application from his business email address and has heard nothing. How does someone like that get a test?

Ms Mallon: The DVA's key worker criteria mirror those in DVSA. It has identified, in the first instance, emergency service, NHS workers, care workers and those involved in food distribution and security. They are all being prioritised. I accept that your constituent is a priority worker. We have a large number of priority workers, and we are trying to work through them, but we have to have criteria to apply, and those are the ones that we are using in the first instance.

Mr Beggs: I seek clarity: is he a key worker or a "high-priority critical worker"?

Ms Mallon: At this stage, the categories that I have set out are considered to be the first group of priority workers. They are those on the front line in the health crisis and others. We have to try to apply a system and criteria as fairly as possible. In the first instance, that is the initial group that we have identified, as is the case with DVSA in England.

Mr Beggs: Let me just highlight that telecommunications are essential to many isolated communities and for many workers who are working from home. When broadband systems go down, it can be difficult for some people to contact their doctor. There are isolated places where phone communication

is difficult. Sometimes, wireless broadband is the only means of communication. I ask that you prioritise that group.

Mr Boylan: You are welcome, Minister, and thank you for the update. At no point would I say, Minister, that any of your staff are sitting on their hands. However, I will say this, that, when you sit in the constituency office and get a number of complaints and questions, it is difficult for us to correspond with people in relation to that.

Ms Mallon: Of course.

Mr Boylan: A number of questions have been asked, but I want to come back to this issue. This question is addressed, probably, to Jeremy, and Mr Buchanan mentioned it. Would it not be safer just to have a look at the mean average over the last four or five years of tests done from, say, June to whatever period? I am concerned about the November period. We can target the key workers, but I am concerned that the numbers will come in November. You may not be prepared. If you took a mean average over the last four or five years, it would give you a rough idea, with projections, in relation to numbers. Did you consider that?

Mr Logan: Certainly, we are well aware of the published stats on driving tests that have been delivered. In these extraordinary times, I do not know that they create an indicator, as you say, or an accurate barometer of what we might face come November and October. I would say, to reiterate the point that the Minister has made, that we are looking at the options that we can put in place. One of them — a fairly strong option — will be using the dual role staff that we have and moving them from vehicle examination work to support the driving examination. One thing I would say is that we are delivering the driving exams from our test centre sites, in the main. Those sites are multiple-occupancy sites, so we have the added issue of delivering vehicle testing and managing the maintenance and fabric of the buildings in accordance with the public health advice on social distancing and the guidance for our staff using those facilities.

I come back to the point that the Chair made on the duties of the driving instructor. There are duties that driving examiners must undertake, including the meet-and-greet, manoeuvres and eyesight tests, as part of the driving exam. All those factors have had to be fully risk-assessed and endorsed by the Department of Health, and we have gone to some lengths and had positive engagement with staff and unions in the response to putting in a very robust, necessary and proportionate risk assessment. There are factors that, while COVID exists, will limit capacity across the network to deliver the test. That said, we will have the resource available through the existing 37 examiners and the dual-role staff who will come in to augment that. I go back to the point that we will not have the full flavour of what the demand for tests is until we open the booking service, because, clearly, during the COVID lockdown, a lot of instruction was not happening as well. I take your point that it is an indicator, but I do not know how accurate a barometer that will be. We will know in the reasonably near future.

Mr Boylan: I am very concerned. I have to stand up for the rural communities, who are reliant on their own transport because of the lack of public transport. I want to go back to the Craigavon issue, because it is worrying, and I am mindful of the R rate in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) area. Will you consider some type of temporary operation there to support the people in that area? A number of us have been contacted, and I am sure that the Committee would support that if you addressed it.

Ms Mallon: There is a unique situation in Craigavon. We are able to conduct MOT testing inside the centre. The grounds are being used by the Department of Health for COVID testing, and, as you said, it is a very worrying time in the area with the spikes. I gave a commitment to the Minister of Health that I would work in partnership with him to ensure that we can conduct vital COVID testing to save lives. I remain clear that I will honour that commitment. We explored the possibility of accommodating both on-site. We carried out a risk assessment and engaged with the Public Health Agency, but it proved to be too risky. The DVA has engaged with local driving instructors, who have a number of potential solutions. We looked at carrying out the manoeuvres just outside the test centre, but, with the increase in demand for testing, there is a high volume of traffic, so even the instructors were not comfortable with that as a solution. We are working through other potential locations at which to carry out that part of the test locally, but we are also working with the Department of Health to scope out other potential locations for it to move to. We have an understanding that, around mid October, the Department of Health may no longer need to utilise the Craigavon testing centre. That would see us resume the practical driving test element in the Craigavon area. In the interim, I am trying to find an accommodation so that we can resume driving tests locally as quickly as possible. As I said, officials

are working through solutions, and they have given a commitment that they will go back next week to update driving instructors in the Craigavon area.

