

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Investigation into the UK Passport Office, HC 738

Monday 19 December 2022

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Mr Jonathan Djanogly; Mrs Flick Drummond; Mr Louie French; Peter Grant; Anne Marie Morris; Sarah Olney; Nick Smith.

Rebecca Sheeran, Executive Director, National Audit Office, and Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Questions 1-150

Witnesses

[I](#): Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, Tricia Hayes CB, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office and Thomas Greig, Director of Passports, Citizenship and Civil Registration, HM Passport Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Matthew Rycroft, Tricia Hayes and Thomas Greig.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 19 December 2022. Today we are talking to officials from the Passport Office, which is now within the Home Office, and from the Home Office, its sponsor Department, about backlogs in passport applications, which dogged this country over the summer. Over the pandemic, obviously, fewer people applied for passports because they could not travel. A backlog was therefore predicted, but in the end, despite preparations in the Passport Office, there was a very big challenge dealing with people trying to get passports in time to travel. That surge was predictable and we want to ask the Passport Office what led, in spite of its knowing that it was going to happen, to the confusion and delays that were so well documented.

I welcome our witnesses. We have Matthew Rycroft, the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office; Tricia Hayes, the Second Permanent Secretary at the Home Office; and Thomas Greig, the Director of Passports, Citizenship and Civil Registration at His Majesty's Passport Office, which is actually now in the Home Office. It is not a separate entity; it has the same branding, but it is part of the Home Office. A warm welcome to you all.

Before we get into the main session, we want to ask some other questions. Last Tuesday, the Prime Minister made announcements about a number of changes to how the Government will be dealing with people arriving on small boats and asylum initiatives. I just want to confirm, Permanent Secretary, that some of those actually were not such new announcements. On the reprocessing of applications that are agreed or dealt with by your caseworkers, work has been being done on that for some time in the Home Office. Is that right?

Matthew Rycroft: Well, tackling the issue of small boats has been a high priority for—

Chair: I am talking about the actual processing of the applications once people have put them in. That processing—re-engineering—has been going on for some time.

Matthew Rycroft: That processing has been part of the very high priority that tackling the whole small boats phenomenon has been for a few years now, but the Prime Minister put particular emphasis on the announcements and the commitments that he made, including clearing the initial asylum decision-making backlog with—

Q2 Chair: Just to be clear, though, your civil servants were already working to make sure that they could turn around more than 1.3 cases a week, and that was work that you had been undertaking for some months before the announcement on Tuesday.

Matthew Rycroft: We have been working on that for some months, absolutely.

Q3 **Chair:** How many months?

Matthew Rycroft: We set up a pilot, which began in our Leeds office, to see what was required to get to four decisions per fully trained caseworker per week. We are now rolling that out around the other hubs. On top of that, we are also recruiting extra caseworkers. As the Prime Minister announced, we have already doubled the number, and what he announced was a doubling again of the number of caseworkers.

Q4 **Chair:** When did that pilot in Leeds start and finish?

Matthew Rycroft: It started about six months ago and it has now led to the lessons being learned around our other decision-making centres.

Q5 **Chair:** Just to be clear, that is not just people who arrive in small boats; it is all asylum applications—but only asylum applications—that you are looking at.

Matthew Rycroft: In that pilot, yes, that is right.

Q6 **Chair:** Okay. You have a big challenge to deliver what the Prime Minister suggested by the end of next year. How confident are you that you will achieve that?

Matthew Rycroft: All of the commitments that the Prime Minister made are stretching targets, and that is deliberate, because this is a major challenge. It is a challenge to the taxpayer, given that we are spending £5.6 million per night on hotels for asylum seekers. It is also a challenge for the whole of the system to ensure that people who genuinely require our protection and asylum are able to receive that. We have been working at pace to tackle all the different aspects of the Prime Minister's announcement. As you say, they build on earlier work but nevertheless are going to be quite challenging to meet, but we are determined to give it our very best shot.

Q7 **Chair:** I note that in your language, you have talked about people arriving on small boats, but the asylum system has been working very much with people from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. When you talk about the people coming, are you using "small boats" as shorthand for all those groups, or are you talking about this support just for people arriving on small boats?

