



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Home Office, HC 200

Wednesday 20 July 2022

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Paula Barker; James Daly; Simon Fell; Carolyn Harris; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald.

Questions 437 - 556

Witnesses

I: Thomas Greig, Director of Passports, Citizenship, and Civil Registration, HM Passport Office; Simon Calder, Travel journalist; and Edward Clarke, Vice-President, Ground Operations, UK, TNT.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Thomas Greig, Simon Calder and Edward Clarke.

Chair: Good morning and welcome to this session of the Home Affairs Committee. This morning, we are going to be looking at Passport Office delays. We are very pleased to have a panel in front of us who will help us get to the bottom of what has happened with the Passport Office in recent times. Thomas Greig, who is the director of passports, citizenship and civil registration at the Passport Office, is joining us virtually as there are no trains from his part of the world today due to the very hot weather. We have a representative of TNT courier service, Mr Edward Clarke, and Simon Calder, the travel journalist and expert, with us. We are very pleased to have the three of you with us.

We are incredibly disappointed that we do not have a representative from Teleperformance, which provide the advice line to the Passport Office. We think it is completely out of order that they have not found time to come and be scrutinised by this Committee. They have a contract with the Home Office, and I hope the Home Office will make it very clear that not attending a Select Committee is not right and that they should make themselves available when we ask to question them. I hope, Mr Greig, that you can take that message back. We will be putting questions to you that we would have put to Teleperformance, and we hope that you are able to answer some of them. I also understand that Mr Calder has to leave at 11 o'clock today.

Simon Calder: That's right.

Q437 **Chair:** Thank you very much for finding time to see us.

I want to start with Mr Greig. Can I confirm with you the figures that Minister Pursglove gave to the House of Commons a little while ago? He said that in a normal year, there are about 7 million applications for passports, and that this year you are expecting 9.5 million applications. Are those figures correct? Is that what you are on course to do this year?

Thomas Greig: Indeed, those are correct. We have certainly been tracking for the last few months at around the levels that will get us to 9.5 million. I hesitate slightly because demand has dropped off quite significantly in the last few weeks, so we may choose to revise our forecast in due course, but the applications I am sure we will be talking about today were lodged when our application bodies were at or above the level of the 9.5 million forecast.

Q438 **Chair:** When did you identify that you would be looking at that level of increase in passport applications?

Thomas Greig: That would have been June or July last year. Obviously, there was a level of uncertainty in that period because we didn't know the pace at which we would come out of the pandemic. As you are aware, the



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cause of the increase in passport applications this year is us coming of the pandemic. There is latent demand in the system. There are about 5 million people who hadn't applied over the course of the last two years. Although we could make forecasts last year—we refined them at the end of last year—it was very much dependent on our road map out of lockdown and our emergence from the pandemic.

Q439 **Chair:** But from last summer, you thought that you would be seeing this real spike in passport applications. You were planning from last summer.

Thomas Greig: We were planning from last summer for a spike in passport applications, but the stage at which we got to the exact 9.5 million figure, I suspect, would have been later last year. I should add that I am a fairly recent recruit to the Passport Office. I am aware of what happened during that period, but I was not part of those discussions. As I understand it, we had that forecast from towards the end of last year, but we would have known that from this period last year that at some point there would be a bounce back and a return of demand.

Q440 **Chair:** When were Ministers informed that there was going to be this big spike?

Thomas Greig: We have been in regular contact with Minister Foster in particular on this target since this time last year. I could find out exactly when and write to the Committee, but I imagine that given the regular level of contact we have with Ministers, they would have been aware of our forecasting at around the same time as we finalised that forecast.

Q441 **Chair:** So you have regular contact with Ministers? How often is that?

Thomas Greig: We meet with Minister Foster every two weeks.

Q442 **Chair:** When did you start doing that?

Thomas Greig: I believe that started towards August or September last year, probably after recess last year, but again I can confirm that in writing to the Committee at a later stage if that would be helpful.

Q443 **Chair:** Can I ask you about the backlog? When the second permanent secretary appeared before the Public Accounts Committee earlier this year, she was questioned about the backlog of 500,000 applications in the Passport Office. Are you able to tell us what the backlog is today?

Thomas Greig: I will give some numbers, but I will start by giving a bit of context, if possible, because it is important to give context around these figures. As you said, we are in a position where we are expecting a record number of passport applications. We have received and processed nearly 5 million passport applications so far this year, so that is more than we processed in the entirety of last year, so the numbers are all, in this context, very big. At the moment, we are outputting between 200,000 and 250,000 applications a week, and we will continue to do that through the summer. At month end, the number of applications pending was around 550,000, but that is falling at a rate of about 60,000 a week. We are



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probably—we can only use month-end figures because they are the properly audited figures—in the range of the low 400,000s at the moment.

As I say, just to contextualise that figure, many of those applications will have been made very recently, and we are outputting a significant number of applications every month. That is our total work in progress for UK applications, but I certainly would not class that as a backlog. We always carry a normal level of working stock and, given the upper volumes of applications in the system, it is not unusual for that figure to be relatively high at this time of year.

Q444 **Chair:** As high as—what did you say—440,000?

Thomas Greig: At month end, it was just over 550,000. At this stage, I would expect it to be in the low 400,000s. As I say, we do not have audited figures, but I just want to give you an idea of how the numbers are coming down.

Q445 **Chair:** How many of those are over 10 weeks?

Thomas Greig: At the end of month period, about 10% of those applications were under 10 weeks, and about half of that 10% were applications that were available to outcomes, so they were available to the decision maker to make a decision.

Q446 **Chair:** Sorry, just so we are clear on this, you are saying 550,000 and that 10% of those are over 10 weeks.

Thomas Greig: Yes, so 10% of those were over 10 weeks at the end of the month.

Q447 **Chair:** So that is 5,500—sorry, 55,000. I am not doing my maths correctly.

Thomas Greig: Yes. Of which about half were available at that stage to decision makers to make a decision.

Q448 **Chair:** So there are still roughly 25,000 applications that are not with a decision maker or available for a decision to be made.

Thomas Greig: When I say, “not available for a decision to be made”, that is not because we do not have someone ready to do that, it is because we are awaiting something from the applicant. There is always a proportion of applications that, for various reasons, are awaiting further information from the applicant, and in some cases they have been for a considerable length of time. The differentiation I am making is between applications that can be resolved and that cannot be resolved.

If I might give a bit of context for where I think we are service-wise, that would be helpful. As Ministers have said in Parliament and we have said on a number of occasions, we have reached record levels of output and in doing so, have delivered a decent service for the vast majority of our applicants. However, there is a small proportion of applicants, which are the numbers we are talking about here, for whom we have not delivered the service we would like. Our whole focus at the moment is on trying to



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resolve those applications and put mitigations in place to ensure those people can access their passports if they urgently need them. I would like to contextualise the numbers by saying that.

If I might say one more thing, Chair, I think it is worth us saying that we accept that that is an issue. We, and I personally, are very sorry for people who are in that difficult situation, and we are putting measures in place to ensure we can resolve their applications as soon as we can.

Q449 Chair: Okay. I think the reason why we are here today is because the offices of all Members of Parliament have been inundated with people who are struggling to get their passports, and regarding the figures that you have just quoted to us, I have to say that I am fairly shocked by them, particularly for those people waiting for over 10 weeks. I mean, that is completely unacceptable, and I think that other Members will want to come in and question you on that.

I will ask just one final question for now. If you were planning for this situation from last July—so, from 12 months ago—this is not rocket science, is it? I looked back at the experience in the Passport Office over the last 12 years and there has been criticism from the National Audit Office of your ability to project and to plan. It just seems to me that this is a complete failure if you were looking at this from last July and we are still now—12 months on—with all these people not being able to get their passports. Why is that? Why have you failed so miserably?

Thomas Greig: I would say a couple of things. The first thing is to say that we have achieved record output and we have produced more passports than we have ever produced. So, a lot of our planning was directed towards that. We have done a lot of work with suppliers and others to ensure that we have the right stock of passports. We have brought in increased numbers of staff to deal with these applications.

For various reasons, which I am happy to go into more detail about for the Committee, there have been a smaller group of applicants—a smaller proportion of applicants—for whom it has taken longer than we would like. And as I say, what we have done is to put measures in place so that they can contact us, and where they need their passport urgently we are able to provide it to them. So—

Chair: Okay, I am going to stop you there, because we will come on to questions. But I had a look, for example, at the priority thing you can do online. I looked at it all through yesterday, to try and see if I could get an appointment, and there were just no appointments. I looked again at six o'clock this morning and there were no appointments. So I have to say to you that what you are saying about providing a service just doesn't hold water.

Thomas Greig: So—

Chair: I will bring in Paula Barker at this point.

Q450 Paula Barker: Thank you, Chair. Mr Greig, I would just like to focus on



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one point, because the Public and Commercial Services Union states that in talks with them you were preparing for a spike in applications, and you promised 1,700 new staff to deal with the 4.5 million increase in applications between 2021 and 2022. So, can you tell the Committee how many additional civil servants were actually recruited on top of the number already in paid employment in 2021, in preparation for the spike in applications? And what is the current paid civil service full-time equivalent figure now compared with April 2021?

Thomas Greig: Just bear with me for a moment while I get my exact detail on this. We have brought in an additional 1,200 staff. I would say, though, that the vast majority of those are not permanent full-time civil servants; the vast majority of those are temporary staff. And we pulled them in because we know that this is a temporary spike. So, for good reasons, I think it is not sensible to employ permanent staff and to bring permanent staff on in order to deliver that service. So the majority of those are temporary staff.

We are up to 1,200 now. We have got about another 200 due to come in and we think that, for now, those are sufficient staff for our operational position at the moment. It's not necessary at the moment to bring anyone else on, predominantly because straightforward applications are being dealt with very quickly and the learning curve to deal with the more complex applications that are taking longer means that bringing anyone else on at this stage would not be sufficient.

I will just say that I do not think our issues over the last few months have been predominantly or primarily an issue of the number of staff we've had in. We had a delay in recruitment and that has had an impact, but our most recent issues—our current issues—are as a result of things to do with the mix of cases on the systems and our ability to move people between one area of work and the other. So—

Chair: We are going to come back on this.

Q451 **Paula Barker:** But you said 1,700 staff. You have recruited 1,200 and you said 200 are due. So why are you now saying that you only need 1,400 rather than the 1,700 that you initially stated?

