



Committee for Infrastructure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Climate, Planning and Public Transport  
Group and Driver and Vehicle Agency:  
Department for Infrastructure; Driver and  
Vehicle Agency

6 March 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

Mrs Deborah Erskine (Chairperson)  
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Baker  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Patrick Brown  
Mr Keith Buchanan  
Mr Stephen Dunne  
Mr Mark Durkan  
Mr Peter McReynolds

**Witnesses:**

|                   |                               |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Dr Chris Hughes   | Department for Infrastructure |
| Ms Julie Thompson | Department for Infrastructure |
| Mr Jeremy Logan   | Driver and Vehicle Agency     |

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** We welcome to the Committee Julie Thompson, deputy secretary, the climate, planning and public transport group in the Department for Infrastructure; Jeremy Logan, chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA); and Dr Chris Hughes, director of safe and accessible travel in DFI. You are very welcome. I know that road safety is in your brief. It therefore would be remiss of us if we did not start by acknowledging the fact that, sadly, somebody died on our roads yesterday. Just yesterday evening, we were in the Chamber discussing the A5. From the Committee, we send our sympathies to the family. I appreciate the fact that you are here. I am sorry for the delay in getting to you today. I ask that you keep your briefing as short as possible, because I know that members are looking forward to asking lots of questions. I will come to you first, and then we will take members' questions.

**Ms Julie Thompson (Department for Infrastructure):** No problem. Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to brief the Committee today on the climate, planning and public transport group. We very much welcome the opportunity to do so and the opportunity to work constructively with you in the time ahead.

I will give a brief overview of some of the key responsibilities of my group. The group is responsible for a number of regional planning functions, including the processing of regionally significant and called-in planning applications, oversight of the local development plan process and the development of regional planning policy and legislation. You will, however, be aware that, since 2015, some 99% of planning applications are processed by our local councils. We recognise that planning is a key enabler that helps shape positively how Northern Ireland looks and functions, both now and for future

generations, supporting places in which people want to work, live and invest. We want to play our part in ensuring that the planning system is effective for everyone.

The Committee will, of course, be aware of the reports on planning and the recommendations made by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Public Accounts Committee in 2022. Since then, we have worked collaboratively with local government colleagues on a joint planning improvement programme to take forward a range of actions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system. By way of an example of improvements in that work to date, the most recent planning statistics, for the first six months of 2023-24, show that the average processing time for major applications has reduced to 34.7 weeks from 50 weeks in the same period a year earlier. That is the fastest processing time since the two-tier system was set up and is just outside the statutory target of 30 weeks.

My group is also responsible for public transport policy, has leadership on climate change for DFI and acts as the sponsor unit for Translink, our public transport provider. As you are aware, increasing modal shift from private cars to sustainable public transport is an essential element of delivering on our climate change obligations. It is important that we invest in our public transport so that Translink has the necessary finances to maintain and grow its services. Public transport policy and climate change targets are also being progressed through the all-island strategic rail review, the decarbonisation of Translink's fleet and the opening later this year of Belfast Grand Central station.

Finally, my group, through Chris and Jeremy, has responsibility for road and rail safety. It has responsibility for ensuring that drivers of cars, taxis, freight and buses are all safe on the roads. Chair, you mentioned — I was going to draw attention to it — last night's tragedy. Seventy-one people lost their life on our roads in 2023, causing pain and suffering to their families and communities. My group feels the pain of that. We work collaboratively on road safety across the Department and with other stakeholders, such as the blue-light organisations, to deliver actions to ensure safe drivers, vehicles and roads. We pass on our sympathies to all those families.

In my group, the DVA performs key functions to enhance safety on our roads, and I know that you have requested a briefing, which we are here to give you, on current waiting times for MOTs and associated fee increases. The DVA conducted over 1.15 million vehicle tests in 2022-23, which is the highest number ever recorded in a year. That was achieved by recruiting additional examiners and offering MOTs seven days a week at most test centres. In 2023, there were only seven days in the year on which the DVA did not offer MOT appointments. I acknowledge and credit the huge effort of all those test centre teams in performing such a significantly high volume of tests.

Disappointingly, over 50,000 vehicles failed to attend a booked appointment in 2023. That is also the highest number on record, and it is very frustrating for those involved. Following public consultation, vehicle test fees increased from 1 October, but that was the first increase since 2005 and was required to enable the DVA to cover the cost of delivering its services. In the light of recent media reports, I assure the Committee that all DVA lifts are operational and have been independently assessed as being safe. The DVA continues to experience high demand for vehicle tests, and, in some cases, customers may not be able to have their vehicle tested before their current MOT certificate expires. The DVA has, however, taken steps to ensure that motorists are still able to use their vehicle when they are unable to secure an appointment before their MOT expires.

That has, hopefully, been the helpful and brief overview that the Committee wanted. We are happy to answer any questions that the Committee has.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Thank you very much. I appreciate your time today, and I thank you for giving us that overview. I will kick off on the modal shift, which is about changing attitudes to using transport, shifting drivers out of the car and on to public transport. Are congestion charges and increasing parking charges on your radar as measures that you can use to tackle that? We have not seen much of a shift in the past 20 years, so what potential measures are you looking at for the next number of years?

**Ms Thompson:** We are looking at a range of issues. My colleague Sian Kerr maybe talked about it a bit last week, because she leads on the transport policy side. In the areas that we are looking at, it is first about trying to reduce the number of trips that we all undertake. That is about how often we travel in our cars, whether we need to travel in our cars and how and where we locate our function and services.