Matthew Rycroft: I think it is worth clarifying that some aspects of the Government's approach, including the legislation—the Nationality and Borders Act—

Chair: I am talking about the processing. You have talked about the pilot in Leeds and so on. That is for all asylum seekers.

Matthew Rycroft: That is for asylum seekers, but some other aspects of the system depend on the route of entry. The whole notion of inadmissibility is based on the route by which someone enters the country.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We use, as shorthand, “small boats” for people who arrive through an illegal route rather than people who might be coming through a legal route and staying on, for instance.

Q8 **Chair:** It is important to differentiate—I would think so, and you are the Permanent Secretary of the Home Office—between people who have arrived through small boats and people who have arrived because they have been invited to the UK, as through the Ukrainian scheme.

Matthew Rycroft: The people arriving on the Ukrainian scheme, or indeed the others that you have mentioned, do not need to seek asylum because they have leave to remain here anyway without seeking asylum.

Q9 **Chair:** Well, effectively, we have given them leave to remain because they were seeking asylum from other countries.

Matthew Rycroft: I am not sure that that is exactly the characterisation—

Q10 **Chair:** Well, we have chosen to give them it, but okay.

I also want to push you on the issue of the new legislation that is being proposed to be put to the House in January. Is this something the Home Office has written already? How far along is that legislation?

Matthew Rycroft: Well, I think we need to wait for the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister to make further announcements about that legislation, but clearly the Prime Minister announced that it would be forthcoming in the new year. The Home Office, as you would expect, is leading on preparation for that future announcement.

Q11 **Chair:** You have clearly given advice to Ministers on this. I am not asking you to reveal your private advice to Ministers, but have you seen any need for a ministerial direction on this issue?

Matthew Rycroft: Not yet, but we keep that under review. As you know, we know how to seek ministerial directions in the Home Office, and we will do so again if necessary.

Q12 **Chair:** At this stage, are you confident that it complies with international law on support for people who are fleeing persecution?

Matthew Rycroft: I don’t think I have anything to add to what the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have said publicly about that, but we will keep that under very close review as the versions of the legislation that are worked up make progress over the coming weeks.

Q13 **Chair:** So we are talking about weeks. We are talking about a January date for legislation to come to the House.

Matthew Rycroft: I don’t have anything further to add to what the Prime Minister said.

Q14 Peter Grant: Permanent Secretary, you referred a minute ago to illegal methods of people arriving in the UK to claim asylum. There is no such thing as an illegal way for an asylum seeker to arrive in the UK, is there?

Matthew Rycroft: The Nationality and Borders Act seeks to address that question and the future legislation will address it further.

Q15 Peter Grant: Under international law, there is no such thing as an illegal way for an asylum seeker to arrive in the United Kingdom to seek asylum. That is correct, isn't it?

Matthew Rycroft: The Nationality and Borders Act does create a new offence of illegal entry in the UK.

Q16 Peter Grant: Which differs from international law.

Matthew Rycroft: No. The Government have said repeatedly, and I am happy to repeat it again for this Committee, that the UK will abide by all of our international legal obligations.

Q17 Chair: Thank you. We will obviously be watching that very closely. Just briefly, before we move on from that, you have had challenging issues at Manston. I will not go into the background, because our sister Committee, the Home Affairs Committee, has looked into this. Do you have any estimate at this point about the cost of all the support that has had to go into Manston, largely driven by that serious overcrowding—the consultancies you have brought in, all the extra health and other professionals you have had to assign to that?

Matthew Rycroft: I can write to the Committee with a total number, but many of those costs are costs we would have been spending anyway, but just elsewhere. The function that is now done in Manston is the initial 24-hour screening between an arrival in Dover on a small boat and moving on to future accommodation. That processing was done elsewhere, mainly just on the harbour there at Tug Haven and Western Jet Foil in Dover, and now there is a better facility in Manston to do that. The support offered there, including the medical support, is, certainly from my point of view, very clearly value for money in order to provide the necessary screening and so on.

Q18 Chair: So are you saying that, in broad terms, there is no significant additional cost because of the challenges of dealing with that number of people in a facility designed for far fewer people.

