



Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

MOTs, Lifts and Driving Tests:
Driver and Vehicle Agency,
Department for Infrastructure

4 November 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Infrastructure

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Driver and Vehicle Agency, Department for Infrastructure

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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

Ms Liz Kimmens

Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Ms Julie Thompson

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Jeremy Logan

Driver and Vehicle Agency

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome Julie Thompson, the deputy secretary of the planning, safety and transport policy group, and Jeremy Logan, the chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). Congratulations, Jeremy, on your appointment.

Mr Jeremy Logan (Driver and Vehicle Agency): Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I am not sure which of you is going to make the presentation, but you may begin.

Ms Julie Thompson (Department for Infrastructure): Thank you for the invitation to provide the Committee with an update on DVA services. This follows the previous update that was provided by the Minister at the beginning of September. We have given you a briefing paper. I will draw out a few points from the paper on the current position on DVA services, and Jeremy will say a few words about the plans, looking forward.

As you know, there has been an understandable impact from COVID-19 on DVA services, as has been the case in many other public-facing services. All processes have been risk-assessed, and the safety of our staff and customers remains the top priority. That has meant that capacity has been reduced, the number of staff and customers within test centres has been carefully controlled, and sanitisation and social-distancing is in place. We know that, at times, that has led to inconvenience for customers at an already very challenging and concerning time.

MOT testing is taking place in all 15 test centres for vehicles that cannot be subject to temporary exemption certificates (TECs). They are taxis and buses that are due a first-time test, vehicles that

have not previously been registered in Northern Ireland and vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months, including vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships. MOT testing for four-year-old cars, motorbikes, three-year-old light goods vehicles and heavy goods vehicles and trailers resumed from 1 September. All other vehicles are receiving TECs. The capacity available in our test centres is able to meet the demand for those MOT tests so that all of the vehicles can be kept safely on the road. As you are aware, driving instructors were included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Following that Executive decision, driving tests have also been suspended over that period of increased restrictions. Motorcycle lessons and tests are unaffected by the new restrictions.

Given the reduction in service provision, a bid was made to the Department of Finance in the October monitoring round for a further £12 million to address the estimated remaining loss of income in the DVA for 2020-21. Unfortunately, the Department only received £10 million from the October monitoring round against its total COVID pressures of some £36 million, and the Minister is considering the allocation of that funding. Any remaining shortfall will need to be addressed and considered as part of the January monitoring round.

I will hand over to Jeremy, who can take you through the plans, particularly for driving tests, over the next few weeks.

Mr Logan: OK. Thanks, Julie. Following the decision to suspend driving tests, we took immediate action to contact those affected customers to cancel their tests and refund their fees. We also met representatives of the Northern Ireland Approved Instructor Council and wrote to all approved instructors to notify them of that position at the earliest opportunity.

The booking service remains closed. We have identified that over 1,000 key workers and customers who had their driving tests cancelled from late March until the end of June fall within the group that have had their tests cancelled due to the restrictions. We plan to provide that initial priority group with advance access to the booking system from 9 November to allow them to reschedule their appointments before it opens to the remaining customers whose tests were cancelled. To create additional capacity, we plan to open up the booking system for February for those impacted customers only. In addition, approximately 2,000 further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as we increase our capacity by recruiting additional examiners. Those slots, when released, will also only be available to those impacted customers.

Once all the customers who had their test cancelled have had the opportunity to rebook their appointments, we will open up the booking service for all other customers. Once driving test services resume again, we will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday. Following consultation with key stakeholders, we plan to offer driving tests for heavy goods vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. We will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual-role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and cover for scheduled driving tests, where, due to a variety of unforeseen reasons, such as sickness absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners may be unable to attend work.

We know that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity, and we acknowledge that their frustration has been further compounded by the current suspension of driving tests. We are working hard to maximise the availability of test slots across all our test centres. However, the COVID restrictions mean that we have had to adapt our services to ensure that they can be provided safely, and we ask our customers to remain patient at this difficult time. We will, of course, keep that position under review and are happy to take any questions that you might have.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you very much. When we scheduled this briefing, it was to get an update on the restart and how you had been progressing through what was then a very large backlog. Obviously, the current restrictions have put that back even further, which is disappointing but understandable.

Julie, I want to take you back to the meeting in February, when the drama about the cracks in the MOT lifts was unfolding. We all got ourselves terribly excited about that and were unaware of what was coming down the tracks in a very short time. At that stage, we heard that the DVA had a very healthy reserve of £36.9 million, and it was detailed that £17 million had been set aside for the development at Hydebank, £3 million for a new booking system and £11 million for new equipment. There was a £6 million contingency fund, and we were told that the DVA had anticipated somewhere in the region of £3 million or £4 million coming in to replenish or add to those reserves.

Things have changed quite dramatically during that period, with the suspension of MOTs as a consequence of the lift malfunctions, the purchase of new lifts and the issues with COVID. In your paper, you mentioned that there would be a request for a further £12 million from DOF. Will you take us through the current financial situation, particularly with those projects and how you see it moving forward?

Ms Thompson: OK. Yes, I guess it starts from the time of the lifts, as you rightly point out, and moves forward. I will clarify what I said in the opening remarks to bring you up to date. We made that £12 million bid to DOF in the October monitoring to deal with part of the £36 million of pressures that the Committee will be aware of. We received £10 million. An element of that might go to DVA. The Minister is considering where to allocate that £10 million.