We then have the modal shift, which is about encouraging us to walk, wheel, cycle or use public transport. We want to make the facilities available so that people can take those active travel measures and, equally, to ensure that the public transport service is available to support the modal shift. Investment in things like park-and-ride facilities and priority bus corridors will allow us to make public transport more attractive to people, which will move things forward.

You are right: there are wider dynamics that impact on how we travel. Car-park charging and where people can park is highly relevant. The final bit is around switching fuels and ensuring that we decarbonise our private cars, our public transport fleet and, indeed, the DFI fleet that Colin Sykes talked about last week.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Rail is a key part of our infrastructure that can help with the decarbonisation of our transport network. As a Fermanagh and South Tyrone MLA, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Fermanagh was one of the only counties not to be included when it went out for consultation. I regret that, as do quite a number of people. Have you explored that further with officials from the UK and the Republic of Ireland? Can you briefly outline the economic benefit of rail infrastructure for Northern Ireland?

**Ms Thompson:** The all-island strategic rail review has a very ambitious programme, and we are very excited about it. It is about encouraging economic development and connections in general, and also how we might decarbonise. We are very aware of the Fermanagh situation, and your personal interest in that is understandable. We continue to work with the review consultants. It is not finalised yet, so we continue to work on that. We will see what happens when the final review comes through. Should Fermanagh still not be part of the final report, there will be review periods where that will be looked into further. You are absolutely right: rail provides an immense opportunity to connect communities and, hopefully, to decarbonise our network at the same time.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** OK. I now come to the elephant in the room: MOT testing. I fully concur with your comments about the employees who are on the ground testing day and daily. They are fantastic and go over and beyond, and the Committee appreciates what they do. However, 1·1 million vehicles have been tested, and that is the highest proportion. Why are there still significant delays? Why are a lot of our constituents coming to us because they cannot get an appointment? I cannot book an appointment. Why are we still in that situation?

**Ms Thompson:** I will open up, and then I will pass to Jeremy. As you said, our capacity and the numbers that we process through the system are the highest that they have been, and that is a credit to the staff. On why we are where we are, there are two factors at play: the first is capacity, and Jeremy will explain what we have done on that side; and the other is demand and the number of people who require MOT appointments. Jeremy, could you talk about how you have increased capacity and the demand factors that are at play?

**Mr Jeremy Logan (Driver and Vehicle Agency):** To put the 1·15 million figure into context, that is a much higher figure than we were testing pre-COVID. In 2018-19 — the last full year of testing before the pandemic and previous lift issues — just under 1·1 million vehicles were tested and 32,000 customers failed to attend their appointments. We offered almost 85,000 more appointments in 2022-23 than we did pre-COVID, which is, in broad terms, a full month of testing. While, obviously, we do not have published stats for the full 2023-24 year, I expect the high level of testing conducted in 2022-23 to have played out again in 2023-24.

We have done a lot of stuff that we would not have normally done. We open our test centres on Sundays and bank holidays, right across the board. As Julie said, there were only seven days in 2023 when we did not have the test centres open. A big issue is recruiting vehicle examiners. Recruiting and retaining staff has become very challenging. We launched the latest recruitment competition on 19 February. Based on the number of applications, I am confident that we will be able to fill vacancies across our network. What happens now is that we will go through a selection process. There will be a four-week training programme for all new recruits in May. We expect those new examiners to be posted out to our test centres in June, which will release more appointments into the system. On the basis that we know that a recruitment campaign is in train, we will start to release appointment slots into the system in the next number of weeks.

As Julie says, the big issue is that there has been an increase in demand. The reality is that that increase has been brought about by an increasing overall population, an increasing number of vehicles on our roads and an increasing average age of cars. All those stats mean that there are more

vehicles of an MOT-able age requiring a vehicle test each year. Unfortunately, I expect that that demand will remain high for quite a while to come.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** That indicates to me that, perhaps, there has not been enough forward planning to recognise that more cars would be on the roads and, therefore, that we would need more capacity in the system — extending lanes or one thing or another — to be able to cope with demand. Is that a fair assessment? You cannot get another day in the week. What can we do? I go online to try to book an appointment but I cannot get one anywhere in Northern Ireland, and constituents tell me the same. Frustration about this is at fever pitch.

**Ms Thompson:** I come back to the two things that will move things forward for everybody, including our customers. Extra recruitment is going on. There has been a really positive response to that recruitment exercise. Those appointments are currently not in the system, because we did not know what the response to that recruitment would be. Now that we are happier, clearer and more confident about the numbers that have replied, we will start to release those appointments, as Jeremy described. We will have people available from June. Those appointments will help, because that is the time frame in which most people look for an MOT. The other aspect of increasing capacity is test centres. Hydebanks are well on the way to opening. That will also help to increase capacity for us. Solutions are coming. Jeremy and the DVA have well-oiled processes for putting in place emergency appointments and for what people need to do if they find themselves in difficulty. There would be no harm in explaining that part of the process.

**Mr Logan:** To come back to the point about our capacity, we have infrastructure capacity. You are right: we cannot glean much more capacity from the centres. There are 15 test centres operating seven days a week, in the main. The construction of Hydebanks test centre is largely complete. We are going into a period of user-acceptance testing of equipment. That testing will be rigorous to ensure that the equipment meets the specification and works in accordance with the requirements.

