

## **Opening Statement by Mr. Sam Waide to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communication, Wednesday 12 October 2022**

Good afternoon, everyone and thank you Deputy O'Donnell.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee, through the Chair, for the opportunity to speak to you all this afternoon to discuss issues affecting NCT Centres, renewal of Driving licenses and the recognition of non-EU/EEA Driving licences.

### **The National Car Testing Service (NCTS)**

The RSA has overall responsibility for the National Car Testing Service (NCTS) - operation, oversight, development, quality assurance and delivery. Following a EU accorded procurement process, the contract for the provision of the service for the period June 2020 to June 2030 was awarded to Applus Inspection Services Ireland Ltd.

The service is provided at 49 test centres nationwide including 2 new centres at Tuam and Navan which became operational in 2021. NCTS currently employs 777 people. To increase capacity further, the company is also investing in new test centres in Shannon, Co Clare; Dublin North; Cootehill, Co Cavan; Fermoy, Co Cork and Castleisland, Co Kerry.

This year has been especially challenging for NCTS, due to the impact of Covid, which caused significant staff absenteeism levels at test centres and in the call centre. There were also very high levels of customer no-shows and late cancellations. With the delay in the availability of new cars, there are more older cars on Irish roads, resulting in more than 1.5m cars to be tested at NCT this year. These multiple factors have caused a build-up on demand, as NCTS has been unable to carry out as many tests as planned.

The average lead time for an appointment for a test is currently 24.5 days. Before the pandemic the waiting time would have been less than 12 days. Where customers have difficulty booking a suitable slot, they can avail of the NCTS priority waiting list as not all slots are released at the same time. A proportion of slots is kept back for people applying later. As a result, the vast majority of customers who go on the waiting list are offered a test within 4 - 5 weeks of application. Use of this priority waiting list is expected to continue for some time as capacity recovers to match demand. Tests are offered all days of the week across the service, with staff also being offered overtime to further increase capacity.

Over the past 2 years, despite regular recruitment campaigns, NCTS has found it increasingly difficult to recruit sufficient qualified (QQI level 6) mechanics as vehicle inspectors, to meet the demand. This is an issue that has also affected the wider motor industry.

To augment the number of vehicle inspectors, NCTS is in the process of transferring 22 staff from its Spanish operations, into test centres which are most under pressure. A further 44 recruits from the Philippines have obtained work permits, facilitated by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment enabling up to 100 General Employment Permits to be issued for vehicle roadworthiness testers. Applications for visas for these staff are currently being processed.

Coupled with other planned local recruitment, the additional resources will enable the NCTS to reduce its backlog and shorten waiting times in the coming months. In the meantime, if customers have difficulty getting a test slot, they should go online to the NCTS website & add their names to the priority waiting list or call NCTS directly.

In relation to insurance, Insurance Ireland has confirmed that its members will be pragmatic and understanding in their approach to the current delays at the National Car Testing Service (NCTS). Cover will continue to be provided where customers, through no fault of their own, are unable to obtain their NCT due to backlogs at test centres. Under the current circumstances, provided motorists make every effort to book appointments in the normal way, insurance companies will recognise that the current issue is not the fault of the customer.

Enforcement of Road Traffic Regulations is the responsibility of An Garda Síochána (AGS). We have briefed the National Roads Policing Unit in An Garda Síochána about the current issues in the NCTS and customers should carry proof of their test booking confirmation to produce to a member of An Garda Síochána if required.

Notwithstanding this, Motor Insurance and Road Traffic Legislation requires that motorists maintain their vehicles in a roadworthy condition at all times and not just at the time of their NCT. It is each vehicle owner's legal responsibility to ensure his or her vehicle is in compliance with the law and maintained in a roadworthy condition at all times.

The NCT contract recognised that the presence of Covid 19 with travel restrictions constituted a Relief Event. In accordance with the contract, this was coupled with associated adjustments to some Service Levels, during the pandemic. Following the resumption of services in June 2020, the Contractor progressively improved adherence to the Service Levels and, except for waiting times, primarily due to absenteeism and staff turnover, the Contractor has met the quality and customer satisfaction performance standards required.

### **The National Driver Licence Service (NDLS)**

In regard to the National Driver Licence Service (known as NDLS), I can tell the members of the Committee that the service has come through the challenges posed by Covid 19 and is coping well with current demand.