On the reserves position, the DVA has enough cash. It has enough reserves for 2020-21 to make payments; that is the most important thing. If you boil everything down, cash flow is, obviously, exceptionally important. The Minister allocated an extra £10 million from DFI capital as part of the funding for Hydebank, if you recall that element. We also received £7.3 million from an earlier COVID allocation. So, that £10 million and £7.3 million were both put in to help rectify part of the deficit. That has left us with the £12 million. So, there was £10 million for Hydebank and £7.3 million additional income, leaving a gap of £12 million arising as we look at it. That is a forecast to the end of the financial year so it is fully encompassed as best we can do it. It is very challenging.

MOT testing is the biggest driver in DVA accounts. We will put whatever remains of that £12 million back into a January monitoring process, which obviously is yet to happen. We expect the trading fund to be in deficit. It is supposed to break even, one year with another. It is virtually impossible that that could happen at this point. What breaking even one year with another means will have to be looked at with the auditors. You are absolutely right; in normal circumstances, DVA would make a small surplus of, maybe, £3 million or £4 million a year. Does taking one year with another allow for that effectively to rectify itself, although it would take some time?

If the £12 million is not provided, that will make purchasing, particularly of the capital equipment that you talked about, very problematic. There needs to be a relationship between January monitoring and what might need to happen with DFI capital funding and budgets in general for 2021-22; all of that will need to be at play. So, it is slightly different from normal parts of the Department's funding. It is because of the trading fund relationship. You can look at DVA and, as it stands, £12 million is a lot. We need to get that addressed. If it is not addressed in January monitoring, there may be implications for 2021-22, particularly in respect of what DVA can actually afford to deliver.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. How has the contribution with regard to the lifts and so on impacted on your budget?

Ms Thompson: The lifts were paid for. That £1.8 million has already been subsumed within the DVA figure work. That is already accounted for in 2020-21, but, as you say, it has been dwarfed by the loss of income that has happened since.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes. I will move on to MOT testing. You have talked about reduced capacity and so on. What does that actually look like on the ground as regards staff and the centres?

Mr Logan: Vehicle testing services have resumed at all 15 MOT centres. They have been unaffected by the current lockdown restrictions. As Julie identified, we continue to manage the temporary exemption certificate process along with the other vehicles that are being brought forward for test. There has obviously been a major impact on fee income. The more vehicles that we bring in, the more fee income we generate, and, obviously, that improves our financial status. We had identified previously that we were working at approximately 30% capacity, but we know that we will have to increase that as we move into January, February and March as some of those TECs come to their natural 12-month expiry.

As regards the change in position since we were last before you, in September, the vehicle examiners are now back in their full shift patterns at all MOT centres. The next thing that we will have to look at is reducing the duration of the test. Currently, the test is 30 minutes for a normal car. We want to bring that down to increase our capacity and allow more vehicles to come through all our centres.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): When do you expect to do that?

Mr Logan: We are doing that gradually at the minute. The examiners are back on their full shifts. We are looking at how quickly we can deliver a test based on the information from the past few months on how long it takes to do a test with the additional controls. We believe that we can reduce it from 30 minutes to 25 minutes, certainly initially. We aim to bring that back towards 20 minutes, which is the normal test time.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Obviously, risk assessments have been taken into consideration to protect staff and customers. There have been complaints about customers having to wait outside for long periods, particularly for goods vehicle testing. That would be a longer test, and they could be there three or four times in a day, depending on their business. What measures are being put in place to protect those customers, particularly as we are going into the winter period?

Ms Thompson: That is a well-understood issue. We have the customers from the vehicle testing and, at points, driving instructors coming to the centres and wanting shelter. As the Minister explained to the Committee in September, that is difficult, because you still have to maintain social distancing and make sure that the risk assessment for COVID is not replaced with further risks from having more people in the building and being potentially able to access things and cause other hazards.

This is being looked at on a local basis. Where people can be accommodated inside the building, they will be. The reception areas are being opened up, but they can take only a certain number of people. There is an element of, "We cannot do everything for everybody". The risk assessment guys are very conscious that if people who are brought inside the test centre cannot be managed safely, they are better off outside for their own safety. We apologise for that inconvenience, but we cannot afford to bring them inside in an unsafe manner, whether for COVID reasons or simply because of the machinery and all the other moving parts in a test centre. However, where shelter can be accommodated locally, it is, and the situation has certainly improved. They have made inroads into that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You expect the recommencement of driving tests from 14 November, subject to what comes from the Executive with regard to restrictions.

Mr Logan: Subject to the Executive's decision, driving tests are still booked in the system from 14 November. Our plan is to reschedule, from 9 November, appointments for customers who had their tests cancelled in the past four weeks, looking first at the priority group of 1,000, who are key workers and customers who had their test cancelled previously. This is the second time that their test has been cancelled, but we are going to give them advance access to the booking system from 9 November.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There is a Northern Ireland-wide concern in the Civil Service with regard to holiday entitlement, and everyone is entitled to holidays. Are examiners being redeployed, or is there a mixture of redeployment and taking holidays? What is the situation with regard to that? There was a concern that if examiners were to take their holidays towards the end of the year, that may have an impact on test availability.

Mr Logan: The issue of accrued annual leave is a concern across the Civil Service, particularly through COVID restrictions. We have been encouraging staff to take annual leave, particularly those who are working from home. We have been encouraging driving examiners to take annual leave during this four-week lockdown, but we cannot enforce that or make it a mandatory requirement.

There is a limit to what driving examiners can do in this period, as their job is examining drivers, and there is little more that we can do to redeploy them. That said, some examiners continue to take the motorcycle tests, and they are continuing throughout this four-week period.

Where possible, we will try to get staff to use up some of their leave, but we are doing that on request and cannot make that a mandatory stipulation.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you. I have loads of questions, but I have to share, unfortunately, so I will move to Cathal Boylan.

Mr Boylan: Thanks, Chair. I think that you have asked most of them already.