Thomas Greig: I am not familiar with that 1,700 commitment. At the point that I've been working on this, we've always been aiming for around 1,400. We received approval to recruit up to 1,700, which is where I think that figure came from, but then, on reviewing our plans, our decision was that we should bring on 1,400. And part of that, as I say, is because of the time it has taken to recruit people, but part of it is because of revised planning and our trying to ensure that we were getting the right number of people in place.

So, yes, we have had approval up to 1,700, but in the end our decision was to recruit 1,400, and that did satisfy our plans for the year.

Chair: I am going to come back to you, Paula, but did you want to come in very briefly, Carolyn?

Q452 **Carolyn Harris:** I want to clarify what is considered to be a simple, straightforward case or a complex case?

Thomas Greig: At the moment applications are submitted digitally with a photo uploaded, either from a photo booth or from your own phone, and broadly stay on the digital system. They are submitted digitally, and they remain on the digital system, so they have no complications that mean they need to be moved to a different system. That is what I mean by straightforward applications, and they cover about 80% of our application intake.

As I say, the vast majority of the applications with issues are dealt with in a very timely manner. The vast majority of those have been on that digital system and have come out of the system much quicker than 10 weeks.

Q453 **Chair:** Just before I come to Tim Loughton, Mr Calder, what do you make of what we have heard so far about the numbers and the number of families and people who are waiting desperately to get a passport?

Simon Calder: Thank you, Chair. Good morning and my apologies for having to leave at 11am. The travel world is quite exciting at the moment.

In the case mentioned, which is of one of the 55,000, a young lady, 11-year-old Olivia from Twickenham, finally got her passport yesterday. Her mother had submitted passport applications for the four people in the family in March. Three of them came back expeditiously, in a few weeks, but this one got stuck. I am receiving many, many contacts through social media, and my apologies to you all for passing them on straight to Members of Parliament to be sorted out.

Clearly, there are issues at the Passport Office; it is heartbreaking. As you will know better than I do, the freedom to travel abroad for family reasons, holidays or business is one of the great benefits of 21st century life, and the fact that people cannot even get as far as the airport is extremely regrettable.

Q454 **Chair:** You did say, though, that 1.5 million British passports had expired since the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown, so you had identified that there was going to be a problem in terms of people applying for passports.

Simon Calder: May I take you back to 20 April 2020? That was four weeks into lockdown. By then, 190,000 child passports and 310,000 adult passports had expired, and it was very clear at that stage that even if we had been lucky enough to come out of covid measures very quickly, there would still be an issue.

Of course, it was then a year later, in April 2021, when the Passport Office suddenly moved from the three-week timetable to a 10-week timetable, and that is still very much in place. I absolutely accept that an awful lot of online passport applications are being done within two to three weeks, and that is commendable, but unfortunately the system seems to be creaking, and, speaking to Olivia's family, it is the same old story—calling the Teleperformance passport advice line and not getting any help. Even the



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caseworker for the MP for Twickenham was struggling and finally, three days before their holiday, the family got the passport that they needed.

Q455 Tim Loughton: Mr Greig, you said that in a normal year—I presume that is post-covid—you would anticipate doing around 7 million passport applications. Now you are anticipating doing 9.5 million, although that might be an over-estimate. During the pandemic how many passport applications were you processing? You said it was below 5 million for last year.

Thomas Greig: I think the figure for last year was about 4.8 million in total.

Q456 Tim Loughton: So you had a lot of people twiddling their thumbs during the pandemic, did you?

Thomas Greig: No, nobody actually. We loaned staff to other parts of the Home Office. We loaned staff to both the EUSS scheme and to some other teams, and I believe we loaned them to other Departments as well. We made the best use we could of our staff.

There was still a degree of demand, and we had our staff in the office from the start of the pandemic processing passports as well. So we loaned a few staff out but, for the offices we covered earlier, we also had to bring in additional staff to deal with this as volunteers.

Q457 Tim Loughton: Were any furloughed?

Thomas Greig: No.

Q458 Tim Loughton: How many of your staff are working from home at the moment?

Thomas Greig: A very small proportion of our staff are working from home at the moment. We are only allowing people to work from home where they can be as productive as they would be in the office. At the moment, our focus is on the more complex case types and those that are on our paper-based AMS system, which is based in the office. We are maximising our numbers in the office at the moment. I can give the Committee an exact number in writing, but I imagine it is very few at the moment who are working full time from home.

Q459 Tim Loughton: Was that the case six months ago?

Thomas Greig: Six months ago there may have been more people working from home, because the proportion of work that we were doing on the digital system was higher. That meant that people could work from home without it affecting their productivity. To be clear, our guiding principle is that we will only allow people to work from home if it has no impact on the production of passports.

Q460 Tim Loughton: So when people were working from home six months ago, there was no problem with the delivery of secure documents enabling them to process those passports as quickly as if they were in a secure office. You have productivity monitoring figures to prove that, yes?



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Thomas Greig: We have figures. First of all, there was no problem with delivering secure documents, because they would be scanned on to the system and would be accessed remotely by the caseworker. Secondly, I do not think we have productivity figures that compare working from home with working in the office, but we have productivity figures that show that the digital system that people work on from home is much more productive than the paper-based system that people work with in the office.

Q461 **Tim Loughton:** You just said that there was no loss of productivity for people working from home, and that it is a condition that there should not be, but you do not have any figures showing that there was any difference in productivity for people working from home compared with working in the office. How can you make that claim?

Thomas Greig: Productivity on the digital system has not changed, and my understanding is that it has not differed whether people are in the office using the digital system or at home.

Q462 **Tim Loughton:** You are now saying “my understanding is”, which suggests to me that you cannot prove to the Committee for sure that the productivity output rate of people you still have working from home, of whom there were more six months ago when this problem was really getting bad, is better or worse. Could you please go back and produce some figures for us, or come back to say, “Actually, we can’t produce those figures,” and therefore that the claim you just made is not valid?

Thomas Greig: I can do that, but I am very confident, having seen the way that our work has progressed over the last few years and months and having seen our productivity, that working from home has not been an issue in our delivery of service.

Q463 **Tim Loughton:** As any MP on the Committee and others will attest, we do not see our staff very often these days because they are sitting in queues in the passport unit here or permanently on the telephone. The productivity of most MPs’ offices has gone down extraordinarily, more than I have ever known in 25 years in Parliament, because we are dealing with constituents who are desperate to get their passports, which they applied for 10 weeks or more before.

As the Chair said, this was not rocket science; you could see this coming. There was a huge reduction in people applying for their passports, so why could you not have written, as various other public services do, to all those people whose passports were expiring within the next six months to say, “By the way, you might want to take this opportunity of a quiet period when nobody is going away to get your passport application in early before we come out of covid and people are allowed to travel again”? It is not rocket science to work out that quite a few people might want to travel and realise they did not have an up-to-date passport.

You might have considered a special scheme—“If you apply now, we will add an extra six months to your passport,” or something like that—as an incentive. Why did you not do that? Would an incentive scheme like that



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have required legislation or permission from a Minister? If it did, was that requested?

Thomas Greig: In answer to your first question, we did something a bit like that. We texted over 5 million people to tell them that their passports were expiring in the next six months and to remind them that it was open to them to renew them. It is a good point that we should reflect on whether we could do something different in future. We did not say, "Things are quiet now, why don't you apply?", but we did remind people.

On your question about incentives, they require fee regulations, so they would require something to be presented to the Minister. Again, to my knowledge, while we have considered incentives in various areas, we did not specifically present an incentive for early submission of applications to Ministers.

Q464 **Tim Loughton:** In retrospect, do you think that might have been quite a good idea?

Thomas Greig: We will get on to this, no doubt, but I think there are lots of lessons that we can learn from the last six to 12 months, and I think in retrospect that probably would have been a good idea. We probably could have encouraged people earlier on to make those applications. Whether that would have helped or not remains to be seen, but I think that is a valid point. As I say, while we reminded people, what we did not do was offer them some kind of incentive.

Q465 **Tim Loughton:** Can I ask you about Teleperformance? As the Chair has said, it is pretty disgraceful that a contractor who is being paid public money and whose service has been described by the Minister as "unacceptable" will not come in front of the Committee today. As I have said—other Members will have similar experiences, I am sure—you can spend an hour and a half on the phone for the MPs hotline. God knows how long our constituents are having to spend. It is not working. Why is it not working? What is it going to take to make it work? It is probably more people, so how many people were taken on, and why has their productivity not gone up to the extent it needs to so that our staff and constituents are not spending an hour and a half on the phone, in some cases then to get cut off anyway?

Thomas Greig: I will take the question about the MPs hotline first. The MPs hotline is run by the Home Office and by the MPs account management team at the Home Office. Since this issue started, we have diverted 15 non-frontline staff from our teams in the Passport Office to provide help and support with answering those calls. As you know, we have also put five members of staff—

Tim Loughton: Fifteen?

Thomas Greig: Fifteen. I accept that our performance on that line fluctuates due to demand. The average wait times have come down, and the amount of calls being answered has come down, but I accept that there are some days where the demand on that line means that you do



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have to wait a long time to get an answer. I accept that there are days in Portcullis House, as well, where people have to queue for a long time.

We have put additional resources on it this week. We have up to 30 people trained. We will keep that under review as we move through the summer and if we think that we can provide a better service on that line, we will. There is a balance, obviously, between using staff to answer those kinds of inquiries and using staff to do other things within the business. We are trying to get that balance right, but my view at the moment is that we probably have sufficient staff trained, and on some days it works well, but we will continue to review it—

Q466 Tim Loughton: Which days does it work well? I would quite like to have prior notice of that, because I have not come across any day when it works well. You may say to me, “Well, there’s this fast-track scheme to book an appointment.” My office has been looking at that daily. There are no appointments available to stump up extra money for a service that you should be getting as standard anyway—you can’t even do that. This is not a question of fluctuating, Mr Greig. This is the 24-hour experience of somebody trying to get a passport at the moment. How are Teleperformance being hauled over the coals for this? Are there penalty clauses on their contract? Are they being told, “If you don’t improve your productivity, if you don’t recruit the additional people”—that is what is at the bottom of this, surely—“you will lose the contract or there will be serious fines”? How are they going to be forced to improve their performance?