On overall recruitment and the mitigations that we have put in place, the police and the Association of British Insurers have been very pragmatic in their approach. There is an offence of not having an MOT on a vehicle but, provided that you have an appointment booked and you keep your car in a roadworthy condition and insured, the police will not penalise for that particular offence. It is worth noting that, at all times, it is the owner's responsibility to keep their car in a roadworthy condition. The vehicle test is once a year and assesses the minimum roadworthiness standard on that day.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** With all due respect, I see people driving on the road when their cars are clearly not roadworthy. We are in a really untenable situation in Northern Ireland with our MOT testing and the backlogs in our system. I want to see short-term measures. I appreciate that recruitment is going on, and I appreciate that Hydebanks and Mallusk are coming down the track. If recruitment is part of the solution, how many appointments will having those extra people release into our system?

**Mr Logan:** It is hard to put a figure on it. I can tell you that we are carrying 55 vehicle examiner vacancies across our network of 15 centres, and that is obviously to recruit for Hydebanks. A vehicle examiner conducts up to 31 vehicle tests per day. I have not crunched the figures. We will increase our capacity when those examiners come into the system, but you will probably not see a significant increase in capacity across the network until Hydebanks comes online. It will have a capacity to deliver about 100,000 vehicle tests a year, as will the new centre at Mallusk, which should open towards the end of 2025.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** So we will not see any difference come June, when those people will be recruited.

**Mr Logan:** I would expect to see a positive impact from June, but we have to manage expectations. We have been delivering record numbers of tests for the past couple of years, and, unfortunately, the demand for tests has never been higher. There has been an indirect impact resulting from COVID and, indeed, the cost-of-living crisis in that people are holding on to their cars for longer so there are more cars of an MOT-able age coming into the system. We have to contend with that.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Lastly, before I go to members, I have to ask this question. Cracks have appeared in the lifts: why are we in this situation again? You have said publicly that the cracks are in a different place from where they were in 2019-2020, but why have we reached this situation

again, where we see the same manufacturer of lifts and cracks are appearing in them? You will, I am sure, have heard me in the media. I am deeply concerned that we have cracks in our lifts again. How will that develop? Is there any redress in relation to the manufacture of those lifts?

**Mr Logan:** Yes, I have spoken about it publicly. These cracks are in a different component of the lift; they are in the weld of the main scissor bushing. The lift issues that were experienced back in 2019-2020 were structural cracks in the scissor arms of the lifts due to metal fatigue. Those lifts had seen quite a few years' service and, in many cases, were well over 10 years old. The latest situation is with lifts that were installed in 2020. The crack is a hairline crack in a weld. We have very robust maintenance arrangements in place. MAHA, our equipment provider, were the ones that identified the hairline crack in the weld. MAHA has confirmed that the lifts are safe to use. Our independent insurance inspectors have confirmed that the lifts are safe to use, and they continue to monitor the cracks. There is an eight-weekly inspection of the lifts. That has been brought down to four weeks for the affected lifts so that they can be assessed and monitored. We know that there is a solution to replace parts, and we have already done that with one of the lifts in Lisburn, where we removed and replaced the leg of the lift. That leg was sent over to Germany to be analysed, and that will inform our remedial works on-site.

I can assure the Committee that the health and safety of our staff and customers is paramount. This is not the same issue that we experienced in 2019. It is being monitored very closely by MAHA. As I say, we have independent insurance inspectors who have identified this risk as being in the lowest category, but we have increased our inspection frequency so that we can keep a close eye on this. When we have to effect repairs on the lifts, we do that in a way that minimises disruption to our customers so that we are not reducing capacity for MOT appointments across our network.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** We are operating on a stretched budget, and it cost millions the last time that this happened. I am going to go to members now. Vice chair, do you want to come in?

**Mr Stewart:** Thanks, folks, for your presentation. I echo your points about the staff in the MOT centres. They go above and beyond, and, when we go there, the service and feedback that they provide on vehicles is second to none. I acknowledge the massive increase in the numbers of cars that are going through those centres. That is the case across these islands. More cars are on the road, and more people are driving and keeping their car for longer. By definition, then, such an increase is going to be the case.

Elsewhere on these islands — the UK and the Republic of Ireland — waiting times for MOTs are measured in hours or a couple of days. We heard this week that the waiting time here is 72 days on average. Dozens and dozens of people come to my office and to that of everybody else around this table about the matter. I want to reflect their tone of weariness with the process. It is hugely frustrating that, when I tried to book an appointment for an elderly lady yesterday, not a single one was available in the country.

I appreciate everything that you are saying about the number of people who cancel, the number of issues that are being faced and the impact of COVID. However, this is not a level playing field. We have to look at a different option. That is my genuine belief. We have to do whatever it takes, and just doing the same thing is not going to solve the problem. We need to look at flexibility in the ability to amend appointments closer to the due date and at a hybrid model. We need to keep the staff who are running to stand still in order to get the day-to-day motorist backlog sorted. Car dealerships that I have spoken to are ready and waiting to play their part and, at the very least, to MOT their vehicles. That will take thousands of cars out of the system and totally alleviate the backlog.

I am happy to be proven wrong, but we need to do things differently. Four years after the initial conversations about those cracks appearing, nobody believes that it is going to get any better, because it is genuinely not. I appreciate the constraints that you are under, but we need to look at things differently. I am interested to hear your thoughts on why that can or cannot be done.

**Ms Thompson:** Looking at change models, that is an entirely different discussion, I suppose. It is a question on policy development for the Minister, but we are not working in that space at all at this time. When it comes to the things that we are doing, it comes back to recruiting more staff in order to increase volume and to getting the new centres up and running. Those are the answers to ensuring that we can increase the capacity to meet that demand.