You are very welcome. Jeremy, good luck in the post. First, on the lifts, the last report that we got on 31 August stated that 18 out of the 23 actions had been taken. Where are we now with the whole lifts issue and all the actions?

Ms Thompson: We will do another update and publish the report, again, on a quarterly basis. We will keep working at that. You can tell from the action plan that a lot has happened. All the lifts are back operating, which is what we have been discussing. Many of the contract management-type issues have been addressed. Inspection maintenance has been addressed. Some of the issues will be ongoing for a long time, given that a couple of them are to do with monitoring, and that will continue. At least a couple of them are in the five that are supposedly not addressed, and yet they are in the process of being addressed. The vast bulk of the plan has been put through, and the actions that are outstanding are very nearly there. It has been a big piece of work to put in place, and it involved working with MAHA and working through the contracts. Inspections are ongoing of the lifts, and work is being done to get that regime well in place. We have good confidence in it. We are pretty much there. We will publish the next report in November.

Mr Boylan: Thank you. Jeremy, going back to the tests, I am trying to get the cancellation figures. I understand that there have been difficulties. How many cancellations were there because of the circuit breaker? What are we looking at? You said that there are 1,000 tests outstanding from March. I am trying to get an overall figure that includes the number cancelled in the last four weeks. I think that you mentioned 2,000. Is that the bottom-line figure that is sitting in the system from now up to the allocation of slots in January?

Mr Logan: We believe that 2,500 car tests were cancelled in that four-week period. As I say, that subset of data, of just over 1,000 key workers and folks who previously had their test cancelled, leaves approximately another 1,300 or 1,400 or so who will have had their test cancelled for the first time. We will be prioritising bookings for them. The 2,000 figure that I mentioned in my opening remarks is the additional capacity that we believe that we can make available from the middle of November to the end of January. That does not include opening up slots for February at this stage, which we have not done. We have been able to release those additional slots between November and January, based on recruiting new staff and making sure that the templates for test centres have been uploaded and are ready for those slots to be booked once the service reopens. That is where that 2,000 figure comes from.

Mr Boylan: That is the additional number on top of what we already have?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr Logan: Yes.

Mr Boylan: What is the figure for the slots?

Mr Logan: As I say, we believe that 2,500 were cancelled in that four-week period. We think that we can accommodate the vast majority of those people with the slots that are available up to the end of January. We will open February slots as well to take any of the additional capacity there.

Mr Boylan: I and many other Members have been lobbied by people looking for tests. I am not asking for there to be one rule for some and another rule for others. However, I know that there are people out there whose job depends on them getting the test. Have you looked at that side of it? I appreciate that people are in the system and are entitled to go, but I have been contacted by people whose job depends on them having the test.

Ms Thompson: The first group, which is the 1,000 that Jeremy talked about, includes key workers. There are a lot of key workers. The total number cancelled over the four weeks was 2,500, and, of that number, 1,000 of them are either key workers or people who already had their test cancelled between March and June. They will all take priority and will be accessing the system on their own, with nobody else allowed in the system until they have been able to access it. That all helps to move it along.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. That will roll it on. I know, and I have said this before in the Committee, that I make a play for rural people. That is because rural people are definitely dependent on transport, given that they do not have the same public service. I appreciate the figures.

Mr Logan: When we introduced the driving tests on 1 September for key workers and those who had their tests cancelled, we continued to process key worker requests throughout September. When the booking service opened on 5 October, it became very difficult to administer and manage the processing of those priority requests. That stopped when the booking service opened for all customers at that stage.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. I am only making the point. I am not saying that it is one person over the other in that they want their test before the key workers. I appreciate the update.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): During that period when driver tests recommenced, how many tests were carried out before we went into lockdown again?

Mr Logan: We had the figures for September. You will appreciate that it causes some frustration — I know that it does — that we are tied in to the official publication of statistics. We have agreed that we will publish the statistical reports monthly, because we know that there is a lot of interest in the figures. For September, they identified that 2,821 tests were conducted across all categories. I caution that September is probably not a good month to assess our capacity because we were dealing, in an ad hoc way, with those requests and having to contact those customers. Equally, Craigavon test centre did not open until the end of the month, so those figures are probably not a good barometer of how the figures will look going forward.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK, thank you.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Chair. I have just a couple of things. What is the maximum length of time that the TECs are valid for?

Ms Thompson: Twelve months.

Mr Muir: OK. The pandemic kicked in in March, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. What are the legislative options here for the potential need to extend this?

Ms Thompson: That is a matter that will affect everywhere. We have the lifts issue coming in from January, and, as Jeremy advised, we had been looking forward to January and seeing how we can manage capacity and demand through the period of January to March. That is all part of the one set of regulations and legislation across the UK. Once we hit the end of March, we will need to consider whether it matters that we are not part of the EU and whether that changes anything and provides further latitude. Northern Ireland will be in the same position as everybody across the UK. Whatever solution needs to be put in place, we are cognisant that March is not that far away and that we need to be running at 100% capacity to enable the cars to move through. It is a matter that will have to be looked at across the UK. Indeed, it is not even just that; the whole of Europe will be in the same situation.

Mr Muir: The issue is that we do not know what the situation is. If we look at our health service, we see the pressure that it is under, and the safety of everyone has to be paramount. Everyone is talking about 13 November and assuming that everything will be moving on, but that will not be the case. We have to be able to budget for the fact that we may not be able to resume MOTs and that testing will have to be suspended again.

Ms Thompson: How to deal with that will be a problem across multiple countries. The law, as it stands, says that you can get it for only 12 months. By the time that it comes back round again, they will need to be tested. It is a big problem that will need to be resolved.

