

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Infrastructure

VEHICLE TESTING SERVICES UPDATE

Published at 10:30 am on Thursday 27 February 2020

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The current disruption to vehicle testing services at MOT centres from the 21st January because of difficulties with the operation of the lifts is unacceptable. My priority has been and remains the safety of DVA staff and customers. Since the moment I was notified of this issue, I have worked to minimise the disruption and to work as quickly as possible to return to a safe, fully operational service.

Over the past five weeks of this disruption, I have acted quickly to ensure all drivers could remain on the road. This included the immediate issuing of Temporary Exemption Certificates, extended opening hours at MOT centres and the commissioning of two independent reviews to provide me with expert advice on the next steps.

I can now confirm that the first review, conducted by independent engineers, has concluded and an executive summary has now been published on my Department's website. The independent expert assessment on the condition of the existing lifts has recommended that all lifts exhibiting signs of fatigue are considered to be beyond their possible product life expectancy and should be replaced not repaired. This assessment ruled out the possibility of short term repairs due to the location of the fault and whilst a more complete replacement of the key parts, including the scissor legs, could be done this would have to be completed off site and would take as long as a full lift replacement. This would also create a risk that other parts of the repaired lifts may fail after reinstallation given the age of the equipment, which may lead to further disruption.

In considering the possibility of a lift replacement programme, Construction & Procurement Delivery (CPD) in the Department of Finance provided me with independent advice on the purchase of the lifts. The advice from CPD was that the quickest way to install new lifts was to use the existing contract. To use another supplier would significantly delay the installation of new lifts. I also sought further QC legal advice which confirmed to me that legal proceedings could be protracted, costly and would not guarantee a resolution for the public.

The audit investigation will conclude shortly but I have been assured by the lead auditor that, in her professional opinion, they have not identified anything which would indicate that new lifts should not be purchased from MAHA.

Therefore, on careful consideration of the range of options, including protracted legal action, I have decided based on expert engineering, audit, procurement and legal advice, to place an order with MAHA for 52 lifts through an accelerated production programme. New lifts will begin to be installed from late April, with all lifts to be in place by mid-July. The lifts will cost £1.8m and will be financed from DVA reserves which have been put aside for that purpose.

I am determined that lessons must be learnt and this must not happen again. Recommendations from all the findings from the various independent reports will be implemented. It is clear that an inadequate inspection regime and metal fatigue has led to this situation. Going forward measures will be put in place to ensure this issue can never arise again. This includes the introduction of an

improved equipment replacement cycle, a review of the contract management regime to be deployed by DVA with MAHA and improvements will be made to the maintenance and inspection regime and reporting by MAHA. Additional regular independent robust inspections and assurances will be arranged by DVA, adding an additional layer of protection. DVA will therefore now work with CPD and MAHA to put in place a revised maintenance and inspection contract from 1 April 2020 which will provide the necessary arrangements to ensure this type of incident does not occur again.

Until all the lifts are replaced and fully operational, I will ensure that all vehicles continue to be provided with the necessary cover to allow them to remain on the road; either through the issuing of Temporary Exemption Certificates (TEC) or a priority appointment with the DVA for four year old vehicles, dealerships and taxis. Road safety is a priority for me and I want to emphasise the responsibility of road users to ensure their vehicles are roadworthy at all times, regardless of the current situation.

The advice to customers remains the same as currently and the priority vehicle contact line, for owners of four year old vehicles, taxis and car dealerships will continue to operate to make it easier for these vehicle owners to contact DVA for an urgent appointment. I have instructed my officials to ensure that there is clear and regular advice to, and communication with, the public as this situation progresses to full resolution.

While these steps will return our centres safely and swiftly to full operation, there is still more to do. This situation has brought to light the need to improve our MOT system and centres and I will be considering this over the coming months.

Finally, I appreciate that this has been a difficult time for both customers and staff. I want to pay tribute to the staff working in these challenging circumstances, with considerable uncertainty, as they continually seek to provide the best possible service to their customers. I hugely appreciate their commitment to their roles and thank them for their dedication, patience and loyalty at this difficult time. DVA sincerely apologises to all of those affected but the safety of staff and customers will always be the top priority.