We understand the frustrations. The teams are working very hard, particularly on behalf of people whose tax is about to expire. We understand the anxiety that that creates for folk. The DVA is working with those people to get them emergency appointments, and, by and large, your constituents will find that that will work for them and that they can be fitted in and be given those appointments. However, that means that we are giving priority to those who really need it and are holding some appointments back to enable that process to work. Coming into the summer, more staff on the ground and the opening of Hydebanks will help us to manage the situation.

**Mr Stewart:** OK. If I may, Chair, I will come back on that. Jeremy, you talked about the flexibilities that the PSNI provides by allowing motorists to drive with a valid appointment even if it is for six months down the line. Julie, you spoke about the impact with tax expiry. Granted, I get that there are flexibilities available to try to overcome those difficulties. However, I had a constituent last week who was clamped by NSL, which is the Department's parking enforcement partner, for being one day over their tax because they could not get an appointment for an MOT for three months. That constituent had to pay £260 to get the clamp removed and £100 to that company. That is diabolical. It is totally unacceptable. When my constituent phoned HMRC to appeal it, they were told, "Tough, that is not our problem". How is that fair?

**Ms Thompson:** As you know, the tax is processed through the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) rather than us. Therefore, we do not —

**Mr Stewart:** It works hand in glove, does it not?

**Ms Thompson:** — have the control over it. That is the unfortunate thing about it. That is why the DVA has made such a point of making sure that it provides support to those customers. That is on the reminder letter that you get. That is specifically drawn out and is on NI Direct. We try to get those messages out to customers — you can help do that for us as well — to say that, if they are within those five days, the DVA will find the appointment that they need. Unfortunately, we do not have control over the DVLA on tax.

**Mr Stewart:** I do not want to dwell just on MOTs. My last point is about the planning improvement programme. As I remarked to our research team prior to your coming in, it has been 10 years since the review of public administration (RPA), when planning powers were handed to our local government. I am equally interested in your assessment of how planning committees are developing, the potential need for more training, which I feel is almost non-existent, and the standards of our planning committees compared with those elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

**Ms Thompson:** You are right that planning committees in councils are very important. For parts of the system, it is important that training is taken forward. We have discussed that with the interim Regional Planning Commission (RPC) so that we can understand what training is going on. It is about our council colleagues ensuring that training is given to the people so that they understand their role and the things that they can and cannot do and all that. We have been doing the programme jointly with councils because so many of the planning applications are being processed by our local government colleagues these days.

It is variable. It is fair to say that performance and processing times are different across councils. All councils are looking at their development management processes to see what they need to do locally in order to understand what they process, how quickly they process it and the various factors that are involved. It is fair to say to everybody in planning — I am sure that this is a recurring thing that you hear across the Department — that ensuring that we have sufficient resources for planning is another part of the jigsaw puzzle.

**Mr Stewart:** It shocks me that there are people who go on to planning committees who have told me that they have never received a day's training. They go on to make massive, multimillion pound decisions without being able to articulate material planning considerations for their proposers or seconders. That is lamentable. How on earth can we seriously consider a planning system to be functional when we have people taking planning decisions who have no concept of what planning policy is? I find that remarkable. Something needs to change.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I will go over the MOT stuff first. I have a series of questions on that, and then I will quickly come on to another subject. Of the 1.15 million tests that you carried out, what would your total capacity be today if all test centres were doing 100%?

**Mr Logan:** That is a very difficult figure to give you, Keith. The bottom line is that our test centres operate at the maximum capacity within the resources that we have at each centre. A number of factors have an impact on capacity, such as staff leave and sickness. We would not put a theoretical model figure out there because I do not think that it would be representative.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Are we running at 90% capacity, or is it 95% capacity?

**Mr Logan:** I would be surmising if I were to give you a percentage figure. All I am saying is that there are different-sized test centres; there are small, medium and large test centres. Each test centre can accommodate only so many staff. As you probably know, we have dual-role staff. We have had flexibility in that we have staff with a dual role who do both vehicle testing and driver testing. We can keep only so many staff on a lane at any given time. The trick and the challenge for us is to make sure that those lanes are fully resourced. When we have additional staff, which means a spare man on each side, we can then deploy them to do things like driving tests and —.

**Mr K Buchanan:** That worries me. I appreciate that you can do nothing about no-shows, which account for roughly 4%, according to my figures. Is that 4% figure for no-shows up or down from previous years? If we cannot maximise the lanes that we currently have in the 15 centres, why are we building two more centres? Yes, you will up tests by 100,000 at each centre, but, if we are building another centre and you cannot recruit for the 15 centres that we have and get them up to capacity, are we going to be fit to recruit for centres 16 and 17 and maximise their capacity? I totally appreciate that you can do nothing about the no-shows, but if we cannot fully staff the centres that are there and we are building two more, where are we going with that?

**Mr Logan:** I understand the point that you are making. The reality is that recruitment has been challenging, particularly over the last number of years. We have, however, received a good number of applications in the recent recruitment competition. That will certainly help to resource not only the vacancies in our existing test centre network but those in Hydebank.