Mr Muir: I have a couple of other things. You did not get the money for the fees in the October monitoring round and will look for it in January. The resource pressures on the Northern Ireland Executive are quite significant around that. If you do not get that money, would increasing the fees for MOTs and driving tests be an option? Is that something that is on the cards?

Ms Thompson: It is not on the cards, but you would have to examine where you are at that point and how you get back to a position of balance. It is not something that we are planning for at this stage. We would prefer to have that resolved in the January monitoring round. We will look at the figure work at that point to figure out cash initially and then the trading fund balance. You are right that it is an option to generate more income, but it is not actively being considered.

Mr Muir: Approved driving instructors have been contacting me because they have not been able to go through their testing. Can you give me an update on that? I know that there has been progress on that across the water but not here.

Mr Logan: There is an issue with some of the extended driving tests. The approved driving instructor test is unique and is conducted by our own supervising examiners. We are looking at further measures to mitigate the risk of someone being in the car for more than an hour and are looking to see whether there are any additional controls that we can put in place in terms of a risk assessment. We are working. We realise that there is pressure on approved driving instructors and some other sectors, and we are hopeful that we will be able to reinstate those services. We are working to reinstate those services as soon as we can, once the current restrictions are lifted.

Mr Muir: Are there any definitive timescales on that? I ask that because I am conscious that this has been drifting for quite a while. There are people who are regularly contacting my office and looking for an update on when this is going to resume.

Mr Logan: I cannot give you a definitive timescale today, but we are in close contact with the Northern Ireland Approved Instructors Council and driving instructors, and, as soon as we have that date, we will immediately communicate that with them. I am confident that that will be sooner rather than later. We have made significant progress on the delivery of the driving tests. Unfortunately, this four-week lockdown has impacted on that slightly. However, we are confident that we will be able to deliver that service very soon.

Mr Muir: I have just one last thing, which is more of a statement than a question. The impact that the MOT situation has had on car garages and mechanics across Northern Ireland has been quite significant. If you speak to them, they tell of a downturn in trade and an upsurge after the initial lockdown. There are also concerns around road safety and about people keeping their vehicles in a proper and roadworthy condition. A point that needs to be made today is that, while MOTs are suspended and there are delays associated with that, people have a responsibility to ensure that their car is in a roadworthy condition. There are concerns around that.

Ms Thompson: Absolutely. I could not have said it better.

Mr Beggs: You have indicated that 1,000 key workers have had their driving tests cancelled. We need them to be able to work whatever hours are needed and to do unsociable hours where there will not be public transport etc. How is the balance determined between the risk of key workers not being able to do their job and the risk that is associated with them doing a driving test?

Ms Thompson: The 1,000 figure not only includes key workers; it includes anybody who had their test cancelled between March and June. The key workers will be a subset of that 1,000.

In balancing risks, you have to go back to the Executive's decision to include driving instructors as part of the current restrictions. Obviously, that left driving tests in the same position as driving instruction. It will depend on what happens at the Executive and their balancing of whether driving instruction should continue or not. Our assumption is that it will all resume again from 14 November, but that is obviously a matter for the Executive to weigh up in the round about everything else, and we will follow any instruction from the Executive.

Mr Beggs: I simply wish to highlight that there are bigger implications once you stop the tests and that you may actually restrict the ability of nurses to work extra shifts. It may come down to that. This is quite important, and it should not just be lumped in with, "Oh, let's stop doing driving tests". The whole needs to be considered, and I ask that that be fed through the system going forward.

I have not heard what the latest assessment of the total backlog is and when you expect that to be caught up on. The system was swamped when it briefly opened and all the booking slots for the three months were taken. What assessment do you have of the numbers who wish to take a driving test but have not even been able to get on to the system? How many additional learner drivers are out there waiting to book, do you think?

Ms Thompson: There are multiple layers to that. There are the 2,500 whom we know about. Their tests were cancelled for these four weeks. You are right: not everybody would have been able to avail themselves of an appointment up to January. If this had not happened, we would have been opening

up for February and accommodating a significant portion of those. In the meantime, theory tests have continued. Effectively, the bottom continues to be populated by more new learners who are coming in and will, in the meantime, have been passing the theory test. That has continued, as theory test centres have remained open over the four weeks with social distancing in place. What we can do and can control is to open up the capacity, as far as possible. As Jeremy pointed out, that involves putting in place the extra slots for November, December and January, bringing in extra examiners and using the dual-role people. At the minute, they are all working on MOTs. When driving tests reopen, we will put them on to driving examinations. We will just have to work through it on that basis.

It is the same across the UK. Wales has closed for two weeks. England will close its driving tests for four weeks. Our understanding is that Scotland is doing very few driving tests. The position here is the same as elsewhere, and, yes, unfortunately, people are waiting in that situation. We will continue to open up the months to allow customers to book, and we will keep working through the numbers. We have a limit to what we can actually deliver, constrained by the number of people whom we can put through. We are taking a lot of steps, as you know, to try to increase that capacity, as much as we possibly can.

Mr Beggs: Given the further delay that has happened unexpectedly, how do you assess the number of temporary driving instructors that you need? Have you considered bringing in experienced driving instructors and quickly putting them through your process so that they can help to reduce the backlog?

Mr Logan: This question has been raised before.

Mr Beggs: I am asking it again because the backlog has just got worse and worse, and it is impacting on key workers and ordinary people.

Mr Logan: The European directive does not allow for driving instructors to deliver driving examinations at the same time. There is a fairly lengthy period for driver examiner training. That is why we have taken the route of using the dual-role staff, who are already trained to deliver driving examinations, and augmenting our vehicle testing staff with the temporary workers. We believe that that is the quickest way to free up resource to deliver driving tests and that it makes the most sense. The training programme for a vehicle examiner is in the region of four weeks, whereas it is much longer for a driving examiner. So, we are using that to respond quickly to the demand issues.