Thomas Greig: Just a couple of things. You are absolutely right that we have had some very serious and honest conversations with Teleperformance since issues with their service at the beginning of March. It did dip to a really low level, and it is still not quite at the service standard. The first thing I would say—again, this is difficult to say, given that so many people have had so many bad experiences with it—is that the rate of call answering at Teleperformance is improving and has started to improve. They are not far off on their main passport advice line, answering those specific calls. There are—

Q467 Tim Loughton: It is an hour and a half now. Where is this improvement coming? We are not seeing it.

Thomas Greig: I am not sure whether you are talking about the Teleperformance line or the MPs hotline, but the Teleperformance line certainly, from the statistics that they provide us and on our sampling of it recently, has shown an improvement and has shown more calls being answered more quickly. They have done that by bringing in 800 new staff and deploying some technical solutions that allow them to answer some questions in an automated way. We can provide all of that detail that Teleperformance have provided us, but as I said, they are close to achieving that service standard. I appreciate that that is hard for people to accept, given experiences they have had historically with Teleperformance.



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I would say as well, though, that further improvements are needed in their service. They need to get better at answering the phone, and we also need to make sure that the advice they give people when they answer the phone is better, and that what happens to people when they pass through the process is better. I am not in denial about the issues at Teleperformance, but I can only report what the performance monitoring shows us. If people have individual experiences that we can investigate to see whether they are outside that performance monitoring audit, and if there is something in that performance monitoring that we are missing, we will do it and we will continue to audit the—

Q468 Tim Loughton: Okay, I will end there, but we need to see those productivity figures so we can make that judgment. You may not be in denial, but your head's on the block for this.

Thomas Greig: I absolutely agree.

Q469 Tim Loughton: You're running the passport service. I would be bloody furious if one of my contractors was so hopeless in its service to MPs. That is not going to go unnoticed. It is taking an hour and a half on the MPs hotline. That is yesterday's experience. I spoke to my staff this morning to say, "Give me some of your experiences yesterday." That was happening yesterday. This isn't historical. It is still happening every day to every MP and to all our constituents. Thank you.

Thomas Greig: Can I just make a very small response to that? First, we have been very strong on Teleperformance, and we have levied financial penalties against them. However, I should be honest and say that the MPs helpline is not them; it's us. We run the MPs helpline, so if you are still experiencing significant problems—I think some of that might have been because, unfortunately, the surgery in PCH was not open yesterday—we will ensure that—

Q470 Tim Loughton: Whose fault is that? All the MPs were in their offices doing their job yesterday, and we were told that the passport special office would not be open on Monday and Tuesday because of the weather. When we kicked up, they eventually found another room where they went, and that wasn't open all day as well. We are here all day. My staff were in yesterday, mostly dealing with passport queries from our constituents, so why are your staff so different from our staff?

Thomas Greig: Again, a decision was made to suspend that service, I think particularly because of the expected temperatures in the room that the team were working in. I think that there were members of staff who, for various reasons, weren't able to work in that temperature. What we tried to do was provide an alternative service during that.

Q471 Chair: Can I stop you there? We are in Portcullis House now. Obviously, today is not as hot, but yesterday people were working in Portcullis House all day, so I am a bit surprised by that reason for not being able to provide a service. Could you confirm—you said that you have levied penalties against the company?

Thomas Greig: Yes, we have levied financial penalties.



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Q472 **Chair:** And how much have you levied? *[Interruption.]* Sorry, can you still hear us?

Tim Loughton: The Passport Office is on fire, unlike its service.

Chair: Can you still hear us?

Thomas Greig: Apologies, that was not an attempt to curtail the session. I'm afraid an alarm went off downstairs—an alarm test.

Yes, we have levied financial penalties against Teleperformance.

Q473 **Chair:** And how much have you levied? What have they paid you?

Thomas Greig: I don't think I'm able to give the exact number at this stage. That will be published through transparency data later in the year, I believe, but it is in the high hundreds of thousands.

Chair: The high hundreds of thousands? Okay, thank you. I am going to come to Carolyn Harris now.

Q474 **Carolyn Harris:** Mr Greig, I am really interested that you say that the MP hotline is run by the Home Office. I am one of those old-fashioned employers; I gave my staff a lunch break and I took over the call. It was the most painful, excruciating call I have ever had in my life. I spent 20 minutes, after waiting on the line for an hour and a half, trying to get someone who you now tell me is a Home Office employee to tell me basic information about a completely normal case—a whole family get their passports except for one child.

I have never experienced anything so painful. They could not put me through to a team leader. They could not put me through to a manager. They could not give me a telephone number of anyone else I could call. They could not even give me a current, up-to-date assessment of where that case was. I was quite prepared to lay the blame at the door of Teleperformance, but obviously this is your responsibility. As an MP, I expect much more service from the Home Office. What's your explanation for that, Mr Greig?

Thomas Greig: I'm really sorry to hear that. We have put passport-trained people, who should have access to all the appropriate systems, on to the passport helpline and into Portcullis House, so you will have met them. We have encouraged them to work in a resolution-focused way—to try to resolve cases for people. I am very happy to look into that individual circumstance. I appreciate the issues with people getting through to those lines, but we have also had some very positive feedback from both the Portcullis House surgeries and the helplines about what has happened once people have got through.

I would hope that that is not the way we are dealing with things. As I say, the members of staff handling those calls are experienced passport staff and should be able to access all the systems and should be able to resolve cases. I am very happy to look into that individual circumstance.



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Q475 Carolyn Harris: It's not an individual one, Mr Greig. You talked about the satisfaction rate with the PCH service and the MP hotline. I have had conversations about the same cases with both, all Home Office staff. I have been told one thing by one and another thing by another, and still nothing has transpired. In fact, I'm embarrassed to say that I ended up calling the Minister, who happened to fast-track quite an important one. I have had absolutely zero satisfaction from either, if I am honest. If I was to give you a list, I could probably keep your office busy just on that list from my office.

Thomas Greig: You're very welcome to. I am really sorry if that is the case. As I say, what we have endeavoured to do is to put experienced members of staff who understand passport systems and passports in both of those locations. It may be that there are issues with our internal arrangements that mean it is difficult for them to get resolution, but I have spoken to those teams and the people managing them and they certainly are people who are experienced and who are very clearly focused on resolving cases. If that is not the experience people are having, then we need to see what we can do to fix that, but that is certainly the intent of the people on those lines and the intent of the operation. They want to do that as well. If there are problems, we will see what we can do to—

Q476 Carolyn Harris: Thank you. Can I take you to Teleperformance now and ask two simple questions? How much training are Teleperformance having on dealing with the issue, and how much access to real-time data are they able to access to give to callers?

Thomas Greig: I think their basic training is about eight days. Teleperformance operate in two ways. They have what they call the main call floor, which are the first set of people that people get through to. Then they have ICH, which is integrated call handling, which is the second set of people—the kind of escalation.

The people in that integrated call handling group are people who have access to all our systems and can respond to queries about the application. The main call floor staff do not have access to all our systems. What they have access to is an extract from our systems, which tells them some very basic information about where cases are in the queue.

What we are trying to move to with Teleperformance is a model where everyone on their contract has access to ICH, because, in the situation we are in now, what we are finding is that the majority of inquiries that people are making are those that require an ICH response. The answer to your question is basically that some do and some don't, depending on the level of the inquiry.

Q477 Carolyn Harris: So people phoning Teleperformance are not guaranteed to be able to get up-to-date, current information about the status of their application.

Thomas Greig: They are able to get up-to-date, current information about the status of their application via either the automated service or the main call floor. What they can't do is get into the level of detail behind



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that. What they can't do is get through to someone who can tell them what is likely to happen next or who can resolve a query for them. Those queries have to be passed to—

Q478 Carolyn Harris: So what's the point of having them, then? What is the point of making the phone call?

Thomas Greig: Because we see that there are calls—less than normal at the moment—where people are just calling to check on progress: “Where is my application in the process?” A main call floor agent and the automated Twilio tool can tell them that. But, as I said, we have now agreed with Teleperformance that we are going to move everyone on to the main system. I agree with you that that would be more helpful, because there are often follow-up questions. It would be more helpful if people were able to access a greater level of information from every call handler they talk to.

Q479 Carolyn Harris: They are pointless, then, really. It is pointless phoning them if you are not going to be able to get exact, current information. Every single caller is not going to get the current, up-to-date, live status of their application, whether it is complicated or straightforward, as you said earlier on—they are not going to be guaranteed to have that information.

Thomas Greig: No, someone who calls will be guaranteed to find out the basic status of their application—

Q480 Carolyn Harris: Yes, we know that. I am talking about if someone has been waiting a long period of time, which may be the 10 weeks or it may be slightly less. How likely are they to then be told, “Your application is with A, and it will be in the post by B or C, or you can come and collect it”? How likely is that to happen? Do they have that information?

Thomas Greig: Some of them do and some of them do not, and where they do not they can escalate that call, in a live transfer or by getting a call-back from either them or us to provide that information. Some of those call-backs are taking longer than we want them to at the moment, although Teleperformance are improving on that front. That is how the system works. But there are still people who just want to phone up to check where their application is, and there are people who want pre-application advice, or other advice about their application, that does not require knowledge of where their passport is in the system.

Q481 Carolyn Harris: Thank you, Mr Greig. I am just absolutely gobsmacked to discover that. Mr Calder, I am sure that you can offer the Passport Office advice on how it can better operate its system, because it is obviously not doing very well on its own.

Simon Calder: Thank you, Ms Harris. I hesitate, because I spend my life telling organisations how they can run their operations better without having to do it myself, but I will take you back to 2018, when the then Home Office Minister Caroline Nokes said that 99.9% of applications were being turned around within three weeks, and that the vast majority were



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being handled in seven working days. That was before we had the benefits of online, which generally make life more straightforward.

The most important question that I would like to ask Mr Greig is simply on the quality of information being put out by the passport advice line. In particular, I am hearing anecdotally that a number of people, if they are lucky enough to get through, are then given misleading information about the validity of passports, particularly in the European Union, which has been a subject of extreme upset for a lot of people. Of course, there are many thousands of applications in at the moment from people who did not need to apply but were mistakenly told, either by the passport advice line or indeed by their travel companies, that they needed to renew.

Q482 Chair: Mr Greig, do you want to come back on that point?

Thomas Greig: I would say a couple of things. The first is that we provide Teleperformance with all the up-to-date information that is required. The information about passport validity comes from the FCDO, and we continue to provide them with that up-to-date information. If people have been given the wrong information by Teleperformance, I am really sorry about that. As I said at the start, I think there is more that we can do to ensure that Teleperformance agents are properly armed with the information that they need.

