



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Driver and Vehicle Agency

20 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Pat Delaney	Driver and Vehicle Agency
Mr Jeremy Logan	Driver and Vehicle Agency

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We welcome Mr Jeremy Logan, who is the chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), and Pat Delaney, who is the DVA's director of operations. Good morning. You are both welcome to the Committee. I invite Jeremy to make an opening statement, and then Committee members will follow up with some questions.

Mr Jeremy Logan (Driver and Vehicle Agency): Certainly. Thank you for the invitation to come to the Committee today to provide an update on DVA services. This follows the previous update, which was provided on 4 November last year. We have provided a briefing paper to the Committee in advance of today's meeting. I will draw out a few points from the paper about the current position on DVA services, after which I will ask Pat, our director of operations, to say a few words about the plans, looking ahead.

As is the case with many public-facing services, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on DVA services, particularly vehicle and driving test services. We have conducted an extensive review of our risk assessments, and those are regularly reviewed to take account of the latest public health advice and guidance in order to ensure the safety of our staff and customers. Inevitably, that has meant that our testing capacity has been reduced, as we continue to ensure that the necessary and proportionate controls are in place, such as hand sanitisation, social distancing and the wearing of face coverings. We know that that has caused disruption for our customers, and we are working hard to mitigate that.

Vehicle testing is taking place at all 15 MOT test centres and has not been affected by the current lockdown restrictions. From 20 July, we resumed testing for priority vehicle groups, including those not able to avail themselves of temporary exemption certificates (TECs). Since then, we have steadily increased our testing capacity by bringing forward additional vehicle categories for tests. From this

month, we have increased our vehicle testing capacity to ensure that we can test vehicles whose 12-month TECs will start to expire early this year. To achieve that, we have adopted a range of measures, including the recruitment of additional vehicle examiners, the use of overtime to provide cover for leave and sick absence and the reduction of the vehicle test time. We will continue to issue TECs to all eligible vehicles until normal testing services resume. That will ensure that all vehicles can be kept on the road. It is important for owners to understand, however, that it remains their responsibility to make sure that their car is maintained in a roadworthy condition to be used on a public road.

I turn now to driving tests. You will be aware that driving instructors were included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 5 February to help stop the spread of COVID. Driving tests have also been suspended over the period of increased restrictions on the basis of the same public health and scientific advice. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by the new restrictions.

In planning for the resumption of driving tests once the current period of lockdown restrictions ends, the Minister announced last night that there will be a phased reopening of the booking service to prioritise bookings for customers on the basis of the expiry date of their theory test pass certificate. Pat will provide more detail on our plans shortly.

I am pleased to advise the Committee that the financial position is much improved from our previous update on 4 November. The agency has secured allocations of resource funding totalling £20.9 million to address some of the lost fee income arising from the COVID pandemic. The current estimated remaining shortfall in fee income is £10 million. The Committee will be aware from last week's briefing on January monitoring that a bid for a further £10 million has been submitted to the Department of Finance to address that shortfall. Suffice it to say that the finance position remains challenging and is being continually monitored.

Pat will now provide a brief overview of our plans for reintroducing driving tests when the current lockdown restrictions end.

Mr Pat Delaney (Driver and Vehicle Agency): Thanks, Jeremy. Following the decision to suspend driving tests for six weeks from 26 December, we took immediate action to contact affected customers to cancel their test and refund their fee. We have now written to those customers to advise them of how they can reschedule their appointment, and they will have the opportunity to rebook their test before the service opens to all other customers. We also met the Northern Ireland Approved Instructor Council (NIAIC) and wrote to all approved driving instructors at the earliest opportunity to notify them of that position.

The booking service remains closed to new customers, but, once the restrictions are lifted and it is safe to resume driving tests, we plan to open the booking service in three phases. Phases 1 and 2 will prioritise groups of customers for a limited period on the basis of the expiry date of their theory test pass certificate, before the booking service is opened to all other customers in phase 3. We estimate that there are around 21,000 customers currently holding a private car theory test pass certificate who have not yet booked a practical driving test. There are approximately 4,500 customers in phase 1 and approximately 5,000 customers in phase 2 whose theory test certificate will expire by 31 October 2021 and 31 March 2022 respectively. Once the Executive confirm the date on which the current restrictions will be lifted, we will contact phase 1 customers directly to advise them of when they can access the booking system. We will ensure that there are sufficient driving test appointment slots available to accommodate those customers, but, given our understanding of the historical data, we do not expect everyone in that group to book a test. That said, we will monitor the situation closely before opening the booking system to phase 2 customers. We will adopt a similar approach for phase 2 customers whose theory test pass certificate will expire between 1 November 2021 and the end of March 2022. That will require us to make further booking test appointments available to ensure that we can manage demand. Finally, for phase 3 customers, the booking system will be open to remaining customers whose theory test pass certificate expires from April 2022 onward. That will be the last group for which we will open the booking system.

The exact timings of those phases will be determined by the outcome of the Executive's review of COVID restrictions, and a further update will be provided to customers once the position is confirmed. Once driving test services resume, we will aim to maximise the availability of driving test booking appointment slots. We are recruiting additional examiners. We will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday. As we move towards the spring and the summer, we will offer driving tests in the evening. We will also use overtime to rota off-duty dual-role vehicle examiners, who carry out driving test

functions as well, to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests where, owing to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

I am also pleased to say that, once the current restrictions end, we will offer driving test appointments for all categories of vehicle. Following engagement with key stakeholders, we will offer driving tests for heavy goods vehicles on Sundays in Belfast, Craigavon and Newbuildings, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the driving test.