Mr Beggs: When will the backlog be cleared under the current model?

Ms Thompson: We cannot answer that today. You cannot guarantee that everybody who takes a theory test will automatically take a driving test. That is not the reality. It does not happen like that. We have discussed several times with the Committee the fact that the pattern of what happened in 2020 will be entirely different from 2019. A lot of learners will not have been able to access their theory test because that was delayed for a time. They will not have been able to access driving instruction because that was delayed for a time. We know that it is there and is growing, because the theory tests are continuing, whereas the driving tests are not. All that we can do is to put in as much capacity as we can, but we are continually constrained by what that looks like. We are putting in the maximum capacity and will continue to open slots up. You cannot compare the numbers from 2019 automatically with 2020; there is nothing to base the analysis on, if you like.

Mr Beggs: Can you provide us with the numbers of those whom you are aware of who have passed their theory test and not passed the driving test?

Ms Thompson: Yes, that can be provided. I do not have it today, but we do have that.

Mr Beggs: Will you give us those numbers and your projected capacity, assuming that everything opens up again, for each month going forward? I would like to have some idea of how long the waiting lists will continue, because it is inconveniencing people and stopping people from taking up new jobs where they become available.

You indicated that you have reduced the number of people in MOT centres and that has reduced your capacity. Have you furloughed those people or what has happened to them?

Mr Logan: We have all our staff back in our testing centres. We looked at the furlough model, and, based on the criteria, it was not appropriate to furlough our staff because they were resuming work.

We had no intention of making them redundant. Our staff are back in all our test centres, delivering vehicle testing services.

Mr Beggs: The briefing that you provided us with states that the DVA has taken steps:

"to reduce the number of people in its MOT centres, which means DVA is operating at a reduced capacity when compared with its normal service delivery model."

That is in the briefing that you gave us.

Mr Logan: The briefing that we gave you, on the reduction in the number of people, refers to the customers and not —.

Mr Beggs: It was not clear from that.

Mr Logan: Under normal circumstances, the customer will be involved in the process and will be in their vehicle, until we get to the stage of the underbody examination of the vehicle, when they get out of the vehicle and sit at the side of the test centre. Initially, when we looked at a risk assessment for customers, they had to be brought out. That goes back to the issue of shelter, which was raised earlier. However, although we are operating at a limited testing capacity, and the test naturally takes longer because of the COVID restrictions and adaptations that we put in place, all our vehicle examiners are back working.

Mr Beggs: I had not picked up that nuance. I understood from the briefing that some of your examiners may not have been there.

I want to return to the issue of buses. There is a higher risk to the public from a larger vehicle and particularly one that carries passengers. You propose to exempt busses from PSV tests for a further year. How did you come to that determination? Have you not examined any other opportunities to protect the public and to ensure safety and good maintenance by continuing the PSV regime for buses?

Mr Logan: The scheme to exempt buses and taxis from the requirement for a vehicle licence was brought in to reduce the pressure on our testing capacity. These are licensed operators, and they are regulated by the Department. We have access to maintenance records and can access them through our enforcement bodies.

It is important to understand that a significant proportion of the bus fleet in Northern Ireland is made up of Translink and the Education Authority. They have very good, robust maintenance regimes in place. Equally, we can spot-check and stop vehicles at the roadside. The conditions applied at the time to their licence extensions made it abundantly clear that there was a requirement to maintain their vehicles in a roadworthy state, that they would be subject to other checks at the roadside from enforcement officers and, indeed, that they would run the risk of curtailment, suspension or revocation of their licences, if their vehicles were not maintained to a satisfactory standard.

Mr Beggs: I can understand that in the case of Translink buses. We have been to their workplace, where they have brand-new hydraulic systems for examining under buses and testing them. It is comparable to MOT centres, I would have thought, or even of a higher standard. I can understand you exempting certain categories, where you have high levels of confidence. However, as I read it, you are proposing a blanket exemption. Is that correct? I am conscious that some schoolchildren in the north-west were using buses and it was discovered that there were poor levels of maintenance. In fact, many buses had to be taken off the road, once they were concentrated on. I am concerned that a total exemption is being given without any intelligence or thought.

Mr Logan: The licences are issued to those vehicles that have been previously tested and issued with a licence and that are currently within the licensing regime. That is a control, and they would have to satisfy certain requirements and terms of their licence applications at that point. They have to meet the additional controls and conditions have been applied on that licence. As I said, there is the capacity for enforcement officers and the police to stop and spot-check any vehicle on the road for roadworthiness. It comes down to the responsibility of those operators and their transport managers to make sure that they maintain their fleet to a satisfactory standard; otherwise, they run the risk of regulatory action being taken against them by the vehicle licensing authorities.

Mr Beggs: Have you considered emergency legislation to enable PSV testing to be conducted on commercial premises, whether Translink's or someone else's, so that the inspector can go to another garage and make the inspection there?

Mr Logan: That option has not been considered at this stage.

Mr Beggs: I ask that it be considered.

Mr K Buchanan: I appreciate that a lot of points have been covered by Roy and members who spoke previously. My question relates to the 30%. Jeremy, you said that the MOT centres are currently doing 30%, in reference to the capacity. Is it reduced by 30% or reduced to that number?

Mr Logan: It is approximately 30% of the capacity of the vehicles that we can test.

Mr K Buchanan: It takes approximately 30 minutes to test a vehicle.

Mr Logan: It takes 30 minutes to do a car.

Mr K Buchanan: In the past, you were testing roughly three in an hour and a half. Ultimately, now, you are testing one in an hour and a half. It is a lot slower.

