

## **Opening Statement by Mr. Brendan Walsh to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communication, Wednesday 20th September 2023.**

Good afternoon, everyone.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee, through the Chair, for the opportunity to speak to you all this afternoon to discuss issues impacting the National Car Testing Service and the Driver Testing Service. Given, recent events on our roads and in relation to Ireland's road safety performance so far this year, it is with great sadness that we acknowledge the tragic loss of life on Ireland's roads in 2023, and on behalf of myself and my colleagues in the RSA, I would like to extend my condolences to all of the bereaved families across the country at this most difficult time.

Over the time period 1st January 2023 to 10 September 2023, there have been 120 fatal collisions, which have resulted in 130 fatalities on Irish roads, which is 25 more deaths (+24%) compared to the same period in 2022. In addition, almost 850 people have been seriously injured in road traffic collisions so far this year.

The RSA welcomes the Committee's invitation to appear before you next week for a focused discussion on road safety, along with other delivery partners will provide more detail in relation to our road safety performance, and to outline our short and long term priorities to reverse this trend, including progress on a number of priority actions identified within the government Road Safety Strategy.

I will begin by providing the Committee with an update on the NCT.

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

The Road Safety Authority has overall responsibility for the operation, oversight, development, quality assurance and delivery of the National Car Testing Service (NCTS). The NCT was introduced in 2000 and, over the past 23 years, it has played an important role in improving road safety in Ireland. It has also played a vital role in protecting the environment as the NCT also enforces regulations around vehicle emissions.

The service is provided at 49 test centres nationwide with a new NCT Centre due to open in the coming weeks in Castleisland in Co Kerry bringing the total number of NCT Centres to 50. In addition, there are plans to open new NCT centres in 4 locations, to cater for future long term needs. These centres are planned in Limerick/Clare, Cork, Cavan/Monaghan, and Dublin.

The responsibility for the delivery of the NCT service lies solely with the Contractor Applus, and Applus's Managing Director Mark Synnott, who is here with me today and will provide a comprehensive update on the service to the Committee shortly.

The RSA's statutory obligations in respect of the NCT are to exercise a supervisory and oversight role to ensure the service is provided in line with the service's Project Agreement. We also work with our parent department, the Department of Transport, in assisting them in relation to the development of policy around vehicle roadworthiness and vehicle standards, which is a key factor in road safety in Ireland.

To assist the RSA in carrying out our supervisory role, we appointed a Supervision Services Contractor (SSC), Deloitte, to carry out certain supervisory services on its behalf. This involves monitoring the contractor's achievement of performance and service levels and reporting on these regularly to the RSA.

Another structural approach to performance monitoring and oversight the RSA has put in place is the appointment of AA Ireland as Technical Inspections Services Provider. They regularly monitor the delivery of the service at the 49 test centres nationwide and at the contractor's headquarters. This includes observing tests and conducting independent tests.

In 2023 as of the end of July, the AA carried out more than 2,654 observed tests and more than 2,063 independent tests. The results show that more than 99% of testing is carried out correctly.

In addition to regular strategic oversight meetings, we meet the contractor on a weekly basis, to facilitate and monitor progress on changes to work practices designed to increase capacity following the disruption caused by COVID and other challenges faced by the service since early 2020.

I want to acknowledge that Applus are not currently meeting the waiting time service level of 12 days as per the project agreement due to demand and capacity issues, which Mr Synott will expand upon. But I do believe it is important to reflect here that there are a number of key service levels which are being met in full and exceeded in some cases. These include customer satisfaction, telephone response times, number of customer complaints and test accuracy.

- 85.2% Customer Satisfaction (SLA 83%)

- 94% of telephone calls answered within 15 seconds (SLA 90%)
- 0.09% of customer complaints as a percentage of National Car tests (SLA 0.1%)
- 98.66% Test Accuracy

Turning to the issue of the backlog itself, the service faced some serious challenges in 2020 & 2021 as a result of deferred tests from Covid 19. To address the deferred tests NCTs required a significant increase in it's testing resource, however the constraints of the local Labour Market particularly in 2022 & year-to-date has resulted in a significant shortfall in the available testers that Applus were able to recruit. A point which was shared with this committee on my previous appearance. However, with the support of the Department of Transport, Department of Enterprise Trade & Employment and indeed the members of this committee, the state approved 200 work permits to date that allowed Applus to recruit testers from the Philippines of which 90 are in situ and a further 50 have their work permits approved and are expected to be operational by the end of November 2023.

I am acutely aware that a commitment was given to this committee, the Minister and the public that the service would be returned to normal operating levels by June 2023. Regrettably this was not achieved due to a prolonged overseas recruitment process, given the interdependencies of multiple government departments and necessary due process. All stakeholders have lessons learned from this process and the current recruitment process is progressing well. It is our expectation that the NCTs will be back to normal operational levels by the end of 2023.

The average lead time for an appointment for a test is currently 18.6 days against a target of 12 days nationally.

