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**Opening Statement by Mr. Sam Waide to the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks, Tuesday 2 March 2021.**

Good morning everyone and thank you Deputy O’Donnell for that introduction.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee, through the Chair, most sincerely for the opportunity to speak to you all this morning to discuss the Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill and delays in driving licence renewals and driving tests caused by the current Covid-19 health crisis.

I am joined this morning ‘virtually’ by some of my Senior Leadership team and together we will endeavour to answer your queries.

Chair, we have submitted a note for members on the issues under discussion. I don’t propose to read it in full, but I would like to touch on the main points in the interests of addressing the key concerns which Committee members may have

**Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill**

As you know the Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan TD announced on Monday 1 February the Government’s approval to draft legislation which address several road traffic and road safety related issues.

The main provisions of the Bill include legislation around the use of e-scooters and legislation relating to e-bikes. In addition to legislation relating to e-scooters and e-bikes, the Bill will also include a revision of legislation in relation to the giving of driving instruction for reward and the introduction of a new power for the Road Safety Authority to revoke a driving licence and legislation for the testing of autonomous vehicles on Irish Roads.

The RSA very much welcomes the bill, and its provisions and looks forward to more details being published. It also goes without saying that we are also available to participate in more detailed pre-legislative scrutiny at that time should the committee wish.

Moving to the RSA’s services. The following summarises the situation regarding our services and the impact, which is ongoing, that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on these services.

**Let me start with the Driver Theory Test.**

The extension of Covid19 level 5 restrictions by Government, until at least the 5 April, means that the Driver Theory Test continues to be suspended.

Over 80,000 driver theory test appointments were in place over the coming months, which are now being rescheduled because the suspension of the service is being extended.

We are very much focused, in line with government advices, on meeting demand and restoring pre-covid waiting times when the service does reopen.

We have plans to significantly increase capacity within the service when it can re-open. This includes increasing capacity from an average pre Covid19 output of 15,000 to 50,000 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 Pro Proctor. Pro Proctor was trialled, last December and January, for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses. The pilot is now being evaluated and the RSA is committed to extending the service for all theory test types during 2021.

**Turning to driving licences and the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS)**

Minister of State Hildegarde Naughton announced details of a further extension to the expiry dates of driving 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 [www.ndls.ie](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ndls.ie%2F&data=04%7C01%7Cbfarrell%40rsa.ie%7C4081da0bf3664bf6a39808d8d8ab1248%7C133605650cc244fe9a5b4f4ec41b8171%7C0%7C0%7C637497576546770923%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=fbJnah4VAGQpybD7QD2eb0mKGpv4SSu1qx%2FdpF4RQfc%3D&reserved=0). Enter the expiry date printed on your driving licence into the calculator and it will tell you the new expiry date. The RSA has also told Insurance Ireland and An Garda Síochána about the extension to driving licences.

Processing times for driving licences are taking longer than usual at the moment with standard applications being processed within a 12 – 15 day average as against a normal 3-5 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 the expiry dates of licences, will result in reduced applications. In addition we are undertaking a number of measures with our service provider which will improve the rate of processing, and we anticipate that turn around times will return to normal levels shortly.

For those who do need to apply for a licence or learner permit 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 Services Card (PSC) and verified MyGovID account, can apply for their licence or permit online. To date in 2021 over 40% of customers have applied online.

**I know that the members are anxious about the backlog that is building up in the Driver Testing Service so I’ll now provide an update on this.**

From the outset, we should not underestimate the impact that Covid-19 has had on the driving test and the challenges faced by RSA driver testers to deliver the driving test safely during this global pandemic.

The RSA’s priority is the safety of our staff, safety of the test environment and the safety of our 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 driving tests. The service is being delivered safely and in line with public health advice.

Our driver testers are at work every day testing people in cars, trucks, and buses so that supply chains can keep open and those deemed as essential under regulations, can continue to provide their essential work. That’s keeping the economy going.

I must commend our testers for their commitment to road safety and to delivering a vital public service at this time.

Pre-pandemic the waiting time for a driving test was 6 weeks. As a result of Covid19, suspended services for over 4 months, and ongoing restrictions has generated significant backlogs.

The extension of Covid19 level 5 restrictions by Government until at least the 5 April means that the driver testing service can only deliver driving tests to essential workers.

Because we can only test essential workers, we are not able to fill all our available capacity. Most recently, circa 25% of driving test slots are going unused. We expect this to persist during level 5 restrictions.

It is not possible to provide waiting times for the driving 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 and 62,024 are waiting for a test. The remaining 30,720 are ineligible for a test. Those who are ineligible are generally customers who haven’t completed mandatory lessons.

If all customers who are eligible to be tested at present, i.e. if there were no restrictions, were offered a test appointment in chronological order, we estimate that average waiting times would be more than 20 weeks.

The RSA is making good progress in recruiting an additional 40 driver testers, that were sanctioned by the Minister, and our expectation is that 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 10 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.

**Finally, the RSA launched a new customer portal MyRoadSafety.ie** on 30 November 2020. MyRoadSafety.ie is a one stop shop for all RSA services. Initial teething problems with the new system led to issues for our driving test customers, in particular long call waiting times to access our Customer Care Centre (CCC). This was compounded by large numbers of customers contacting us looking for a driving test date.

We have assigned additional resources to our customer call centre, and reduced call wait times by 50%. However, volumes are continuing at high levels with driver testing wait times being the main query.

That concludes my opening Statement.

Chairperson I would be happy to take any questions you or the committee members may have.