Matthew Rycroft: Some of the costs will have gone up just because the numbers spiked. Some of the costs are per person, so you would expect them to go up when there are more arrivals. I do not think that the fact we are doing it at Manston rather than at Western Jet Foil has significantly added to cost.

Q19 Chair: Okay, so it is a numbers-driven issue.

Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Chair: Ms Hayes, you look like you might want to add something.

Tricia Hayes: I just want to add a very quick thought. Obviously, we are reflecting on the experiences we had at Manston over the autumn and considering a number of different capital projects that we might put in place to improve the facilities and improve flow through Manston. We do not have any financial information on those yet, but I just thought I would complete the picture.

Chair: There are so many more issues on money going into this, including, of course, the non-hotel accommodation that the Minister said on the Floor of the House today would be provided. That will, no doubt, be costly, so we will be constantly watching this as a Committee and working with our sister Committee, the Home Affairs Committee, with us looking particularly at the pounds spent.

Q20 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Good afternoon, Mr Rycroft. Does today's verdict in the High Court on Rwanda mean you will now be proceeding with the policy, or do you have to wait pending an appeal to the Supreme Court?

Matthew Rycroft: The Home Secretary will be addressing that question almost as we speak on the Floor of the House of Commons, so I will let her make her announcements.

Chair: She is on her feet now and has been for nine minutes, so she has probably made her announcement.

Matthew Rycroft: I will let her words speak for themselves.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We will come back to it, Chair.

Chair: We will come back to it later, because by then she will have said it, so I think you can then speak on it without any problem.

Q21 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: On a separate issue, could you let us know what plans the Home Office is making for industrial action by border staff?

Matthew Rycroft: Yes, absolutely. Ms Hayes might want to come in on this as well, but I will just say that, obviously, it is a very high priority for us to ensure that the disruption to people travelling is reduced as far as possible. What I cannot commit to is that it will be reduced to zero, because, clearly, one of the purposes of the strike is to be disruptive, but I am very glad to say that some Home Office volunteers, as well as colleagues from the National Crime Agency and military colleagues, will be coming in to support where Border Force officers do go on strike over the holiday period.

Q22 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Which is the chink period, when you are likely to see delays?

Tricia Hayes: Obviously, we have had the industrial action called for the eight days over the Christmas period. While we have pretty robust plans, based on a number of different scenarios about exactly how many people take industrial action and in what locations, it is difficult to be absolutely definitive at this point about exactly where or what the impacts will be in individual places. That is why we have put into place a contingency resourcing model that is based in regions, which will allow us to move people around within regions based on the patterns of action that are taken.

Over the last month, we have put a huge amount of effort into ensuring that we have fully trained contingency teams in place—as Matthew said, drawn from the military, other parts of the civil service, Home Office volunteers and the NCA—but we cannot pretend that substituting efficient border officers with newly trained individuals, however talented, is going to give you a like-for-like service, so we are telling the public to communicate with their travel providers and think hard about their travel plans over Christmas.

Q23 Chair: To be clear, Border Force officers have a warrant for the detention of people, don't they? If there was a serious issue, it could be quite a serious safety issue.

Tricia Hayes: We have plans in place: if non-Border Force staff find themselves in a situation where that kind of action might be needed, they will always have access to a fully warranted Border Force officer. There will still be some Border Force officers working, even through the industrial action.

Chair: Okay. Again, we could spend our entire time discussing that alone.

Q24 Sarah Olney: I have lots of newly arrived Hong Kong nationals in my constituency—I am very pleased to have them there. One problem they have raised with me is that they have come to this country on a BNO passport, but they find that if they try to travel, border officials in other countries do not recognise that passport. They do not understand its status and do not recognise the holder's right to travel. What is the Home Office doing to provide more guidance to its counterparts abroad?

Matthew Rycroft: Thank you for the question, Ms Olney. First, I want to say how pleased I am that so many British nationals overseas from Hong Kong have taken the Government up on the offer: 150,000 of them have applied, and 145,000 have had their BNO passport granted, out of a total of 2.9 million who could be eligible. This is a very significant offer to the people of Hong Kong, bearing in mind possible action by the Chinese authorities.