We know that learner drivers are keen to take their driving test at the earliest opportunity, and we acknowledge that their frustration has been compounded by the current suspension of driving tests. We are working hard to maximise the availability of test slots across all our test centres, but the COVID restrictions mean that we have had to adapt our services to ensure that they can be provided safely. We therefore ask our customers to remain patient at this difficult time.

Chair, we are ready to take questions.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you both very much. I will start with the financial situation. Jeremy, you said that you are in a better place than you were in, by virtue of the fact that you have received a considerable amount of money from the COVID pot. We heard last week about the £10 million shortfall and the bid that is going through January monitoring to address the issues with your reserves. Are you in a position today to give us a broader picture of the situation with the reserves? We have had a number of conversations in the past about how reserves are normally anticipated to be used. Obviously, that has changed over the past year.

Mr Logan: Yes. I will outline the position with the reserves. At the start of April 2020, DVA accounts amounted to £37.8 million, which was accumulated for planned capital investment and working capital requirements going forward. Essentially, that money was to be used to build a new test centre and depot at Hydebank; to replace vehicle testing equipment as part of a refresh programme across all our existing test centres; and to develop a new booking and rostering IT system for vehicle testing and driving tests. That is what the money was earmarked for. COVID obviously impacted on that. As I said, we have been successful in getting bids worth circa £21 million, and that further bid for £10 million will certainly help address some of the shortfall. The cash balance at the end of December was £18.2 million. With the cash secured from COVID funding, £12.2 million will be drawn down from the Department into DVA reserves. That will increase our cash reserves back to circa £30 million. If we are successful with our future bid, our reserves will be really quite close to where they were at this time last year. Those reserves have been earmarked for the areas that I have already mentioned, such as the Hydebank test centre and depot, the development of our booking and rostering system and the equipment replacement programme. That is what that money has been earmarked for and will be used for.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What is the status of those three programmes? Subject to any further changes, are Hydebank, the refreshing of equipment and the IT system all on track to be delivered? Of course, all the lifts have already been refreshed in the past year.

Mr Logan: Yes. That is the position.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you. I will move on to the MOT situation. The problems associated with the lifts and subsequently COVID presented considerable challenges. It is remarked in your briefing paper:

"The Agency will continue to issue TECs to all eligible vehicles until normal vehicle testing services resume."

At this stage, what is defined as being an eligible vehicle, given the fact that you have started to test vehicles that are four years old, that have a statutory off-road notification (SORN) and that are being sold by dealers? I am curious as to what that line means.

Mr Logan: Essentially, TECs have been issued for the vehicles that we cannot test. As you rightly say, we have identified and phased our testing programme from 1 June, when we started doing the individual vehicle approval (IVA) test. From 20 July, we brought through vehicles that could not avail themselves of a TEC and then further vehicle test groups from 1 September. We are therefore trying to manage the vehicles that we can test and issuing TECs for the vehicles that we cannot test to

ensure that they can legally remain on the road. That has been critical for us. Following an extensive review of our risk assessments, we have increased testing capacity across all our 15 test centres from January of this year. That is to address some of the lift issues, after we had to issue TECs from, I think, 20 January 2020 because we could not test all vehicles. The vehicles that we tested last year will receive a TEC, and, conversely, the vehicles that we did not test last year will be brought forward for testing over the next three months. It is about striking a balance between testing the vehicles that we can test and issuing TECs for the vehicles that we cannot. That is the current position.

That information is on nidirect, and it is clear about the categories of vehicles that we are bringing forward for testing. Our customers will receive a reminder notice from us when their vehicle is due for a test. They will have to act on that notice and get their vehicle tested within the advised period.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You are restricted by the length of time for which a TEC is issued. It is for 12 months, at which stage the vehicle has to be tested. The onus then falls on the DVA to ensure that that test happens.

Mr Logan: At the minute, the extension allowed for TECs is to a maximum of 12 months, and that is what we have been working to. Some TECs will start to expire this month. We have therefore had to review and revise our testing processes in line with the risk assessments to ensure that we continue to test those vehicles that are now coming up to their 12-month TEC anniversary.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Finally, your paper states that there will be a:

"reduction of the current vehicle test time".

What does that mean? Does it mean that there will be a reduction in the standard of the test?

Mr Delaney: Do you want me to take that question?

Mr Logan: I am happy for Pat to take that.

Mr Delaney: No. The reduction in time is the reduction in the time made available for the test to be conducted. The test itself takes 20 minutes. There is no change to the test time. The additional 10 minutes that we allocated when we were putting in our COVID measures was to allow our vehicle examiners to avail themselves of handwashing facilities, to change their gloves and to doff clothing. Over time, we have looked at the data. Our examiners have become familiar with the procedures and are doing them more quickly. Having looked at the test data for how long it takes for a vehicle test to be conducted, we are confident about now introducing a 25-minute appointment slot rather than a 30-minute appointment slot. The actual time for a vehicle test to be conducted remains 20 minutes, however. We neither added to nor subtracted from the time available for the test to ensure that its integrity was maintained.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you for that clarity. People have been waiting anxiously for a driving test for a considerable time. It is welcome that a plan was published yesterday. When you are 17 and you have counted down the time until you hope to get the keys to Mum and Dad's car, it is difficult to be put off and off. Being able to learn to drive and become independent is one of the clear milestones in life. You said that you met the Northern Ireland Approved Instructor Council: I assume that there has been regular contact with it during this period. Is it generally content at this stage with the plan that has been published?

