

Opening address to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communication Networks

By Liz O'Donnell Chairperson of the Road Safety Authority.

Wednesday 2 December 2020

Introduction

Mr Chairman Deputies and Senators. Good morning. It's always a pleasure to come back to the House, where I served as a Deputy and Minister for a period of fifteen years and made so many friends in all parties.

Thank you for your invitation to appear before the Committee today in the context of my reappointment by the Minister as Chairperson of the Road Safety Authority for a further term.

I am very happy to continue to serve in this capacity. Indeed, it has been an honour to contribute to the organisation and ambition of the Road Safety Authority for the last five years.

I would also like to put on the record of the House recognition of my predecessor as Chair the late Gay Byrne who sadly passed away in November 2019. Gay was the RSA's first Chair and made an important impact on public awareness of road safety. He was a man of so many talents as a broadcaster and chat show host that it would be too easy to forget his contribution to road safety. His work and achievements as Chair of the Road Safety Authority ought not to be just a footnote in his high-profile broadcasting career.

The aim of the RSA is quite simple: to save lives and prevent injuries by reducing the number and severity of collisions on the road. Yet to achieve success in delivering this is highly complex and although the RSA is the lead agency co-ordinating the Government Road Safety Strategy, we absolutely depend on key collaborations with partners and stakeholders across a wide range. To do this Strategy is vital.

Since the Irish government's first Road Safety Strategy 1998–2002, the number of deaths on Irish roads has fallen from 458 in 1998 to 140 in 2019. Ireland's safest year on record was in 2018, with 139 deaths recorded.

In 1998, Ireland had 124 deaths per million of population. This has reduced to 28 deaths per million in 2019. This represents a 77% reduction in deaths per million over this time.

None of the success so far could have been possible without all the stakeholders that signed up to the government's Road Safety Strategy working together in a coordinated way.

Road Safety Update

Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in fatalities with 10 more people being killed on our roads this year compared to last year. This is a concern and emphasises the need to continue focusing educational and enforcement measures to tackle the main causes of collisions. A breakdown of road deaths to date this year is provided in the Appendix.

Ireland is now a world leader in road safety, ranked the second safest European Union Member State in 2019, in terms of road mortality surpassed only by Sweden. Globally Ireland is ranked fourth safest country in the world. At an EU level Ireland is participating in a road safety exchange where the RSA is mentoring Portugal and Romania on how they can improve their road safety record.

Government Road Safety Strategy 2013 to 2020

The current Government Road Safety Strategy started in 2013 and concludes at the end of this year.

Between 2013 and 2019 road traffic fatalities have reduced by 26% in Ireland, while EU-27 rates have reduced by only 6%.

The implementation of measures contained in the Strategy have delivered this reduction.

New road safety legislation has had a positive impact on behaviour. For example, new laws on learner drivers, safe overtaking of cyclists, the introduction of screening for drug driving at the roadside, tougher penalties for drink driving, and the increase in penalty points for speeding, seatbelt and mobile phone offences.

The strategic and operational engagement by the RSA with AGS has also been a key success factor. The introduction of the Garda Mobility enforcement App was a significant milestone. And has been described as a game changer for road traffic enforcement.

Our Graduated Driver Licensing System saw the introduction of the 'Novice' for newly qualified drivers and a lower penalty points threshold for both novice and learner drivers was introduced.

The introduction of a risk-based approach to commercial vehicle enforcement. The introduction of updated Medical fitness to Drive Guidelines by the RSA and National Office for Traffic Medicine. The introduction of 30km speed limits in housing estates. The publication of landmark forensic collision investigation reports by the RSA and AGS plus collaboration with the Health Research Board on Collision data gathering. The continued investment in the National Road infrastructure and new road openings. And of course, the RSA's high-profile evidence based public campaigns. All have contributed over the last five years to the reduction in road deaths in injuries.

New Government Road Safety Strategy 2021 to 2030

The current Road Safety Strategy ends in 2020. The government's next Road Safety Strategy will last for 10 years, from 2021 to 2030.

This Strategy will be aligned with the EU Road Safety Policy Framework 2021–2030, which aims at halving the number of fatalities and serious injuries on European roads by 2030, as a milestone on the way to 'Vision Zero' – zero fatalities and serious injuries by 2050.

This is also in keeping with the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety which culminated in the forward looking 'Stockholm Declaration' which took place in February of this year and which calls for a new global target to reduce road deaths and injuries by 50% by 2030.

The current Programme for Government has identified that the next Government Road Safety Strategy will have a 'Vision Zero' approach at its core.