Mr Boylan: With your indulgence, Chair, I have one wee final question. Obviously, there are limited transport connections in the rural areas, so the general public may have to use school transport. Given the masks and safety and all the guidelines and rules, how do we protect drivers, pupils and members of the public who may have to cross over and use that service?

Ms Mallon: Translink has put on several hundred additional buses to try to deal with the additional capacity. As you say, public transport is an important element of that, in addition to the school transport provision, which falls within the remit of the Department of Education. Face coverings are mandatory on public transport for those aged 13 and over. I had written to the Education Minister, because, for consistency of messaging, I thought that we should have had a single message on face coverings for both public and school transport, because a significant number of children in the Belfast area, for example, cross over and use both. I do not think that the Education Minister shares my view, but I am clear that, on public transport, if you are 13 or over, it is mandatory to wear a face covering. It has been put into the public domain as well, and Translink has put in a significant number of additional mitigations to keep drivers and passengers safe.

Mr Boylan: I am definitely concerned about the rural areas.

Ms Mallon: If you have a concern about a service, please flag it up to me or to Translink directly, and we can work to resolve it.

We have also put in a significant number of measures on the Strangford ferry to try to ensure that we have mitigations and that we can get schoolchildren across safely. It is a big issue for my Department, and I am working closely with the Minister of Education to make sure that we get it right, because it is another challenging situation in these unprecedented times.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Minister, for coming along this morning. Before I ask specifically about Craigavon — I am sure that Members will understand that that is where I am getting most representations from — I would like to make a more general point about the expectation of the public about the delivery of public services whilst we are still in a pandemic and there are many concerns about a second surge. There should be a note of caution, and I hope that the Minister will raise that at the Executive meeting. I understand an individual's concerns about their business or their driving test, but we are all part of a much wider society and have citizenship responsibilities in terms of what can and cannot be done. A joint message needs to go out from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, if possible, about how we come out of the crisis not just in terms of economic recovery but in trying to return to whatever "normal" is. I think we are all agreed that there is a new normal and that things will not be the same for a considerable time. As a matter of interest, I was told by a nursing friend that their information was that we were planning for between 18 months and three years before coming out at the other end of the pandemic. There is a wider message about people being realistic, patient and responsible.

That having been said, driving tests are an issue in my constituency. You spoke, Minister, about measures including examiners maybe coming out onto the roadside. I know where the test centre is — I do not know if the rest of you know — but there is not a lot of flexibility of access because of the number of businesses in the neighbourhood. What might the time frame be for some of those processes? I know that some of your officials met the driving examiners on-site yesterday or the day before. There is a real need to correspond meaningfully with the driving instructors, who are alarmed at what might be the rising cost for their students of having to learn a route elsewhere. I suppose one might say that, if you are learning to drive in Craigavon, you should know Lisburn, if you know what I mean. You should be able to drive all over if you are really up to it. As someone who just scraped through her driving test, I understand that dilemma.

Mr Boylan: Craigavon is unique.

Mrs D Kelly: We have a lot of roundabouts; that is for sure.

As for Craigavon, at the outset I advised Department of Health officials and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, in particular, that the owner of the local equestrian centre, which has a significant hardcore car park, had offered the site as a COVID testing venue. I ask that you take that up with your departmental colleagues in Health. I am happy to facilitate any meetings with the owner. Obviously,

some activity has started again, but I am sure that the site is big enough, and I am sure that the owner would be keen to assist.

Ms Mallon: Thank you. As you say, we are in a pandemic, and there has been global disruption. Northern Ireland and its services have been impacted on. The reality is that they will be impacted on for some time because we have, out of necessity, had to introduce a series of mitigations and measures that mean that, whether you are a restaurateur, have a retail shop, are a dentist or work in the NHS, you are not able to provide the same service at the same level as before in terms of the numbers. That does not mean that we should not have ambition to reduce waiting times. With regard to public health, it is important that there is a management of expectation as well, because we have to constantly remind people, as we see in the Craigavon area, that the virus is still very much with us. We have seen the impact of mixed messaging and how that plays out among the public, so I am with you on that.

