

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Dé Máirt, 2 Márta 2021

Tuesday, 2 March 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 10 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 10 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Crowe,	Jerry Buttimer,
Brian Leddin,*	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Michael Lowry,	Timmy Dooley.
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Duncan Smith.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Steven Matthews.

Teachta / Deputy Kieran O'Donnell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Pre-legislative Scrutiny of Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2019

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Steven Matthews. Deputy Brian Leddin is substituting for him. The purpose of our meeting is to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2019 and to examine delays in driver licence renewals and driver tests. On behalf of the committee, I welcome the following officials from the Road Safety Authority, RSA: Mr. Sam Waide, CEO; Mr. Declan Naughton, director of driver testing and licensing; Mr. Brian Farrell, communications manager; and Mr. Michael Rowland, director of road safety, research and driver education. They are all very welcome and I thank them for attending at such short notice.

All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable and engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of that person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

For witnesses attending remotely outside the Leinster House campus, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege. As such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as witnesses physically present does. Witnesses participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised that they should also be mindful of domestic law and how it may apply to the evidence they give.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses of the Oireachtas or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located in the Leinster House complex. In this regard, I ask all members, prior to making their contribution to the meeting, to confirm that they are on the grounds of the Leinster House campus.

For those watching this meeting online, Oireachtas members and witnesses are accessing this meeting remotely. Only the Chairman and necessary staff essential to the running of the meeting are physically present in the committee room. Due to these unprecedented circumstances and the large number of people attending the meeting remotely, I ask everyone's forbearance should any technical issue arise.

I call on Mr. Waide, CEO of the RSA, to make his opening statement.

Mr. Sam Waide: I thank the Chair for his introduction. I thank committee members most sincerely for the opportunity to speak to them this morning and to discuss the pre-legislative scrutiny of the road traffic Bill and delays in driver licence renewals and driver tests caused by the current Covid-19 pandemic. I am joined virtually by some of my senior leadership team, which was noted by the Chair, and together we will endeavour to answer committee members' questions. We have submitted a full briefing note on the issues under discussion. I do not propose to read it in full but I would like to highlight the main points in the interest of addressing key concerns which committee members may have.

With regard to the road traffic Bill, as members know, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, announced on 1 February the Government's approval to draft legislation which

addresses several road traffic and road safety related issues. The main provisions of the Bill include legislation around the use of e-scooters and e-bikes. In addition to the legislation relating to e-scooters and e-bikes, the Bill will also include revision of legislation regarding the giving of driver instruction for reward, the introduction of a new power of the Road Safety Authority to revoke a driver licence and legislation for autonomous vehicles on Irish roads.

The RSA welcomes the Bill and its provisions and looks forward to more details being published. It also goes without saying that we are available to participate in future detailed pre-legislative scrutiny at a time decided by the committee.

The following summarises the situation regarding RSA services and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on them. I will begin with the driver theory test. The extension of Covid-19 level 5 restrictions by Government, until at least 5 April, means that the driver theory test continues to be suspended. More than 80,000 driver theory test appointments in place over the coming months are now being rescheduled because the suspension of the service is being extended. We are very much focused, in line with Government advice, on meeting the demand to restore pre-Covid waiting times when the service reopens.

We have plans to significantly increase capacity within the service when it can reopen. This includes increasing capacity from an average of 15,000 tests per calendar month to 50,000 tests per calendar month when the service resumes. This increased capacity will be available from mid-April 2021. In addition to this, we are working on rolling out an online driver theory test service called ProProctor. This was trialled in December and January for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses. The pilot is now being evaluated and the Road Safety Authority, RSA, is committed to extending the service for all theory test types during 2021.

Regarding driver licences and the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, announced details of a further extension to the expiry dates of driver licences on 24 February, as have other EU member states. The extension will apply to different groups of licence holders, including those who benefited from previous extensions in 2020. Drivers can see if they qualify for the extension by using the expiry date calculator on the website *ndls.ie*. Entering the expiry date printed on a driver licence into the calculator will tell a driver the new expiry date. The RSA has told Insurance Ireland and An Garda Síochána about the extension to the driver licences.

Processing times for driver licences are taking longer than usual at the moment with standard applications processed within a 12 to 15 day average as opposed to the normal three to five day average. This is due to higher volumes of applications, inclusion of a postal option for those aged over 70 and more complex Brexit-related cases. The introduction of the extension to expiry dates of licences will result in reduced applications. We are undertaking a number of measures with the service provider which will improve the rate of processing and we anticipate that turnaround times will return to normal levels shortly.

For those who need to apply for a licence or a learner permit, the NDLS centres remain open for essential workers. In addition, our online application service *ndls.ie* has been successfully rolled out and those with a public service card and a verified MyGovID account can apply for their licence or permit online. To date, in 2020, more than 40% of customers have applied online.

I know members are anxious about the backlog that is building up in the driver testing service so I will provide an update on this. From the outset, we should not underestimate the

impact Covid-19 has had on the driver test and the challenges faced by RSA driver testers to deliver the driver test safely during this global pandemic. The RSA's priority is the safety of its staff, test environment and customers. We have strict public health protocols in place to achieve this and, to date, since reopening in July 2020, we have conducted almost 90,000 driver tests. The service is being delivered safely and in line with public health advice. Our driver testers are working to test people in cars, trucks and buses so that supply chains can remain open and those deemed as essential under regulations can continue to provide their essential work. I must commend our testers on their commitment to road safety and to delivering a vital public service at this time.

The waiting time for a driver test, pre-pandemic, was six weeks. As a result of Covid-19, the suspension of services for more than four months and ongoing restrictions have all generated significant backlogs. The extension of Covid-19 level 5 restrictions by Government until at least 5 April means that the driver test service can only deliver driver tests to essential workers. Since we can only test essential workers, we are not able to fill all our available capacity so most recently circa 25% of driver test slots are going unused. We expect this to persist during level 5 restrictions.

It is not possible to provide waiting times for the driver test because the service is not operating as normal. As tests are only available to essential workers and we have surplus capacity we can offer test slots to essential workers almost on demand. What we can say is that we have 98,414 applications on hand and of these 5,670 hold a test appointment in the coming weeks while 62,024 are waiting for a test. The remaining 30,720 are ineligible for a test. Those who are ineligible are generally customers who have not completed mandatory lessons.

If all customers who are eligible to be tested at present, that is, if there were no restrictions, were offered a test appointment in chronological order, we estimate that the average waiting time would be more than 20 weeks. The RSA is making good progress in recruiting an additional 40 driver testers sanctioned by the Minister of State and our expectation is they will be available to conduct tests by the end of June 2021. In addition to the existing complement of 138 driver testers, this will add much-needed capacity to the service.

However, this will not be enough to get waiting times down to the service level commitment of an average of ten weeks. The RSA is submitting further proposals to the Department of Transport seeking approval for an additional number of driver testers, on a temporary basis, to tackle the backlog.

The RSA launched a new customer portal, *MyRoadSafety.ie*, on 30 November 2020. It is a one-stop shop for all RSA services. Initial teething problems with the new system led to issues for our driver test customers, in particular long call waiting times to access our customer care centre, CCC. This was compounded by the large number of customers contacting us looking for a driver test date. We have assigned additional resources to our customer call centre and reduced the call waiting times by more than 50%. However, volumes are continuing at high levels with driver testing wait times being the main query. We continue to improve this service.

I am happy to take questions from the Chair and committee members.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Waide. I will take the first Fine Gael slot.

I go back to Mr. Waide's point that there will not be enough driver testers. There are 138 driver testers in place at the moment and there will be another 40 by the end of June to meet

the commitment of an average waiting list time of ten weeks. According to my analysis of the figures, there are roughly 68,000 people awaiting tests, 5,670 of whom have appointments as essential workers. There are a further 30,720 who are awaiting the approved driver test hours from instructors. There are just short of 100,000 people in the mix awaiting driver tests. In addition, there are 80,000 people awaiting driver theory tests.

The waiting list is 100,000 and the existing number of RSA testers is between 138 and 140, which will increase to 178. If the RSA runs with existing testers, how many weeks will it take? I did a quick calculation and I reckon it would take about 20 weeks. How many additional testers does the RSA require, beyond the 178, to get the average waiting time down to ten weeks?

