

Opening Statement by Mr. Sam Waide to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communication, Wednesday 1 February 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 affecting the National Car Testing Service and the Driving Test service.

Please note that in addition to my opening statement I have provided the Committee with a submission document which provides more details on the services

However, before I begin, I want to acknowledge to the committee members and to anyone watching that in the areas of the NCT and the Driving Test services our customers are not getting the level of service that we want to deliver today, and in the course of our discussions we will get an opportunity to say why that is and what we are doing to fix it. I want to apologise for any inconvenience caused and want to assure everyone that we are working hard to rectify them.

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.

Following a procurement process run in accordance with EU procurement rules, the contract for the provision of the service for the period June 2020 to June 2030 was awarded to Applus Inspection Services Ireland Ltd.

The service is provided at 49 test centres nationwide and there are plans to open new centres in an additional 5 locations, to cater for increased demand.

The responsibility for the operation and delivery of the NCT service lies solely with the Contractor Applus, and Applus's Country Manager Mr. Mark Synott, who is here with me today, 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. The Project Agreement specifies the performance standards for the contractor and covers

such matters as premises, test equipment, staffing, test arrangements, facilities management, information technology, media and marketing, and customer service.

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 Authority 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, including,

- Average waiting times nationally and at individual test centres
- If a customer waits more than 28 days for a test, that they are offered a free test, within certain parameters. That 90% of customers receive a notification 4-6 weeks in advance of their test due date and 100% at least 5 days in advance of test due date.
- That the test operations ensure that testing is conducted in a consistent manner and that procedures protect test integrity.
- At least 90% of telephone calls to the call centre are answered within fifteen (15) seconds.
- That customer satisfaction and mystery shopping surveys are undertaken and that findings meet the standards required.
- That operational audits are undertaken.

Performance monitoring and oversight which RSA has put in place is the appointment of AA Ireland as Technical Inspections Services Provider. They regularly monitor the delivery of the service. This includes observing tests and conducting independent tests.

In 2022, the AA carried out more than 4,600 observed tests and more than 2,600 independent tests. The results show that more than 99% of testing is carried out correctly.

In addition to regular strategic oversight meetings, we have met the contractor on a weekly basis, over the past year, to facilitate introduction and monitor progress on changes to work practices to increase capacity following the disruption caused by COVID and other challenges faced by the service since mid-2022.

I want to acknowledge that Applus are not currently meeting the waiting time service level due to demand and capacity issues, which Mr. Synnott 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.

Turning to the issue of the backlog itself, it is no exaggeration that the service has faced some serious challenges due to the impact of COVID, which caused significant staff absenteeism levels at test centres and in the call centre. There were also very high levels of customer no-shows and late cancellations. Reduced availability of new cars, has meant there are more older cars in the Irish fleet. This means there are circa 1.5m cars to be tested at NCT this year.

There have also been additional challenges, distinct from COVID-19 and relating to broader employment trends which have had an impact in mid-to late 2022 - difficulties in retaining and recruiting Vehicle Inspectors has also exacerbated the problem.

Taken together, these issues have caused a backlog to build. The average lead time for an appointment for a test is currently 25 days. Before the pandemic the waiting time would have been less than 12 days.

Mr. Synnott will shortly outline the plan and measures that they have been undertaken to increase capacity. These include an extensive recruitment programme in Ireland and abroad, increased overtime and opening hours. This plan will deliver improvements to the service over the coming months and a return to normal service levels by June of this year.

Driving Test Service

Turning to the Driving Test Service, I would like to update the Committee on the current position of the service at the end December 2022;

- 15,813 had been scheduled to sit a driving test in the following four weeks
- 47,364 learner drivers were waiting to receive an invitation to book their test

Separately, 49,105 customers were issued with an invitation to book a test date by the RSA but did not use that invitation within the 10 days provided.

Lastly, while a further 24,003 learner drivers have applied for a driving test date, they were not eligible to sit a test, 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 appointment to sit a driving test is 47,364.

At the moment, the national average time to invite for a test is 19 weeks. 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 reapplies, we endeavour to invite them to book another test date 6-8 weeks after their failed test.

To put this in context, the RSA is currently providing an average of 4,000 tests per week, up from 3,000 in October 2022.

The backlog of applications which built up throughout the pandemic were effectively cleared earlier in 2022 and new demand was being met within expectations up until July / August 2022.

Since then, unfortunately, there have been challenges to meeting increased demand, including,

- a 36% increase in applications for a driving test in 2022;
- there has also been a new and very significant increase in the number of learner permits issued across all age groups since mid-2021.
- reduced workforce owing to staff retirements and contracted staff reaching the end dates on their contracts;
- a need for dedicated training of staff to conduct tests in higher categories so as to meet the demand for truck, bus and motorcycle tests;

To meet increased demand known at the start of 2022, we were given sanction by the Department of Transport to increase the number of permanent driver testers from 100 to 130 in early 2022. The vast majority of these permanent testers commenced in December and the remaining three commenced in January this year.

As of end January, the Driver Testing Service currently has 125 permanent testers, taking into account statutory leave, and 10 contracted driver testers available to conduct driving tests.

However, as outlined to the Committee back in October, this resource level is not enough. The current staffing level will **neither** reduce the backlog of driving tests, **nor** will it meet the projected future demands for the service (based on the learner permit demand).

In December, the RSA submitted a request to the Department of Transport seeking sanction for 40 additional temporary resources, as a full complement of circa 165 testers is required to bring us to a point where we work through the backlog and meet the 10 week average wait time.

However, beyond 2023 / 2024 the RSA projects that a permanent pool of 170 testers is required, year-in-year-out, to meet estimated future demand in the service.

We are committed to restoring the service to the 10 weeks waiting time. If a positive decision on sanction is received for the 40 additional temporary testers in the coming days, we will be able to complete the recruitment process by July, offer contracts thereafter, complete training and have those individuals testing by October. With these interventions the service would return to the levels expected. From this point onwards, we will see improvements in waiting times immediately in October, with those lists where waiting times are longest targeted first.

As CEO of the RSA, I wish to acknowledge the frustration and confusion that customers have experienced as a result of the delays in securing a test appointment for the Driving Test Service and the National Car Test Service. I want to apologise to customers for this.

The message I wish to tell our customers is that we are doing everything we can to return the services to normal and I want to thank you and to ask for your continued patience as we work to reduce waiting times.

Road Safety

I have provided an update on the current situation regarding progress in road safety in the submission document provided to the Committee.

Despite our long-term progress in reducing fatalities on Irish roads, we saw a 14% increase in road traffic fatalities in 2022.

As of 30 January, there have been 18 fatalities on our roads, 4 more deaths compared to the same date last year.

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

ENDS