The no-show figure of 50,000 is about 18,000 more than it was in the last full year pre COVID. We surveyed our customers; we have access to contact them directly through our new booking system. There were three main reasons for no-shows: they simply forgot about the test; their car was not ready for the test; or they had sold their vehicle before the test. Our system gives you a reminder two days before your test so that you do not forget about it. If it does not suit you, then you can change or cancel your appointment. That used to be an opt-in service, where you had to opt in to avail yourself of reminders. We changed that in July to an opt-out service so that, by default, most customers will get reminders. It is too early to say whether that will have a positive effect. I expect to see that in the statistics for quarter 3 and quarter 4, when those come back. Hopefully, that number will be reduced.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I have a broad concern about the whole capacity thing. You said that, pre-COVID, you had done 1.1 million tests. Now the maximum that you have done is 1.15 million, so you have done 50,000 more. At what cost was that 50,000 more, and how many more staff were employed, how many worked on Sundays, et cetera? It is just regarding that total. We will delve into the questions later regarding the whole number thing. In addition, if the two test centres were operational tomorrow and there were 200,000 more tests done, I would say that that was 20%. Theoretically, that would solve your problem, but I do not think you are ever going to hit the 20% because you are not hitting 100% of what you have today, so that is going to be a problem.

As to reminders, if my car is up for the MOT and a reminder is sent out, at what period of time does that reminder come out to me prior to the car being due?

**Mr Logan:** The reminder is issued six weeks before the MOT.

**Mr K Buchanan:** The problem is that you cannot get a test for three to four months.

**Mr Stewart:** At least.

**Mr K Buchanan:** So, to be fair to people, the reminder needs, whatever way you want to word it, to say "Your car is going to be due in June. You need to start looking now for a test." So that reminder, with respect, is a waste of time.



**Mr Logan:** We know that customer behaviour has changed. People know when their MOT due date is. You cannot book an MOT three months beforehand; the system does not allow you to do so.

**Mr K Buchanan:** At least it alerts people.

**Mr Logan:** But people are starting to look and book and, I suppose, if we extend that reminder period, we are allowing more people to jump in to take appointments. For those who require a test more urgently, that reduces the available appointments. This is really a demand issue. Demand has never been higher, and we are trying to ramp up our capacity to deal with it.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Demand is only 50,000 higher.

**Mr Logan:** About 70,000 tests more were conducted than —.

**Mr K Buchanan:** That is not a big percentage. It is a 5% or 6% increase on what you were doing previously. In the last Committee you were at, when I asked you about this before, you talked about staff, staff, staff. If you are not using 100% of the facilities that you have today, you are never going to achieve 100% of the other two facilities.

**Mr Logan:** We obviously have to react to the recruitment position. Staff resign and leave, and we have to respond to that. Unfortunately, the recruitment processes in the Civil Service and the process of recruiting staff take longer. We have to react and respond to those situations, and that is why we have consistently run recruitment competitions to try to fill those vacancies. However, there is no question that it is challenging.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Two quick questions, then.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Quickly, please.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Are you confident that the lifts will not develop into a bigger problem, reducing the output of the test centres? We do not know currently what the problem is. Are you confident that it will not reduce output?

**Mr Logan:** At the minute, the lifts are being assessed in line with our own planned preventative maintenance. We have not lost tests because of the cracks issue. We continue to monitor them and, at a point in time when we need to replace the scissor arms, we will do so. To be fair, the equipment contractor is very good at working with us to try to reduce disruption to our service.

**Mr K Buchanan:** My final question is about community transport. I want to talk about community transport briefly, which is Out & About in my constituency, or Shopmobility, the provision of mobility scooters, et cetera. In Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt there are facilities. Community Transport is Northern Ireland-wide. I think the community transport sector gets a rough deal. Every year they come at the end of the budget, and they get a bit of paper to say that they have another month or two. Is Translink treated the same way? The community transport people are the lifeline of rural communities. They bring elderly people to their appointments. They transport generally older people, but all people. Translink is not treated like that. What is your opinion of community transport and the way that it is treated? What are your thoughts on community transport? It should not be dangling by a thread at the end of the financial year, getting a little bit of paper to tell them that "There is a month for you, there is another month, there is another month." Translink does not get that, so why is community transport treated differently?

**Ms Thompson:** There are several questions in that. We recognise absolutely the huge value of community transport and the service that it provides to people right across our communities, generally older, disabled and vulnerable people. They rely fully on those services for their ability to get out and about. We know that at least one third of what those people are doing is going to various versions of health appointments, day opportunities and things like that, so it is a hugely valuable service to people. You ask whether they are treated differently to Translink, and you described the uncertainty. Declan talked a little about this earlier. The Department as a whole was in this position last year, and both community transport and Translink were unclear about their budget. I can confirm that Translink was no different. It did not know what budget it was going to get through the early part of last year. That applies equally this year. We have confirmed to community transport that the funding is there until the end of May. We know that the Executive plan to produce a Budget by, I understand, the end

of April. That will allow us the opportunity to confirm things further forward. Translink is no clearer about its budget going into next year. Both are and were treated the same and had the same uncertainty. It is not a circumstance that we want to repeat. We hugely value the service.

**Mr K Buchanan:** When do you see Shopmobility and Out and About getting funded?

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Keith, I will have to try and —.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** We will maybe follow up on some of those questions. We are very close to the wind on time.

**Mr Dunne:** Thanks, folks, for your presentation. I would like to raise a couple of issues. On the future of concessionary fares, which I raised with the Minister during yesterday's Question Time, it is now six months since the consultation closed. Obviously, there was huge interest in it, with over 20,000 respondents. I appreciate that it takes time to go through the responses and so on, but are we any closer to knowing when there will be a decision? Obviously, it impacts on a lot of older residents and our most vulnerable. We would like to see clarity on that soon. I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on that.