Mr. Sam Waide: May I bring in my director of licensing and driver testing, Mr. Declan Naughton? Mr. Naughton will answer the Chair's question.

Mr. Declan Naughton: At the moment we have 138 driver testers and we expect to have an additional 40 on the field by the end of June. To get down to ten weeks, we expect we will need 40 extra driver testers and we would achieve that by February 2022. The caveat is that we are currently delivering six driver tests a day. We had expected to be at seven at this point but due to the pandemic we are not. The question is around how quickly we get to seven or eight tests a day. The short answer is that we would need 40 additional driver testers to get to ten weeks by February 2022.

Chairman: Is that correct that it would go from 178 to 218?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Yes, 178 plus 40.

Chairman: That is approximately 218. The RSA needs 220 driver testers. Am I correct?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We need 218 driver testers to get down to ten weeks by February 2022.

Chairman: I will round that up to 220. The RSA has gone from 138 driver testers. It has 40 additional driver testers. Will the additional 40 be in place by the end of June?

Mr. Declan Naughton: The expectation based on our training plan is that we will have the 40 by the end of June or early July.

Chairman: What is the process by which the RSA can start to recruit the further 40 to get up to 218 driver testers? How long will it take? Are there driver testers out there? What is the process and how quickly can the RSA have them in place?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We commenced a recruitment campaign last December. On foot of that campaign, we got sanction from the Department to take on 40 additional driver testers. We are subject to caps on our staffing, so we first need sanction from our parent Department for an additional 40 driver testers. If we get the sanction, we have the numbers in place in terms of the list from the current recruitment campaign. The plan would be to draw from that recruitment campaign to get the additional 40 driver testers-----

Mr. Declan Naughton: If the RSA got sanction from-----

Mr. Declan Naughton: In terms of how quickly-----

Chairman: I apologise to Mr. Naughton. Keep going.

Mr. Declan Naughton: Sanction would be required for this additional 40-----

Chairman: I am considering the logistics. Has the RSA made a submission to the Department of Transport for these further 40 driver testers? The RSA is seeking to recruit 80 additional driver testers on top of the 138 it has at present. Some 40 have been approved and recruitment is under way and it expects to have them in place by the end of June. Has the RSA submitted an application to the Department of Transport for the additional 40, to bring it up to 80 testers?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We mentioned in our appearance before the committee in December that we had a proposal with the Department for at least 80 driver testers at that time. It was with a view to having them on the pitch earlier this year. It would have brought our waiting times to ten weeks, assuming we are able to deliver seven or eight tests per day by the end of this year. The Department granted us sanction to take on 40 additional driver testers on the foot of that submission which is still live with it.

Chairman: Has the RSA had communications with the Department of Transport seeking sanction to start the recruitment of the further 40 driver testers?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Yes. It is a live sanction request with it in terms of the major proposal. We are communicating further with the Department and saying that if we got the additional 40, it would now take until February 2022 to get back down to ten weeks.

Chairman: What feedback is the RSA getting from the Department of Transport on the request for these additional 40 testers?

Mr. Declan Naughton: The Department has asked us to keep it apprised of what the 40 driver testers we have at present will do to the waiting time and of our preparedness to take on additional testers. However, we have not gotten formal sanction for any more than the 40 testers we mentioned.

Chairman: I will put it to the committee today that we write to the Department of Transport asking it to expedite the provision of these 40 driver testers to bring it to 80 additional driver testers. The number will then be 218. How quickly can the RSA have these 80 additional testers in place if it gets the sanction? If they are in place and the level 5 restrictions are lifted, how quickly can the 218 driver testers reduce the backlog of more than 100,000 waiting on driver tests, many of whom are young people? It has huge implications for jobs and cost of insurance. Insurance could be reduced by between 30% and 80% for a young driver.

Can Mr. Naughton give me the logistics of getting sanction, having the additional driver testers in place and having things operational, so that the waiting list is reduced from 20 weeks to ten weeks? How quickly can the RSA can do that?

Mr. Declan Naughton: The logistics are getting the sanction, going back to the pool of people on the recruitment panel, securing additional people to go on to that panel and doing the interviews, assessments, driver test and training. Our best guess is that if we were starting from today, we would have them in place by next October.

Chairman: Mr. Naughton is talking about a lead time of July to October. Will he give me the timescale on bringing the waiting times down? If the RSA operates with 178 driver testers, how many weeks would that bring it down to? When will the RSA get to a ten week waiting time?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We are doing six driver tests per day at present. We had hoped to be at seven on 1 February but we could not do that because of the pandemic. Assuming that we get to seven by June and perhaps to eight by the end of this year, with the 40 who have been sanctioned, we will get to 12 weeks in February 2022.

Chairman: It will be 12 weeks in February 2022. If the RSA gets the additional 40 on top of the 40 now recruited, bringing it to 218, what is the trajectory to get to ten weeks? How long will it take?

Mr. Declan Naughton: I apologise. I should have said that if we got the 80 we would get to 12 weeks by 2022.

Chairman: What will the waiting times be if the RSA stays at the additional 40 to bring it up to 178 rather than 218?

Mr. Declan Naughton: It would be extremely difficult to do that because we would be at approximately 15 weeks in February 2022 in that instance. Given the volumes of applications, it would be extremely difficult to get to ten weeks. It is a numbers game in terms of having people on the ground to deliver driver tests.

Chairman: Mr. Naughton is saying it is not feasible only operating with the additional 40. The RSA needs an additional 80, otherwise it will never be brought back to ten weeks. Mr. Naughton said that it would be 12 weeks by February of next year if the RSA gets the additional 40, bringing it to 80 driver testers. When will it get to ten weeks?

Mr. Declan Naughton: It would be approximately the end of March or April.

Chairman: We will write to the Department posthaste asking it to expedite it but Mr. Naughton's side will have to uphold it. If the additional 40 come on board, I would like to see the timeframe on the recruitment be brought back from October. Everything should be done because this is an enormous issue for ordinary people who cannot get driver tests. Once level 5 is lifted, it is hugely important that, dare I say it, the RSA is able to drive on with speed on this issue. I thank Mr. Naughton and Mr. Waide.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I support the proposal by the Chair to write to the Department and to support those additional posts. I thank Mr. Waide for the presentation. On the significant increase in capacity in driver theory tests that looks set to materialise in mid-April, how will it be done and will it include the online element?

Mr. Declan Naughton: I can take that question as well. At pre-pandemic theory test capacity, we were able to have normal waiting times of up three weeks by doing 15,000 to 17,000 theory tests every month.

To deal with the backlog that happened over the first level 5 restrictions, we moved up to being able to do between 22,000 and 25,000 tests, and that helped us to loss some of the lost ground. Clearly, with further level 5 restrictions during October to November, and also from late December to now going on to April, much more fundamental measures are needed. Over the last month or six weeks, we have engaged with the service provider, Prometric, to see how to bring back the waiting times and meet the demand that is there. The puzzle that is now signed off on is that the capacity will be doubled over those coming months. The plan initially had been that if we were back up and running on 5 March, that for the months of April, May and June, potentially, 50,000 tests could be delivered in each of those months. That is pushed out

now obviously because we will not be back up and running until April. If we look at the number of people who have test appointments at the moment, the number is a little over 82,000. What that extra capacity will do is generate slots into the system that either new people can apply for or in the case of existing people who have slots up to October and November of this year, they can pull back and apply for another earlier slot during the year. They are both options that are available to either existing candidates or new people wishing for an appointment. That is signed off on with the service provider.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The online facility has been trialled. What about the prospect for an online facility?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We have had 1,300 or so online tests for trucks and buses since the beginning of December. That has been really successful. Obviously there have been issues in terms of evaluating the applications. We want to make sure that security, invigilation and connectivity are secure and adequate and that any learnings coming out of that will be applied to the car tests when we roll it out. On foot of that, we are also having conversations about how to roll this out for car tests. While most of the conversation during the last couple of weeks and months has been around additional capacity, we have also been having conversations about the online capacity. Currently, the plan is that by June, we should be able to roll out some capacity for cars. Our expectation is that we will be able to do about 1,000 a month. That is why the Deputy will understand why we concentrated on the much higher numbers available in the centres.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to discuss the current driver testing capacity. I note it has been stated that because of the restrictions whereby the RSA can only test essential workers, some testing centres or testers are operating at 75%. There is an earlier blockage in the system because some essential workers cannot get a test because they cannot complete their essential driver training, EDT, lessons. Why does that blockage exist? Has the situation been reviewed? It is an anomaly that essential workers have been prevented from sitting a test when there are available test spaces because they cannot get lessons.

