

Performance Audit Follow-up: Vehicle Emissions Control Schemes

This follow-up performance audit concluded that, to varying degrees, Transport Malta (TM) strengthened its major control mechanisms aimed at reducing air pollution from vehicles, as proposed by the National Audit Office in the Performance Audit Report: Vehicle Emissions Control Schemes (2009). Towards this end, various initiatives relating to the Vehicle Roadworthiness Test (VRT), the Emission Alert Campaign (EAC) and Roadside Technical Inspection (RTI) were implemented. However, further improvements are required to ensure that these mechanisms further complement the regulatory and fiscal measures introduced in recent years, which embrace the polluter-pays principle. Moreover, the compilation of policies relating to further educating and incentivising owners to undertake regular vehicle maintenance, as was proposed by the NAO in 2009, have not yet fully materialised.

TM increased the number and type of inspections aimed at ensuring the proper administration of VRT tests. Such initiatives led to a significant increase in VRT emissions failure rates. The monitoring of VRT stations by TM now includes the retesting of vehicles at TM's facilities (Post-VRT Checks) as well as surprise Spot Checks and Full Day Inspections at VRT stations. VRT station operators are also obliged to photograph vehicles during testing. The various types of inspections carried out at VRT stations are designed to complement each other. However, when individually evaluated, it transpired that some of these enforcement mechanisms were found to be more effective at identifying shortcomings. Moreover, despite the increased monitoring, there is still significant variation in the emissions test pass and failure rates between the different VRT stations.

Public participation in the EAC, by reporting potentially polluting vehicles through SMSs, has decreased over time. This declining trend was temporarily reversed following an ad hoc campaign, which was undertaken by TM in 2011. Due to financial constraints, the EAC is still not supported by the appropriate IT infrastructure. Moreover, the EAC is also subject to operational limitations, such as the lengthy periods to process SMSs received and to summon potentially polluting vehicles for emissions testing. A significant number of owners did not always subject their vehicle to the relative emissions testing as requested by TM. However, in such circumstances the Authority was not always able to prevent these potentially polluting vehicles from continued circulation on the road through the timely imposition of a vehicle road license restriction.

RTIs aim to ensure that vehicles are appropriately maintained at all times. RTI targeting is highly dependant on the acumen of TM's enforcement officers since the Authority only provides its officials with general targeting guidelines. TM has, over time, increased the number of RTIs carried out, where vehicles are at least subject to a visual emissions test. Such coverage, however, has not fully absorbed the lacuna that materialised after the curtailment of Roadside Emissions Tests in 2008 which used to be carried out by Local Wardens.

At the operational level, the vehicle emissions control schemes discussed above are still not fully feeding and appropriately complementing each other, namely in terms of targeting and enforcement action. The further synchronisation of these mechanisms will contribute towards sustaining the improvements registered in Malta's ambient air quality.