Mr Delaney: We are meeting the council later this morning, so the conversation to advise it on what those plans are is taking place then. We will wait to see what its views are on that. That said, my understanding is that it has been discussed previously that we prioritise, and the fairest way to prioritise is that we ensure that the customers whose theory test pass certificate is about to expire be given the first opportunity to do their test.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): In the past, we have discussed the number of examiners and looked at having additional examiners. During this period, how many examiners have been added to the workforce?

Mr Logan: Previously, we had identified that our plans were to bring in 27 new vehicle examiners. That is the best and quickest way in which we could free up the dual-role examiners, who are trained

to do driving tests and vehicle tests, to help with some of the pressures and demands in that area. So far, we have brought in 10 temporary vehicle examiners who have been recruited on appointment and four permanent vehicle examiners. The figure is therefore 14 at the minute. Offers have been made to a further 12 permanent examiners who will join us in the next couple of weeks and will be trained, so the number will be 26. We have checked with our recruitment agencies, but, unfortunately, at this stage, supply is limited. We have therefore taken the decision to recruit more permanent examiners to fill the gap that we had identified, and we are looking to bring in further staff to meet the demand going forward.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): If there were to be no further health restrictions, how long would it take to get through the current cohort of people who are required to be tested?

Mr Delaney: If there were no restrictions?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes, if there were no further restrictions. I am just trying to get a sense of the time that it will take to get through the current backlog.

Mr Delaney: The current backlog can be measured only by the number of people who can apply for a practical driving test. That number is around 21,000, because they are the only ones who currently hold a theory test pass certificate. For category B driving tests, the number of tests that we would normally conduct in one month is 3,900, so roughly 4,000. Working on that basis, if we were conducting tests on a normal, pre-COVID basis, we would say five months. We are, however, increasing the number of staff who are available to do that. We have, in fact, identified four staff in the DVA as dual-role examiners. We will increase that by a further six to 10, and we are going through the process of permanently appointing 10 new driving examiners. That was already in train before COVID and had to be halted at that time. We will be bringing in those 10 full-time driving examiners. Working on the basis that they do seven tests a day — they currently do five, but, from the beginning of February, if restrictions are lifted, we will move to six, which is a 20% increase — we are confident that we would get through the current backlog within those five months. That is not to say, however, that, once theory tests open again, that number will not then be added to. It will be an ongoing issue.

I will just add that one of my other roles is as vice president of the International Commission for Driver Testing (CIECA). From speaking to my colleagues across Europe, I know that we are all face a backlog. In the DVA, our unique service delivery model, where we have vehicle and driving examiners, gives us flexibility that other organisations do not have.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Finally, we have had the discussion about what the plan is for potential driving instructors. As things stand, what is the anticipated plan for those who seek to become driving instructors?

Mr Logan: As Pat mentioned, the good news is that we are reinstating all of our driving test categories, including those for potential driving instructors. We have had representations from elected representatives and instructors about getting their tests booked. We were in a position at 11 December to start facilitating those tests, and, unfortunately, the restrictions came in. Yes, we will be able to accommodate the tests for those potential driving instructors, but I understand that some will be worried that their qualification period of two years may expire shortly. We are certainly looking to see whether there is any legislative provision that we can make to accommodate that or potentially to extend that. We are working through that at the minute, and we will advise of our position on that in due course.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK, so that is something that you are actively looking at. I wanted to ask about that. I have been approached by driving instructors and driving schools who have had an issue with the number of driving instructors who have left as a consequence of COVID and do not want to come back, and they have not been able to replenish those.

Mr Logan: As I understand it, the number of potential driving instructors in the system is very small. Nevertheless, we will try to accommodate that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK, you are actively looking at legislation. That is great. Thank you very much.

Mr Hilditch: My question is on the driver testing services that the agency will make available for Saturdays and Sundays. Your briefing paper states that tests will be offered on a Sunday:

"where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test."

What do you mean by the "integrity"?

Mr Logan: I will start, and maybe Pat can clarify. Obviously, the test has to be done in a fashion that is a true test of your driving standard, and, clearly, on Sundays, at certain test centres, maybe the traffic volumes would be such that it would not be a representative test. So, our supervising examiners have been looking across the network to see what centres are suitable. I think that Pat mentioned Belfast, Craigavon and Derry as the centres where the test could be delivered with the supervising examiners being satisfied that the standard can be met for those tests. We have consulted our HGV colleagues in the industry to advise them that that is our proposal moving forward.

Mr Delaney: The tests that Jeremy was referring to are for heavy goods vehicles. We certainly have had significant representation from industry bodies on that, and we are happy enough to accommodate it. The same applies to category B tests. We can conduct a category B test only if that test can be conducted in such a way that the candidate encounters certain hazards, obstacles, road conditions and opportunities where their behaviour can be observed. At certain times of the day — particularly a Sunday morning, for example — where there is very little traffic on the road, it is difficult for a driving examiner to make an honest assessment of that person's driving ability without them being tested to the level that they need to be to obtain a pass certificate and drive safely unaccompanied.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you. You said that you had been talking with staff and the union side, but, obviously, there must be tremendous pressure on staff on the ground. How is that working out for you at the minute?

Mr Logan: I have to say that the response from the staff and the trade union side has been incredible throughout the COVID crisis. Staff have been wanting to get back to work as soon as they can and test vehicles for our customers and conduct driving tests. Obviously, the current restrictions are frustrating for them in that regard, but we have worked collaboratively with our unions to make sure that our risk assessments have developed to keep staff and our customers safe. Yes, there are restrictions and adaptations that we have had to make to our testing process, but, obviously, they are designed to keep our staff and our customers safe. As I said, they have responded incredibly to the situation. Yes, like all public services, they are under pressure. They are nervous about the spread of COVID, and we are doing all that we can to make sure that the processes that we have in place mitigate that.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Pat and Jeremy. I have a quick question. Jeremy, the last time that you were here, I questioned you a bit on the percentage of tests being carried out. Is it correct that we were down to a capacity of 30%?