Mr. Declan Naughton: Yes, the Deputy is quite right. We do not know the numbers because when people apply for a test they do not tell us their occupation. The public health advice that we have received is that driving instructors should only be doing pretest lessons and not the mandatory EDT lessons. That is the public health advice that we have got and that is what we abide by in terms of the advice to driver testers and our customers.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Did that advice come from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, the Department or the HSE? Is it possible to question that advice at this stage?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Yes, it is the advice that we received from the Department. Again, as that came from central government, that conversation would have to be had in that space.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I propose that the committee asks the Department to review this situation in the current context to maximise the available capacity.

Chairman: I agree.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I have a question on the extension of driver licences. Does that apply to provisional licences? Where do people with a second provisional licence stand?

Mr. Declan Naughton: On 24 February, the extension for full licences was announced and that covers somebody from 1 December to the end of June. Therefore, anybody who has a renewal, their licences will be extended by ten months. There was no announcement at that stage about learner permits. I understand that the Department is considering the matter. It would be a decision nationally for ourselves. We do not need EU sanction because learner permits are a national matter. So that consideration is happening in that space, I understand.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I am pleased that extensions have been given because I was finding in the constituency office an inordinate number of elderly people who did not have access online and were unable to do a walk-in service in the offices of the authority, which is regrettable. My office was open with all of the Covid prevention measures in place and we found ourselves having to do the online work for them. I fail to see why such work could not have been done in the RSA offices. However, we were happy to do it and, thankfully, it worked out in many cases.

The real issue is young people who, as the Chairman has said, are waiting to get their tests. In addition to the other considerable burdens on young people as a result of Covid, the delay is causing enormous stress. The witnesses have indicated that the RSA has sought to get 40 additional staff. Will they be recruited as full-time staff for the RSA?

Mr. Declan Naughton: There are two aspects to this matter. There is a considerable backlog, as we have already said. We need to bring that back down to ten weeks and at that point it will be stabilised. There is a secondary exercise that we in the RSA have to do at that point. We must consider what do we need to do to maintain it at ten weeks or less. The people we are taking on now are on temporary contracts. When we bring back our waiting times to ten weeks and stabilise, because that will take a considerable number of driver testers to do that, at that point we will do an estimation of how many driver testers do we need to maintain a continuous ten-week waiting time, and we will then make that submission to the Department in terms of permanency. So how many of the driver testers we have at that point do we need to be permanent to maintain or even reduce the ten-week waiting time.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The RSA is setting a very low ambition rate. The authority should be trying to get to a point where it can do tests within two weeks, quite frankly, because ultimately when one brings it down to that level, the RSA will need the same amount of people to do the tests. If the RSA sets the bar at ten weeks then it is the same number of people who are required if one sets it at two weeks. The RSA also needs to have a greater number of temporary staff to cater for a surge in demand at certain times of the year. To address the kind of situation that we have, the authority needs a more flexible pool of testers. Of course, it needs the standard group who are there all of the time on full-time contracts but the job lends itself to having part-time staff appropriately trained that can be brought on at relatively short notice. I ask the RSA to give consideration to this matter.

I wish to check an aspect of the authority's overall operation. People who wanted to change from a British driving licence to an Irish licence have had difficulty in doing this during the lockdown period. Without a public services card, they do not seem to be able to do that. Can Mr. Naughton enlighten us? Is there any way, in the current climate and without access to the offices, for someone who wants to replace a British licence with an Irish licence to do so without a public services card?

Mr. Declan Naughton: There are two ways. People can apply online with a public services card if they have one. Otherwise, attendance at the office is needed to do business in that fash-

ion. In 2019 and 2020, and to date in 2021, 71,000 people have exchanged their licences. That was very near the number that was expected of those who hold UK licences.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I get that but what is the process for a person who does not have a public services card? Am I right in saying there is no access to the offices at the moment?

Mr. Declan Naughton: There is access. Our NDLS offices are open. People can make an appointment and attend an NDLS office.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: How long is the delay when making an appointment?

Mr. Declan Naughton: There is no delay. There are slots available every week. I understand availability at NDLS offices is more than 25% this week. There is no waiting.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank Mr. Naughton.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank our witnesses for attending and for their presentations. We are all frustrated by the delays. I have received emails about this, including one from a young man who applied to take the driver theory test on 27 July last year but is still waiting. Like Senator Dooley, I wonder if we could be more innovative and expeditious in our approach to driver testing and essential driving training? I note from Mr. Naughton's remarks to the Chairman that the RSA gave four options to the Department. On the driver theory test, Mr. Naughton speaks about rolling it out, but why are we waiting until June to roll it out? The four options to the Department include recruiting 100 testers on an 18-month contract. Could the RSA not break those contracts into chunks of six months or two months given that we will be in level 5 until 5 April at least and maybe beyond?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Could Senator Buttimer clarify the question? I am a little unclear about his question on contracts.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: In the submission to the Department before Christmas the RSA referred to recruiting 80 testers on 18-month contracts and continuing overtime until December 2021, which it did, or recruiting 100 testers on 18-month contracts and ceasing overtime from July 2021. Could these be broken down into shorter term contracts to hire additional testers?

With regard to the driver theory test, Mr. Naughton referred to 1,300 trial online theory tests taken for the bus and truck driver test. Why are we waiting until June to roll this out when we should be increasing capacity online now?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Setting up the online driver theory test for car drivers requires a certain technical infrastructure and invigilators. The Senator will appreciate that, from an invigilation and anti-fraud point of view, an online test is a much more involved process than doing the test in the test centre. The 1,300 trial tests were for bus and truck drivers. The numbers for car drivers will be some 100,000 per month, which is much greater than already undertaken with the bus and truck theory tests. The volumes will be greater and, therefore, the infrastructure and capacity needed will be greater. This is why it will be at least June before we could do that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Could it not be done faster?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We want to do it in a way that is secure and prevents fraud. There are a number of measures we need to take to be absolutely sure the test is the same as if the person went to a theory test centre. These are the considerations that need to be taken into account.

The Senator referred to the contractual period. To attract people to becoming driver testers we need to offer a decent contract. We need to offer contracts of 18 months at a minimum. The training period is six or seven weeks and there is a lead-in time for recruitment. When offering contracts and trying to attract people we need to offer a minimum time to ensure we get good people into the service. That was the thinking around the duration of the contract.

Chairman: What is the profile of the people the RSA recruit as driver testers? What qualifications do they require?

Mr. Declan Naughton: The minimum qualification is related to the European qualification framework, which is a standard framework across the EU. Something less than the leaving certificate is sought but in practice it is not academic qualifications that are critical. It is really around people, assessment service and the ability to deliver a quality service. These are the skill sets we look for rather than academic achievement.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will give Mr. Naughton an example. One person who contacted me lives in Cork city and had booked a driver theory test for 27 July 2020. The earliest appointment available to him was 31 January in Ennis or 16 February in 2021 in Cork. These dates were cancelled due to level 5 restrictions and he has now been given a new date of 2 June 2021.

My driving licence expired in the middle of last summer. I thank the NDLS staff in Cork who were very efficient, courteous and professional. While in the queue, I watched how they dealt with people and I want to give them credit for the way they handled the system. I thank them for that.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I thank the Senator.

Chairman: Has Senator Buttimer concluded?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I appeal to Mr. Naughton to be more innovative and creative in our approach. I appreciate that we are in difficult times but other organisations have adapted. The feeling is that we have not adapted in this case in the way we should have.

Chairman: In that context, what is stopping the RSA from being ambitious in setting a target waiting time of two or three weeks? Why are we settling for ten weeks? If the RSA was to set a target of a two or three-week waiting time, how many testers would be required in the short, medium and long term?