There was, as you said, a meeting in the Craigavon area with local driving instructors. I think there was a view among some of them that the COVID testing site would remain in the Craigavon testing centre well into 2021. As I said, our understanding is that, come mid October, the Department of Health may no longer use the site. In the interim, we are looking for an alternative location locally for the practical driving test to be carried out. At the same time, I know that the Department of Health is scoping out alternative locations to ensure that — something I very much support — the people living in the Craigavon area have good, quick access to COVID testing; that is critical. As I have said, officials are scoping out some of the practical options on the table to see which are viable. They have given a commitment that they will go back to the local driving instructors next week to update them on that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you. We have two other members, and I would like them to have the opportunity to ask questions before you leave.

Ms Mallon: I just want to say that I have not received an agenda or any papers for the Executive meeting, so I just need a bit of time before the meeting begins at 11.00 am to see those.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. We only have Andrew Muir and Martina Anderson.

Mr Muir: Thank you to the Minister for her update. I have just two issues. From listening to the radio this morning, I understand that this issue will be discussed at the Executive meeting at 11.00 am. Maybe the Minister can outline whether any more actions that we are not aware of or have not been briefed on this morning will be discussed and agreed at the Executive. Also, when testing opens after the processing for the key workers and those who have had their test cancelled, what arrangements will be in place to ensure that those who need a test for their job will be prioritised?

Ms Mallon: OK. I learnt that the issue would be on the Executive agenda via 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, Andrew, so I am not clear on whether there will be any additional practical papers or any discussion. I will learn that when we go into the Executive meeting. I hope that, at the Executive meeting, we are able to discuss and see a paper on the COVID recovery plan in general, because, given that we are now in September, there is a critical need to have a cohesive and strategic economic recovery plan as we try to work our way through this.

I will hand over to Jeremy to answer the technical question, if that is OK with you.

Mr Logan: Yes. On the key worker issue, initially, during the very early stages of lockdown, DVSA introduced criteria for key workers, and we intended to do something similar by providing some emergency tests for key workers. Unfortunately, given the public health advice and guidance at that time, it was not possible to put a risk assessment in place that would allow that to happen. We have received a number of requests, and that is where the figure of 200 comes from. As we move out of lockdown and restrictions ease, it is much more difficult for us to identify criteria and assess who is a key worker. DVSA has found that it is in the same position. The likelihood is that we hope to get back to whatever the new normal is and to open the testing service and the slots to the public where there is availability of slots for everyone. That will have to be carefully managed over the next couple of months to see how it pans out, given the questions that were raised earlier about how we resource and meet that demand.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Jeremy. How will we manage the risk that there will be a complete free-for-all and the IT systems will be overwhelmed by people wanting to book appointments? From what I understand, there is a high risk of that happening.

Mr Logan: It is certainly a high risk, and DVSA has experienced that. We will work with DVSA to learn lessons from how it managed its process. We have already agreed that technical support for some of its systems will engage with our staff and IT providers to try to mitigate any risk of our booking system crashing once that is issued.

Mr Muir: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you. Finally, Martina Anderson. Hello?

Ms Anderson: Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes.

Ms Anderson: Minister, thank you for coming to the meeting today. I know that it is a bit awkward for us all when we are not in the room, so I appreciate that this can be a bit difficult. Chair, will you allow the Minister to answer my questions about taxi drivers? We learnt this morning that that could be discussed at the Executive today. I assume that you, as the lead Minister, may bring that to the Executive, so can we have a wee update on that, if possible?

On the issue that you are here to discuss, when did the issue surrounding the recommendation on driving tests first reach your desk?

Ms Mallon: I am not sure. Will you clarify the second point for me: which recommendation are you referring to?

Ms Anderson: You talked about increasing testing capacity and ensuring the safety of DVA staff, which is crucial. From reading the road ahead, as I know, Minister, you and others do, you would have known that this challenge was coming at you, and you have talked about the options. For instance, I am trying to ascertain whether the approach was proactive, rather than reacting to the situation that we are in today. Is recruitment still an option, or have you decided how you will take that forward?

Ms Mallon: I have asked for options to be brought forward and for their viability to be worked through and for risk assessments in terms of COVID, road safety and the financial implications. That work is being done. A paper will come to me with a series of recommendations, and I will take decisions on that.