Mr Logan: I do not know what the actual breakdown is, but it is a 30-minute test, whereas, previously, we were doing a 20-minute test per vehicle.

Mr K Buchanan: What restrictions have you put in that have reduced that so dramatically? I appreciate that you have to keep the test guys and ladies in the centres safe, but what has made that reduction so massive? That is a massive reduction.

Mr Logan: The COVID controls around —.

Mr K Buchanan: What are they that has reduced that by 70%?

Ms Thompson: It is about the number of lanes in use and how the staff are operating those lanes. You now have somebody driving the car rather than the customer driving the car, so you end up using staff to do things that the customer previously did.

Mr K Buchanan: In the past, when you drove into the MOT centre, you had the conversation with the examiner, "Don't be too sore on that". It was a jokey conversation. You jumped out after 30 seconds, and the examiner took your car. That has not changed dramatically. That examiner took your car the whole way through the system. I cannot understand how your capacity has reduced by 70%.

Mr Logan: Not all of our lanes are in use in the test centre to keep up with social distancing.

Mr K Buchanan: That is even more worrying.

Mr Logan: That is part of the health and safety risk assessment that we have done to ensure that there is safety there and protection between the lanes that are operating in test centres. Not all of the light goods lanes in test centres are operating. We discussed earlier that we absolutely need to increase our capacity, and we have already modelled our demand forecast from January right through to March. We believe that we will be having to deliver about 50% of vehicle tests from that period forward.

Mr K Buchanan: Ultimately, Jeremy, you will need to increase to get it back to 100% plus another 50% to catch up.

Mr Logan: There is no backlog. Julie highlighted the fact that, come March, it is an issue that is going to affect a lot of the services across these islands. Yes, you are right: we will have to deal with 100% of the vehicles if we are not to find another legislative way to deal with exemption certificates. However, at this stage, we are looking to the projections from January through to March to deal with

the issues that first arose from the vehicle lifts. We have modelled, and we believe that it is possible to ramp up our capacity for testing vehicles to 50%.

Mr K Buchanan: To be fair to Andrew, he picked up on the point about local garages. A local business in Cookstown that contacted me normally has 15 or 16 MOT operations a week. It is down to two. That tells me two things. Possibly, there are a lot of vehicles out there that are not roadworthy. You cannot confirm that. The lack of capacity has had a massive impact on those businesses. That is a problem, and we have not seen the outworkings of those vehicles that — we assume — are not roadworthy. We can only assume, to be fair, but a customer who goes to a garage always goes to that same garage generally. The gentleman who contacted me is down, on average, 13 cars a week. Those cars are not, theoretically, roadworthy.

Ms Thompson: The responsibility of the owner is to keep them roadworthy —

Mr K Buchanan: Correct.

Ms Thompson: — which is why the points were being made. We continue to make those messages and try to make sure that those messages are out with the public at all times, yet, obviously, the business is experiencing what has happened there. At the moment, it is completely the owner's responsibility to keep their vehicle safe, and that is what we expect them to do. All that we can do is to communicate that message on an ongoing basis.

Mr K Buchanan: I appreciate that I am not, by any means, carrying out the risk assessment in an MOT centre, but any time that I went by the local one in Cookstown, there were always two to three vehicles in every lane queuing. Now there are none, and I go by it four or five times a day. There is never a car queuing. There is an issue there if there are no cars queuing to get into the centre. There has to be a capacity issue or something, but I will leave that.

On driving tests, I believe that there are thousands who have never even got on to the system to book. Julie, you said that you cannot go by 2019. Going back to 2018, there are still thousands of people, year-on-year, going through the test. They have not even got on the system, and my daughter is one of them. If they have not even got on the system to be part of the so-called backlog, how are you going to catch up with that?

Ms Thompson: I picked 2019, but the same would apply for 2018. We know that the circumstances in 2020 are completely different. There is a whole set of learners who would have been out driving and learning in that period from March to June who did not do that and were not able to do it. Equally, the theory tests only opened from July onwards, and getting theory test appointments has obviously then been working through. I do not disagree that there are people waiting. Of course there are; we know that. However, you cannot automatically assume that the numbers per month in 2020 are the same, because learners have not been learning for portions of those months, and they have not been learning at the same rate. The last four weeks will have impacted on that as well, with people who thought that they were potentially ready but who will no longer be because they have just lost four weeks' driving instruction, unless they are able to get it by some other means through their household. Predicting the backlog is highly difficult because, effectively, you have no accurate historical trend to work from. That is the reality. All that we can do is open up the capacity as quickly and as safely as we can, expand it as much as we can, bring in extra people, which is happening, and bring them in on the vehicle examiner side in order to get more capacity quickly into the driver testing side.

Mr K Buchanan: Just to make a final point, the TECs are fine. It is a piece of paper that says that you can legally drive on the road but you have to maintain your car. Fair enough. If you hand out TECs, you have the risk of unsafe cars driving around the roads. You cannot give a TEC to a driver until they have a test, obviously, but they are there. If you watch social media, you see that there are thousands who are not getting on the system. I asked about the Sunday night opening, but I did not get an answer because the specific data was not there. There are thousands of people, generally young people, who have not got a test, and the problem is coming down the road. You cannot push it back; you have to increase capacity to do it. Simple.

Ms Thompson: As I said, we are increasing —.

Mr K Buchanan: Julie, I have not seen that, and my other colleague and I have not heard it.