'Vision Zero' Approach

'Vision Zero' is a best-practice strategy that aims to eventually end all road traffic fatalities and severe injuries, supported by shorter-term targets. The long-term 'Vision Zero' strategy uses the 'Safe System' approach. It seeks the inclusion of road safety and a safe system approach as an integral element of land use, street design, transport system planning and governance, especially for vulnerable road users and in urban areas.

It recognises that people make mistakes that can lead to road crashes. These are often inadvertent mistakes made by otherwise compliant road users. The 'Safe system' compensate for this so that road users are always protected.

Delivering on a 'Vision Zero' won't be easy. It will be challenging but is achievable with the highest levels of leadership right down to local community level in this country. It is important to remember this is not an RSA Road Safety Strategy but a Government Road Safety Strategy. For it to be successful the buy in of all the key agencies into the Vision ZERO / Safe System approach is crucial.

And the reason we must deliver on this vision is for the families of those people who have been killed or seriously injured on our roads. I have read the letters and emails they've sent me. Their stories are why we are here, their stories are why we are committed to road safety. Their stories of tragedy, loss and heartbreak must strengthen our resolve. Vision Zero is not just a catchphrase it is a serious commitment to end all death on our road.

We must ensure however that in our road safety strategy, we not only reduce fatalities, but also the number of serious injuries. Road deaths represent only the 'tip of the iceberg' of road collisions.

Survivors of a serious collision may be viewed as the 'lucky ones' but, they are often dealing with life-changing injuries and personal trauma requiring many months and years of medical attention, rehabilitation and support. Not only are they learning to cope with their injuries, but their families, friends and loved ones are also coming to terms with these life changing injuries and how to support them every day. Serious injuries must be a new focus of the next strategy.

The strategy will not exist in isolation. There are other key government policies and commitments that will both support and influence the strategy, namely how we address climate change, greater active mobility and our support for more and better access to public transport.

We are going to see significant changes on our roads across the lifetime of the strategy.

Technology will be hugely transformative in terms of the vehicles that we drive. In the short-term we will see the introduction of increased safety standards and safety assist technology in cars to reduce the number of incidents and protect lives.

In the longer-term, we will see more connected and autonomous vehicles on our roads, and we will need to have the appropriate policy and legislation to support this.

At a practical level we are engaging with our key partners, An Garda Síochána, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the Medical Bureau of Road Safety, the Health and Safety Authority, Department of Justice, Local authorities etc. To evaluate how far we have come and how we set out our strategic ambition and goals for the next ten years. Public consultation is important in this regard and to date we have received in excess of 2,000 submissions from the public on what needs to be addressed in road safety over the next decade. This is an extraordinary response by the public and it clearly highlights the importance the public places on road safety as a social issue in this country.

Changing driver behaviour and eliminating poor choices and reckless driving like speeding and drink and drug driving is not easy. Buy in from the public is important. I want road safety to be a people's project, embraced by our citizens and our young people. I want it to reflect a new perspective of healthy living and sustainable development, in terms of land use, engineering and the construction of roads which are designed with how we want to use them and share them.

A key part of the next Government strategy will be how we protect the lives of vulnerable road users. The lockdowns of this year have transformed how roads are being used and shared by our citizens. Social distancing required by our efforts to combat the spread of Covid-19 has resulted in unprecedented space being made for active travel, walking, cycling, especially by younger people.

Just as remote working has transformed the workplace, interventions to provide space for vulnerable road users had transformed our transport environment and overall mobility. But this has created a new vision, a new possibility for the future not just during a pandemic. We must support this.

Digital Strategy.

A core goal of the RSA's Corporate Plan over the past five years is to drive 'digital transformation' in the delivery of our services, specifically with greater integration of online services. This is in line with the Government's digital strategy which promotes convenient, intuitive and joined up digital services for citizens.

This really is about reducing the administrative burden on both our customer and the RSA so that the efficiency of doing business is improved, time is saved, and customers benefit from a fast-efficient service.

Examples of what 'digital transformation' in the RSA means in practice includes the way people learn to drive and complete the learner permit to full licence journey including driver theory test, driving test booking, learner permits, licence without having to provide the same information repeatedly and making several visits to front offices to avail of the services. We will, of course, continue to provide a front office service for those customers who wish to avail of our services in person. Our streamlined service to customers will also have broader economic, societal and road safety benefits reducing unnecessary journeys, emissions, down time at work.

Our online services will be delivered through our new online 'customer portal' so that it becomes a one stop shop for all our customers who are learning to drive. It will also be the gateway to accessing other RSA services. The 'portal' will allow the customer to set their driving goal and see a clear journey map to achieve it, it will also include education and information to supports customers in becoming safe licensed drivers.