**Ms Thompson:** Absolutely, and we understand the huge interest in the consultation. The Minister confirmed that he is working with us, and he hopes to be able to confirm the position as soon as possible. It is partly dependent on the budget situation. The Minister indicated that what can happen there is partly dependent on what budget is available. He is and will be working with us on an ongoing basis. You will appreciate that it is early days for the Minister in getting to an understanding of the depth of the responses and what needs to happen next.

**Mr Dunne:** Thank you. I appreciate that. It is sometimes thought that it affects just the over-60s, but it affects many more beyond that group, such as those with disabilities and so on.

The next one is on road safety. You touched on some of the alarming stats: 71 deaths in 2023; 55 in 2022; and 50 in 2021. Those are shocking statistics. We talked about the overnight tragedy on the A5. What more can be done by your Department to improve the situation? I appreciate that the PSNI and others also have a role to play. We have seen the TV ads, for example, which are one tool. Where are we with such efforts? What more can be done, given the budget constraints?

**Dr Chris Hughes (Department for Infrastructure):** I begin by reflecting on the fact that every single death that occurs is a horrific tragedy.

The Minister has tasked officials with bringing forward a draft road safety strategy for Executive agreement. That is supported by a cross-departmental action plan that reaches out more widely into our non-departmental bodies or partner bodies, in particular, the blue-light services. A lot of the issues are well understood. It is a lot to do with driver behaviour and driving without due care and attention. It is about trying to make the best use of the resources that we have.

There are three main elements to the focus on road safety. There is engineering, which was covered last week in the briefing from Colin Woods and his team on the transport and road asset management (TRAM) group. There is enforcement, which is a matter for the PSNI and some aspects of DVA. There is also education and driver behaviour. What we are looking to do through an Executive-agreed strategy is work towards getting zero deaths by 2050. That is a European-wide approach that has been adopted here. Underpinning that is an action plan. As departmental budgets are settled, we will try — Julie leads a group, which was recently set up with James, that coordinates the work across all those bodies — to more effectively coordinate how we and our partner bodies interact to focus our spending on addressing those issues.

**Mr Dunne:** OK. Thank you.

Finally, on the MOT issue, I echo some of the comments around the uncertainty. It causes confusion for people. I think that you appreciate that it affects things like tax, insurance, where people stand and so on. We appreciate the efforts of staff, as has been said. Recent media reports state that a 72-day wait for an MOT test is the new normal. People across the country find that disappointing, and it would

be good to get that figure down drastically. Certainly, there should be strategies and, going forward, delivery. In February 2022, Minister Mallon produced a report on biennial MOTs. Over two years on, I am keen to hear where we are with that. Do you believe that that is a solution that would relieve some of the pressures that you are facing on MOTs?

**Ms Thompson:** I referred to that in the answer that I provided to John, the Deputy Chair. Obviously, you are right: the call for evidence was done two years ago. In between, there has been the absence of a Minister and an Assembly and understanding where a Minister wants to take that. It is very much a ministerial decision. We are not currently working on it. We would need to discuss with the Minister a substantive change like that and what that would look like if he were minded to do it. I confirm that we are not looking at that at this time.

**Mr Dunne:** Very finally, as I did not ask a question in the previous evidence session —.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** I have four other members with questions, and we are very pushed for time. We can follow up with questions afterwards.

**Mr Dunne:** Very quickly, please. It is on Mallusk and Hydebank, the two new centres. Can you confirm the future of the remaining sites across the Province? Are those secure?

**Mr Logan:** We have the 15 test centre sites, and we will not make a decision on reducing that capacity until Hydebank and Mallusk are open. Obviously, there is another test centre at Mallusk, but our key objective is increasing our capacity to meet the demand for testing. Those decisions will be considered in due course, but, at this time, there are no plans to close any of the existing test centres.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** I appeal to members to please work with me in our few remaining minutes.

**Mr Boylan:** Chair, after those 40 questions, I have only two or three. Jeremy, my first one is on recruitment. It is a difficult one, and the Committee dealt with this in the previous mandate. I will ask my questions all in a row. Are you trying to recruit to dual roles or single roles? The PAC followed up on an Audit Office report on the planning improvement programme. Can you expand a bit on what the main focus is of those recommendations? We all feel very strongly about road safety, and we are all sorry to hear of another death on the roads. I do not want to make an issue of this, but it is about what the main focus of the new strategy is. Clearly, the stats show more deaths on rural roads. Are you identifying and looking at that? Those are my three questions, and, hopefully, I can get a response from Jeremy first.

**Mr Logan:** I will start on the question on recruitment. There are two aspects to the dual role. That is where examiners can do both driving tests and vehicle tests. We are at a very advanced stage with driving examiner recruitment. Driving examiners are going through their training. We expect new examiners to be deployed across our test centres from the end of March onwards. Another tranche is being trained from the end of March, and there will be another training course in May. You will appreciate that it is a four-week, fairly rigorous training course and that not everybody passes it, but, by June, we hope to bring in 18 new driving examiners across the network. That will alleviate some of the pressure on the dual role guys and allow them to do more vehicle testing. As we have said, our plan for the vehicle examiner recruitment competition is to bring in 55 vehicle examiners to fill the vacancies that we currently have across our network. We anticipate that the first of those new examiners will take up their posts from June onwards. That is the programme as we have it at the moment, Cathal.

