

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Infrastructure

FAILURE OF LIFTS IN DVA TEST CENTRES: PUBLICATION OF AUDIT INVESTIGATION REPORT

Published at 3.15 pm on Thursday 23 April 2020.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Members are aware that most vehicle testing services at MOT centres were suspended in late January, for safety reasons, given the faults identified in the scissor lifts across all of the MOT centres. At that time, I commissioned two independent reviews. The first was a short, review by independent engineers exploring the steps needed to return the MOT centres to full service operation; the second, a fuller investigation focusing on the timeline of events which led to the 55 lifts being taken out of operation.

I confirmed the outcome of the first review by the independent engineers to the Assembly in a Written Ministerial Statement on 27 February and have published the report on my Department's website. I also gave a commitment that the second independent report would be published to ensure full transparency on this issue. Unfortunately this process has been slightly delayed because of the COVID 19 pandemic and the focus on other urgent priorities. However, I am now in a position to publish this report and am, later today, placing a copy of it on my Department's website.

Key findings

This investigation was conducted by the NICS Group Audit Service, which is independent from my Department. It undertook a very thorough review to determine when the issue was first identified, what actions were taken to resolve the issue including the role of both DVA and the supplier and to understand how the operational management of the maintenance contract impacted on the issue.

As is the case with all audit reports, a copy of this investigation report has been provided to the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The investigation has provided clarity on the timeline of events and the auditors concluded that it was reasonable for DVA to place reliance on the equipment manufacturer, supplier and maintenance contractor, MAHA, and the independent engineering insurance inspection reports.

As the Assembly will know, DVA was not alone in doing so and similar issues have arisen with similar lifts in test centres in the south and in other parts of Europe which other vehicle testing authorities have also had to deal with.

Nonetheless, the report does raise important questions around DVA's approach to some aspects of its lift maintenance and inspection regime, including in relation to setting target dates and timescales. They need careful attention so that lessons are learned and to prevent such disruption to the public from ever happening again.

It is also concerning that the report finds that the overall standard of record management observed within DVA was less than satisfactory. That is not acceptable, not least given the recent focus on the importance of good record keeping. I have already made clear that I expect to see clear improvement in this area within DVA but I also need to be satisfied that similar problems do not arise across the Department and be provided with regular updates to ensure this never recurs.

Members will be aware that DVA is planning to transition to a new supplier of test centre equipment, with installation expected from 2022 and the intention was therefore to only replace any lift which had reached its absolute life end. To inform this, MAHA carried out a survey of all existing vehicle testing equipment, including the lifts, in October 2018. This survey showed that the lifts, whilst showing signs of wear and tear, were generally in good condition. The audit report finds that DVA took assurance from the 2018 survey that a major refresh of lifts would not be necessary and did not anticipate the scenario where all the lifts would be taken out of service at the same time.

The report also identifies wider learning which must be captured and applied in DVA and indeed more widely. Those lessons include ensuring that clear target dates are set for reporting back by inspectors, better record keeping, particularly with regard to the making of key decisions and the need for repairs to be carried out with prior approval.

Key lessons

In line with the findings of the independent engineer's report, I remain clear that an inadequate inspection regime and metal fatigue led to this situation. As I have noted above, lessons must be learnt and every step taken to ensure this situation does not happen again.

Under my instruction new contractual arrangements are being taken forward in partnership with the Department of Finance's Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) team for DVA to procure the independent engineering inspectors directly. Their reports will be provided directly to DVA's Health and Safety team. The Health and Safety team will take ownership of these reports and ensure any necessary follow up actions are implemented by MAHA, through the DVA Contract Management team, and closely monitored. Where there is an immediate health and safety issue arising from these inspections, the MOT Centre Manager and the Health and Safety team will be informed immediately by the inspector.

DVA is also liaising with MAHA with regard to the expected lifetime of an inspection lift taking into account the load collective / load distribution; vehicle weight; and the number of lift cycles / vehicles inspections. Based on this assessment, a thorough review of the condition of each vehicle lift will be conducted at an appropriate point in the lifetime of each lift. This condition survey will be externally verified to provide some further assurance as to the quality of the assessment and the reasonableness of any assumptions or recommendations. This will then inform a proactive lift replacement programme.

Turning to that replacement programme, the new lifts are now ready for installation on a phased basis. Members will be aware that I have offered all of our MOT centres to the Minister for Health and our Health and Social Care Trusts for use as COVID-19 testing centres or indeed for any other purpose that might be helpful as we fight back against the coronavirus and its devastating impacts. This has meant that the replacement programme requires very careful management and new lifts will only be installed in those centres that the Department of Health and the Trusts have confirmed will not be required as part of our COVID-19 response. If, at some later point after lifts have been installed, those centres are needed I have assured the Health Minister and our health care workers that the offer still stands and that they will have priority use of our MOT centres for the duration of this crisis.

Next steps

I have asked my Permanent Secretary to ensure that the report's findings and learning are followed up robustly and at pace. The first step will be the development of an action plan with clear and specific actions and timescales and I am pleased to report that work to finalise this plan is well in hand. The plan will be signed off by me and only when I am satisfied that it is capable of addressing the issues and shortcomings that are identified in the report. I will also make this available to Members as soon as possible.

Progress in delivering the actions that the plan sets out will be monitored in the first instance by the DVA's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee which will provide a scrutiny and challenge function to ensure that actions are implemented in a timely manner. The Committee will also review the annual DVA Audit plan to ensure any control weaknesses highlighted in the report are reviewed during this financial year, with a particular focus on Contract Management.

Because of the seriousness of the issues in the report, and their wider application, the plan will also be directly and closely monitored by my Permanent Secretary in her role as Accounting Officer. I have

made it clear that DVA will be required to provide regular monthly updates on progress in implementing the action plan and my Permanent Secretary and I will be scrutinising these carefully, with the assistance of the Department's own Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, to make sure that progress is not only made but sustained.

Additionally, my Permanent Secretary will be taking action to ensure that learning from the investigation, including in relation to contract management and record keeping, is applied more widely across the Department.

The fact that this situation arose is unacceptable and I want to assure Members and the public that I have taken all of the independent engineering, procurement and audit advice I requested, and steps and processes will continue to be put in place to ensure that this situation never arises again.