Mr Logan: Approximately, yes.

Mr K Buchanan: Roughly. What is that now, on the basis of the additional 10 minutes' cleaning-up time, as I will call it? Is it heading towards 50%, or what direction is it heading in?

Mr Logan: As I reported last time, we took the decision that we would start to publish monthly stats, because there is obvious public and political interest in what we do. We have seen a steady interest in the number of tests that we have been conducting since we started bringing further groups back in September. We estimate that our current capacity for vehicle testing is just over 50%. That will be in place from January right through until the end of March.

Obviously, we are getting quite close to the maximum testing capacity on the basis of the current COVID controls that are in place and the necessary adaptations that we have had to make to our testing processes. I estimate that, at the minute, it is just over 50%. That is certainly what we have modelled for the next three months.

Mr K Buchanan: I see a point that refers to heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses. A wee while ago, we heard from the Road Haulage Association (RHA). Obviously, they have issues with the delays for lorries, and I know that they have other issues at the moment. Is there a delay there? Where do you see that heavy goods side of it all?

Mr Logan: We had very positive engagement with Logistics UK and the Road Haulage Association when we reinstated testing, back in September, for heavy goods vehicles. There were some issues around the booking services and the reinstatement of standing appointments, but we worked with them. Across all test centres now we are delivering tests, and we are back to pre-COVID levels as far as testing for the heavy goods vehicle industry is concerned.

Pat, do you wish to add anything?

Mr Delaney: Yes. That is one industry that we were keen to work with and accommodate as best we could because we understood the frustrations that it had, particularly the parts of the industry concerned with maintaining vehicles. When we got back up and running, we were only able to offer appointments one month in advance, and that is not particularly helpful for a company that is trying to put in a maintenance programme. They wanted to get back to booking three months in advance, which was the pre-COVID arrangement. We worked quickly with them to do that.

Essentially, the heavy goods vehicle industry, lorries and trailers, are now operating as they were pre COVID. They have their standing appointments. We meet them regularly and are in contact with them individually or collectively to make sure that they have everything they need so that their vehicles are kept safely on the road.

Mr K Buchanan: Can I ask about the temporary exemption certificates? Let us say that my vehicle, for example, was tested in January '19. It should have had a TEC in January '20, but it will now be tested again in '21. That is a period of two years since my vehicle was tested. Two years is the worst-case scenario, but what is the average period for which vehicles have not been tested? Is it 18 or 14 months?

Mr Logan: In the vast majority of cases, when we issued TECs, they were for a 12-month period. That was essentially to bring the vehicles back in on the anniversary of their MOT due date. It was also to try to manage the profile of our testing as we went forward. Had we brought them back in after six months, we would have had a spike in demand at certain points in the year and limited demand at others. It was to manage the testing capacity. We have been carefully managing that, and the vast majority of vehicles have been issued with a 12-month TEC. The first of those, as you rightly state, will start to expire this month. They were issued on the back end of the lift issues.

Mr K Buchanan: My final question is on driving tests, which generally affects young people, but I must be careful because it is not only young people who need driving tests. The Chair has covered this. You said that 21,000 had done theory tests, so you are talking about roughly five months of testing if you only had to do those. What percentage of an increase in capacity will you have to put in, bearing in mind that you will get the same number of people coming in with theory tests? How will you ever get on top of the 21,000 figure, if you have the same number coming in now with theory tests?

Mr Logan: There are a number of angles to this. Obviously, we have to take account of the COVID restrictions that are in place and the adaptations that we have made. That, ultimately, reduces our capacity to a point. In some respects, with the current restrictions in place, theory tests have also been suspended so that is not adding to the backlog, but I take your point. Once services resume, theory tests are likely to resume as well, and we will have to deliver more practical driving tests to come out of the scenario, given the demand that is currently there. The measures that we have identified, such as recruiting additional examiners, offering overtime and evening slots and Sunday opening, are designed to increase our normal testing capacity to bring that down as quickly as we can.

Mr K Buchanan: That, Jeremy, would need, theoretically, a 100% increase in testing.

Mr Logan: Certainly, we would need to increase the number of tests, and that is our strategy: to maximise the resources that we can put forward for the driving test. As Pat said, we are fortunate in the fact that we have dual-role staff whom we can utilise to manage those demands, and we will do that to the best of our ability.

The one thing that I will say about the 21,000 figure is that our data shows that not all of the people with theory tests will convert them to practical driving tests. There will be some fall-off in that figure. They are indicative of the current position, but it is hard to be exact.

Mr K Buchanan: Where do you see that bottleneck? There are young people who do not have their theory test. Where will that bottleneck be, and how will you improve it? If they are not on your system, it takes the pressure off you, but they are there. They do not have a theory test, therefore there is no issue with your systems, but the bottleneck is getting a theory test. You need to increase your driving test capacity so that more theory tests can be done to get the bottleneck out of the system.

Mr Logan: In normal circumstances, there is equilibrium between the number of candidates who get theory tests and the number of driving tests that we do, but you are absolutely right.

Mr K Buchanan: There will be a bottleneck, but that will not show in your system. There will be people shouting, "I cannot get a theory test".