Mr. Declan Naughton: I have been in the driver testing service for a long time, since 2000. My feeling is that for the most part people need certainty around the test day. That is the critical issue. Once they know it will be in eight, ten or 12 weeks, they plan around that. They do their lessons and are ready to go on the day. The critical issue is that they have certainty on when a test date will come up for them. In the coming months, the RSA wants to provide a number of tools on our road safety portal to give people more certainty about when they can expect a driving test so they can plan around that.

On the Chairman's broader question, this is about resources. Once we get to a steady ten weeks and we need, say, 140 testers to maintain the waiting time at ten weeks, if we wanted to bring that down to eight, six or four weeks, we would need greater numbers of driver testers. It is a resource issue and a matter for the Government in how we allocate resources to the driving test as against other services. If, in the conversation with the Department and the Government, they are open to having lower waiting times, we will certainly be open to having the conversa-

tion on doing that. We have the capacity internally in the RSA to make that happen.

Chairman: The RSA needs an additional 80 testers for a period of 18 months. When those 80 testers come in the RSA will be able to function thereafter on a complement of 140 driver testers, with an average waiting time of ten weeks. Am I correct in my analysis?

Mr. Declan Naughton: We have not made an analysis that tells us the figure is 140 testers but from previous demand analysis, it looks like it is around that number. One must remember that right now we are doing six tests a day, whereas in normal times we were doing eight tests a day. We are not sure when we will get back up to eight tests a day again.

Chairman: In that context, perhaps Mr. Naughton might provide the committee with an indication of what additional driver testing capacity would be required if the RSA were to bring the weeks down incrementally from ten weeks to two weeks. It would be a good measure to look at, and it is something we could follow up with the Department on the RSA's behalf.

Sinn Féin has agreed to share its second slot with the Green Party. I call Deputy Leddin, who is substituting for Deputy Matthews. He has seven minutes.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for facilitating me. I thank the witnesses for attending, in particular Mr. Waide. I was very happy to receive the letter he sent last week about parking on footpaths and cycle lanes to both Deputy Matthews and me. This is a very serious issue around the country and he acknowledged the seriousness of it in his response. We look forward to the RSA campaign that will be rolled out nationally to try to change driver behaviour so that people do not park on footpaths and cycle lanes. The onus is on motorists to give priority on the footpath to vulnerable road users and to those who have mobility impairments instead of thinking that their responsibility is to let the driver pass more safely. The greater responsibility is to let those walking on the path get by. I thank Mr. Waide for that.

On the subject of the theory test, we have seen quite a worrying trend in the past year where the rate of injury to pedestrians on roads has increased. That is because a lot more people are out walking due to Covid and also because the lower traffic volumes mean that traffic tends to go faster. Are the witnesses considering addressing the issue in the roll-out of the driver theory test? That is perhaps a question for Mr. Naughton.

Mr. Declan Naughton: In the last revision of the driver theory test, which was approximately 18 months to two years ago, we designated a certain amount of mandatory questions on alcohol. As things stand, the test includes questions about pedestrians and the interaction of drivers with them at pedestrian crossings and the use of footpaths and so on. Normally, every 18 months or so there is a revision of the theory test. At the next revision we will look at the casual factors that lead to crashes and injuries on the roads and review and update the theory test accordingly. That is generally the approach we take to adapting the theory test in accordance with what is happening in real life on the ground.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I welcome Mr. Naughton's response. I urge him to give it the priority it deserves because those trends are quite worrying.

I would like the witnesses to comment on the ambitious roll-out of active travel infrastructure across the country. The Government is trying to make walking and cycling in particular a viable option for people in towns, villages and cities. Does the RSA have interactions with other national authorities such as the National Transport Authority, NTA, or Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and does it input into the decision-making on the roll-out of active travel

infrastructure?

Mr. Sam Waide: I will take the question initially. The answer is “Yes”. We are engaging on an ongoing basis with other organisations and delivery agencies on road safety. Most recently, for a number of months we have been working in partnership with said organisations – An Garda Síochána, the Department of Transport, the NTA, TII and all of the key delivery agencies - to develop the forthcoming road safety strategy that runs to 2030. All of the matters, including those mentioned, are part of the discussions and detailed strategy and action plans.

I welcome the committee’s view on the road safety strategy and specific interventions. We have involved a wide range of stakeholders, not only the public sector organisations but the public as a whole, and we have reached out to political parties to seek their views on particular aspects of road safety and the transformation that is required over the next ten years to reduce the fatalities and serious injuries occurring on the roads in Ireland. There has been ongoing consultation and discussion and it will evolve into a detailed strategy for the next ten years. As a country and society, we are committed to vision zero, which is zero fatalities and serious injuries by 2050. The programme for Government commitment is a 50% reduction in fatalities and serious injuries by 2030. I look forward to those activities and actions that address many of the road safety challenges we have, including the specifics touched on by Deputy Leddin.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank Mr. Waide. The final issue I wish to address is mobility scooters. They are important tools to help people to maintain their independence. I appreciate that the upcoming legislation on powered personal transporters excludes mobility scooters, but I would welcome the views of witnesses on how mobility scooters are provided for in road traffic legislation from a road safety perspective.

Mr. Sam Waide: In terms of an overarching response to the question, the RSA welcomes the legislation on e-scooters. Whatever the sustainable mobility solution, it is extremely important that we maintain and enhance road safety. Deputy Leddin is correct that as an organisation we have contributed to the legislation on e-scooters. If I may, I will bring in my colleague, Mr. Michael Rowland, who has been leading our response and contribution in particular on the e-scooter part of the legislation. He will comment further in that regard.

Mr. Michael Rowland: We have been contributing and we have made submissions to the Department on e-scooters. In particular, we have made recommendations on the permitting of devices for the rental schemes to ensure there is not an over-proliferation of e-scooters on footpaths or where there are other vulnerable road users, but that the scheme is well regulated. We have also made recommendations on the guidance in terms of speed limits and where these devices should be used. That relates in particular to the protection of other road users but also given the known speed tolerance for deaths and serious injuries of vulnerable road users in collisions with motor vehicles. We have recommended that these scooters should operate within speed limits in no more than 50 km/h zones, but ideally, their use should be curtailed to 30 km/h zones, where possible. Consideration needs to be given to the proliferation of these scooters where there are interactions with heavy goods vehicles. Importantly, we have also highlighted the need for these devices not to be used on footpaths where there are vulnerable road users or pedestrians. We have also made recommendations on the age limits of who can, and should, use these vehicles. In line with that, we have recommended that the age limit should be 16 or older. We have suggested that maximum speed limits of 20 km/h should be considered for these devices. We have also made recommendations to the Minister and the Department on the use of personal protection equipment, PPE, and in particular, the use of helmets, considering the differing characteristics that these devices have when compared with the traditional bicycle in

respect of the stability of the vehicle and while encountering uneven road surfaces. The mandatory use of helmets, when using these vehicles, should be considered.

The RSA has an important role to play in the training, education and awareness campaigns. We have welcomed the recommendations of the Minister in respect of us embarking on a major campaign to make other road users and potential users of these vehicles aware of their requirements under the rules of the road. We have also made suggestions on the vehicle standards themselves, because that is critical to maintaining safety standards. We are also working with the European Union on type approval, which we believe will need to be rolled out-----

Chairman: I ask Mr. Rowland to conclude.

Mr. Michael Rowland: That is it, essentially. We have made the submission to the Minister and the Department on e-scooters.

Chairman: Perhaps that submission could be made available to the committee. It would be welcome.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I wish to confirm that I am on the Leinster House campus. I welcome the witnesses. There are a few points I would like to raise. First, I received an email this week from a young constituent who is completing his leaving certificate. He wants to be a paramedic more than anything. To be a paramedic, one must have a full licence. It is a requirement of enrolment into college, which is unique for any third level course. He has applied for a B category theory test, and has a date for the test in May 2021. Going on current waiting lists, it could be well into August before he could provisionally obtain his full licence. With such a delay, he will not get his college place. He is already looking at plan B and the possibility of taking a year out. It is ludicrous that a delay in obtaining a driving licence would inhibit a 17-year-old who is planning a career as a paramedic in such a way. It is a front-line health service profession. The issue must be looked at. There are a number of students in this predicament, right throughout the country. In a normal year, it would be tricky for them to get a test date but it is particularly awkward this year. I ask Mr. Naughton to respond.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I have a few comments. If the case concerns a school leaver aged 17, they would first have to get a car licence. I believe that Deputy Crowe said that the individual in question needs a C category licence, which means that they will first get their car licence, then move up to get the C category licence. Therefore, in actual fact, it would take some time for them to get this licence. It brings into question-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The individual requires a B category licence.

