

September 2013



## **Consultation response on the Future of Vehicle Registration and Licensing Services in Northern Ireland**

### **Introduction**

The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above named public consultation. We believe it is vital to modernise the overall service that is delivered to users in Northern Ireland and put this on a par with the service that is available to motorists in the rest of the United Kingdom.

We also note that it is claimed that the proposals are consistent with the UK Government's drive to ensure that public services become increasingly digitalised and will purportedly save £12m of public money every year.

### **Disparity in current service provision**

It has been deeply unfortunate that since 2004 a two-tier service has developed between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The most apparent disparity has been the fact that motorists in Northern Ireland are still unable to license their vehicles online.

Whilst a telephone licencing system has been in place, the number is deliberately not advertised and subsequently only a small proportion of motorists – often in certain careers – know the option even exists.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that this position is deeply regrettable as it has excluded the vast majority of motorists, many of whom would have keenly used it. We also believe that the intentional decision not to publically advertise the service was calculated so that the DVLA can now use the subsequent shortfall to justify railroading through its plans to centralise all services in Swansea, Wales.

## **Projected impact on jobs**

The Ulster Unionist Party has serious concerns about the impact which the current DVLA proposals will have on the 324 people employed within the DVA here to carry out registration and licensing services.

Whilst we accept that an increase in online services may lead to a reduced need for DVA staff to process transactions, we would have concerns that a decline in staff would lead to a decline in the quality of service. In addition we note the findings of the consultation exercise on the transformation of DVLA services in June 2012 which found that half of respondents wished to retain face to face contact and 1/3 valued the local expertise offered by the local centres.

Following the closure of 39 local offices in GB we can only assume that the same fate may inevitably befall the offices currently in Coleraine, Armagh, Belfast, Ballymena, Downpatrick, Enniskillen, Londonderry and Omagh. The Ulster Unionist Party oppose such a proposal.

Whilst the Ulster Unionist Party has fears about the future of the local offices, including the 260 DVA posts which are currently located in Coleraine. We believe that is a matter of huge regret that no alternative options have been proposed for this centre.

We were also very disappointed by what we believe to have been grossly premature comments by the Under Secretary of State for Transport, Stephen Hammond MP, that in order to attain new services it was necessary to centralise all vehicle licensing in Swansea. This is simply not the case.

Whilst closure is obviously the DVLA's preferred conclusion, the Ulster Unionist Party rejects this. We believe that whilst services for motorists in Northern Ireland should be enhanced, the current posts should be retained by allowing the workers to take up additional responsibilities. We believe there is quite clearly a case which justifies retention of this centre. We believe that by assuming additional responsibilities many of the posts in Coleraine and the local offices could be retained. Why for example must there be total centralisation of services for the DVLA when Government Departments, such as DSD and DWP, can work with one another on the administration of social security payments over a range of different centres.

There has also been no convincing economic case put forward to justify the closure of the Coleraine office – a reduction in jobs there will only lead to a subsequent increase in Swansea. Whilst it is claimed that these proposals would save £12m, this has quite clearly not taken into account the loss of the significant wage packet in the North West of Northern Ireland. In addition the Department of Environment have been quite clear that alternative posts within the NICS would not be available/suitable for a large number of the employees in Coleraine.

## **Conclusion**

This is a challenging and very disheartening consultation exercise. Whilst the Ulster Unionist Party would welcome the better availability of an online service, the roll out of a telephone service and the widening of options currently available at Post Offices, we are disappointed that it would appear the DVLA have used these merely as a bargaining tool in order to justify the reduction of the vast majority of DVA posts in Northern Ireland. Quite simply the issues are not synonymous with one another and it was deeply regrettable that the DVLA ever put enhancing the service available and the centralisation of jobs in the same proposal.