Mr Synnott will shortly outline the extensive plan and measures that the NCTs have undertaken to increase capacity within the service. These include an extensive recruitment programme in Ireland and abroad, increased overtime and extending opening hours.

However, I wish to acknowledge the frustration and confusion that customers have experienced as a result of the delays in securing a test appointment. The message I wish to tell our customers is that we are on track to return the service to normal by the end of 2023 and I want to thank you the committee and to ask for your patience as we work with our contractor to achieve this.

### **Driver Testing Service**

Turning to the Driver Testing Service and the current position at the end of August 2023 and I would like to give the Committee an insight into the current position of the service;

- As of the end of August this year, 16,043 people have been scheduled to sit a driving test in the following four weeks this has increased from 13,980 in October 2022 as per my first appearance at this committee.
- In addition there are 71,554 learner drivers waiting to receive an invitation to book their test up from 44,545 in October 2022.

- In Q2 2019 there were 230,729 active learner permits in the state and the average from the previous 2 years was stable vs this figure. As of the end of Q2 2023 there are 352,887 driver learner permits active in the state representing an increase of 53%. We are experiencing increases from those aged 17-20 where the increase has been 64% and from those aged 30-39 where the increase has been 54%.

A further 28,459 learner drivers had applied for their driving test though, they were not eligible to sit a test yet, usually because they have not completed their 12 mandatory lessons or the six-month rule applies – whereby they cannot sit a test in the first six months of having received their first learner permit.

Therefore, to be clear the actual number of learner drivers who are available, eligible and waiting for an invitation to book their driving test is 71,554 up from 44,545 in October 2022, an increase of 61%

At the moment, the national average time to invite for a test is 30 weeks which is unsatisfactory. The service level agreement that is in place with the Department of Transport is to maintain an average waiting time of 10 weeks. Where a learner driver fails their test and reappplies, we endeavour to invite them to book another test date 6-8 weeks after their failed test, this is longer in some centres with exceptionally high demand. Those waiting for a truck / bus or motorcycle test are generally invited 10-12 weeks after applying.

To put this in context, the RSA is currently providing an average of 4,000 tests per week, up from 3,186 in October 2022 when we first briefed the Joint Oireachtas Committee. The number of applications made for a driving test in 2023 is 5,024 per week, on average, and has increased from 3,254 applications per week in 2018 which is the historical reference period for RSA as being “normal service” levels.

The backlog of applications which built up throughout the pandemic were effectively cleared earlier in 2022 and reduced to a six-week waiting average and the new demand was being met up until July / August 2022.

Since then, unfortunately, there have been challenges to meeting increased demand. These challenges included,

- a 16% increase in applications for a driving test vs the same period in 2022 owing to the increased level of drivers passing through the Essential Driver Training (EDT) cycle
- Need for dedicated training of staff to conduct tests in higher categories so as to meet the demand for truck, bus and motorcycle tests;
- reduced workforce owing to staff retirements and contracted staff reaching the end dates on their contracts;

To meet increased demand, we were given sanction by the Department of Transport to increase the number of permanent driver testers from 100 to 130 in early 2022 and all these posts were filled by an open competition. The RSA made a request to the Department of

Transport for additional driving testers and this was approved on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2023. The RSA was granted approval to recruit up to 75 additional -Driving testers for a period of 2 years, and my colleague Ms. Alison Coleman will be happy to take questions in relation to our recruitment process, which commenced immediately after this approval. We are delighted to say that the first 14 recruits have successfully passed through their training and are now operational since the 18<sup>th</sup> September.

Over the past 20 months we have seen applications for driving tests at unprecedented levels, for example up to the end of August we have received 170,826 vs 169,237 for the full year in 2018. This is driven by a number of factors, including population growth, inward migration, and an increase in drivers under instruction by Approved Driving Instructors (ADI's). The number of applications for learner permits has also increased to record levels and currently stands are +35% vs the same period in 2019 and continues to grow. Our indicators, that we track through the service from learner to licenced driver, will provide us with the information that will allow us identify the number of driver testers required in the future and we are working with our colleagues in the Department of Transport to monitor the data points and to ensure that we are staffed correctly to deliver the 10 week SLA after the temporary sanction expires.

I know the Committee wants to know when we will be in a position to meet the SLA of 10 weeks and I want to be clear on that. Based on our permanent and temporary staff the Driver testing SLA is expected to be achieved in mid 2024.



I would like to reiterate the position with regards to requests for urgent driving tests: if a customer is a Critical Frontline Worker employed by the HSE, a private hospital or the emergency services and need to drive in the course of their duties they may submit a request using the form on the RSA website. If that request is approved, then the customer will be prioritised.

In the interest of fairness and transparency to all customers, invitations to book a test slot are issued in strict rotation, with those who applied and are eligible being invited first. Where a customer has previously failed their car test and reapplied, these are fast-tracked and sent a new booking invitation 6 to 8 weeks after their previous test, this is longer in some centres with particularly high demand.

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

ENDS