Mr. Declan Naughton: If he needs a B category licence, he would be required to pass his theory test first. Once he has a learner's permit, he will have to wait for six months before he can sit the test to get the licence. In certain circumstances, we will facilitate people who need such licences for urgent purposes. That is something that can be considered.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I encourage the RSA to implement a fast track mechanism for cases of students such as this individual. It is quite a unique situation. A student who is going to study business or arts does not need a driving licence. It might be desirable and something that their family wants for them, but it is not essential. It is a requirement for someone who wants to undertake a course to become a paramedic. That sets them quite apart from other students. We all want to see young people get their driving licences but this situation sets these students apart from others in their age cohort.

The next issue I wish to raise is that of BE licences, which are required for towing dual-axis trailers. Many people in rural Ireland, for example, farmers towing cow or horseboxes, use and require such licences. A farmer from County Clare recently told me that when his licence came up for renewal, he submitted all the paperwork. Lo and behold, when he got back his licence, the capacity to tow a trailer had been removed from it. He went to the ends of the earth in trying to get an answer, and was told that there is a minuscule box on the form asking the licence holder if he or she wishes to keep their trailer licence on renewal of the driving licence. That goes against the whole spirit of licence renewal. The whole idea of renewing a licence is that the holder of a licence running close to its expiry date applies for it to be renewed and extended. There are a number of cases, but not many, such as that to which I referred. Those who have lost their BE licences in such circumstances, should have them reinstated immediately. It is most unfair on farmers, and those in rural Ireland, in particular. I ask Mr. Naughton to respond.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I am somewhat surprised because when one has a category listed on one's licence and one renews it but fails to renew one particular category, one does not lose it. Normally, one has some time, ten years in most cases, within which it is live. I am not sure of the individual circumstances in which somebody will not retain it. Perhaps they did not tick the box when completing the form. However, that would not prevent them from going back and reinstating it on their licence. Certainly, in the NDLS, when a person attends the office, the agent behind the counter will tell actually that person that he or she has other categories on the licence and will ask him or her if he or she wishes to renew them as well. We are conscious of that. Therefore, if there are individual cases, I would certainly be happy to hear about them to see what could be done.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Is there an email address to which representations can be made?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Representations from Members of the Oireachtas are normally sent to *secretariat@rsa.ie*, and are subsequently assigned to individuals. I am also happy email the Deputy directly.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: That would be excellent.

I am almost finished. I wish to make one final point. It concerns small public service vehicle, SPSV, licences, which are used by those who typically provide a local minibus or vital service. There are currently huge delays in the granting of these licences. The SPSV licence is a requirement for those who want to gain employment in that sector. In recent months, we have seen how schools, particularly in rural areas, have been pressurised because of the Covid restrictions in respect of seating limits on buses. It requires increasing numbers of drivers being able to take on contracts in rural areas. If the drivers cannot take the test, they cannot drive the buses and play their role in that system. Can Mr. Naughton tell members anything about how the process can be sped up? The delays are denying people the opportunity to take up employment and keeping some of them on the live register unnecessarily.

Mr. Declan Naughton: Is the Deputy talking specifically about the SPSV element of the licence itself, or just the driving test? The SPSV is not really a matter for the RSA; it is usually a matter for local authorities.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am referring to the theory test aspect.

Mr. Declan Naughton: That is not a matter for the RSA. As I understand it, both are the responsibility of the National Transport Authority

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I will conclude by stating that the RSA offices need to be more streamlined in their messaging. I live in a rural area, and recently went to a driving licence centre to get an add-on for a BE licence. The process was extremely problematic. Sufficient information is not provided. There is feedback on the line at present.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I will conclude by noting the information on the website in respect of licence add-ons in particular, and what happens at the test centre, is grossly inadequate. I say that as someone who has experienced this in the past seven weeks or so. It needs to be streamlined and made clearer. That is just my experience, although it has been said to me many times in emails and phone calls from constituents. It is not streamlined. There is a great deal of gobbledegook that needs to be narrowed down to show what the service is and what the requirements are.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I thank Mr. Wade, Mr. Naughton and Mr. Rowland for their contributions to the meeting and for the information and facts they have given us, which are very interesting. This is a huge issue throughout Ireland, and in particular in rural Ireland and my constituency of Tipperary. Many of the general questions I had wished to ask have been asked and I will not repeat them. The delays are causing significant problems for young people especially and have implications for jobs, the economy and insurance premiums being levied on young people while they await a test. As I understand it from the figures, 68,000 people are awaiting a test, 30,000 are in the process of taking lessons, and 80,000 are awaiting the theory test. It might be too much to ask but do our guests have the figures to hand for the waiting lists in Tipperary? If not, I would appreciate it if they forwarded them to me.

I have a slight concern about the issue of testers. Additional testers are needed, but given that many of them will work part time, I worry about their commitment to the job. I am looking at this in the context of standardisation across the system. It is not unusual for me to be told by a person who has taken a test that he or she had a stickler of a tester. There seems to be a variation in the reactions of people who have taken a test. Some of them find the test person to have been very nice and approachable and tell me he or she understood that they were nervous, treated them with care and gave them the kind of attention they deserve, whereas in other cases, people have told me that the tester was not nice to them. For instance, I know of one tester who failed five people in one week, each of whom had been through lessons and had done the necessary preparation. How are tests benchmarked within the RSA system? How does the RSA ensure an equal standard across the system? I am concerned about that number of people being brought in on a temporary, 18-month contract. How can it be guaranteed that a temporary tester will be as good or as qualified as someone who is permanent and has been working within the system for years?

I very much welcome the submission that Mr. Rowland made in respect of e-scooters. I am in favour of e-scooters but they must be strictly regulated. We have all been to countries where e-scooters are licensed. It is terrible to see them zigzagging between cars and on footpaths between people, where they are a danger to pedestrians. I support many of the items within the submission.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I fully agree that the relationship on the day between the driver tester and the customer is critical. Everyone is entitled to be treated with integrity, dignity and so on. We very much emphasise that in our training and when talking to driver testers to ensure

that level of quality will be given to every customer who comes in. Whether it is the first or the 20th time he or she has taken the test, it is essential the customer be treated with dignity and respect.

As for the standard, we have a quality assurance policy. The initial phase of any quality assurance has to be the recruitment process, followed by the training and then the on-the-ground supervision that happens when testers are in their local test centres and assessing driving tests. They are the individual steps and that is monitored monthly. Of course there will be variation. I have examined data from throughout the EU and it is a reality that there are variations in terms of pass rates. Even in the case of the 2020 leaving certificate, there was a difference between the calculated grades and the exam results of previous years. Every driving test is different. There are different road, weather, pedestrian and traffic conditions. I assure the Deputy, however, that for the RSA, the integrity of the test is really important and we fully agree with him in that regard. Everything we do is to try to ensure the customer coming in the door will receive a fair, transparent test.

In regard to the taking on of driver testers, I would like to think that within the 18-month contract, the combination of training, supervision and so on will lead to a commitment on their behalf to be with us and to want to make a career with us in future if that opportunity arises for them.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Is there a provision for the client to make an observation and to give feedback to the RSA on his or her experience with a tester? If somebody has failed the test, he or she is unlikely to give feedback in case it would jeopardise their chances in the future, but it would be good if people could do so. I am not 100% happy with the aptitude and approach of some testers to people who are taking tests. I have had too much negative feedback in that regard. It is important that a system be put in place, if it is not already in place, whereby the applicant can give feedback that is treated confidentially within the system.

Mr. Declan Naughton: We agree with that because that is the way in which we learn and get better. It is not just for the candidate or the customer to give feedback to the RSA. There is another channel for the driving instructor to speak to the driver test supervisor and to convey any issues he or she may have. Both channels are there and we encourage their use. If there is an issue that is perceived by customers, we want to know about it and to improve our services by acting on any feedback we get.