I also think that we need to do a bit better in terms of the information that we put out. I accept that Mr Calder's central point is right. Some of the information that we have online is not as clear as it should be. We need to do more, particularly on social media, to make sure that we are reassuring people and providing them with appropriate and sensible information about what is likely to happen to their application, and where it is likely to be in the system.

Q483 Chair: Do you have any idea when you will get back to the three weeks, which used to be the period a passport would be issued by?

Thomas Greig: As I said at the start, our WIP—our stock of applications—is coming down really quite quickly at the moment. It is coming down by about 60,000 a week. It will not continue to reduce at that rate, because there are some very tricky applications that will need to be resolved. There is a level of complex applications in the system that will need to be resolved, but I think it will continue to come down. I think as we exit the summer we will be in much better shape. As I said, at the moment digital applications are probably going through within that three-week period. New digital applications are probably taking about three weeks, so I think that turnaround times will reduce, but for that small proportion of applications that are taking longer, the turnaround time will reduce as we exit the summer.

I do not think that I will be in a position, partly because of the volatility of demand in the next few months, to step back from that 10-week warning for a few months, because I do not think that we will be in a position to be certain about anything, particularly as we know that there is still another 5 million-worth of labour demand to come in next year. In reality, at the



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moment, digital applications are not too far off. If there are no problems with your digital application, we are probably not too far off that three-week mark. In terms of the set of applications that have taken longer for various reasons, and for which we do need to provide a better service, I expect them to start reducing over the summer, and I expect—

Q484 **Chair:** So by the end of the year we will be back to three weeks.

Thomas Greig: I don't think that I can guarantee that, because I do not know how demand is going to behave over the course of the next year. What I would say is that I would expect that by the end of the summer we will be in a position where the passport experience feels much more normal to people, and it feels much more like what they experienced pre pandemic.

Q485 **Chair:** Which was three weeks.

Thomas Greig: But I don't think that I could yet guarantee—

Chair: Okay, I don't think that we are going to get any further. I call Stuart McDonald.

Q486 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Mr Calder, you mentioned a family in Twickenham who got passports back on completely different dates. You also mentioned variations in the standard of advice that people get from the advice line. Are there other recurring themes in the complaints that people make to you about their experiences of the Passport Office?

Simon Calder: Thank you, Mr McDonald. You will all be familiar, as your caseworkers will be, with the standard problems. I absolutely accept that Mr Greig is always going to have a number of complex cases, and there are a number of silly things, such as not getting the photograph right, which clearly the media needs very much to ensure that people are doing.

I mentioned in response to Ms Harris the problem of people applying for passports when they did not need to. Part of this huge backlog is entirely people who were told mistakenly that their passport was not valid for travel to Europe when in fact it absolutely was. That is the biggest cause of unnecessary distress, partly because people are still waiting for passports they didn't need to renew and partly, of course, because their applications are in the queue in front of people who really do need a new passport.

Q487 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Do you have any indication of how many people are in that boat of unnecessarily applying for a passport?

Simon Calder: It's difficult to say. We are talking about peak applications—and Mr Greig might wish to correct me on this—of around 1 million per month. It appears that somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 of those are unnecessary applications, but of course that is kind of unknowable: you will never quite know the issue date, the expiry date or where they were planning to go. It might simply have been unnecessary caution. But certainly Government were responsible for



causing an awful lot of this confusion by their apparent misunderstanding of what Europe's rules were.

Q488 Stuart C. McDonald: Can you give us an idea of the impact that this is having on families in terms of expense, missed holidays and cancelled holidays?

Simon Calder: The typical story, as you will have heard, is that people have not taken the Passport Office advice not to book a holiday, because, frankly, if you are going to allow 10 weeks for an application, you probably still want to book your holiday, and crucially, this summer, with the travel industry in such disarray, if you haven't booked a holiday by now, it is going to be very difficult and extremely expensive. Typically, they have spent some thousands of pounds on a holiday, and one or more members of the family does not have their passport back, and that threatens the whole thing. I occasionally will advise them that, as long as they have done everything right, HM Passport Office has a mechanism for refunding trips that are impossible because of failures by the Passport Office.

Q489 Stuart C. McDonald: Thank you very much. Mr Greig, can I just pick up on one or two of the complaints that we heard about there? That family in Twickenham is pretty typical, from my casework. Two or three passport applications are made at precisely the same time. There is nothing to differentiate them in terms of the documents that have been provided. There are no issues flagged up in terms of needing more information or anything else. Yet two of the passports come back within three or four weeks—great—and the other one does not come back until week nine, 10 or 11, after relentless chasing. Why is that? It creates the impression that this is some sort of lottery.

Thomas Greig: I will answer that question, but I will just say one thing off the back of what Mr Calder said, which is really important for customers who are watching. We have mechanisms in place for people who have been waiting more than 10 weeks, or have been waiting more than six weeks and are travelling in the next two weeks, to contact us to expedite their passport application. I want to be clear: I don't want anyone who is beyond 10 weeks to think that they do not have a route to get in touch. I know it is via Teleperformance, which can be trying, but it is working at the moment for many people, and we will try.

Where people are over 10 weeks, we will expedite their application free of charge if they are travelling soon, and where they are under 10 weeks and over six weeks, they can apply for an upgrade. We are doing thousands of those every week. I think it is important, because people will be watching this, to let people know that there is a mechanism to do that if they want to do it, and that we are focusing a lot of our resource on ensuring that while it is difficult and trying—I appreciate that it is really an unfortunate situation to put people in, and we are really sorry about it—there is a route for people to resolve their applications if they need to and if they are travelling. I just wanted to put that on the record. I will now answer your question in the best level of detail that I can.



Our digital system, as it was designed and deployed, did not have the ability to link applications; all applications were dealt with as separate applications. In the scenario that you are talking about, all those different applications will have been routed to different locations and will have been dealt with entirely separately. The system will have treated them basically agnostically. What will have happened to one of those applications is that that system, because it is a fairly new system and can only deal with certain types of cases and certain functionalities—some issue will have meant that that application will have been moved from that digital system to what we call the legacy system, the AMS paper-based system. So the three applications you are talking about will have come out of the process quickly, will have stayed in the digital system and come out, but the fourth application will have reverted to the paper-based system, and that is why it will have taken longer than the others to deal with.

Q490 Stuart C. McDonald: But why would that application have gone to the paper-based system? In the cases that I have seen, there have not been any requests for further information, a new photograph or anything else. What is causing that? What sorts of things cause that issue?

Thomas Greig: It can be a variety of things. For example, if someone is turning 16 during the period when the application is current, it might go on to that system. There are other areas. Where there are concerns about the counter-signature or the counter-signatory can't be contacted, or where documents can't easily be viewed on the system—there is a range of things. I just want to say on this that we recognise that that is not good and that is not the way the process should operate. We have a team of people working now to try to reduce the number of times that that kind of thing happens.

We have also introduced new measures to ensure that where documents are on a different case, you can also see them. This is not the circumstance you are talking about, but if someone sends all their documents only on one application and not on the others, it causes a problem for the other applications. But we have introduced measures that mean that people can look at other applications to see the documents and to ensure that they can get those cases through. So, this is not an ideal circumstance, but we are working really hard to try to mitigate it.

Q491 Stuart C. McDonald: Good. I'm glad work is going on to try to mitigate it, but how did we end up with a system that doesn't tie applications together in the first place?

Thomas Greig: I think at the time the system was developed— I think that functionality is probably to come in the system; it's just not currently in the system. So the system as deployed doesn't do that. We have been talking to developers about changing things. If I'm honest, I think the system assumed a type of operation that is not similar to the one we have at this precise moment in time; it assumed a situation where we didn't have the volume pressures we have now and where there were more safeguards in place for applications to be completed in a certain way. So we continue to develop and try to resolve these issues, but as I said, if we



hadn't had that digital system, we wouldn't have been able to deal with the volume of applications we dealt with this year, because it is much quicker and much more productive than the standard process for dealing with applications.

Q492 Stuart C. McDonald: Another issue that comes up quite a lot is that somebody will contact me and say that they made their passport application on such-and-such a date, and I head along and speak to the Passport Office staff and the date that they have on the system as the date of the application is not just a couple of days later—accounting for post, for example—but quite significantly later. When does the 10-week clock start ticking?

Thomas Greig: The 10-week clock starts from the physical receipt of the supporting documents into our offices, or rather our commercial partners Sopra Steria's offices. What has happened in the past—this is not a problem anymore, but at our peak, it was taking Sopra Steria sometimes up to 10 working days to register applications on to the system. So what we have done for those periods where we don't actively know exactly what date things arrived in the process—we add a worst-case scenario, or a close to worst-case scenario, for the amount of time for things to be put on the system. If you lodged an application in March, we would consider day one to be the date that we logged your application minus 10 working days, so with the 10 working days added on for the assumption that it took 10 days for that to be put on the system.

Q493 Stuart C. McDonald: In relation to expediting applications, there are a couple of groups that we come across now and again that don't have very much control over their need for a passport at short notice. They have planned their travel and then something has happened—for example, people have lost or had valid passports stolen, perhaps four or five weeks before they will really need them. There are also a small number of cases where, say, a grandparent has bought a holiday for a grandchild for their 18th or 21st birthday, for example, not realising that they do not have their passport. Is there anything that people can do—those who have lost or had their passport stolen, or ended up being gifted travel and need their passport—to try and accelerate things?

Thomas Greig: There are three things. I accept that some of the circumstances you are talking about might not meet those criteria, but where there is an urgent or compassionate need for a passport, or where, for example, a relative has died overseas or where someone needs something urgently for Government business, they can contact us and we will ensure that we expedite it. Those are our most important circumstances. That is the thing that we focus on. Then there are a few other options. It would depend on when they were travelling.

As I said at the start, if someone is travelling in four or five weeks' time, I would really encourage them to make a digital application. It is most likely that that digital application would be resolved in time for them to travel. That is what I would say if they were travelling in four or five weeks' time, and that is what I would advise people: they should make a digital



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application. If they want to make it even quicker, the quickest thing they can do is use a professional photobooth, get the codes you can get from there and use that to make their application. That would cause their application to be quicker.