Ms Thompson: Jeremy talked about how we are putting 2,000 extra slots in from November to January, but this is a pandemic. There is a limit to what we can do. Obviously, the last four weeks have not helped, and another four weeks' worth of tests would be done. We understand the frustration for those young people in particular and what they would have preferred to happen — we would be frustrated too — but, at the end of the day, we can only increase the capacity as safely as we can, allow the ones who have now been affected twice to be allowed access to the system first, bring people forward and keep opening up the months as quickly as we can. However, there is a backlog on driving tests across these islands, and it is caused by the pandemic. Unfortunately, that is the reality of where we are.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Three more members indicated that they want to speak — Ms Anderson, Ms Kimmins and Mrs Kelly, in that order.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Julie and Jeremy. Obviously, we are very conscious that we are the middle of an awful pandemic, and picking up on your last comments, I think that all the members are aware of that. To explore capacity further, when did the DVA first start exploring ways to increase testing capacity?

Ms Thompson: That has been an ongoing process through this. You can go back to things like taking back into our usage the three test centres that were used for COVID and bringing that extra capacity in. That work has happened, and those three centres are now back in.

Bringing in extra staffing has also been worked on since we knew that we could bring driving tests back. That has all been part of the jigsaw puzzle of putting this together. You cannot actually put slots in place until you are confident that people will be there to deliver the service. Hence, even though there has been no service for the last few weeks, we have been able to identify another 2,000 slots to go into November to January, and that has been part of the process. It has been a work in progress right the way through, with people trying to push to get more through. As Jeremy also said, when we started we were not on full shift pattern on MOTs. We have put that up to full shift pattern now.

There has been a massive amount of work done in DVA. I know that there is a huge amount of frustration in the public. We understand that, but there has been a huge amount of work from Jeremy and his team to keep everything working and on getting access to services for as many people as possible. On the MOT side, there have been results, and as pointed out, there is no backlog on MOTs. The TECs are taking care of that, and that brings in a different issue, which was pointed out by Keith and Andrew. That leaves us with the driving test backlog, which we are trying to address.

Ms Anderson: I think, Julie, that you need to appreciate that all of us, including you, are frustrated, but there is a perception that it was very late in the day that the increased capacity started to be explored.

Picking up on what Keith and others said, you need to be mindful of the evidence of the increased capacity. Even though we are living with the restrictions now, but even before then, that is not the evidence that people are seeing or that we are witnessing. I will leave that with you, because we need a demonstration of that, and I do not think that we are getting it.

Regarding the learner drivers whose tests have recently been cancelled, you stated that the DVA contacted customers directly to advise them that they can reschedule their appointment. Have all those drivers been successfully contacted? I say that because I am sure that not just us but other MLAs are being contacted by drivers asking questions about when these bookings will be rescheduled. I know that you gave us a time frame, but I am concerned that perhaps not all of them, or maybe not too many of them, have been contacted.

Ms Thompson: There are two elements to that. They have yet to be contacted about the 9 November date. We are telling you that. We have to get that message out, and we will do that through the remainder of this week so that everybody knows that the 9 November date is for only the priority groups, that is, the key workers and those who had their test cancelled from March to June. Jeremy was talking about contacting them about the original cancellation, but you are quite right to say that people are not aware at this point and have not been contacted individually to alert them to the fact that they can go into the system from 9 November, and we will be doing that over the next couple of days.

Mr Logan: We have made a lot of efforts over the last couple of days in particular to get the key details for some of the folks in that affected group. We had email addresses and mobile phone numbers, but, for some, unfortunately, we had only postal addresses, so we have written to them to ask them to provide us with email details so that we can contact them quickly. If anything, we have learned a lesson on how we can get these messages out to customers as quickly as we can, and we hope to have that information and the email addresses for all those affected customers so that we can communicate messages very quickly to them. As I said, we also use the approved driving instructor network and the council to help to get those messages out to the candidates that they have been providing instruction for, and that has been very effective in getting the messages out there.

Ms Anderson: I have one last question. Given that you have not been furnished with that information, when you state that refunds were issued as quickly as possible, does that mean that that has been completed? You talked about 1,000 drivers. Have they all been refunded? How did that happen if you could not contact them to notify them directly about the rescheduling of the dates? I am wondering about the data that you may have available to refund them.

Mr Logan: When customers booked their test, the only payment option that they had was to put through a credit card or debit card payment, so my understanding is that all those customers have been refunded and that their refund has been put back to the card that they made their initial payment with, in which case we did not have to get their details.

Ms Anderson: OK. They have all been refunded?

Mr Logan: To the best of my knowledge, they have all been refunded, yes.

Ms Kimmims: Thanks, Julie and Jeremy, for the update. I have a couple of questions. A lot of the stuff has already been covered. I know that, when the online booking system reopened on 5 October, there was a bit of an error and it reopened early. Did that have a big impact? Do we have an idea of how many people were able to get booked prior to most people's knowing that the system was even open? That was a big issue that I was getting.

Mr Logan: The booking system was intended to open, as you rightly said, on 5 October and was advertised as such. Our booking provider was doing testing on the system and accessed that system, we believe, at around 8.00 pm that evening to start bookings. We think that a significant number were booked before midnight that night, but thousands of slots were still available the following day for bookings right through to January. We are very cognisant that, when we reinstate the booking service, that anomaly should not happen again, so we will put in additional controls to ensure that nobody can access the system before we advertise it and that everybody has an equal opportunity to get the slots that are available.

Ms Kimmims: OK. That is fair enough. We talked a lot about dealing with the backlog, and I know that work is under way to recruit more examiners. How do you see that recruitment helping with the backlog? Obviously, test centres can still accommodate only so many tests a day. Will the recruitment be an internal process, or will you also be looking externally?