Mr. Sam Waide: I concur with Mr. Naughton. I will commit the RSA to examining how we can receive that feedback in a more formal way, with the feedback remaining anonymous, because I recognise the Deputy's concern about the sensitivity of feeding back to the organisation about the customer experience. That is at the heart of what we do. It is about road safety but we also have to ensure the customer experience is satisfactory. I welcome that suggestion and we as an organisation will take it away for formal consideration.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Will Mr. Naughton forward me the details of the waiting lists for Tipperary?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Yes. I have a copy to hand and will forward it to the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Lowry: If the Chairman will allow it, Mr. Naughton might tell me the figures for Tipperary now.

Mr. Declan Naughton: Okay. If the Deputy is asking specifically about Tipperary town,

the number of people waiting-----

Deputy Michael Lowry: I am asking about Tipperary town-----

Mr. Declan Naughton: There are three test centres. There are 365 people in Tipperary town who are eligible to sit a driver test tomorrow morning. Some of them may not be essential workers. In Thurles, there are 498 eligible people, while in Clonmel there are 812. Those are all people who are eligible for a test appointment, provided, of course, that they are essential workers, which-----

Chairman: I ask Mr. Naughton to repeat those figures.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I will. There are 812 eligible customers in Clonmel, 365 in Tipperary town and 383 in Nenagh. I will send the full list to the Chairman in order that the committee has access to the numbers of people on waiting lists at the moment, by centre.

Chairman: Does Mr. Naughton have a total figure for Tipperary?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I ask Mr. Naughton to include details for all counties, and County Cork in particular, on the list he sends to the Chairman.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I will send the full list of eligible people to the Chairman. It will encompass the 62,000 people on our list.

Chairman: We will circulate that list. Does Mr. Naughton have a total figure for Tipperary?

Mr. Declan Naughton: I would have to add the figures up on the fly.

Chairman: That is okay. I have no doubt that Deputy Lowry has already computed the figure.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I have.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I am not interested in how many eligible people there are in any particular county; the Chairman can send me the national figure.

Chairman: I assumed the Senator would be interested in all counties.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: That is what I said. As a national politician, I am interested in the national figure.

Chairman: I would say his members would be very interested in all counties.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am sure Senator Craughwell will send the list to all the Independent councillors in Cork and Tipperary.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the representatives of the RSA for their attendance. I compliment them on the work they do. Following on from the questions of Deputy Lowry in respect of testers, is it not time for testers to wear a body camera for their own protection as well as to provide feedback for the organisation with regard to how tests are being run?

The year before last, I took to the streets of Dublin on a bicycle purely because I had been critical of cyclists and was challenged to do it. Cycling around the streets of Dublin was taking my life in my hands. It was absolutely frightening. I compliment the Government and the various county councils on the greenways that are being put in place around the country.

Cycleways are needed desperately. Bearing that in mind, is there any prospect of the RSA running cycle training courses in national schools? I am thinking of a person or a group of people travelling around the country to deliver one-week programmes that would help kids to sort of get into the essentials of cycling. It is not as simple as putting one's leg over the crossbar of a bicycle and taking off, although far too many people think that is what it is about.

Mr. Rowland addressed the issue of e-scooters. I have serious concerns about them. In my part of south Dublin, there are three or four people who commute on a single-wheel vehicle without handlebars. I have no idea how they brake, take corners or anything else. These vehicles have a single wheel. The rider stands on a sort of a platform with one foot on either side of the wheel. What is the legality of such vehicles? Where do they fit in with regard to road safety?

Cars have changed drastically since my day when we had crash gearboxes and God knows what else. Today, cars are such a gathering of technology that it is not funny. All cars now have satellite systems, reversing cameras and parking sensors. Cars have sensors such that the driver is warned of oncoming cars when opening the door and is warned when changing lanes. When is the driving test going to be brought up to speed to meet the technology? I sometimes think the technology might have reached a stage whereby it has lulled us into a false sense of security that we can do no wrong while behind the wheel of a car.

On the issue of the employment of testers, I am aware that several former military people wish to move to the RSA. They worked as highly skilled driving instructors in the military. The issue of pension abatement has stopped them taking public service jobs. Has the issue of pension abatement come across the desks of the witnesses at any stage?

I thank them for their time and appreciate any answers they can give me.

Mr. Declan Naughton: I will take the questions relating to the driving test. I know there are other questions relating to cycling and e-scooters.

The issue when it comes to the usage of body cameras is the general data protection regulation, GDPR. I am not in favour of bringing in body cameras because there are probably privacy issues to be considered. It is a little more complex than might be thought at first blush.

On the issue of vehicle technology, I fully agree with the Senator that there is a need to look again at the driver test. In fact, as recently as two weeks ago, this issue came up at an EU licensing committee meeting. A new licensing directive will be brought into being in the next 18 months. Some of the conversation at the meeting was certainly around how technology has changed driving and how we can adapt the test or the licensing process to take account of that. That is certainly part of the thinking and will definitely see the light of day in the next 18 months or so.

Pension abatement has not really become an issue. It may be the case that those who would be affected just did not apply in the first instance. I am not aware of it as an issue in terms of it prohibiting people from taking up employment with the RSA but there is no doubt that if a person would lose some of their pension as a result of taking up another post, that would certainly be a deterring factor in terms of going for the post. I am not aware of it being an issue that has arisen for the RSA.

I will pass on to Mr. Waide who will answer the other questions.

Mr. Sam Waide: I ask Mr. Rowland to address the specific questions regarding e-scooters and other powered vehicles.

Mr. Michael Rowland: I thank the Chairman and the Senator. On the issue of cycle training, the RSA works with Cycling Ireland and the Department of Transport on the Cycle Right programme. It is a cycle training programme delivered by accredited trainers at national schools throughout the country. The programme has been in place for several years and is very popular. There is great take-up of it by schools. The Cycle Right programme is delivered to a particular standard by trainers who are trained to that standard.

Chairman: Who delivers the programme? Senator Craughwell has raised a very important point regarding education and children learning how to cycle bicycles properly. Who runs the programme?

Mr. Michael Rowland: Cycling Ireland runs the programme on behalf of the RSA. It has a national cycling officer, a training officer who is responsible for the oversight of that programme. It is funded by the RSA and-----

Chairman: It is an RSA programme; is that correct?

Mr. Michael Rowland: No, Cycling Ireland is tasked with the delivery of the cycle training. It is overseen by the Department of Transport and the RSA and we have active engagement with Cycling Ireland in that regard. It is the-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: How does a school apply for an instructor to deliver the programme in the school?

Mr. Michael Rowland: The school can apply through its local road safety officer or directly to the RSA and we will put them in touch with Cycling Ireland. If they visit the Cycling Ireland website, they will see details of the Cycle Right programme there. It is a very accessible programme.

Chairman: Mr. Rowland might conclude on the questions from Senator Craughwell as I think he raised other questions.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I asked about the single wheel vehicle.

Mr. Michael Rowland: Part of our submission to the Minister actually called out these particular types of vehicles and said they should be excluded from the definitions of personal powered transport or e-scooters. Senator Craughwell is quite right. Several of these are less stable on our roads, including hoverboards. I suspect these are what the Senator has seen. We recommend that they would not be included in the definition of e-scooters as proposed by the Department.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I am aware of the hoverboards but they are not the particular vehicles I am talking about. There are three in the Sandyford area that I see on a regular basis. The vehicle I have in mind has what is like the wheel of a wheelbarrow with a platform on either side. The person stands legs astride on this thing. I have no idea how people manage it. The hoverboard is another thing I would have a serious difficulty with. I really want the place to be safe for cyclists. I understand the frustration of cyclists. I live on the side of the Dublin Mountains and we get cyclists every Saturday and Sunday going up to Enniskerry and on to the mountains. The number of people who get on their bicycles is amazing. Sadly, a few

are not responsive to Covid-19 rules and regulations. I appreciate the answer from the Road Safety Authority officials and their presence today to listen to what we have to say.

Chairman: We will move now to Deputy Ó Murchú, who was gracious to give his time earlier. He has seven minutes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I wish to add my voice to what the Chairman said previously. The capacity of testing is major and the committee needs to send that correspondence.