The third thing is—I know the Chair mentioned this—that there is a lack of availability of appointments, but people can get appointments. They can try to get an appointment. There have been appointments available over the past week, although they go very quickly when they come online. We are starting to see, because we can see from our digital system—what we call the Queue-it—that the number of people looking at appointments is starting to fall. As I say, as we move forward through the next few weeks it might be more likely and more possible for them to get an appointment, but it would depend on when they were travelling. If they were travelling in the next two or three weeks, I would suggest they hold out for an appointment or make an urgent, compassionate case to us. If they were travelling in four or five weeks, I would encourage them to make a digital application.

Q494 Stuart C. McDonald: On the issue of compassionate cases—in relation to funerals, for example—that has proven helpful for some constituents, but one thing that seems to be missing from the policy is weddings. I have had various people miss out on weddings because that is not included in the compassionate circumstances policy. Who signs off on that? Where would I need to make the pitch for something like weddings to be included in circumstances where there should be acceleration?

Thomas Greig: I think we would have to clear it with Ministers, but we could certainly consider it ourselves. I presume you are talking about people who had not made an application at all, but were intending to go overseas shortly for a wedding rather than people that had an application in the system.

Stuart C. McDonald: Yes.

Thomas Greig: Certainly we can consider that. I suspect it would be rare, or fairly rare—although you probably know better than me—that someone would be in a circumstance where they had not applied in advance of a wedding that they were planning to attend, but I do not see a problem with us reviewing and seeing whether that policy needs to be more flexible.

Q495 Stuart C. McDonald: Final question from me. Another repeat complaint is from constituents who wait for a significant period of time to get through to the phone line in order to request the upgrade that you have just spoken about and pay the extra fee. They are then told by the person at the other end of the line that they cannot take payment and somebody will have to call them back. Why does that happen in the first place, and why are so many call-backs not happening at all? What are you doing to monitor the quality of these calls, as well as the contractor saying, “We answer such and such in a certain amount of time”? If that sort of stuff is happening, how is that picked up on?



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Thomas Greig: We do regularly monitor, and Teleperformance do their own monitoring on the calls. We do our monitoring and we feed back to them on the quality of their calls.

In answer to your question about call-backs happening on upgrades, there is a mixture of things going on there. Teleperformance's performance on call-backs has not been great up until the last week or so, when I think it has improved—I hope it has improved. Also, where people are waiting for call-backs from the call-back teams, the upgrade teams are our staff. They are staff who work within HMPO. They work on date of travel, not on when people have contacted us. We are servicing that demand at the moment, and most offices are around four to five working days ahead of date of travel as we speak. But we will prioritise people based on the day that they are travelling, rather than on when they contact us.

One of the difficulties we have—I have spoken to my team recently about whether we can do more to reassure them—is that people who are in that upgrade process, who will get a call before date of travel and who will get a passport, which is what happens with the vast majority of people who end up in that service, then seek an alternative route either by their MP or via another route into us because they think that it's not going to happen and that, as I say, is because—

Q496 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Teleperformance are not telling them that is what is going to happen, presumably.

Thomas Greig: Sorry?

Stuart C. McDonald: Teleperformance do not appear to be explaining what is happening and that the call-back might not happen until quite close to travel. Is that the issue?

Thomas Greig: We have asked them to, I believe. I certainly asked them to. Can I just come back to one crucial point about this? Without the volume pressures we are under, some of these processes would ideally work better than they do. It is difficult, because people are stressed and nervous, and understandably so. As I said, we have put people in really difficult situations, but where people have got into the upgrade process, by and large we are contacting them and getting back to them in time so that they can travel in a timely manner. It may be more difficult than it should be, and I absolutely appreciate that, but that process is being undertaken every day by people in all our offices.

If individual Members of Parliament have cases where they do not believe that has happened, I would be really pleased to see them and to try to deal with them, because then we could resolve what the issues were in the system. Our intent is that everyone who is travelling imminently and has had a passport in the system, either for over six weeks and they are travelling in two weeks, or for over 10 weeks, will get their passport in time.

Q497 **Chair:** I think you're going to have a long list from Members of Parliament, because we have all got cases that we are very pleased to



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send to you for you to hopefully sort out.

I know you have to leave at 11 o'clock, Mr Calder. In terms of accessing priority appointments, what is your experience with, or what are people telling you about, the ability to get a priority appointment?

Simon Calder: It is horrible—it's passport roulette. I am hearing from people that they are setting the alarm for 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning, because they have heard that sometimes appointments will suddenly appear. You will all know of people who have driven across the country to get to a passport office, or flown across to Belfast.

We need to look forward here, and one option that I would urge HM Passport Office to consider, once things are on an even keel, would be that the whole idea of these services is that you buy instant access to a passport, either the one-week fast-track or the one one-day premium service. That used to work pretty well for people who foolishly had let their passport expire.

The market has found a solution with covid. For example, if you needed to go to China right now, there is a place that will sell you a PCR test done in one hour for £500. You might well choose to throw money at the problem, as so many people would be prepared to do, but no amount of money can get them a passport instantly.

Q498 **Chair:** Mr Greig, what time of day do these appointments go online?

Thomas Greig: It does vary. Normally, we would see the digital premium service come online first thing in the morning and fast-track appointments later on in the afternoon.

Q499 **Chair:** Do we have a time?

Thomas Greig: The best times to log in are probably about 8 in the morning, and then at about 4 or 5 in the afternoon.

Q500 **Chair:** So, 8 o'clock in the morning, and 4 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Everyone's going to be logging on; let's hope your system can cope.

Thomas Greig: I have to give people the best information I can, but appointments will be available throughout the day. Individual offices do top up their appointments as and when they can through the day.

Chair: Okay—that is news to me, because I spent yesterday looking and I couldn't find one appointment.

Mr Clarke, I think we need to come to you. Mr Daly is going to ask you some questions.

Q501 **James Daly:** Hello, Mr Clarke. Why has it taken so long to deliver passports and supporting documents once they have been processed?

Edward Clarke: Hello and thank you for the opportunity to come and speak with you today. It is important for me to give you a bit of context and background about the service we offer, what happens, and the scale and size of the operations. We have held this contract since 2020 when we



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took over. In that time, we have delivered 14 million items with a service level attempted within 48 hours of receipt at 99.6%, in that period for that volume. There is a question about what happened, and you have to unpack some of that information to understand the set of circumstances historically.

I am pleased to be able to tell you that the system and the performance this year are incredibly robust and performing as they should do. As a business, we have constructed and set up a completely separate and bespoke offering for the HMPO contracts. It is separate from our existing networks and it meets the demands and some very specific requirements that were asked of us as part of the tender process. There were 216 separate service obligations that this network was constructed to meet. The advantage of having that separate structure is that you get enhanced security. We have advanced technology being used in that, and for everyone who operates in that field, their training is solely focused on what we do for the HMPO.

There are some disadvantages to having a completely separate network. It is less flexible to volume changes, because it is a completely stand-alone environment. We spoke a minute ago about some of the volume, and we mentioned the averages being worryingly different from what they had been. I would say that it is more than that, because an average is just an average. We have seen record lows followed by record highs, so the erratic volume has been quite significant and brought about by the pandemic.

As a business, we worked really closely with the HMPO to make sure that we had the right capacity to meet the volumes and demand that were being put through to us. As part of that, when there were issues we took steps to recruit more staff, bring people on and get them trained. We permitted the HMPO to leverage other companies to deal with excessive volumes—

Q502 James Daly: Mr Clarke, may I interrupt you for a second? I do not mind listening to TNT's brief on what is happening, but I want to get back to the question. TNT has a contract to deliver passports and other documents. If you could give me the figures, that would be very helpful. From my constituents, I have numerous examples of delays in the delivery of those documents. Why has it taken so long to deliver passports and supporting documents once they have been processed? What is the reason?

Edward Clarke: If you actually look at the SLA that we are working with, we are achieving the SLA as a business. There was a nine-week period back in October last year when we had a wave of volume come through to us that was totally unprecedented and was not in the forecast that we were dealing with. While we put in the right measures and made it our No. 1 business focus to address that issue, we fell out of line with the SLA for a nine-week period. But ever since then, we have been operating as per the SLA. In fact, 97% of everything that we get is attempted and delivered within the 48-hour period that it gets passed on to us as a business.



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Q503 James Daly: Going on from that, if I were to ask you how you performed against your service level agreement with the Passport Office, what would you say?

Edward Clarke: From 2020, including the nine weeks of impacted service that we had, the current performance level is at 99.6% service.

Q504 James Daly: What is the issue with people reporting lost documents? Could you give us an idea as to the scale of that problem within the system?

Edward Clarke: Every network is vulnerable to some errors. By having this bespoke network, we do everything we possibly can to ensure that we have a robust procedure, and we work really hard to ensure that we minimise any of those impacts. We have dedicated training for those individuals who are only handling these HMPO shipments, and we ensure that we follow up on any item that has been lost.

Q505 James Daly: Can you give me an idea of the scale of the problem? I understand that you are taking steps to address it. How bad is the problem of people's documents being lost?

Edward Clarke: I think there are two different areas here: there are items that are initially raised as incidents of losses, and then there are actual losses. To put a bit of context around that, in one of the recent accounts that just came through, a passport was reported as lost, but on investigation between us and the HMPO, the delivery had been made to a family member in that household. That halves the amount that have come through, because they are actually successfully delivered. But 1,917 items were initially reported as lost, with more than 50% of those being resolved.

Q506 James Daly: Mr Calder, I am going to come to you, because I know that you have to go at 11 am. I have to be honest and say that I have been slightly open-mouthed regarding some of the evidence that we have heard today. This is a big question that takes more than the five minutes that you have, but we are here talking about the system. What do we need to do? What is the takeaway from this Committee to ensure that these problems get sorted out?

Simon Calder: Absolutely, I am very grateful to you all for addressing this, hopefully for the benefit of future travellers. I would say that communication is a very large part of it. On social media, I have been repeatedly trying to remind people, "By the way, your passport has possibly run out. Do check it." I know that we heard that 5 million text messages had gone out from HM Passport Office, which is good, but it is clearly not enough. I hope that we will not be in this position ever again of having a pandemic that effectively closes down outbound travel for the vast majority of people.

There is one aspect in respect of which I would like whether anything can be done. I realise that I am the only person who can remember the 1980s and 1990s, but in those days, there were most definitely problems with passport issuing from time to time, and you took your passport along to



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the passport office in Petty France and it got stamped so you had an extra six months or an extra year. Clearly, you cannot do that with present documents and the International Civil Aviation Organisation rules on those documents, but if there were some way of doing that, it would be strongly to the traveller's advantage.