The NDLS processes Learner Permit and Driving Licence applications through three distinct channels.

1. Online applications for those applicants with a PSC (Public Services Card) and a verified MyGovID account for 41% of applicants.
2. A postal channel for over 70s accounts for 4% of total applications,
3. While the remaining 55% of applicants apply through the network of 34 local NDLS centres nationwide.

Appointments are readily available in centres across the network. On 6<sup>th</sup> October we had 17,845 booked appointments with 58,401 or 76.6% available to book.

Up to the end of September 2022, the NDLS has processed over 778,000 permit and licence applications which compares with a normal full year of 700,000 applications. The forecast of

applications for this full year will be over 900,000. This increase in applications is a result of the effect of the licence and learner permit Extensions introduced as a result of Covid. The NDLS has coped with this extra demand.

Application processing times can vary depending on how the application was submitted and if there are no issues with the application itself.

Over 40% of online applications and NDLS centre applications are processed automatically and are issued through the postal service within 24 hours of receipt.

Standard applications that require verification or processing within the NDLS Back Office are currently processed within 4 days and issued through An Post.

Applications received by post require more manual processing and are processed within 11 working days.

Processing time for all application types can be increased if the application is not complete and requires updates or supporting documentation from the applicant.

### **Foreign Drivers Licence Exchange**

16,717 foreign licence exchange applications have been received by NDLS to date in 2022.

80.3% have been processed. Average processing time for applications received to date in 2022 was 39 days.

The top five countries for licence exchange are UK (3,693 applications), South Africa (1,618 applications), Poland (1,149 applications), Romania (857 applications) and Canada (614 applications).

The RSA is aware of driver shortages within the commercial driver industry in Ireland, and industry recruitment of drivers from abroad continues. One such country for recruitment activity is South Africa. To date in 2022 the NDLS has received 1,618 applications for exchange of a South African driving licence. 89.7% have been processed. Average processing time for applications received in September was 24 days.

There are various reasons for delays such as the driver needs to submit outstanding information, e.g., a medical or eyesight report, or the physical Driving licence itself in the case of an online application. The most common reason is that the NDLS await verification of the driving licence from the foreign driving licence authority. At times we can get a response very quickly but sometimes we can experience considerable delays.

### **Recognition of non-EU/EEA Driving licences**

We have a driving licence exchange agreement with the following non- EU/EEA countries, Australia, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Japan, Jersey, South Africa, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, New Zealand, Taiwan, UK, NI, and the following Provinces of Canada, Ontario, Manitoba, Newfoundland & Labrador, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta and New Brunswick.

The licensing system in Ireland is broadly like theirs and we agree to these arrangements. An essential aspect of any mutual licensing arrangement is that two countries initially agree to engage and explore their licensing systems, accept that licensing systems are broadly similar and put an administration system in place to manage licence swaps. The RSA are currently engaging with Argentina and North Macedonia and hope to make recommendations shortly in relation to those. We continue to engage with the remaining provinces in Canada and hope to commence a review on the licensing and testing system in Israel shortly.

Ukrainian driving licences are now recognised for driving in Ireland for people granted temporary protection. Prior to recognition, for a short time Ireland exchanged Ukrainian driving licences. During that time 2,241 were issued a 1-year Irish driving licence. Any of those who wish to have their Ukrainian driving licence returned to them can request it and must surrender the Irish driving licence.

### **Road Safety Update**

In closing, I hope the Committee will allow me the opportunity to provide an update on the current situation regarding progress in road safety this year, which is first and foremost on all of the topics tabled.

Between 1 January- 10 October 2022, there have been 118 fatalities on Irish roads. This is an increase of 13 on this time in 2021 and an increase of 10 on 2019.

While road deaths in the second half of this year are running at a lower rate than the first half of the year, the overall trend in 2022 remains a concern not only for the RSA but for the Road Safety Transformation Partnership (RSTP), which has oversight of the Road Safety Strategy. The Board is chaired by the Department of Transport and comprises senior representatives of the key State bodies, across transport, justice, health and education.

At this time, the vast majority of actions are on track and where challenges do arise, we are working with partner organisations in monitoring these closely to ensure they stay on track.

This concludes my opening statement to the committee. I am happy to take questions members may have in relation to our Submission and my opening statement.

**ENDS**