**Ms Thompson:** On planning improvement, the simple answer to your question is that it covers every aspect of the planning process. We have recommendations around statutory validation checklists to ensure that the quality of applications going into the system are at the right level. There are recommendations around the actual process of development management as well. There were recommendations around the local development plan process. We framed a planning improvement programme. Effectively, it picks up legislation recommendations, governance recommendations, local development plan recommendations, development management recommendations and the engagement and performance framework. We have put it all together as a programme that encompasses all of those issues. We will be reply formally, obviously, on the memorandum of reply to the Public Accounts Committee. That is part of the process now that we are all back up and running again. That will come through fairly shortly.

**Mr Boylan:** Sorry, Chair, but I need to come in on this important point. I know that they are a long way behind, but there is no point in local development plans looking at a number of units throughout their whole area plan without having important discussions about what the capacity is in NIW. If a local development plan says 10,000 units over the next 10 years, without knowing that there are 100 areas with constraints — it may not be in every area — that has to be recognised. That is the only point.

**Ms Thompson:** I appreciate that, and you have had a lot of conversations about that already.

**Mr Boylan:** All right, and on the road safety point?

**Dr Hughes:** We are aware that we have a rural network. That is reflected in where collisions take place and the after-effects of those. Driver behaviour tends to be the key cause of collisions, 95% of which are because of driving without due care and attention. When you tackle the causes, it has a beneficial effect across everything.

**Mr Baker:** Thank you for your presentation. I will take things in a slightly different direction. The South announced €12.5 million for the hourly train service from Belfast to Dublin. Have you had any engagement with our Southern counterparts? Following on from that, part of the additional funding from the British Secretary of State was for a feasibility study on electrifying the line from Belfast to the border. Are there conversations around widening that to the all-Ireland railway network and taking a more holistic approach?

**Ms Thompson:** We are very pleased that we have that funding. It will help immensely to develop the service on both an interim basis and, hopefully, a more permanent basis as we look at the all-island strategic rail review. We will look at putting that service in place, enhancing the existing service and bringing it in on an hourly basis from the autumn. The money from the Shared Island Fund will be an absolute assistance in helping that to grow. That will also help with the modal shift agenda, which we talked about earlier, and with the connectivity between the two cities.

The all-island strategic rail review is, effectively, where the electrification issue comes in. We await the findings of the review. As you rightly point out, we have money to do a feasibility study on that. We will then work through how to make that happen. There will be challenges, obviously. We will have to look at implementation plans and budgets. Your basic question was about whether we are engaging with our Southern counterparts. Absolutely, we are, and Translink, too, will do so.

**Mr McReynolds:** Thank you, everyone, for your broad overview of what you do. I have a number of questions that do not connect very well. I will just rattle through them.

Will you tell us a little about what policies and proposals are in the climate action plan (CAP)? It was not really touched on during the presentation, but it is really important, and it is certainly very important to me.

**Ms Thompson:** Yes. I think that I addressed comments about the climate action plan to the Chair. The main policies and proposals are around reducing our number of trips, increasing our modal shift and switching fuels. You will appreciate that all Departments are feeding into that climate action plan, and our main area of interest is, obviously, the transport sector. We are at a point, as are all Departments, of engaging with our Ministers about the draft and whether they are happy with the proposals or want to amend them. That process is ongoing, and it will feed into the DAERA-led process. We will all feed our actions into that.

We are doing work around energy as well. The renewable energy policy is also part of that agenda. We are working alongside that. The detail of that will come through in the draft CAP. We need to understand where the Minister wants to take that, which all Departments are trying to do at the minute, and we are feeding into that process.

**Mr McReynolds:** Is there any sort of time frame?

**Ms Thompson:** We are working to DAERA's time frames on where it wants us to be. We are feeding in as it asks us to do so.

**Mr McReynolds:** Secondly, I turn to planning reform. I am contacted about it all the time and any time that I meet developers or am at an event or a dinner. Everyone seems to be singing from the same

hymn sheet about the recommendations that need to be taken forward. Is planning reform on the Minister's agenda? I know that there has already been a motion, which was proposed by the Chair, on planning reform, but, given that so many people across multiple sectors are saying the same things, it seems like a bit of an easy win. Will we see something moving on that in this mandate?

**Ms Thompson:** You are right. There has been a motion on this, and it also touches on the planning improvement programme that we are taking forward. We are very committed to doing that. As I said, we have made progress. Our major application processing times are down to 34.7 weeks from 50 weeks, so things are better than they were. With regard to the reform question, our Minister has explained that he wants to see us implementing the planning improvement programme, working with our stakeholders and resourcing the system properly to enable us to do our jobs in the way that they need to be done. That is where the Minister is at. That is not to say that we do not need to make improvements, because we absolutely do, but we need to get that resource in place and then continue the work of the planning improvement programme that we have already started.

**Mr McReynolds:** Potentially, moving on that at some point during this mandate. I am thinking, for example, about reform of the Planning Appeals Commission, which is brought up with me quite a lot, actually. Will those major changes that could be made be looked at in this mandate?

**Ms Thompson:** The Planning Appeals Commission, as you are probably aware, is sponsored by the Department of Justice rather than our Department. The Minister has clearly said that he wants to work alongside the Department of Justice and the Planning Appeals Commission on how we can work more effectively together.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** To be fair — sorry to cut across — the Minister will be coming to the Committee, so we can put some of that to him.

**Mr McReynolds:** I think that John may have made the point that I was going to make —.

**Mr Stewart:** Sorry about that.

**Mr McReynolds:** Have you spoken to the DVLA about the car tax issue? I appreciate that it is not your remit, but Northern Ireland is a special case, so is it possible to speak to them to let them know about our special circumstances in comparison with GB?