Another aspect is children's passports. The previous idea was always to have them valid for five years and nine months maximum—to give you credit for unspent time. There are reasons why you would not do that with adult passports anymore, but there is no reason at all why you should not do that with children's passports, which would ease some of the strain that we are seeing.

Q507 James Daly: Thank you, Mr Calder. I come finally to Mr Greig. We have heard what Mr Clarke has had to say regarding TNT's performance. Some have reported that TNT have delivered a poor performance in terms of the indicators. Can you give us a flavour of your view on the service that TNT has delivered? Has the Passport Office had to employ other additional delivery firms to cover up for that poor performance?

Thomas Greig: I agree with Mr Clarke. I think that since the service issues that TNT had late last year, they have broadly delivered against their contract. The number of complaints and losses that we have had reported to us are not significantly above the industry average; they are about what we would expect and what has historically been the case in the contract.

We have, however, had to bring in other delivery firms to support us, but that is as part of the planning that we have done to deal with the unprecedented number of passports that we are dealing with this year. TNT are contracted and have the capacity to deal with only a certain number of deliveries—55,000 a day, I think—which includes deliveries for UKVI and other services. We knew that we were going to need more than that this year, which is why we have brought on another delivery supplier who act as an overspill and can pick up when we are outputting more than the amount that TNT can handle. We are also using Royal Mail to support the return of documents, again so that we can reduce the load on TNT.

That is not as a result of TNT's service failure; that is a result of the fact that TNT was contracted to deliver a volume and the volume has turned out to be much higher than that. We have had lots of conversations with them about their ability to deliver that going into this year, so we sensibly sought mitigations.

Q508 James Daly: I was late coming into the meeting, so forgive me, but may I ask how long you have been in post?

Thomas Greig: I joined the Passport Office in late January.

Q509 James Daly: Are you telling us that it is just circumstance that has created the problem of where we are today with these issues, or is it management failures within the Passport Office that have put us into this situation? I appreciate that steps will be taken to address those problems,



but where does the fault lie?

Thomas Greig: I will try to answer that as honestly as I can—I will answer it honestly, actually. We are in a really unprecedented circumstance and we are operating with a higher volume of applications than the system has ever dealt with before. We are operating in a scenario where we are using two operating systems rather than one, which was always the plan in this period, but it was not the plan to have this volume of applications in the way we are currently.

As I said at the start, we have dealt with the vast majority of applications that we have received in a very timely manner—I think we are at 90%-plus in under six weeks this year. We are in an unprecedented circumstance and we have taken a lot of steps to correct it. Are there things that I would do differently? Are there decisions that I have made that I would make a different way again? Yes, absolutely, but I think by and large we have managed the circumstance we have been in—

Q510 **James Daly:** Mr Greig, I am not asking you that question. I am sorry to press you, but I want to establish this. You are saying to us that management failures in the Passport Office have created this problem, aren't you?

Thomas Greig: No, I don't think so.

Q511 **James Daly:** So, there are no management failures in the Passport Office?

Thomas Greig: First of all, I am accountable for the delivery of the passport service and, therefore, if there are elements of that service that are not working, I am the person responsible, along with my seniors and the Ministers responsible for it. I absolutely take responsibility for the outcomes we have seen this year and for the proportion of people who have had a difficult circumstance. My team and I are working really hard to resolve that. That is as a result of a very unusual operating environment and a set of decisions that we made in good faith—both prior to and during my time—to try to ensure that we handled applications as best we could during that period.

Obviously, we can reflect and look back and say that we might have done things differently. However, do I think that the primary cause of what's happened is entirely decisions made by HMPO management? No, that is not the case. I would say it is a confluence of factors. However, yes, we are responsible and accountable for them. My colleagues and I absolutely think carefully and critically about the decisions we have made.

Q512 **James Daly:** The Committee is looking at this and we are going to consider and perhaps put forward a recommendation. What evidence can you put to us that we should have any confidence whatsoever that the current management of the Passport Office is up to the task of dealing with these issues—getting rid of the backlog, getting back to the three-week waiting period and all the other things the Chair has talked about that we want to see? What evidence is there that you are up to the job



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and that you have the structure and management in place to deliver the change that is needed?

Thomas Greig: Can I go back to the point I made earlier? I am not complacent about the issues we have had. However, as I say, we have dealt with 90% of the applications within six weeks in the year to date. I pay great tribute to my teams; this is an organisation that is more committed to customer service, certainly in terms of the people working here, than I have ever seen. We have done a huge amount to do that.

How can you have confidence in me? First, we are resolving these issues. As I said, our WIP is coming down by 60,000 cases a week. We are putting measures in place to ensure that people who need their passports get them, and people are getting them. We are working with our suppliers to improve their capacity.

For next year, we have already started to generate a range of plans to ensure that once we get through the current set of issues that we are dealing with—I think that will take some weeks, but they will resolve themselves towards the end of the summer—we will be able to put a much more stable plan in place for next year. We will understand what our operating systems are, make the necessary improvements to the digital systems, ensure that we have staff trained appropriately so that they can flex between systems and ensure that we are ready for demand and improve our customer comms. We will do all sorts of things. I would be very happy to share that with the Committee or to come back and discuss that at a later date, so that you can make the analysis for yourselves.

Q513 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Mr Calder, I think you need to leave. Thank you very much for attending today. Is there anything you want to say to us finally, before you go?

Simon Calder: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I look forward to your report. I hope you all have a very happy summer and that your trains, boats and planes are all on time—do get in touch if they're not.

Q514 **Chair:** We hope that as well. Thank you. Before I call Mr Fell, I just wanted to follow on from the question that was just raised. Mr Greig, you said earlier that Ministers were meeting every two weeks from last July to look at this issue and address the problems.

Thomas Greig: I would have to confirm the exact date, Chair. I am afraid that is not something I know. It was certainly from last year.

Chair: But you talked about Minister Foster, who is the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State.

Thomas Greig: That's correct. He is.

Q515 **Chair:** Has this ever been escalated up to the Home Secretary, because of the nature of the concerns that everybody around this table has? Have you ever met with the Home Secretary? Is she engaging with this?



Thomas Greig: Certainly I have met with the Home Secretary. My senior, Abi Tierney, who is the director general, has met with the Home Secretary on it. We regularly update the Home Secretary on progress and performance. I would say that both Minister Foster and the Home Secretary have been supportive of us. They have been appropriately challenging of us, though, too—we are not getting an easy ride from them by any means. So, yes: we have met with the Home Secretary about that. We have met more regularly with Minister Foster.

Q516 **Chair:** When did you last meet with the Home Secretary?

Thomas Greig: I could not say that with a degree of accuracy. I would say it was probably some weeks ago. I suspect Ms Tierney has spoken to her about it more recently than I have.

Chair: Okay, thank you.

Simon Fell: I am afraid, Mr Greig, that I am coming back to you.

Thomas Greig: That is no problem at all.

Q517 **Simon Fell:** I want to pick up on some of Ms Barker's questions around staffing and the mechanics of how you run your office. How do you forecast demand for passport applications in the future? What model do you use to make sure that you have the staff in place to deal with a potential rise in applications?

Thomas Greig: We have a set of analysts that forecast demand. That is based on a number of things. In what I would describe as the old days—the pre-pandemic days—that was very straightforward. We knew how many people had passports that were expiring, we knew how many people had been born and we broadly knew how many people had died. That makes it quite an easy analysis for us because we also know the propensity of people who have been born to apply for passports. That was straightforward.

Post-2014, when we had some issues around forecasting, we have had fairly stable and accurate forecasts for passports. The forecasts also take into account customer insight; we look at whether people are intending to travel, what levels of people are intending to travel and when—and various other things. That is all built into a demand model and that is the model that gets us the 9.5 million this year.

What then happens is that that model is delivered to my teams, and they develop a capacity plan based on the numbers in that model using average productivity—what we know about staff and their skill levels. They then generate from that a staffing requirement based on that productivity. We then monitor and refine that plan over the course of the year. That is how we do it. If you would like to hear a bit more about what has happened this year, I am very happy to go into that.

Q518 **Simon Fell:** I think you are pre-empting my next question. Obviously, you have been through an exceptional period, so how did that model stand up



given where we are in the pandemic?

Thomas Greig: On a demand front, it stood up at the macro level fairly well. What we have seen, which has made life more difficult for us, is some very high spike weeks. When stories about the Passport Office first started to be in the news, and when there were discussions in Parliament and elsewhere, we saw three very high weeks that spiked even above the profile of our forecasts, and then came down below it. However, broadly, the total number matches the forecast profile made by us.

In terms of staffing numbers, there have been a couple of things that we have had to revise as we went along. First, the digital system—the online system—turned out to be more productive than expected. We have delivered more out of it with less staff. Equally, partly because of the types of cases that end up on the more complex paper-based system, that has been less productive. Our assumptions on both have been slightly out. That goes back to the question one of your colleagues asked about decisions by management. The decision that I made a few months ago, that I reflect on, is that we probably turned staff from one system to the other too late, because our knowledge about the productivity of the various systems was not as accurate as it should be.

The second issue that we have had this year is that our recruitment has taken longer than we expected. We were roughly eight to 10 weeks behind on people arriving. Part of that is just general approval delays; part of that is because Home Office recruitment was prioritising staff for Ukraine visas and various other things. Those are the things that have been different this year from how we expected them to be. But we have tried to refine and adjust our model as we have gone on.

Q519 **Simon Fell:** Obviously, we are talking about your core staff in your team in Sheffield and other satellite offices around the UK. How does that apply to the contractors you use, such as TNT and Teleperformance? Is there scope in the contracts you have with them for flex in periods of high demand?

Thomas Greig: The contracts vary. We shared with our suppliers early on what we expected to happen. To go back to the answer I gave earlier about TNT, we brought in other suppliers because we knew TNT could not meet the demand. Set TNT aside for one moment, the rest of the other contractors—Telus who do our printing and Sopra who do our business processing—managed relatively well. Sopra Steria had some issues at the start of the peak period. We had those very high-peak weeks and they were not quite ready. But they have recovered and are back at a decent stage now. We share our forecasts with them, and most of them have managed to adopt them, and where they have not, we have brought into place other measures and contractors to support us.