I personally was not aware of the issue that you raise. Unless either of my colleagues is, we will write to you with an answer to that question and make sure that we help your constituents and others in the same situation

to overcome those sorts of challenges. The passport should be recognised in exactly the same way as any other.

Sarah Olney: That is obviously the expectation, but they are finding certain challenges.

Matthew Rycroft: That is clearly what they deserve, and we will make sure that we are helping them if we can.

Q25 Chair: Ms Olney can write to you with the specific details, and we can encourage other Members of the House to do the same—we will trawl for that. Thank you.

I want to touch on the knotty issue of the Emergency Services Network. Mr Rycroft, you are at least the third Permanent Secretary to have been dealing with this issue—the fourth or fifth, possibly, but certainly the third in recent times for this Committee. We knew from the beginning that one of the challenges of the scheme, which is to replace the Airwave operation so that our emergency services can connect with each other at times of emergency, was that Motorola was dealing with both the old and the new contract. In October 2022, just earlier this year, the CMA said that Motorola was earning significantly higher profits from operating Airwave than from delivering its obligations to the new system. It estimated that Motorola could be expected to make “supernormal profits” of around £1.1 billion between 2020 and 2026 from operating Airwave.

We have said repeatedly on this Committee that the ESN is late and delayed. We keep being promised that it is getting back on track, only for it to be delayed further. This is an awful lot of taxpayers’ money on something that could have been resolved. Where are you at now? What next steps will happen, given we still await the final report from the CMA? Can you act before that final report to try to resolve the issue?

Matthew Rycroft: There is a lot that we can do before the final report, but you are absolutely right that we need to wait for it to be very clear with Motorola about the next steps.

Q26 Chair: I gather they are threatening legal avenues.

Matthew Rycroft: There is a lot of work behind the scenes with Motorola, and I will happily update the Committee on it further once it has reached a resolution. I hope that the Committee shares my appreciation of the work of the CMA: £1.1 billion will be saved to the British taxpayer as a result of its work.

Q27 Chair: You are content that that will be saved?

Matthew Rycroft: Subject to the final announcements by the CMA and whatever appeal Motorola goes through, but clearly, there will be a very significant sum of cost to this programme that will be reduced. In shorthand, this latest episode, which, as you say, comes on the back of many others with this programme, will lead to a less expensive product, but over a slightly longer timeframe. When I next write to the Committee

on this—I write to you quarterly—I will set out what it means in more detail. In shorthand, it is a slightly slower process, but at a significantly reduced cost to the British taxpayer.

Q28 Chair: We have been warning about this for quite some time. It is great that you are congratulating the CMA for saving the taxpayer £1.1 billion, subject to the legal avenues that could be pursued, but don't you think the Home Office missed it here? The CMA had to come riding to the rescue of the Home Office to prevent profiteering—well, a contractual benefit accruing to Motorola as a result of poor contracting by the Home Office.

Matthew Rycroft: I don't agree with that characterisation, Chair. Actually, I think we should give credit where it is due, which is to our commercial colleagues and our colleagues running the ESMCP programme in the Home Office. They are the people who spotted this and knew there was the possibility of a very significant refund owed to the British taxpayer. I am absolutely delighted that, so far, the process to receive that refund is on track.

Chair: Okay. It just feels a bit like shutting the door after the horse has bolted, but there we go. We will leave that, because we will be looking at it again, probably in April time, when we hope the National Audit Office will have had the chance to finish its work in that area. We will now move on, you will be glad to know—maybe—to the issue of passports and the challenges of the backlog. I will ask Mr Nick Smith MP to kick off.

Q29 Nick Smith: Afternoon, everybody. Last year, the valleys in south Wales were alive with the cry, "Where's my passport?" **Chair:** How romantic.

Nick Smith: Chair, it was the single biggest casework topic that my office had to deal with. I had people who were afraid they were losing holidays, who couldn't attend family crises and who sometimes couldn't get employment. It was a really big thing. Ms Hayes, how satisfied are you with the performance of HMPO in meeting customer expectations last spring and summer?

