



Opening Address to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport

By Liz O'Donnell, Chairperson Designate, Road Safety Authority

Tuesday 11 November 2014.

Mr Chairman, Deputies and Senators. Good afternoon.

I am honoured to have been nominated by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Pascal Donohoe, as chairperson of the Road Safety Authority. I want to thank the Chairman and members of this committee for the invitation to come before you today.

As a former Deputy and Minister, it's always a pleasure to come back to Leinster House, where I spent a considerable period of my life and made many good friends of all parties and none.

By way of background, I was first elected to Dublin City Council in 1991 for the Progressive Democrats. Before that I was active in the women's movement, canvassing for Mary Robinson's presidential campaign as a volunteer and Vice Chair of the Women's Political Association.

I was first elected to the Dáil in 1992 and served as Progressive Democrats TD for Dublin South from 1992 to 2007. I was my initially party's spokeswoman on Health and Social Welfare and later as Whip and Spokesperson on Justice.

In July 1997, I was appointed Minister of State at the Dept. of Foreign Affairs with responsibility for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and Human Rights, a position I held until 2002.

In this capacity, I had a role in Anglo-Irish relations. I was a member of the Government's negotiating team in the multi-party talks at Stormont, culminating in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

In 2007, I was promoted to cabinet as Minister of State to the Government on the retirement of my dear colleague Robert Molloy TD.

I was a long-time member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Committee of Procedure and Privileges and a member of the first Commission of the Houses of the Oireachtas. I also served as Chief Whip and as Deputy Leader of the Progressive Democrats.

I retired from politics following the 2007 General Election.

I now work on a diverse portfolio of activities which includes, journalism, public affairs consultancy and lecturing.

I wish to put on the record how honoured I am to have been asked by Minister Donohoe, to take on the role of Chairperson of the RSA. I am glad to offer my experience to the role and hope I can make a valuable contribution to reducing fatalities and serious injuries on our roads.

I acknowledge the important remit of the RSA and the very committed staff of diverse qualifications there. In particular I would like to praise the work of my predecessor Chair, Mr Gay Byrne, who played such a ground-breaking role in promoting the interests of road safety in Ireland. Gay's passionate contribution to road safety since 2006 has been immense. He has been a tireless campaigner and helped keep the spotlight focused on this important health and social policy area.

The aim of the Road Safety Authority is quite simple: to save lives and prevent injuries by reducing the number and severity of collisions on the road.

The impact of such death and injury is felt in every corner of the country by every member of society. Each fatality and serious crash has life altering impact on families and individuals. The unexpected loss of a loved one in a car crash is a massive tragedy with long term emotional and financial loss for families.

Fortunately, over the past number of years, Ireland's road safety record has measurably improved. This has been thanks to the work of the many agencies and individuals working in a strategic way to prevent death and injury on our roads.

In taking on this role I am not starting with a blank sheet. Far from it. A current strategy is already in place since 2013 and runs until 2020. My job is to ensure the strategy is implemented.

An evaluation of the previous Government Road Safety Strategy which ran from 2007 to 2012 has revealed that 686 lives were saved in this time; 1,400 serious injury collisions were prevented. In addition to ensuring that fewer families had to grieve the tragic loss of a loved one, in monetary terms, this equated to a saving of approximately €1.85 billion to society.

The current and fourth Strategy builds on the progress and understanding provided by the first three strategies (1998–2002), (2004–2006), (2007–2012) tasked with improving safety on Irish roads.

458 people died on the roads in 1998, the year Ireland's first road safety strategy was launched. Despite the worrying rise in road deaths last year which saw 190 people lose their lives, fatalities have dropped by 58%. This must also be set against a 66% increase in the number of cars using the road over this period.

There are 144 actions contained in the new Strategy. All aimed to make the roads safer.

The areas covered by these actions include;

Work Related Vehicle Safety, Medical Fitness to Drive, Drug Driving, Fatigue, Distraction, Mobile Phones, Vulnerable Road Users, Emergency Response and Care.

Critical to the success of the strategy is an informed public that guards against complacency and high profile enforcement of live saving road traffic laws.

The current Strategy requires a reduction in the number of people being killed on the road to 25 per million population or less by 2020. This means reducing deaths from 41 fatalities per million population or 190 road deaths in 2013 to 124 or fewer by 2020.

SERIOUS INJURIES.

In addition to continuing to reduce fatalities, a special emphasis is given to the reduction of serious injuries in the Strategy. There continues to be systemic under-reporting of serious injuries. Improving the way we capture data on the number of serious injuries resulting from road trauma is the most important task in this area.

Reduced fatalities and serious injuries will realise benefits for public health policy objectives, as well as reduced demands on the emergency services. A safer road environment will encourage more road users to walk and cycle, thus improving their wellbeing, reducing congestion and improving the environment. Better driving will reduce fuel costs and transport related emissions which will benefit everyone, especially those involved in business and industry.

The Ministerial Committee on Road Safety will continue to oversee the implementation of the Strategy. Ongoing monitoring and reporting on the progress of the strategy will be augmented by a midterm review.

REMIT OF RSA.

The Road Safety Authority has changed significantly since it was established in 2006, with the addition of new functions. These new responsibilities include;

- The transfer of Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Testing from the local authorities to the RSA
- The introduction of the new Plastic Card Licence and the transfer from local authorities of driver licensing responsibilities to the National Driver Licence Service
- Regulation and management of additional vocational training for Bus and Truck Drivers under the Driver CPC or Certificate Professional Competency programme
- Carriage of Dangerous Goods Regulations

An organisational challenge facing the Authority is to realign its structures to ensure it is in the best possible position to deliver these new and existing functions.

Since establishment the Authority has become entirely self-financing. Last year, 2013 the RSA received €6.5 million in funding from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In 2014 no state funding will be allocated to the Road Safety Authority.

Part of my role as non-executive chairperson will be to oversee the effective functioning of the Board and to ensure the required corporate governance standards are in place and functioning to the highest standard.

The RSA wants to ensure that it is a highly effective and cost-effective organisation offering the best value for money and respected as a leading public service body demonstrating integrity, trust and credibility in all its operations

UN WORLD REMEMBRANCE FOR ROAD TRAFFIC VICTIMS.

This Sunday the 16th November is UN World Remembrance Day for Road Traffic Victims. The day allows us to pause, and reflect on the tragedies caused by road traffic crashes.

23,592 people have died on Irish roads since records began in 1959. Roughly the population of Tralee, Co. Kerry. A further 76,586 people have suffered serious, life-changing injuries since we began recording them in 1977.

Already this year, 163 families, friends and communities have tragically lost a loved one. Although great progress has been made in reducing deaths on the roads, there is no room for complacency. Constant advocacy, awareness and collaboration with the Gardaí, Emergency services and the wider public is needed to ensure that the Public embrace Road Safety and take personal responsibility for their driving behaviour.

In my role as Chairperson, if the committee ratifies my nomination today, I look forward to working with the staff of the RSA and my fellow Board Directors and other agencies devoted to road safety to prevent further needless loss of life.