I wish to double up on what Deputy O'Rourke said earlier. We need some sort of correspondence to deal with the anomaly of essential workers being able to have tests but not necessarily being able to have lessons. Obviously, wherever this goes we must have some interaction with approved driver instructors and their representatives.

I will start with approved driver instructors. We all spoke previously about the lack of access in test centres of toilet facilities, etc., which people need in work. Have we any news or progress in moving that on? One issue that has come up relates to the annual driver instructor permit renewal. It costs a considerable amount of money. I gather the figure is approximately €250. Businesses are under pressure and we are talking about putting in supports across the board. What is the possibility of looking at a waiver in this regard? I wish to deal with that point first.

Chairman: Mr. Waide, do you wish to redirect the question to Mr. Naughton?

Mr. Sam Waide: Mr. Naughton could response to that particular question from the Deputy.

Mr. Declan Naughton: The first question related to access to driver test centres. We acknowledge this has been a contentious issue. We also acknowledge that driver instructors have a major role to play in the whole learning-to-drive process. We have acknowledged that publicly. However, in terms of the protocols we have in place to prevent spread of the virus, we have strong rules around who can access the driver test centre. We have conducted more than 90,000 tests since last June or July, when we returned, without any notified cases of virus transmission. We strongly believe that those rules must remain in place while the pandemic is with us. We would be delighted to welcome back ADIs when the conditions allow and when we get support from public health to say that is feasible. However, right now it is not feasible and I believe that to do so would put our ability to continue to deliver driver tests at risk. A whole architecture is necessary in respect of driver instructors but we do not have that in place. We do not foresee that happening until the pandemic is no longer a factor. I will ask Mr. Rowland to deal with the question of the renewal of the ADI permit.

Mr. Michael Rowland: We are looking at the renewal programme for the ADI permit. We are looking at extending it given the Covid-19 lockdown and the restraints or constraints that have been put in place. We are actively looking and considering that at the moment. We are looking at the requirements for ADIs to renew their check test. We are postponing them on the basis of the lockdown at the moment. That is something we are actively considering and we are communicating with ADIs in that respect.

Chairman: Mr. Rowland might elaborate on that a little because that is a big issue.

Mr. Michael Rowland: ADIs are required to renew their ADI status every two years by way of a check test. Given that the check test-----

Chairman: For the public listening, ADI means approved driver instructor.

Mr. Michael Rowland: My apologies. Yes, I am talking about approved driver instructors. Given the constraints of the lockdown, we are unable to carry out the check tests. We are postponing or renewing their ADI status, which happens every two years, as a result of that. We are postponing the check tests but we are renewing their status as ADIs.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There will be no costs for those approved driver instructors. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Rowland: The costs will remain. We have not considered the cancellation of the costs. What we are saying is that we will extend the length of time. We will renew their ADI status once it is due for renewal.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome that the RSA will extend it but someone has to seriously look at the point that these businesses are under severe pressure. I accept the difficulties with giving people access because of health protocols and so on. To a degree this group of people believe they have not been engaged with sufficiently. I believe the move is not only a necessary support but a show of good faith as well. If that could be considered in any way, they would be appreciative. I would put it even more plainly by saying it is absolutely necessary.

Chairman: Does Deputy Ó Murchú have other questions to put?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I assume I will not get an answer on it but there needs to be consideration of it. People have already voiced that concern in respect of safety features of e-scooters. Some of this lies in the fact that we are dealing with something that is unregulated and unlicensed. Obviously, we welcome any level of regulation. Have the RSA officials looked into international best practice, what is working and what is not working? We are often given examples from parts of Britain where we have seen schemes in operation and parts of Germany and so on. What aspects of these systems would we be dealing with? Would we be allowing for a situation whereby local authorities would be able to operate e-scooter projects in same way as the DublinBikes scheme?

Mr. Michael Rowland: We have made recommendations in respect of how e-scooters would be regulated and whether they would be regulated through local authorities or not. That is a decision the Minister will make based on our submission to him. Many of the proposals from the Department of Transport are based on the transport laboratory research we commissioned back in 2019. This looked at what was happening elsewhere in Europe and the issues arising. We also consulted with our colleagues in Europe to see how they were dealing with those issues. That Transport Research Laboratories, TRL, report made a number of recommendations following which we made recommendations to the Minister at that time. These are reflected in the submission we made to the Department last week on how these scooters should be regulated, dealing with safety, speed, who can use them and where they can be used, and all that goes with the safe use of these vehicles. That is something we have considered with our international colleagues also.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: With the proposals by the RSA for dealing with e-scooters, what country would it most look like?

Mr. Michael Rowland: We did the research in 2019 and things have moved on a lot since then. One of the recommendations we made to the Department was that we would update the research, having seen what happened in the intervening period. Germany has been mentioned

as a model for type approval. Some countries have done very well but we would like to update that research given the number of years that have elapsed since the previous research.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that. More research is necessary.

Mr. Michael Rowland: It would not take long. It would be a table-top type of exercise.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Would that be done within a month?

Mr. Michael Rowland: Maybe not that quickly.

Chairman: When that is concluded Mr. Rowland might provide a copy of the research in that area to the committee. We are keen to ensure we get the legislation right on the e-scooters and e-bikes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the witnesses. My committee colleagues have covered the driver licence element of this in good detail, so I will not revisit that. I thank the witnesses for their responses on that. On the matter of e-scooters, and further to what Deputies Ó Murchú, Leddin and others said, where does Mr. Rowland see e-scooters fitting into the overall transport network of first-mile and last-mile solutions in five and ten years' time? We seem to have been fighting long and hard for improved infrastructure for bikes, but in fairness there have been huge leaps forward on this in the past months. E-scooter use has exploded in the last few years and months. When we plan road safety policy and transport infrastructure, to what extent have e-scooters entered the conversation on how we will plan our cycle lanes, our safe lanes and our regional towns? For example, I live in Swords and we are hoping at some stage to have a MetroLink. I hope to be able to cycle or get an e-scooter from our home to a MetroLink stop that may be too close to drive to but too far to walk for a daily commute. What conversations are taking place about five and ten year's down the line, and not just about this legislation? If the use of e-scooters grows at the current rate, they will be incredibly common in our major towns and cities, as common as the use of bikes if not more so. I am interested in Mr. Rowland's thoughts on that.

Senator Craughwell referred to cycling in Dublin city. Some 20 years ago I witnessed a cycling fatality in Dublin city. It was a horrific thing to happen and to have witnessed. It highlighted to me how unsafe our city is. It is welcome to see cycle lanes developed but to what extent will they be improved and networked? As with the pencil bollards, which are necessary for traffic segregation, what is the long-term plan for these lanes which are unsightly. It would be great to see them replaced with a different type of segregation, perhaps a lower kerb, when other road users and particularly motorists are used to and accept the fact that cyclists have parity and need extra protection on our roads. I am interested in Mr. Rowland's thoughts on the future for e-scooter use.

Mr. Michael Rowland: The first thing I would say in response to the Deputy's query on infrastructure, transport planning and all that goes with it is that this is not the function of the RSA. This is the function of the National Transport Authority and the Department of Transport.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I was referring to the safety perspective.

Mr. Michael Rowland: From a safety perspective, the RSA has suggested to the Department that we would take on the role of education of all road users with regard to e-scooters

and e-scooter users and that we would engage in major awareness campaigns highlighting the associated dangers and the need for safe travel. We have made a number of recommendations on how they could be used on our roads. The road safety strategy, which our CEO, Mr. Waide, referred to earlier, will also look at micro-mobility or e-scooters. I expect there will be a number of recommendations on the safety measures and how they can be used. From the Road Safety Authority point of view, in addition to education and awareness, we are also responsible for the type approvals and ensuring that those types of vehicles or scooters are safe and meet a required standard.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Mr. Rowland. If there are no further answers, I am happy to give my time back to the committee for other questions.

Chairman: We have ten minutes left. I will take two minutes and I will give two minutes each if others would like to be brought back in.