Mr Logan: On the demand for theory tests — Pat can qualify this — we have been working closely with Pearson VUE, the theory test provider, so that it can accommodate theory tests. Essentially, since 6 July, it was delivering a significant number of theory tests via Zoom to meet the current demand and will continue to do so when that service can resume. Pat, do you wish to add anything?

Mr Delaney: When theory tests resume, Pearson VUE will decide what the arrangements are in its theory test centres and the number of people who can safely do theory tests at any one time. That will be a matter for Pearson VUE. You are right to say that those people will eventually start coming through, but it is important that we recognise that this is not a normal year. We are in a pandemic, and I do not want to create an expectation for anyone that this is something that we will deal with quickly. There will be delays, and those delays may be significant for some prospective candidates. Some will get their tests earlier than others, and others will have to wait for some time. How long that will be is difficult to say without knowing what the volumes will be. However, we will do everything within our power to minimise the inconvenience that those customers experience, and we will try our best to get through those tests as quickly as we can. However, to try to put an end date on it would be purely speculative on my part. It is difficult, even with the modelling, to arrive at that date.

Mr Beggs: Thanks for coming along and giving us an update. I remember that, the last time you were here, I pressed on the issue of additional driving instructors and was told that you did not think that you needed them because you had dual-role instructors. Are you confirming today that you have employed 10 more? Did I pick that up right?

Mr Delaney: I will just clarify that for you. Before COVID, we were in the process of an exercise to recruit driving examiners to fill vacancies that were already in the system. We are in the process of doing that, but that was halted because of COVID. We have trawled for staff in the agency to volunteer as dual-role staff. We got 27 applications for that. We are working with the first four, and then we will move on to the next six. That will give us 10 additional dual-role staff. That will give us that flexibility in the agency. One of the beauties of having the dual-role workforce is that we can flex up and flex down depending on what our demands are. There is a tremendous amount of flexibility and comfort in that workforce arrangement.

Mr Beggs: I agree. In normal circumstances, that is definitely right, but do you accept that, at present, you are under pressure from both sides of the house: theory testing and driver testing?

Mr Delaney: We are under pressure from both sides of the house, but there is a third side of the house, which is that, with COVID restrictions, we cannot train driving examiners because that is driving instruction and that is covered in the regulations. That makes it even more difficult for us, so we are caught between a rock and a hard place in certain circumstances.

Mr Beggs: I am just trying to get an accurate feel for where we are. You said that there were 21,000 people who had had their theory test. That has stopped for two months, perhaps more, so there will be further pent-up demand. Is it reasonable to think that?

Mr Logan: Yes. There was a suspension of theory tests in the period before Christmas, and, with the current six-week lockdown, people who would normally have been tested in that period will be looking for their test once the service resumes.

Mr Beggs: Is that likely to have increased by 4,000 per month? What numbers are we looking at? We could well be talking about having to deal with at least 30,000 people before you get back into operation. Is that possible?

Mr Logan: When theory tests resume, we anticipate, driving tests will also be able to resume. We will deliver driving and theory tests at the same time, so the number of theory tests should reduce.

Mr Beggs: The point I make is that more people will have been added to those seeking a theory test. There is an additional pent-up demand among young people who have now reached the age of 17 and want to do their theory test.

Mr Logan: Yes, and they will apply for their theory test. We are hoping that, at that stage, driving tests will be back in line, so we will be delivering driving tests, and they will go through the process. In a normal year, that would work in equilibrium.

Mr Beggs: In a normal year, what is your monthly capacity for delivering driving tests?

Mr Delaney: In a normal year, the monthly average capacity for all categories of driving test is 4,500 tests. We deliver roughly 57,000 driving tests per year. Of those, 46,000 are category B or private car driving tests.

Mr Beggs: If you were allowed to reopen on 5 February — it may be a month later, we do not know — what would be your capacity then?

Mr Delaney: Currently, we have 37 full-time and 40 dual-role driving examiners. If you are looking at simply the theoretical capacity and we round that number up to 80, you are looking at 400 tests per day, but that is not where we are going to go.

Mr Beggs: What are you prepared to commit away from vehicle testing?

Mr Delaney: Once we get back up and running, we will be looking at between 3,500 and 4,000 tests per month.

Mr Logan: Those would be category B driving tests.

Mr Delaney: Those would be category B, and we will have to work up to that.

Mr Beggs: Are you are saying that with, even those additional bodies, you will have less capacity than previously and that the waiting list will grow?

Mr Delaney: What I said to you is that we are moving up to six. We normally do seven tests per day. Up until now, we have been doing five tests per day. We are moving to six, so we are —.

Mr Beggs: You are increasing from where you were during the previous pandemic stage —

Mr Delaney: Yes.

Mr Beggs: — but my question is this: what is your capacity compared with your normal capacity pre pandemic?

Mr Delaney: Our capacity is in the region of 3,500 tests per month.

Mr Beggs: Except that is less than it normally was.

Mr Delaney: That is less than it normally was, yes.

Mr Beggs: Do you expect, therefore, the waiting list to grow?

Mr Delaney: No. We are employing the additional staff, so, when the additional 26 staff are in place, that will release additional staff from the vehicle testing centres to do driving tests. When we get them

trained, that will, hopefully, allow us to add to that figure, so that figure will increase beyond what our normal average capacity was.

Mr Beggs: What capacity do you expect to have when that happens?

Mr Delaney: I would hope that, when we have all our vehicle examiners in place, we would be moving towards, for category B driving tests alone, in excess of 4,500 tests per day.