The full rollout of an online service for applying for and renewing a driver licence or learner permit went live this month. The timing of the delivery of this project, could not have been better and will enable people to apply online rather than having to visit a National Driver Licence Service centre in person. The uptake so far has been excellent, and the RSA will be promoting the new system and creating awareness of through targeted notifications to customers and social media initially.

Covid-19

Like other organisations, the RSA has been materially impacted throughout 2020 both financially and operationally as a result of the Covid-19 health emergency. We have put measures in place that allow for the operation of our services in a safe manner, adhering to public health guidelines. Doing so has reduced capacity. However, protecting RSA customers and staff is our primary goal. While the RSA has resumed most of its public services and continued to operate most services through the current Level 5 lockdown, it has as I say been at a reduced capacity basis.

We know that the issue of most concern and frustration for our customers is the delay for driving tests arising from the Covid-19. The RSA has taken steps to increase capacity, and we have made a formal submission to the Department of Transport seeking sanction for the

recruitment of additional driver testers. Indeed, our CEO Sam Waide has submitted a briefing note to the Committee recently providing an update on the status of our services, and this is appended to the opening statement for your information.

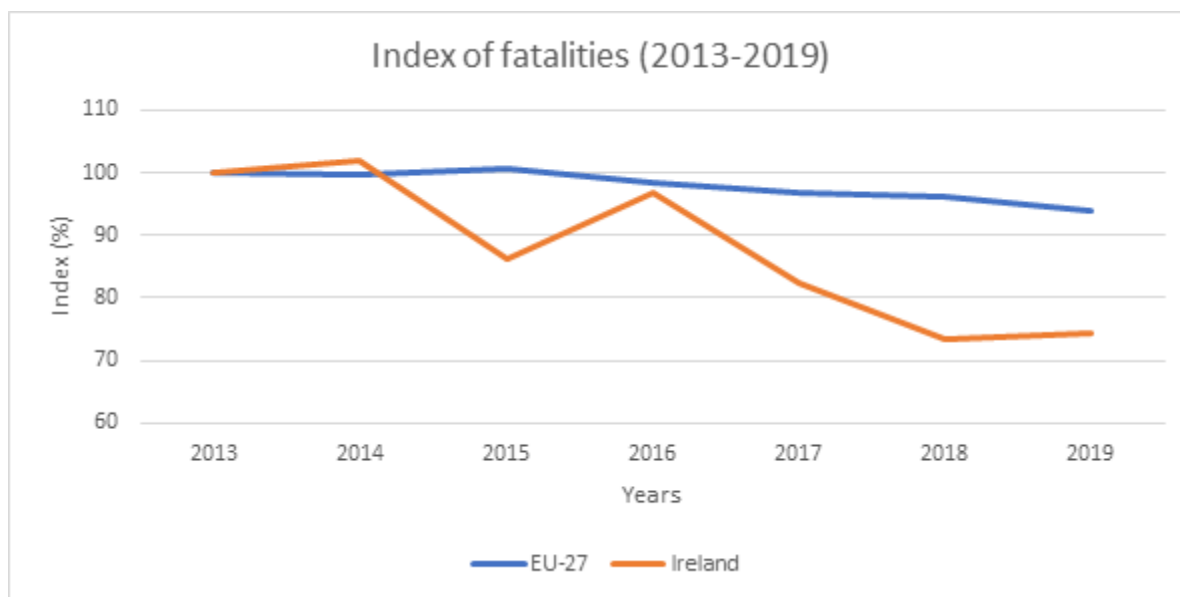
The RSA has continually engaged with its parent Department of Transport on its financial position and on the maintenance of its public services throughout 2020 and will continue this engagement into 2021.

Finally, in my role as Chairperson, if the committee ratifies my nomination today, I will continue working with my fellow Board members, the staff of the RSA, and other agencies to prevent further needless loss of life and injury resulting from road trauma.

I am happy to take questions members may have in relation to my nomination.

Appendix

Figure 1, Index of road traffic fatalities for Ireland and EU-27, 2013-2019



Source: European Commission, 2020 available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/transport/road_safety/road-safety-facts-figures-1_en

Casualty Statistics YTD (30/11/2020)

As of the 30 November 2020, there have been 135 fatalities as a result of 127 fatal crashes on Irish roads, compared to 125 fatalities following 115 fatal crashes up to the same period in 2019. This means that there have been 10 more people killed this year compared to last.

Table 1. Road User Fatalities From 1 January – 30 November, 2019 vs 2020*

Road User Fatalities	2019	2020	+/-
Driver	63	54	-9
Passenger	14	24	+10
Pedestrian	25	29	+4
Motorcyclist	15	17	+2
Cyclist	8	11	+3
Total	125	135	+10

*Provisional and subject to change