

## **Opening Statement**

**by the Minister of State for Transport, Jack Chambers TD**

**Joint Committee on Transport and Communications**

**22 March 2023**

Good afternoon.

Thank you Chair and Committee members for inviting me here to meet you this afternoon, to discuss my remit at the Department of Transport since my appointment in mid-December of last year.

Since my appointment as Minister of State at the Department of Transport with special responsibility for International and Road Transport and Logistics, I have sought to progress work in relation to road transport and road safety, maritime and ports, as well as aviation and airports. In addition to this, I also have responsibility for Postal Policy but as this committee's focus is on Transport, I will not address this area today.

Last month I had the opportunity to attend the Informal meeting of Transport and Energy Ministers in Stockholm. This was a good opportunity to discuss many of the shared priorities with my European colleagues.

I have also spent time meeting key transport stakeholders and agencies, including Rosslare Europort, Dublin Port Company, the Irish Aviation Authority, Shannon Airport, and I have met some of the Irish Coast Guard's volunteers, who carry out an extraordinary and vital service for the country, saving lives at sea. In the coming weeks I will meet with other key stakeholders including Cork Airport and the Port of Cork to discuss shared priorities.

### **Road Transport and Road Safety**

Road safety is a key priority for me as Minister and I will lead efforts to ensure our roads are as safe as possible for everyone. My approach is about saving lives and preventing serious injuries for all who use our roads, and my starting point is recognising that road deaths or serious injuries should not be the price to pay for our mobility.

However, 40 people lost their lives on our roads from the beginning of this year up to 14 March 2023. This represents an increase of 4 deaths when compared to that same date last year. These are not just statistics to me. They are 40 people who set out on a journey and never came home. Behind each of those numbers is a tragedy and a family left behind or changed forever.

We must also not forget that in addition to those who have lost their lives on the roads, many have been seriously injured. In 2022 that number stood at over 1,200.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Road Safety Strategy (2021-2030) has a target of reducing road deaths and serious injuries by 50% by 2030, and to achieve Vision Zero (no deaths or serious injuries) on Irish roads by 2050. The Strategy recognises that there is no silver bullet. Human error and human frailty are a reality and must be accommodated in our road traffic system. It also emphasises that there is a shared responsibility for road safety across all parts of this system, from road users themselves, to how our roads and vehicles are designed, to how we provide emergency care for those involved in a collision. Every day, every weekend, every week without a road death or serious injury in our communities is Vision Zero in action.

The RSA has overall responsibility for overseeing implementation of the Road Safety Strategy and reports quarterly to me, on implementation progress. The first annual review of the Road Safety Strategy was held on 2nd February, with the aim of setting priorities for 2023, focusing on reversing the trend in fatalities seen in 2022 and progressing Actions in the strategy. Revised Ministerial Priorities will be proposed and agreed at the Ministerial Committee of Road Safety on 22nd March 2023.

The Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 will legislate for e-scooters and e-bikes and also addresses a Programme for Government commitment to address the anti-social use of scramblers. Once the Bill is passed, as with any other class of vehicle, regulations will have to be made for the construction, equipment and use of e-scooters, and under EU law we must allow a three-month consultation period on the technical specifications before the regulations are brought in. It will, as the committee no doubt are aware, only be legal to use e-scooters in a public place when these regulations are in place.

I am deeply concerned and frustrated at the delays and backlogs facing the National Car Testing Services or “NCTS” since the beginning of 2022. The average waiting time for the NCT is now just over 27 days, an increase from 12 days pre-Covid, due, largely, to an EU-wide shortage of qualified mechanics. The NCTS is working to increase test capacity and reduce average waiting times and testing capacity has increased significantly since December, with the ongoing recruitment of vehicle inspectors. Approximately 35,000 full tests were conducted last week, compared to December when tests averaged approximately 25,000 per week.

Other measures are being taken to tackle the backlog and these include recruitment campaigns nationally, and both within and outside the EU. Staff overtime has increased, allowing up to 12 tests

per tester per day, and a priority waiting list is in place for motorists to avail of cancellations.

55 additional non-EU testers have been identified and are currently going through the work visa process. A timeframe of mid-to-end of April is anticipated for these testers to be in place.

In addition to this I have instructed Department of Transport officials to continue holding weekly meetings with the RSA to closely monitor progress in reducing test delays and to assist with any further issues or challenges which may arise. While I remain frustrated with the delays, the RSA are doing everything possible to work towards a target average waiting time of 12 days, which the RSA has stated is its aim to achieve by end-June.

The Government published Ireland's Road Haulage Strategy 2022–2031 in December of last year, following two phases of public consultation. Implementation of the short-term actions contained in the Strategy has begun and their progress will be monitored by a new Road Freight Forum, which consists of relevant stakeholders from Government, relevant agencies and the haulage and road freight sector.