Mr Logan: Our ambition is to increase our tests above what we would normally do to address some of the backlog issues. However, even when the current restrictions are lifted, there will still have to be COVID controls in place for all our testing processes, such as sanitisation, face covering and social distancing. That necessary adaptation will restrict our capacity to do tests. We are trying to augment that with resources to bring it up to somewhere near normal. If we can exceed the normal testing capacity, we will certainly do so.

Mr Beggs: The difficulty that I see is that you seem to be bringing it up to about normal levels, therefore you are not really eating away at the backlog, which is likely to be 20,000 to 30,000 applicants. Again, for all the young people who have not been taking driving lessons, there will be pent-up demand. I am concerned that this could last for years, not just months. Would that be realistic?

Mr Delaney: As I said, we are not in normal circumstances. We are increasing the number of examiners who are available to do tests, and we are trying to go above that which we normally do. However, it is accepted that there will be delays in being able to do a driving test. We all have to accept that.

Mr Beggs: Might you employ even more examiners and automatically go into an extended working period to deal with the backlog?

Mr Delaney: We will have to consider all of those options.

Mr Beggs: Turning to the MOT side of the house — I declare an interest as one of those on the waiting list with an appointment coming due — it is vital to the entire community to have timely slots available. People may not be able to get to work, and kids may not be able to get to school, particularly in a rural community where public transport options are limited. I am concerned again that there is pent-up demand there. What is your normal capacity per month, and what is your expected capacity, given the plans that you have put in place?

Mr Logan: In answer to Keith's question, we said that we estimated our capacity — certainly over the next three months — to be just over 50%. That is probably our maximum capacity at the moment, given the controls that we had to put in place. In order to manage the capacity and the need for people to maintain and keep their cars on the road, between TECs and MOTs, everybody will be legally allowed to continue on the road. That will continue until such times as normal testing services can resume.

In answer to your question, you will either be called forward for an MOT because we have identified that your vehicle needs one — it has come to the end of its 12-month TEC or it falls into another category that cannot get a TEC — or you will get a TEC to allow you to continue to operate your vehicle. The key thing — I mentioned it in my opening remarks — is that it must be understood that the vehicle owner is responsible for maintaining their vehicle. So, even if a TEC has been issued and even if the car has had its MOT, it is tested for a minimum roadworthiness standard on that day. The owner should check tyres and lights and regularly service and maintain their vehicle as they normally would. They should not be under the misapprehension that a TEC excuses them from that level of maintenance.

Mr Beggs: How do you determine whether to issue a temporary exemption certificate? Obviously, that is an easy way to increase capacity — do not test annually but, instead, every 18 months or every two years. That is something that you have had to revert to. At what level do you offer the TEC? There still need to be timely slots for vehicles that are due to be tested so that they can apply on a timely basis. You need to be able to deal with someone who applies four weeks beforehand, which, normally, would be a reasonable time to apply but is no longer a reasonable time. How do you determine what that extended period is before you issue a temporary exemption certificate?

Mr Logan: The answer your question lies in our modelling. Reminder notices will issue, and we will give you a date when your car has to be presented for test. We have done extensive work with our statisticians on the resource availability that we have over the next three months to ensure that we have capacity across our network to test the vehicles that are being called forward and that they can get it before their MOT due date or when their TEC expires. As I said, that modelled figure is in and around 50%. That has been carefully looked at to ensure that people who get a reminder notice do not find themselves in a position where they cannot get a test at a test centre.

Mr Beggs: I am alarmed at the figure of 50%. That assumes that everybody will get a two-year exemption. If you drop below 50%, cars will start to come off the road if you are allowed to extend only to two years.

Mr Logan: That is the 50% of the cars that we are bringing forward for test. The other cars will be able to continue on the road through a TEC. That has been modelled, throughout the COVID crisis to ensure that we test the vehicles that we can test and bring those categories forward. We will put a TEC in place for the vehicles that we cannot test.

Mr Beggs: Does your modelling look at the number of cars that come due for testing each month?

Mr Logan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Thank you.

Mr Muir: Thank you to the officials for their answers thus far. I just want to ask about a couple of things. I was listening to a discussion on the radio this morning about driver testing and the Minister's announcement of plans for the resumption of testing, which have also been detailed here today. Will the officials confirm that all of that is predicated on the restrictions being eased? Let us take a step back. The restrictions are in place to help to manage the spread of COVID-19, to save lives and to protect the NHS. I know that they are having an impact on people's lives, but the virus has taken lives. We need to be conscious of that. I would like clarity that plans for the resumption of driver testing are predicated on the easing of restrictions. As another member outlined, I do not see those restrictions being eased in the short term. It will take a while before we are able to move back to close-contact services, which is what I understand driver testing to be. It goes into the same category as personal care and getting your hair done, for instance.

Mr Logan: Yes, our position on driving test resumption will be predicated on Executive decisions on when those close-contact services can resume. Before restrictions came into place, as I said, we carried out an extensive review of our risk assessments to ensure that driving tests could be delivered safely, and we consulted colleagues in the Department of Health to present the control measures that we had in place to ensure that they were satisfied that we were taking adequate, necessary and proportionate controls to deliver the service safely. Absolutely, I take your point that COVID is still very much with us. We will have to ensure the safety of our staff and customers throughout the testing process. Certainly, that was adhered to in the few weeks in which we were able to deliver tests, once they resumed. Obviously, they have been significantly disrupted by the ongoing COVID restrictions. In answer to your question, once the Executive say that it is safe for the tests to resume, they will resume on the premise that the risk assessments that were always in place — hand sanitisation, the wearing of face coverings and social distancing, where possible — will still be in place.

Mr Muir: It is important to give that clarity, because I do not see close-contact services resuming this month, never mind next month. That is the reality of the scale of the issue, the spread of COVID-19, the lives being lost and the pressure on the NHS.