Apart from the driver test, the committee is doing pre-legislative scrutiny on the road traffic (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2019. The Minister has indicated that he will bring forward amendments on Committee Stage to deal with the whole issue of e-scooters and e-bikes. Could I get a summary under a couple of headings? I understand that a speed of 25 km/h is being considered. The RSA has put in 20 km/h. It has not yet decided on an age limit. Will Mr. Rowland elaborate on why the RSA believe the age of 16 and over is important? It will not be classified in any way. Is there a need for a register for these types of personal powered transport vehicles, PPTs, that are coming in? What about the whole area of where they are allowed to be used?

I am amazed that more cyclists are not killed in Dublin. I often get a bus or a taxi to Heuston Station and I am amazed at what I see. While it is hugely positive to see so many cyclists, it is certainly an area that requires a duty of care from cyclists and from drivers so that nothing happens. What is Mr. Rowland's perspective on where the PPTs should be allowed? There is talk of them on cycle lanes and bus lanes and not being used on footpaths and not being allowed on national roads or motorways. Greenways will be looked at separately. Will Mr. Rowland go through those headings of speed, age limit, the need for a register and where they should be allowed to park and be used? Mr. Rowland said they should be regulated by local authorities. Should they be more properly regulated by the RSA or the NTA? The rapid growth in the number of these e-scooters and e-bikes, as mentioned by Deputy Smith, is quite amazing. It is a positive feature but there are elements to their use that cause severe worry with regard to safety. Will Mr. Rowland go through those headings?

Mr. Michael Rowland: Yes. We made a number of recommendations in the submission to the Department of Transport. The submission was based on a previous submission we had made in 2019. We recommended a speed of 20 km/h at that time. Given the vulnerability of road users and that these are unprotected vehicles, we felt that a 20 km/h speed limit was an appropriate one for consideration. I know the Minister suggested 25 km/h. I do not disagree with that, but we suggest that 20 km/h would be an even better speed limit.

On the age of users of powered vehicles, again, we felt that given that they can achieve quite significant speeds on the roads and that anybody under 16 would not have the necessary skill sets or abilities to use them in a safe manner. It is important that whoever uses them has the ability to use them and we were concerned that children could get their hands on these vehicles and that they could be seen as a toy when in actual fact they are a means of transport. That was the important issue for us in terms of the age being set at 16 years or older for potential users of electric scooters.

It is not within our gift to say where the scooters can be used, but we suggested that they could be used in 30 km/h zones and that they should not be used on high-speed roads. We also made a recommendation that, if possible, we need to limit their use in areas where there is a proliferation of heavy goods vehicles. Those are among the recommendations that we have made.

You referred, Chairman, to the local authorities. One of the suggestions was that it could be done nationally, or it could be done by local authorities. It will be up to the Department to decide. What is important is to ensure that we do not have an over-proliferation of these vehicles. We have seen situations where there has been an over-proliferation-----

Chairman: Does Mr. Rowland recommend a register of these types of vehicle?

Mr. Michael Rowland: That is something the Department will have to decide on. From a road safety perspective, we need to limit their use to appropriate use and ensure that the users are safe, educated and aware of the dangers. If a register helps with that, we would welcome it, but I do not think it is within my gift to make such a recommendation.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am not clear on whether secondary legislation is required. If it is, how long will it take or what will the format of it be? It is important that the legislation we progress would allow for cities like Cork to launch an e-scooter scheme this summer as we prepare to reopen cities in a safe way. I welcome the contribution. Will we require secondary legislation and what will be in the statutory instrument regarding e-scooters?

Mr. Michael Rowland: I will have to defer to my colleagues in the Department of Transport. We were asked to make a submission, but the Department will have to answer any questions on legislation as I do not have responsibility for that.

Chairman: My understanding is that the Department is looking to use the Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill and to introduce amendments on Committee Stage to deal with e-scooters. It would involve amendment of existing legislation rather than stand-alone legislation.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: That is good, because it was unclear. It is an important departure for us as a European country with many new innovative ideas for transport.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish to return to the backlog in driving tests. I am interested in the restriction that is preventing us from getting to eight tests a day. Does it specifically relate to Covid-19 restrictions? What is the likely timeframe? Related to that, has there been any exploration of overtime, adding extra hours to the working day or working at weekends? Is it a five-day service or a seven-day service? Have the boundaries been pushed and tested in that regard?

Mr. Declan Naughton: When we came back in June last year, we started doing five tests a day and we moved up to six tests a day. At that point we had planned to move to seven tests a day towards the end of December or the beginning of January this year and to provide eight tests a day perhaps two months or so thereafter, but the new level 5 restrictions really impacted on that. Right now, all of the reasons that we are doing six tests a day rather than eight tests a day are down to Covid. The Deputy will understand if I say that we are not quite sure when we will get back to doing seven or eight tests a day because it depends on the progress of the suppression of the disease. As I mentioned earlier, that will have a big impact in terms of us managing our backlog.

Deputy O'Rourke had a second question.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It was about the possibility of working overtime and on Saturdays and Sundays.

Mr. Declan Naughton: We do not have overtime so much in the evenings during winter-time, but we were doing overtime on Saturdays until recently. In many centres we are currently under-subscribed in terms of taking up test slots. In a number of centres where we still have a backlog, we are considering restoring overtime on Saturdays and that is something that will happen in the coming weeks.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will ask two short questions very quickly. I am looking for the figures for waiting times for tests in Louth, in particular for the new test centre in Drogheda.

Does Mr. Naughton have any figures for the remaining number of applications for the transfer of Northern Irish licences for cars, trucks, etc. due to Brexit? Do any issues arise in that regard?

Mr. Declan Naughton: Specifically, in Drogheda the number of people who could take a test in the morning if they were essential workers is 415. I will include that detail in the documentation I will send to the committee post the meeting.

On the exchange of licences, it was suggested in 2019 that there were probably 70,000 to 80,000 UK or Northern Ireland licence holders resident here. Right now, we have exchanged just more than 71,000. The numbers are falling in terms of daily intake which would suggest we have pretty much reached peak exchange.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Were there any issues?

Mr. Declan Naughton: There were no issues.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I will return to e-scooters again. I am not a philistine, but a couple of issues arise. I have noticed an increased number of cases where there is more than one person on the vehicle during a commute. This is probably a question for Mr. Waide. I frequently see an adult and a child or two adults on e-scooters. To me, that would require the RSA to start providing the Government with some sort of advice with respect to the legality of that.

The second issue I wish to raise is insurance. I know many in the cycling fraternity will not like me to mention the word "insurance", but Deputy Lowry mentioned a situation where some of these vehicles are weaving in and out of traffic. In the event of an accident, surely a car owner or scooter owner is entitled to claim for any repairs for damage caused, whether it is a car hitting an e-scooter or an e-scooter striking a car.

Chairman: I advise Mr. Rowland that we have to be out of here in a moment, so I ask him to make a very quick response to Senator Craughwell.

Mr. Michael Rowland: Regarding the carrying of more than one passenger, we have recommended that there should only be one passenger on board. We have also made recommendations in relation to the carriage of other goods, for example, shopping. We have recommended that it should be one person per scooter, and that they should not use the scooter as a vehicle for carrying any other loads, as such.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Sorry, what about the issue of insurance?

Mr. Michael Rowland: As far as I know, the Minister has made a determination that no insurance is required for these vehicles. That is the recommendation that he has made.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: What is the view of the RSA?

Mr. Michael Rowland: The RSA's concern is whether it will impact on road safety. For this reason, we did not make any recommendations on insurance. Our focus is on education, awareness and making sure people use these vehicles appropriately. The insurance aspect would not be an issue on which we would hold a view, as such.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses from the RSA for attending the engagement with the committee today. In summary, we ask that details of all the test centres and waiting times nationally, broken down by county and centre, be provided to the committee. Second, we would like to get a copy of the RSA submission to the Minister on the e-scooter legislation. I also have asked Mr. Naughton to provide details on the number of extra driving testers needed to bring the waiting time down from ten weeks to two weeks. Finally, the committee will write to the Minister about two issues. The first is the 40 additional testers that are required to bring the number up to 80 new testers, so that there is a complement of 218 testers. Second, we will also contact the Minister about the anomaly whereby essential workers can go for tests, but are awaiting the approved driver test hours. It is a hugely important issue to which we will return.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.02 p.m. *sine die*.