

COMMISSION DECISION (EU) 2021/1362**of 30 June 2021****authorising Ireland to apply an extension of certain periods specified in Article 3 of Regulation (EU) 2021/267 of the European Parliament and of the Council***(notified under document C(2021) 4736)***(Only the English text is authentic)**

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,

Having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/267 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 February 2021 laying down specific and temporary measures in view of the persistence of the COVID-19 crisis concerning the renewal or extension of certain certificates, licences and authorisations, the postponement of certain periodic checks and periodic training in certain areas of transport legislation and the extension of certain periods referred to in Regulation (EU) 2020/698 ⁽¹⁾, and in particular Article 3(4) thereof,

Whereas:

- (1) Article 3(1) of Regulation (EU) 2021/267 extends the validity of driving licences, which, in accordance with Article 7 of Directive 2006/126/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council ⁽²⁾ and point 3(d) of Annex I to that Directive, would otherwise have expired or would otherwise expire between 1 September 2020 and 30 June 2021.
- (2) By letter dated 27 May 2021, Ireland submitted a reasoned request for an authorisation to apply an extension of a period specified in Article 3(1) of Regulation (EU) 2021/267. Ireland provided additional information in support of its request on 4 June 2021.
- (3) Through its reasoned request, Ireland seeks an authorisation to apply an extension of four months of the period between 1 September 2020 and 30 June 2021 specified in Article 3(1) of Regulation (EU) 2021/267.
- (4) According to the information provided by Ireland, the renewal of driving licences in Ireland is likely to remain impracticable beyond 30 June 2021, due to measures that it has taken to prevent or contain the spread of COVID-19.
- (5) Among these measures, which according to Ireland have led to a backlog of licences due for renewal, Ireland closed its National Driving Licence Service (NDLS) centres from 27 March 2020 to 8 June 2020. Subsequently there was a gradual re-opening, as follows: 20 centres reopened on 8 June 2020, a further 6 centres reopened on 22 June 2020 and the remaining eight centres reopened on 29 June 2020. However, after the reopening the requirement for two-meter social distance reduced by almost one third the capacity of the NDLS centres.
- (6) Moreover, the driver testing service was further restricted from 1 January 2021 to 17 May 2021, when only essential workers have been granted the possibility to submit applications for renewal or issue of a driving licence or learner permit in-person at the NDLS centres. This meant that during that period, a cohort of people who were not pertaining to that category could not apply for a driving licence or learner permit.
- (7) As from 18 May 2021, the NDLS centres are again open to all drivers. Still the request for two-meter social distance reduces the capacity for renewal or issue of a driving licence or learner permit by approximately one third.

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 60, 22.2.2021, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ Directive 2006/126/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on driving licences (OJ L 403, 30.12.2006, p. 18).

- (8) The Road Safety Authority (RSA), which provides the NDLS, introduced an enhanced online service in November 2020, to allow customers to apply for a driving licence online. Although applications for driving licences can be made online, a major part of the holders of driving licences did not use the online system due to registration requirements. This includes the possession of a Public Services Card (PSC), which is a Government-issued card for authentication of identity when accessing public services. From March to July 2020 and from January to May 2021, the PSC issuing service operated at a very reduced capacity, and customers could not obtain a card. There is currently a high demand for PSCs to access other Government services, as well as for online driving licence applications. This will delay the possibility for some customers to apply for a driving licence online, who will have to attend a NDLS centre to apply in person.
- (9) Furthermore, according to the information provided by Ireland, theory testing and driver testing which had been curtailed are now becoming available again to all applicants. However, there is now a significant backlog of licences due for renewal, following the extension provided for in Regulation (EU) 2021/267.
- (10) Driver theory test centres were closed from 1 January 2021 to 7 June 2021, and therefore applications for a first learner permit were deferred. There are currently over 120 000 customers awaiting a driver theory test, and about 20 000 of those will be tested in June. Additional plans from the Irish authorities are in place to increase capacity (when COVID-19 restrictions permit) in order to allow for the undertaking of 50 000 theory tests per month for the three subsequent months. During the Pre-COVID period, there were approximately 12 000 appointments for theory tests a month. However, the expectations of the Irish authorities are that the extra capacity will also mean significant additional volumes of customers applying for a first time learner permit in the coming months, resulting in an increased demand in the NDLS centres.
- (11) The driver testing service was restricted to essential workers from 1 January 2021 to 7 June 2021 and up to 30 000 customers were not able to sit a driving test. Significant additional testing capacity is now available, which will in turn result in extra NDLS demand from customers passing their driving tests.
- (12) Due to the measures adopted by Ireland, it is expected that there will be larger volumes of first-time learners applying for permits in the coming months. The expected figures are of about 42 000 for each month between July 2021 and September 2021, and of 22 000 for October 2021, which are significantly higher in comparison to 22 600 in June 2021, and to 37 896 first-time learner permits that were issued, for example, for the whole period between 1 June 2018 and 31 October 2018.
- (13) According to the information provided by Ireland, it is expected that when these issuing driver licences' services resume, there will be, first, an increase in the number of learner-permits to be processed, where a person has passed a theory test, and second, an increase in the number of driving licences to be processed, where a person has passed a driving test. Application demand is expected to reach levels of 200 % of the normal processing figures, which will further load the capacity of the licensing service.
- (14) According to the information provided by Ireland, the most recent forecasts estimate 1,1 million applications for the 12 months from June 2021 to May 2022. This contrasts with a normal application volume of less than 60 000 a month, or of just over 700 000 in a twelve-month period. The increase in the total demand in 2021-2022 is particularly heightened in the June-October 2021 period, with an expected total monthly demand of over 110 000 in most months. Reduced capacity in NDLS centres, due to the 2-meter social distancing rule, results in the centres lack of possibility to accommodate normal throughput.
- (15) According to the information provided by Ireland, the reason to request an extension for a period of four months is justified by the build-up of a very significant backlog of the renewal and issuing capacity of the NDLS centres, as described above. Figures indicate that over 40 % of learner permits due for renewal in the later part of 2020 and into 2021 have not been renewed. The expectations of the Irish authorities are that the extension requested will ease the burden on the licensing system by reducing demand by up to 100 000 applications during the last quarter of 2021. In consequence, the renewal and issuing capacity of NDLS centres may return to a normal output, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

- (16) The extension is being requested for those drivers whose licence expires between 1 July and 31 October 2021, a period in which there is a high demand in NDLS centres. The limited window of time should not add a disproportionate risk to transport safety and security.
- (17) Ireland should therefore be authorised to apply an extension of four months of the period between 1 September 2020 and 30 June 2021 specified in Article 3(1) of Regulation (EU) 2021/267,

HAS ADOPTED THIS DECISION:

Article 1

Ireland is authorised to apply an extension of four months of the period between 1 September 2020 and 30 June 2021 specified in Article 3(1) of Regulation (EU) 2021/267.

Article 2

This Decision is addressed to Ireland.

Done at Brussels, 30 June 2021.

For the Commission
Adina-Ioana VĂLEAN
Member of the Commission