I have two questions on vehicle testing. I would like some clarity on the MOT. At the weekend, I went online to see when my car's MOT was due to expire and found that it was due to expire at the end of February. I knew then that I needed to get the car booked in for a service and to book the MOT. However, when I went back online this morning, I saw that the MOT is set for 28 August 2021. I would like clarity, because a number of people have asked me about it, and the rules keep changing. Things change nearly every day. Is it correct that we should wait until we receive a letter inviting us to book an MOT before we take any action? Do we need to go online, check the expiry of our MOT and book it?

My other question relates to the 12-month expiry, which was picked up on previously. I understand that legislation would be required to enable the issuing of TECs beyond 12 months. I understand the

view that you outlined about starting the process for vehicles beyond the 12 months, but I am hesitant about whether that could be achieved. I am looking for assurance on whether legislation will be introduced to allow the TECs to be issued beyond 12 months.

Mr Logan: I will start with your first question, and Pat can add the detail, where necessary. Once a vehicle is due to be brought forward for MOT, the customer will receive a reminder notice. You identified the scenario of looking at the online checker. Under the legislation, we apply TECs. We apply a six-month TEC for a private car and automatically, back-to-back, apply a further six-month TEC. That is why there has been a change in your position and the MOT has been pushed forward to August. I assume that your car was due its MOT in August 2020 and has been pushed out for the full 12 months. Customers do not need to do anything with regard to the TEC process, because that is managed automatically by us. However, for peace of mind, customers go on to the car tax checker and the MOT checker to check the current position. The key point is that, when we need to bring a car forward for test, the customer will receive a reminder notice from us about five weeks in advance of the test to enable them to book their test slot.

Mr Muir: What about the 12-month expiry and legislation?

Mr Logan: As it stands, we are not extending any TECs beyond the 12-month period. We have managed that throughout the COVID crisis as COVID restrictions have changed. We are looking at what we do from the end of March going forward. Those are proposals that we are working at. You are absolutely right: we need to seek further legal advice on whether it is possible to extend TECs beyond 12 months, if that is an option that we need to consider. Those are proposals that we are working on. As soon as we have clarity on how we will take that forward, we will certainly be more than happy to come to the Committee and advise members of what our plans are. We will consult and advise our key stakeholders and customers of the approach. At the minute, no TECs are being issued for longer than 12 months. As I said, we have modelled the position for January right through to the end of March; we believe that, between TECs and the vehicles that we can test, we can keep everybody on the road. We have the capacity to test the vehicles that have been brought forward.

Mr Muir: The current arrangement in Northern Ireland is that an MOT is done every year after the vehicle is four years old, and TECs are being issued now for six months and then up to 12 months. What work is being done by the Department to raise awareness around road safety? There is an obligation on motorists to ensure that their car is roadworthy, not just at the MOT but thereafter. It is important that that is raised. I know from speaking to those at car garages and mechanics that their business has dropped. I have concerns about people not getting their car properly serviced and ensuring that it is roadworthy.

Mr Logan: I appreciate the concerns. We have certainly been mindful of that. As I said to Roy, customers should not think that having a TEC means that they do not have to maintain their vehicle because it is not being brought forward for test. The Minister has made several public statements around the requirement for owners to keep their car maintained as they normally would. I appreciate that some customers are not using their car as frequently as they would have done pre COVID, but, nevertheless, diagnostics in cars now tell you when it needs a service and lights are out. People should be aware of that. They should also be aware of tyre condition and lights. They should make sure that all the basic checks continue to be done. We have had consultation with the Association of British Insurers (ABI) and the police, and they support those road safety messages. We have them on our nidirect website. We use our social media feeds to reiterate that message so that customers understand exactly that it is their requirement and that it remains their responsibility to maintain their vehicle in a roadworthy condition.

Mr Muir: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Ms Anderson, we cannot hear you; you are on mute.

Ms Anderson: Sorry, Chair. Thank you.

A lot of my questions have been answered. However, I was a bit confused when I heard about the instructors. Recruiting additional instructors was mentioned in the pack. Are we to understand from what was said to Mr Beggs and others that the additional instructors who were to be recruited from last September have not been?

Mr Logan: No, we have recruited at least 14 instructors or vehicle examiners. They have come in to the system and have been recruited and trained in that period. We have another 12 who are going through their training programme now. They will be ready for service in February. We have 26 of the 27 in place. Pat has outlined plans in terms of some of the temporary opportunities that we have provided for staff in the agency to bolster those numbers, to react and respond and to create as much capacity for driving tests when that service can resume.

Ms Anderson: When driving tests were being conducted last year, how many tests were happening on a weekly basis?

Mr Delaney: It is easier if I could go for a monthly basis. For category B tests, which are private car tests, on average, we would do 3,900 per month.

Ms Anderson: Was that happening from the end of COVID?

Mr Delaney: No, driving tests were suspended; during COVID, driving tests were conducted for only a few weeks since 26 March.

Ms Anderson: It is those few weeks that I am talking about. I know that you only had a few weeks. It was probably as frustrating for you as everyone else, but, obviously, the health message is crucial. How many tests took place during those few weeks?

Mr Delaney: We had 126 driving tests conducted in July, 449 in August, 2,821 in September, 2,343 in October, 1,269 in November and 1,981 in December.

Mr Logan: The point is that, unfortunately, we have not had a comparative month where we can look at how many tests we can actually deliver because of the disruption due to the COVID restrictions. However, the figures from December were certainly encouraging based on the limited opportunity that we had to deliver driving tests. When we get back to delivering a full service, as I said, our ambition is to increase the testing to pre-COVID levels with the additional resource that we will have in place. If we can exceed that with the current COVID restrictions, we will certainly aim to do so.