**Mr Logan:** They are aware. We have had engagement with them. They have a UK-wide policy for enforcement. The reality, from our perspective, is that we have put in place the provisions that we have to mitigate the difficulties. As Julie said, if people cannot tax their vehicle, they can contact our customer services, and we will get them an urgent appointment. They know that that is the position that we have adopted.

We are going to take the five-day window offline and see if we can increase it, so that people can contact us earlier, and that may provide customers and ourselves with more flexibility to offer those short-notice appointments, which we are doing on a reasonably regular basis across the test centre network. Unfortunately, we have no authority regarding the DVLA's position. They understand the position here, but, unfortunately, their policy is their policy in terms of enforcement.

**Mr McReynolds:** Are they not willing to change that to recognise the situation here?

**Mr Logan:** No.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Thank you, Mark, for your patience.

**Mr Durkan:** You will pay me back in spades, Chair, I am sure.

Thank you for coming. It is like bingo, sitting until the end. It is good, though. You will be glad to hear that most of my questions are off the table. It is timely for us, but maybe not so convenient for yourself, Jeremy, that you are here this week, given that MOTs are back in the headlines. The system is obviously under massive pressure, and the media here are more interested in delays in MOTs than in delays in life-saving health procedures. However, it is something that gets the public exercised and, therefore, gets us exercised.

Most of the issues have been touched on, but where are we now on diesel emissions testing? Is it a case of thinking that by the time we introduce it, we will not have any diesel vehicles left?

**Mr Logan:** There is an ongoing court case. I cannot say too much about the detail of that other than that, since 2006, we have had a diesel smoke test but had to stop it, following consultation with the Health and Safety Executive, because of the risk that it posed to our staff and customers.

We always took the view that we would need investment in new test centres to enable us to carry out a fully compliant test. We do a partially compliant test, but, as technology and time have moved on, there is a new type of test called a particulate matter test, which the European Commission has identified as a more suitable test for younger vehicles. So, we are working on detailed proposals to introduce a fully compliant diesel emissions test through a range of particulate matter testing for younger vehicles and the diesel smoke test for older vehicles — those would be vehicles made before January 2013. However, it will require investment in additional new test centres, over and above Hydebank and Mallusk. We are looking at proposals to introduce another two test centres to help us to meet the demand for that test.

**Mr Durkan:** When you look at how long it has taken us to get here with Mallusk and Hydebank, you would not be filled with confidence. I am not blaming you in any respect for that. Chris, I was heartened to hear what you and Julie said about road safety. Julie, you will have heard me talk before about the need for enhanced partnership and cross-departmental working. The concern that I have aired of late is that, at a time when we are seeing record enforcement, with more people than ever being detected speeding and, one imagines, record revenue being generated from that, I have been able to ascertain that a lot of Road Safety Partnership spend has been on the enforcement end rather than being ploughed in to education and engineering solutions through partners other than the PSNI, such as you, to improve road safety. Specific reference has been made to advertising, but what work is the Department doing to look at other, more modern ways to get road safety messaging out to a new generation of drivers?

**Dr Hughes:** There is a focus on trying to communicate with younger drivers, who can be at particular risk, through non-traditional media, such as social media, Facebook messaging and the like. That is an area of particular focus for the Department. We also work through partner organisations. For example, the various sporting codes work with the Department to get messaging out. Messaging comes out from the football association, the GAA and rugby. The issue is that those are one hits, so you need to keep working at it. There is a very active campaign in the Department that looks at how to identify non-traditional communication channels. There is a lot of focus on social media to target young people.

**Mr Durkan:** Julie, we heard a bit about modal shift, and you mentioned priority bus corridors. That is something that we really need to look at. It is about how that ties in with local development plans and your colleagues at the transport end of things. Although a lot of focus has been on rail — the first motion that I brought to the Assembly was about that — the only way that you are going to get people out of cars is if they see buses overtaking them in the morning when going to their destination. Is it only Belfast that is currently served by bus corridors in the North? I am unaware of any outside Belfast.

**Ms Thompson:** You would know if there were any in Derry, wouldn't you? It is only Belfast. I think that there was a brief discussion last week about the eastern transport plan. You are right: it is part of the connection with the local development plan. That planning process uses really rich data on how we travel, the number of people who travel, the times that we travel. It models that and then identifies where the best places are to put in those priority bus corridors effectively. That will not be just a Belfast thing; it will be broader than that and will be fit for purpose for whatever town or city across Northern Ireland it needs to be in.

**Mr Durkan:** Having that infrastructure in place can influence where development occurs.

**Ms Thompson:** It can. The joining up of local development plans and transport plans needs to be very solid.

**The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine):** Thank you very much to you all for providing evidence to us today. It was incredibly insightful.

The last point that I will make is about MOTs. I would hazard a guess that the wait for an appointment is actually more than 72 days. That cannot be the new norm. I want the Committee to be in solution mode when it comes to what we can do to try to tackle that. People have seen a price increase. The previous one was in 2005. I was a second-year pupil in high school when that previous price increase for MOT testing happened. We have increased it at a time when people are not seeing the service match the price. We really need to tackle that issue head-on and get it dealt with.

We will probably follow up with some further questions that we did not get to during the briefing today. Thank you for coming to the Committee today. Hopefully — maybe not "hopefully" in your case, Julie — we will see you again at Committee. I appreciate your time today.

**Ms Thompson:** Thank you for your interest and your questions. We appreciate it.