Q520 **Simon Fell:** Obviously TNT is a supplier, and others are available. I am not quite sure what it looks like in the call centre space, and what flex looks like there. How quickly can you move to get another supplier online, with personnel trained up so that they are able to answer questions and



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access the data they need securely, in order to help people who are phoning through?

Thomas Greig: To go back to the original point, there are staff at Teleperformance who have access to the appropriate data. We are increasing the numbers of staff who have access to the more detailed data, because we are seeing more people who need that information at the moment.

What Teleperformance has done is bring additional staff through subcontractors; rather than us contracting a separate group, they have broadened subcontractors, which we obviously check for relevant quality. That is how we have increased capacity. Teleperformance increased the level of agents by 800; some of those are Teleperformance agents, and some of them are in subcontractors. Going forwards, we will look at all the options in place, but Teleperformance has increased their numbers, and they are answering more calls. The question is now about getting up to a fully serviced standard and ensuring that the policy advice being given is as good as it can be.

Q521 **Simon Fell:** During those peak periods, what percentage of core Passport Office staff are regularly employed, and how many are temporary staff? How long does it take to train a temporary member of staff to be sufficiently across the detail and systems to work well?

Thomas Greig: I will have to write with those exact proportions. As I said, the majority of the new people we have recruited have been temporary staff, because of the spike, but the majority of our workforce prior to that is the 3,600 that we had in place prior to the start of the pandemic, who are permanent civil servants.

In terms of temporary staff, the training course is about two weeks for the basic service, although we have shortened it so they can do it in eight days. One of the issues, of course, is that they can only deal with the more straightforward applications, so they then have to be trained and taken through a learning journey to be able to deal with the more complex applications.

Q522 **Simon Fell:** Again, you have led me to my next question. You keep talking about the complex cases being the ones that are causing the problems in the system. Is it only fully contracted Passport Office staff who are dealing with those cases, or do you have some of your temporary staff on them as well?

Thomas Greig: I need to correct something, perhaps because of the way I described it. Not all of the cases on the paper-based system are necessarily more complex. There is a reason they have all ended up on that system, either because of the way the person has applied or because something has caused their system to move from the digital case. There is a higher proportion of complex cases on that system, because that is where all of the complex cases end up, but there will be people on that system whose applications will appear straightforward to any reasonable person, but there will be something in the way that it is processed. I want



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to be careful about that; I am not saying they are all difficult cases, because there are less difficult cases in there as well.

Temporary staff can deal with the full range of applications, but it is more likely that it would be a full-time person, because of the levels of experience and knowledge needed, and the fact that those temporary staff were brought on more recently, so they are likely to have a lower level of training. One of the things we have started doing, because we have dealt quite well with our straightforward queue of work, is training some of those staff up and using them in other areas.

Q523 Simon Fell: Are you able to comment on the level of overtime being undertaken at the moment by Passport Office staff?

Thomas Greig: It is very significant. We are often working overtime every weekend, and we are incentivising staff to do that overtime because we want to make the best of our teams. I think that is the right thing to do. There are some concerns around the cost and staff welfare, but my strong view and my experience so far is that we will not need that level of overtime going into the year later, so we need to use it now. We will move to a period where that overtime will be less likely to be used.

As you spoke about staff, I want to take the opportunity to reiterate that our operation teams are doing a brilliant job under really significant, heavy pressure. I am sure everyone will agree with that; it is the feedback we get from MPs. Whatever fault lies anywhere in this, it does not lie with them. In my experience, this is an organisation that—more than other public sector organisations that I have spent time with—is really focused on positive outcomes for customers. I want to get that on record; I think I said it earlier, but our teams are working as hard as they possibly can under really heavy pressure to deliver as many passports as they can.

Q524 Simon Fell: I am sure they will appreciate you saying that. I would like to come back to that point, but before I do, sticking with overtime, you mentioned wellbeing. How are you trying to mitigate any potential impact on your staff's wellbeing from the significant increase in overtime? What is the cost of that overtime to the Passport Office?

Thomas Greig: To give you the total cost, I would have to come back in writing. I could try to add it up, but I don't think that would be advisable at this point. We will come back in writing with the best cost we can. I would expect it to be significant, but it is important that we use it at the moment.

As I say, our teams are under a great deal of pressure; it is really difficult. We are speaking to them a lot as managers about how they are feeling and about what is happening and making sure they are aware of all the assistance and support they can access. From downwards, I am making sure my managers continue to support their teams and each other.

In order to improve the situation, you have got to improve the situation. We need to support our teams and offer them those options for accessing wellbeing and support, through our employee assistance programme or



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through colleagues who have specific skills. We are doing things like specific targeted wellbeing exercises in offices, with conversations. We are doing psychological safety training as a way of making it easy for people to talk to each other.

What will make people feel better in the offices in the main is resolving the situation we are in. As I say, that is something that we are focused on. The operational reality is not divorced from the way people are feeling, so we need to support them through this period, but we also need to resolve the operational situation. As I say, that will have an effect and improve people's wellbeing.

Q525 Simon Fell: One of the reasons I mentioned wellbeing is that there have been multiple reports in the press, and questions have been raised in Parliament about toxic working cultures, bullying, the impact that IT failures have on your staff morale, and poor management. There are questions about whether there is a reasonable whistleblowing capacity inside the Passport Office. Of course, we know from our engagement with our constituents that they are upset and frustrated. Often, when they can get on the phone to someone, they vent that frustration at your staff. Do you recognise those reports? If so, what are you doing to mitigate them and change the culture?

Thomas Greig: To start from the beginning, these are tough times for our teams. They are not as tough as they are for people who are waiting for passports and are nervous and stressed about it. Those are the people we should be worried about firstly, but for our teams it is really difficult and they are dealing with some very difficult customer interactions. As I said, they want to do their job well; they are focused on that. They know that they are doing a lot of it well, but they also know that there are cases that are taking longer. That is the kind of impact.

I do not recognise the reports that you refer to as the general culture of the organisation. That is my experience of being in it for the past six or seven months. That is not the management culture that I see in the organisation at the level of managers that I deal with most regularly, but also when I go round and see people, that is not what I see. That is not to say that I am dismissive.

Since those reports, verbally to staff on an all-staff call, I and my boss have reminded people of the avenues for making a complaint. There aren't any specific complaints that I am aware of or that have been made to me about those that we can investigate. If they do come up, we will investigate them and make sure that appropriate action is taken.

In any organisation, there may be places and teams where work needs to be done around the culture and where support is needed. As I say, that is why we are doing things like psychological safety training, which is to help people talk. We are going to roll out a programme of management training, and we are encouraging senior managers to make sure they are around their teams so that they can pick up on these issues. We are



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encouraging people to complain if they need to, either anonymously or specifically to us.

Again, as a generality, that is not a culture that I recognise. In fact, when some of these issues were raised regarding the Durham office, we spoke to the local unions there. Although they identified issues that they wanted us to resolve, they agreed that they did not think there was a toxic working culture there. There are definitely things that we need to work on, and there is lots more that we need to do about management culture, but I do not accept that there is a toxic working culture as a generality in the Passport Office.

Q526 Simon Fell: How are you measuring that? You have spoken about a couple of measures that you are putting in place, which are welcome, but talking to other organisations that have had these kinds of stresses and pressures, whether that is whistleblowing policy or the workplace culture or being able to speak to management in a high-pressure situation like you are under at the moment, having an independent arbiter who can come in and offer that safety valve and sense check is really welcome. Are you taking any steps like that?

Thomas Greig: Not at the moment. It is certainly something that we could think about. There is an independence, in so far as there is an employee assistance programme, where people who need help can approach someone. But I think you are asking about something slightly different, which is someone to come and look at the way that our offices function. It is something that we have done a few times before with internal HR in various places. We could certainly think about it again. It would need to be in a few weeks because, at the moment, anything like that would cause a level of disruption that we probably do not need. We will give it some thought.

I am aware that these concerns are real—they have been raised with me as well. I don't think they are a general issue, but I do think we need to make sure we do all we can to resolve them and I want everyone to feel good about coming to work.

Q527 Simon Fell: I have one last question. What is the impact on staff retention for core staff employed by the Passport Office? How many are staying with you and how many are leaving?

Thomas Greig: The last set of numbers I saw regarding the churn rate was that we were not particularly out of step with the normal public sector churn rate. I don't think we are seeing large numbers of people leaving as a generality; there may be some specific teams where we are above the churn rate we would normally see. I am happy to put a bit more detail on that in writing—I could give a rough percentage—but I don't think we are out of step with the rest of the Home Office and the rest of the public sector.

Q528 Paula Barker: Mr Greig, I have been made aware that management have continued to deploy incentivised overtime despite saying it was going to be a short-term measure. The PCS Union has advised that it was told that



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overtime would be worked in grade, but that senior managers are being asked to complete work at lower grades for overtime payments, including incentives. What would your comment be about that?

Thomas Greig: First of all, incentivised overtime is something that we would not always use but we will continue to use it while we need it. Our objective is to maximise our output and to make sure that we are serving customers. We have kept PCS updated throughout as we have made the decisions that we have needed to make.

On managers working out of grade, again, ideally that is not something we would do and it is not our principle to do it but, on occasion, where there were specific tasks that needed doing and we knew that our managers could do, we have offered that option to them. It is not the norm, but we are trying to get the work done.

I would rather not do these things, but they are necessary at the moment because of the pressure and the unprecedented demand we are seeing. As soon as we are in a more stable situation, we will revert to our normal processes.

Q529 **Paula Barker:** What sort of incentives have you used?

Thomas Greig: I would have to get the exact detail, but people get paid an incentive in vouchers for working. I think you have to do three in a row, or two in a row—two weekends in a row—and they then see the incentive.

Q530 **Paula Barker:** Could you provide the Committee with a full breakdown, please?

Thomas Greig: Sure, I would be very happy to.

Q531 **Paula Barker:** Am I right in saying that you are still using the old application management system?

Thomas Greig: Yes—I referred to this in previous answers. We are using that for about 20% of applications.

Q532 **Paula Barker:** But it was due to end in 2020. Is that correct?

Thomas Greig: I believe so, yes.

Q533 **Paula Barker:** What is the timescale for the full roll-out of the new digital application system and what is the current end date of the AMS system?