Ms Anderson: We were informed last week that additional moneys for PPE were requested by the DVA. What is the current stock of PPE in the agency?

Mr Logan: I am not aware that we have any issues with stock. Stock is managed at a local level by our centre managers, who make sure that they have the right PPE, gloves and hand sanitiser in place. There is no issue with supply that I am aware of. Pat, do you have anything to add?

Mr Delaney: No. Nothing has come across my desk in relation to PPE. As far as I understand it, the centre managers are managing the PPE. The orders are going in when the orders need to go in to ensure that there are adequate supplies of PPE in all test centres.

Ms Anderson: OK. Thank you very much. All my other questions were asked earlier.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you, both, for such a detailed update. Like Martina, a lot of my questions have been answered. Just so that I have this right in my head: does "dual-role instructors" mean driving instructors who are also able to be examiners and it is nothing to do with the MOT?

Mr Delaney: No. It is dual-role examiners, not dual-role instructors. It is a vehicle examiner or a member of our admin team who can also provide driving examining. We have vehicle examiners who are driving examiners and admin staff who are driving examiners.

Ms Kimmins: OK. That feeds into my next question. Will the use of dual-role examiners to address some of the backlog affect MOT testing, or do you think that the recruitment of new examiners will offset that?

Mr Delaney: Given that we are running at just over 50% capacity in our test centres and that, because of the COVID restrictions and for social-distancing purposes, we are limited in the number of staff whom we can have in a test centre, we have the vehicle examiners who are also dual-role driving examiners available to us to provide driving instruction. We also have two teams: a team on and a

team off. We offer the team that is off overtime when they are off rota to come in to do driving testing as well.

Ms Kimmins: OK, that is good. It is good to see that you can pool resources like that to help with some of this.

My only other question is on something that I raised before, and I ask it to see whether we are ahead of it this time round. When we reopened for driving tests last year, one of the issues that we had was that instructors could not wait in the test centre while their pupil was out on their test. There were a few issues with getting that all ironed out. Is that issue sorted now? Do we now have everything in place so that it will not happen again that instructors are left standing outside for the duration of the test?

Mr Delaney: Yes. The instructors can use the accommodation in the test centre. We have had that risk-assessed by our health and safety risk assessors and health and safety officials. Some people choose to stay outside and wait for their vehicle or wait for the test because they feel that that is safer for them, but the option is there for them to use the accommodation in the test centre for shelter whilst the test is conducted.

Ms Kimmins: OK. That is great. Thank you, both.

Mr Boylan: Thanks, Jeremy and Pat. I have a couple of points. The officials who were at the Committee last week emphasised the impact of COVID on reserves. Jeremy, I may have missed it at the start, but where are we with the reserves? Can you give me an update on those figures?

Mr Logan: As I said earlier to the Chair, at the start of the year, the reserve position was sitting at £37.8 million, and, fortunately, we have been able to secure some resource funding from the central COVID fund. We have bid for a further £10 million in the January monitoring round, and, if we are successful with that bid, I estimate that our reserves will be in a similar position at the end of April this year to last year. That money has been set aside for our capital works and equipment replacement programmes and some of the IT transformation projects that we have been taking forward. As I said, the financial position is certainly better than that reported at the previous meeting, and we hope to be in a position with our reserves at the end of this financial year that is very similar to where we were 12 months ago.

Mr Boylan: Thank you. I ask that in the context of knowing that the 12-month TECs are running out and that those cars will have to be tested. I declare an interest because I have booked my car's test. Do you have any idea of the number of cars that will need to be tested as a result of the TECs running out? How will that impact on your income? Have you acquired any moneys to address that problem?

Mr Logan: Our bid for lost fee income for this year was predicated on the testing that, we believe, we will be able to do up to the end of March. Vehicle testing is the most significant loss of income and is running at around £24.6 million for the 12 months. Modelling that carefully and looking at the vehicles that we can test has been built into the bids that we have made for funding.

Once the 12-month TECs are up, we will bring those vehicles in for testing. That is happening now. Equally, it is about carefully managing that. I do not know whether Pat has to hand the figures for vehicles that will need to be tested over the next three months, but I think that our testing capacity across the network for that period is in the region of 160,000 vehicles. That is what we are bringing forward. TECs will be issued for the vehicles that we cannot test, but they will not go beyond the 12-month extension period at this time.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that and all the questions that were asked earlier. It is important that we get the safety message out, and you have to conduct the tests safely. Mr Muir asked about road safety. We still need to get the message out that drivers and owners are responsible for the roadworthiness of their car. I take it that you are working with the PSNI and all the other relevant authorities to get that message out, because there may be people out there who are not adhering to it. To be perfectly honest, they should not be making as many journeys. We need to get that message out as well, and I think that you indicated that as part of your response to Mr Muir.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Do you not need a response? Are you finished? His line is breaking up, so I will assume that that is OK. We cannot hear you.

Mr Boylan: Hello. Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Yes. We can hear you now.

Mr Boylan: Sorry, Chair. I am finished. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. No other members have indicated that they want to ask a question. I thank you both. We recognise that it is a fluid situation, and we will no doubt revisit it. Members have commented on the situation that we find ourselves in and the challenges that that presents. That has created problems for you that, I know, you are trying to work through. Thank you both for coming this morning. No doubt, we will see you again.

Mr Delaney: Thank you, Chair.

Mr Logan: Thank you, Chair.