I recently announced that “Logistics and Supply Chain Skills Week”, an initiative of the Logistics and Supply Chain Skills Group, which was

founded in 2019 by the Department of Transport, will take place, next week, from 27<sup>th</sup> March to 1<sup>st</sup> April. This is an important week for a sector that is at the very heart of our economy.

The objective of the week is to promote the sector to students, new entrants and career changers, as well as highlight the skills needed in the industry now and into the future.

As many of you here today of course know, the road transport and freight sector is facing a significant driver shortage and there are many job opportunities available in the wider logistics sector, and we need to do all that we can to make job seekers and students as well as those looking for a career change aware of all of the career opportunities currently available in the sector. There will be a mix of in-person and online events at national and regional level, and I will formally open the Week in Rosslare Europort, next week.

## **Aviation**

A review will commence this year of the National Aviation Policy which was published in 2015. The current National Aviation Policy which was published in August 2015 continues to guide aviation policy. The principal goals of the policy are to enhance Ireland's connectivity, to foster the growth of aviation enterprise and to maximise the contribution of aviation to Ireland's sustainable economic growth and development.

A Mid Term Review of the Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025 will also be carried out. The review will explore how international connectivity to and from the regions can be maintained and enhanced.

Significant disruption was caused at Dublin Airport recently, due to illegal drone activity near or on the airfield, with operations at the airport having been suspended on six separate occasions since late January. Illegal drone activity presents safety risks to aviation, leading to diverted and delayed flights and severe disruption to passenger journeys. daa have a drone detection system in place and it has been used to support enforcement activity. Two cases are before the courts. Government agreement was secured on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March to appoint daa to purchase and deploy a counter drone technology solution at Dublin airport, as a matter of urgency.

This is an immediate and interim response to the risks posed by illegal drone use at Dublin Airport and Government will consider tasking an existing state agency to select and deploy counter drone technology more broadly to protect critical infrastructure, including our airports, in the medium to longer term. daa are already examining potential technology solutions and subject to receiving the necessary regulatory approvals should be in a position to deploy a system within a matter of weeks.

The Department also intends to publish a National Policy Framework for Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) this year, to set out the vision, strategy and priorities for the development of the UAS sector in Ireland.

## **Maritime and Ports**

The last Ports Policy was published in March 2013. The core objective of the National Ports Policy (NPP) is to facilitate a competitive and effective market for maritime transport services. The Review of the National Ports Policy will commence this year with the publication of an Issues Paper for public consultation in Q2 2023. It is anticipated that all stages of the review will be completed in the second half of 2024, with a new Ports Policy document submitted for Government approval at that time.

The Department is working to facilitate Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) in relation to the provision of port infrastructure to facilitate the development of Offshore Renewable Energy, supporting the work of the Offshore Wind Energy Programme and Offshore Wind Delivery Taskforce objectives to deploy at least 7GW of offshore wind energy by 2030, as well as supporting the development of ORE infrastructure and capabilities (fixed and floating) by maximising use of Irish ports. The Department is also exploring the availability of funding streams to



support the delivery of ORE related port projects and will produce guidance documentation to allow for safe navigation of vessels around ORE installations.

In line with NDP objectives and National Ports Policy, the State ports are continuing to progress projects under their Masterplans. These non-exchequer-funded investments will enhance Ireland's capacity and connectivity and will allow the ports to respond to market needs, handle increases in ship sizes and frequency and serve the import and export needs of the economy.

### **Safe Routes to School**

The Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Programme was launched in March 2021 with the aim of supporting walking, scooting and cycling to primary and post-primary schools, and creating safer walking and cycling routes within communities, through the provision of infrastructure interventions. This programme is a key part of reducing congestion around schools and encourages more students to walk or cycle to school.

I am pleased to inform the committee that the scheme has proven to be extremely popular, with 931 applications received from schools across every county in Ireland. 170 schools were notified on 21st June 2021 that they were selected for inclusion in the first round of the

SRTS Programme. Subsequently two schools have deferred their applications and one school has withdrawn, leaving 167 schools in Round 1. It should be noted that all schools that applied to the original call for applications were accepted into the programme, and if not selected in Round 1 will be selected for forthcoming rounds.

In December, 108 additional schools were announced for Round 2 of the Safe Routes to School Programme, bringing the number of schools actively involved in the Programme to 275.

The SRTS Team in the NTA and An Taisce are in the process of beginning to engage with Round 2 schools.

I will conclude on that point, Chair, and I look forward to having the opportunity to hear the committee's views and take any questions.

ENDS