Thomas Greig: We are working through that at the moment. What has happened over the last few weeks and months is that we have had to ask for quite a lot of changes to be made to the roll-out of the digital application system in order to ensure that we can meet some of the unusual circumstances that we have seen. I do not think I can give a date for when we are going to move fully on to DAP. I hope it would be as soon as possible, but I think that we have got to be realistic. As you have rightly said, it has taken longer than we expected already and there have



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been quite a lot of things that have happened since the last time we set a roll-out that mean that we will have to adjust it.

I am impatient to get off the AMS system and on to the DAP system for everything because I think it makes things much more straightforward and, as we said, the digital system is much more productive. I am impatient, but I would say that what we are doing is planning on a worst-case scenario. We are planning on the basis that we will not have a particularly greater level of functionality in DAP next year so that we can make sure that anything additional is a bonus, as it were. But no, we have not concluded how long that is going to take.

Q534 Paula Barker: Is there any penalty cost for using the legacy AMS system?

Thomas Greig: There will be additional charges should we end up having to extend one of the services that supports that system, as I understand it. We are getting to the edges of my exact knowledge about this, but, as I understand it, there would be an additional charge if we were to go beyond the period through which we have contracted to use the services and the support services.

Q535 Paula Barker: And who would those penalties be paid to?

Thomas Greig: I'm afraid I don't know.

Q536 Paula Barker: Again, could you clarify that in writing to the Committee, please?

Thomas Greig: Sure.

Paula Barker: Thank you.

Thomas Greig: I would say in terms of clarifying things in writing, we will have to check whether these things are commercially sensitive or not. We will share whatever we can share, but yes, we will be as open as we can on that.

Q537 Paula Barker: We have heard that 91,000 civil servants are going to be cut. How many staff have you told the Cabinet Office that you will be cutting from the Passport Office?

Thomas Greig: I don't think we have done it in quite the way you suggest. We have a set of plans. First, we are not intending at the moment to make anyone redundant from the Passport Office. We are not intending any staff reductions; we are increasing staff as we go. We have some transformation plans that go forward into the future, but I am not sure that there is advice that is as specific as you put it about the Passport Office. We can certainly respond in more detail in writing if necessary.

Q538 Paula Barker: Okay. The Teleperformance contract was awarded at a cost of £22 million. Do you think it has been value for money?

Thomas Greig: I think there have been some significant issues with Teleperformance—



Paula Barker: I think that is putting it mildly, Mr Greig, to be fair.

Thomas Greig: —over the last year. As I say, we have levied some service credits about them, and we have had conversations with them in no uncertain terms about their performance. They have responded to those. The reason I hesitate to talk about value for money, to be quite honest, is that I don't know the market rate for these things. It is not an area that I am directly managing, but I would say that there has been a little bit of improvement in their delivery of the service, and we certainly hope to see that improvement continue.

Q539 **Paula Barker:** It is interesting that you have raised the issue of market rates, Mr Greig, because I understand that a lot of staff who are employed on the Teleperformance contract are generally paid national minimum wage rates but the CEO is paid £4.2 million per year, which is over 200 times what the frontline staff are paid. Do you think that is right? Do you think that that should be happening? Do you not think that those services would be best provided in-house, rather than paying vast swathes of money to an organisation that, quite frankly, is letting this country down?

Thomas Greig: It is obviously not for me to comment on how Teleperformance chooses to remunerate its staff. There will be safeguards to ensure that they meet things like the national minimum wage. In terms of the model of delivery, I think that we will consistently review our model for delivery of services, and which bits we do and which bits we ask private contractors to do. There are many, many private contractors who bring skills, expertise and economies of scale in areas that we can't. We have Ed sitting here from TNT. It wouldn't be sensible if the Government set up its own delivery service, for example. I think we have to review those models carefully as we go forward. We have no plans to change ours specifically, but we will continue to look at that.

What I am focused on is taking the processes we have at the moment in this contract, which are pretty much baked in, and ensuring they work as well as they possibly can for customers, which they need right now.

Q540 **Chair:** Mr Greig, when is the contract up for renewal with Teleperformance?

Thomas Greig: I think it is about a year and a half, but again I will have to check and get someone to write with something more specific about that.

Q541 **Chair:** Will you let us know?

Thomas Greig: Yes.

Chair: We would be very interested to know what happens when that contract comes up, after everything you have said to us this morning. I will bring in Carolyn Harris, then I have one more question.

Q542 **Carolyn Harris:** It is a very simple question, but I am going to ask you to be very honest, Mr Greig. Given that you have already told us that Teleperformance have been sanctioned or had fines for their performance,



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do you honestly believe that Her Majesty's Passport Office is currently delivering a value-for-money, professional service to the general public?
[Interruption.]

Thomas Greig: Sorry?

Carolyn Harris: Your hesitation speaks volumes.

Thomas Greig: I was just waiting for your Division bell to stop. I will go back, I am afraid, to the answer that I have given. For a very large majority of customers, we think that we are delivering a good professional service. If you look on some of the online forums, there are people saying what a positive service they had, how quickly they got their passport and how well they feel like we performed. For another group of customers, we have not delivered the service that we should have delivered this year. I am really, really sorry about that. We are doing absolutely everything we can to make sure that they can get their passports in advance of their holidays, by bearing down on that queue of longer applications but also by offering them expedited and upgraded services. But yes, I accept that as an organisation, there is a group of customers that we should have done better for. Our focus is on resolving those issues for those people now, and then making sure that, in the future, it is not a circumstance that we see again.

Q543 **Chair:** Can I ask about the income that the Passport Office is generating because people are having to pay additional fees to get the service? I understand that in '20-'21, the income from passport fees was £210.9 million. It has now gone up, as I understand it, in '21-'22, to £380.2 million. Do you recognise those figures?

Thomas Greig: That would sound about right. Some of that—most of that—would be a function of increased demand, though, I would imagine. We are not talking about figures for this year. I would have to look at that; I do not know. That sounds relatively accurate.

Q544 **Chair:** All I really want to know is, in terms of your budgeting, will that additional fee income stay with you in the Passport Office, because obviously you have been struggling, or does it go straight back to the Treasury?

Thomas Greig: My understanding of that circumstance—again, if I am not right about this, we will clarify—is that we set a budget with the Treasury and we only retain the fees within that budget. If we are over the budget we have agreed with the Treasury, my understanding is that that would go back into the central Home Office pot or back to the Treasury. That is certainly how arrangements like that have worked in other areas that I have worked.

Q545 **Chair:** Although I get what you say about there being more people applying for passports and therefore the figures are going to go up, the other problem is that people are having to pay for the priority service. That is the point: people are having to pay even more now to get their passport because of the flaws in the system.



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Thomas Greig: People who need a passport quicker than the system is currently providing.

Chair: Yes, waiting up to 10 weeks.

Thomas Greig: For people waiting over 10 weeks, that service is free.

Q546 **Chair:** But up to 10 weeks. In the past, there was a three-week turnaround. Now it is 10 weeks, so the service has declined and people are having to pay more to get what they had before. That is my point.

Thomas Greig: The same number of people are applying for priority—well, more people, because we have provided more priority service appointments—

Q547 **Chair:** If you can get an appointment, but we will not go into that. Can I ask one other question about Ministers? We have talked about Ministers meeting and having discussions about this since last summer. In terms of the wellbeing and morale of the staff, have Ministers visited the passport offices around the country?

Thomas Greig: Certainly, there are plans for them to visit in the not-too-distant future. I believe Minister Foster has visited—in fact I know that he has visited—our offices on several occasions.

Chair: Minister Foster has visited, did you say?

Thomas Greig: Yes, he has.

Q548 **Chair:** Has the Home Secretary visited any of the passport offices?

Thomas Greig: Not during the period that I have been working for the Passport Office, as far as I am aware, which is the last six months.

Q549 **Chair:** Right. Will you check and let us know whether the Home Secretary has visited any passport office in the last 12 months to talk with frontline staff? It would be helpful to know.

Thomas Greig: I can certainly do that. As I said, Minister Foster has, but I am not sure about the Home Secretary.

Q550 **Chair:** Just one very final question: how much are you paying in compensation to people who are not able to get their passports? What is the running total?

Thomas Greig: Our general stance is that we do not pay compensation, other than in certain limited circumstances. The top-line advice on our website—I have not mentioned this, because I know that it is slightly different from how people normally behave—is that people should not book a holiday until they have a passport, so our general stance is that we do not provide compensation. I know that there are some circumstances under which we do. I can certainly provide a more detailed breakdown of when we do it and when we have done, if that would be helpful.

Q551 **Chair:** That would be very helpful. And where are you at the moment with numbers of complaints?



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Thomas Greig: Numbers of complaints are relatively low. I think last month it was about 173, if my recollection—

Chair: You had 173 complaints last month?

Thomas Greig: Something along those lines, according to the numbers I have. I do think—

Q552 **Chair:** I have to say that that feels very low.

Thomas Greig: I agree. I think that what we might see—I have seen this in previous jobs—is that, where people have their applications resolved, even if they had a difficult experience, many of them do not then complain. I will be honest, although this puts me in a less advantageous position: I do not think the level of complaints we have had is reflective of the number of people who are unhappy with our service.

Q553 **Chair:** Have you done any customer satisfaction surveys?

Thomas Greig: We have done customer satisfaction surveys. Again, I think the percentage of people saying that they are satisfied with the service is in the high 60s, close to 70%.

Q554 **Chair:** When did you do that survey?

Thomas Greig: I think that was last month. I think we do them on a monthly basis.

Q555 **Chair:** Will you send us those figures as well? We would be interested to have a look at that.

Thomas Greig: Yes. Again, as I say, this bears out the two streams of issues that we have here. There are lots and lots of people who, if you asked them, “How was your experience of applying for a passport?”, would say it was very good, so that probably surprises me less than the level of complaints.

Q556 **Chair:** I guess as MPs we are at the sharp end of the people who are not having a good service. As Tim Loughton said earlier, our offices are inundated with problems with the Passport Office.

Thank you very much for your time today. Thank you, Mr Clarke, for attending. We very much appreciate that, as a contractor to the Home Office, you have turned up. As I said at the outset, we are very concerned that another contractor, Teleperformance, did not bother to come to answer questions. That is not acceptable. As I said, I hope, Mr Greig, you will feed that back through to the people you speak to—

Thomas Greig: Indeed. We have done.

Chair: You have done already, okay. It would be interesting to see the correspondence between you and Teleperformance about this, because in Parliament we are just not impressed at all by your contractor.

Thomas Greig: Understood.



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Chair: Thank you again for your time today.