As you know, Martina, I have raised the need for financial support for the taxi industry for some time. I very much agree with your party colleague Caoimhe Archibald, who is the Chair of the Economy Committee. I noticed her statement last week, I think it was, calling on the Economy Minister, who has responsibility for the self-employed and taxi drivers, to bring forward a financial package. I am very supportive of that statement from Caoimhe Archibald, and, as I have said to the Economy Minister on a number of occasions, I am keen, having access to information as the regulator, to work with the Minister for the Economy and others to ensure that we can get support to all those who have fallen through the cracks. We have the ExcludedNI movement, and we need to do what we can as an Executive to better support people through this incredibly difficult time.

Ms Anderson: Minister, you will be clear that Caoimhe Archibald understands that the Minister for the Economy will implement the scheme but you, as lead Minister for the taxi industry, will be the Minister who will seek support in the Executive to get that scheme up and running, and that is what I was hoping you would bring forward today.

I am a little concerned that you have only asked for the options paper you have talked about today. I had hoped that you would come to the Committee having examined such an options paper and having made decisions on the recruitment processes that you would put in place. I understand completely what you say about the challenge for learner drivers and others if you were to extend the hours into the weekend. However, that said, we, as Committee members, expected to hear today that you had not just asked for that paper but that it was already on your desk. Reading the road ahead, every one

of us knew that this would be a problem. I assume that your officials would have known about this had they been reading the road ahead to see what is coming at you.

Ms Mallon: As I said, I have proactively made a request, and that work is being done. I am sure you will agree that these things have to be properly assessed to ensure that they are viable solutions. As I said, my Department has not been found wanting on bringing forward practical solutions to help people during this difficult time if they fall within our statutory responsibility.

You will also be aware that my statutory responsibilities in terms of financial hardship schemes are clear. Your party colleague recognised that as Chair of the Committee. The Economy Minister, working with the Finance Minister, has brought forward hardship schemes that recognise the loss of income across a number of sectors. I have said clearly that I will be supportive of money and support going to those who have not been able to avail themselves of any of the existing schemes to date. I will do absolutely everything within my statutory responsibility to ensure that we play our part in getting support to those industries.

Ms Anderson: Chair, I know you that do not want to open this up into a taxi dispute. People are very aware of the role that you play in regulating the taxi industry, Minister. We all want to see you and the Economy Minister working together.

I really want to know about the options paper that you talked about in the context of recruitment. What time frame have you given your officials to bring that to your desk?

Ms Mallon: When it is brought to my desk, I will give it careful consideration, and, as I do on a range of issues, I will ensure that the Committee, the public and the sectors involved are kept clearly updated.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you.

Ms Anderson: I am sure you will, Minister. However, have we a time frame? When did you tell your officials that they needed to bring that options paper to you, given that you do not have it yet?

Ms Mallon: I have said clearly on a number of occasions that I want officials to work with the industries to make sure that we can get solutions that work for everybody in place as quickly as possible. This area is no different. I can assure you that my officials are working urgently to ensure that we do what we can to mitigate the risks and the disruption. However, as I said, we are in a global pandemic. People are not able to access health services and dental services in the way that we were. We are not able to go to restaurants in the way that we were. We are not able to go into shops but have to queue outside because we want to keep one another safe. My priority is ensuring that staff and customers are kept safe, and I will not be derailed from that in any way.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you —.

Ms Anderson: You can tell us that we are in a pandemic, and we all know that there are people out there who trying their best to cope with it. We know that very well, but, Chair — *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs D Kelly: Chair, there are some people on the Committee who do not believe that the regulations apply to them or their party whenever there are public events.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): One second, please.

Mrs D Kelly: I think that we have heard enough from Martina.

Ms Mallon: Chair, can I just say —

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Excuse me. Mrs Kelly — .

Ms Anderson: If we have a situation that we do not know when the options on recruitment are coming to the Minister or when we will get them as Committee members, I ask, Chair, that we try to ensure that we do not have a situation where we open up the service before deciding that it needs more

instructions. That would be another problem for the Minister and, in particular, the people out there, and we should try to avoid that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you for your comments.

Minister, we are moving to the stage where you will have to leave. You will appreciate that there are still many concerns on the issue. We will return to it at Question Time at the beginning of next week, and I would appreciate any additional information that you could provide around the options that you have discussed and regarding some of the data. Thank you both for attending this morning, and we will return to this.

Ms Mallon: No problem. Thank you for your time. It has been a welcome opportunity to set out some of the facts.