Mr Logan: It is a bit of a mixture. At the minute, we are looking to temporary workers through our recruitment agency in order to try to facilitate those people and get them into the DVA very quickly. Indeed, some of the folks we have recruited have worked with us before, which helps with the training requirements and reduces the time that is needed for training. We also have a recruitment list for permanent staff, and we intend to draw 12 people off that. It is a bit of a mixture of a permanent and a temporary solution, as we are bringing staff in from the recruitment agency, and many of them have a lot of experience.

That process has kicked off. Five staff were trained last week and should be fully up to speed and able to commence testing very soon. Unfortunately, another victim of COVID is the number of staff that we can train at any given time. At the minute, we are training five staff in each batch. The next five will come in over the next couple of weeks, and we will continue to do that until we have the full complement. We have said that, at the minute, we need 27 instructors, but that may increase depending on how we feel we are getting through the backlog of tests.

Ms Kimmims: OK. Thank you. My final point is one that I raised with the Minister prior to this period of restrictions for examiners, and I know that the Chair also raised it about people not being allowed

inside MOT centres. I know that work was done to try to address that in some way. Has that work now been completed? Are there facilities indoors for driving instructors who are waiting on their pupils who are out on tests?

Ms Thompson: We have been able to sort out the driving, yes.

Ms Kimmins: OK.

Mr Logan: Since September, we have been able to put in facilities for driving instructors to use the reception areas in our test centres.

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

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for the presentation. It has been a difficult year for DVA given the difficulties with the lifts at the start of the year. I acknowledge the work that you and your teams have been doing.

I want to ask about HGV tests, particularly for people who work in the sector and bring lorries in from England and resell them here. How does that sit with the tests? Having spoken to some of the people who are involved in the sector, I know that there are huge problems trying to get tests booked. Sometimes people had to book for a number of vehicles at one time, and they had to do that through a telephone system, which often took a long time to get through to and then, when they got through, they were not connected to the correct department or there were other difficulties. Will you clarify whether that is available as an online service?

Given that we are now into, if you like, the second lockdown for elements of the sector, what lessons have been learned for the Department's response? Have any of those lessons and recommendations been implemented?

Mr Logan: I can certainly address the first point about the HGV testing. Initially, the booking service was open through the call centre booking line only. As you would expect, there was a lot of demand for that service, and it caused quite a bit of frustration for the HGV and goods vehicle industry in particular. They often book multiple vehicles in at any given time, and even getting through to that line caused them a degree of frustration. We have had a lot of key stakeholder engagement with Logistics UK and the Road Haulage Association, and they expressed in no uncertain terms the frustrations that they were having.

We reintroduced the online booking service for the goods vehicle industry on, I think, 1 October, and since we did that its concerns have eased considerably. A lot of people in the goods vehicle industry were also used to having standing appointments in some of our test centres so that they could have a bit of flexibility in how they managed their fleet. We have been able to reinstate those as well in our test centre network. That has alleviated a lot of the concerns and pressures that the industry had in early September. The feedback has been that the service has improved considerably. We are now testing goods vehicles across all our 15 test centres, which is another good aspect because, at that stage, Belfast had not come back online for testing purposes; we got it back only in late September.

Mrs D Kelly: Is there a backlog in that still, or have you been catching up well given the demand on the service?

Mr Logan: There is no backlog in goods vehicle testing. All the heavy test centre lanes are open, and we have been able to test any vehicle that presents. We are bringing those vehicles forward and have been doing that since 1 September. There is no backlog for the goods vehicle industry.

Ms Thompson: You asked about lessons learnt. You are right; there were a lot of issues that had to be dealt with over a period of time, whether it was the learning from risk assessments to do with MOTs, which was then carried into the risk assessments that were done for driving tests, or the automation processes that were put in place for TECs compared with the early days, when all that was done manually. As Jeremy said, the refund process is now much more streamlined compared with the manual intervention that was done at the very start.

Ms Kimmins talked about avoiding problems with anomalies in the IT system. When we reopen, we will have the online booking system up and running, because the customer service line was not able to cope with the demand. A lot of things have moved on and changed, and we will continue to capture

that learning and keep moving forward. We will make sure that, as far as possible, we are improving the service and getting as much open as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you. Just as a matter of interest, will any of the changed work practices be brought forward as routine rather than as a response to the COVID pandemic?

Mr Logan: That is unlikely. We will want to get back to normal working practices as soon as we can, purely because of the capacity and efficiency of our testing model. It would make sense to get back to normal, and the sooner that we can do that, the better it will be for everyone.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I appreciate that you are not here to talk about enforcement, but I understand that the goods vehicle enforcement functions are funded by the levy on HGV and trailer tests. If you cannot do so today, could you put in writing the financial details of how that revenue is ring-fenced and spent specifically on goods vehicles enforcement?

Mr Logan: Yes. We get a small proportion of funding from the levy enforcement; it equates to approximately three full-time equivalent staff, but it is embedded across all the enforcement officers who work in the agency. Enforcement has continued throughout albeit in a restricted way, targeting things like road safety and dangerous and unsafe vehicles. A lot of work has been done on enforcement to make sure that those safe practices can be adhered to. Indeed, they have converted a couple of their enforcement vans to have safe access when dealing with drivers. A lot of work has continued from an enforcement perspective throughout the COVID pandemic.

I will need check for you what the impact has been. With the restrictions, we are paid as an agent by the Department for Transport (DfT) to deliver the enforcement function around the levy. With that having stopped, we do not have to do that at this point in time. I can certainly come back to you with more detail on that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes, if you could provide more detail on enforcement, that would be appreciated.

Thank you both for your time this morning. No doubt, you will receive another request, probably in the not-too-distant future, to give us a further update, and we will look forward to that. Thank you again.

Mr Logan: Thank you.

Ms Thompson: Thank you.