Tricia Hayes: First, I would like to say that I am really sorry about the kind of experiences that you are talking about. A couple of times in this building, I visited MPs' casework surgeries that colleagues in the Passport Office put on, so I saw at first hand some of the high emotion that the issuing of passports generated earlier in the summer.

I would say, though, that if you look at the overall level of performance of the Passport Office over the last six months, there are some things to be positive about. By the end of this year, we will have processed more than 8.5 million passport applications, which is 1 million more than we processed in any previous year. The majority of customers who did business with us this year had a positive experience: 95% of our standard applications between January and November were completed within our published timeline of 10 weeks.

At system level, in terms of our overall performance, I have a lot to be proud of. I am proud of my team and the efforts they made in difficult circumstances. Clearly, there are some customers for whom we did not do a good enough job. As the Report sets out, we have done a lot of internal reviewing and soul-searching about the things we can do better next year so we can avoid your mailbox and surgeries having passports as their No. 1 theme.

Q30 Nick Smith: Thank you for that answer. It is good that you have concentrated on the positive and said what a good job your staff team did. Across the country, a number of offices did see that, so we are grateful for their work, but overall my casework team were inundated with problems from people needing passports. Of course, it stopped them doing other things too, so it had really big impacts on many of my constituents and people right across the country. Mr Greig, why did so many customers resort to writing to their MPs to get over these difficulties?

Thomas Greig: Thank you for the invite to the Committee today. The first thing is that I would just echo the second permanent secretary's point.

Nick Smith: We have heard her response.

Thomas Greig: Indeed.

Chair: We are sure you agree with her—that is usually wise for someone in the civil service.

Nick Smith: Why did people contact MPs, who are usually the last people they come to? They usually come to us because they are fed up that they are not getting a service and are at the end of their tether.

Thomas Greig: The first reason was that, for a small proportion of our customers—that was still quite a large number, given the volumes that we deal with—we did not provide a good enough service. That is the root cause of the issues that we had this year. There were a significant number of applicants, albeit a small proportion, whose cases took longer than 10 weeks, and for that reason they had every right to want to find out more information about their applications. However, as well as that, we had some significant issues with our customer contact provider, and that meant that those people could not contact us, and so they went, quite rightly, to their MPs or they sought to escalate their inquiry in another way.

The root cause of it was the issues that we had with that small cohort of cases, but that was exacerbated by the fact that our customer contact processes did not work as they should have. If we are honest, a lot of people were also getting information from social media, and we probably were not as forward-leaning as we should have been in providing general information to customers on social media, which would also have helped to address some of those issues.

Q31 Nick Smith: Thank you. The NAO Report says that there were approximately 11,400 MP contacts about constituents. I remember that I alone had 66. Of the 11,000 contacts about constituents you received, how many were by letter, how many by email, how many by phone, and how many by people going to see you downstairs in Portcullis House?

Thomas Greig: I would have to write more directly to provide you with the full detail of where those inquiries came from and how they went together. For example, in July we received, I think, nearly 5,000 calls, so we were averaging about 237 calls from MPs per day. I think, in total, in November we received 237, but we would have to write with further detail on the precise breakdown of the nature of those communications.

Q32 Nick Smith: Can you, please? The Report says you had 11,000 inquiries. I think there are going to be many thousands more, and I want to understand that a bit better. A simple calculation: 66 for every constituency MP multiplied by 650 gets you 40,000-plus. I do not understand the numbers you have.

Thomas Greig: I would need to look again at the Report and compare that to our numbers. I suspect that they are using only a certain cohort of inquiries—possibly letters, or something of that sort. We should check, and we will come back to you with a bit more detail.

Chair: There is also a more practical issue. If we are in a situation of dealing with the Home Office on immigration issues in a similar way, it might help to streamline how MPs contact different parts of the Home Office when there is a service challenge or failure.

Q33 Nick Smith: Yes. We will come back to a lot of the topics that you have raised already, so thank you for that.

I have one more question. What does the number of customers contacting MPs tell you about people's trust in your customer service? I had one constituent who got in touch to say that she tried to ring you to ask about her family's holiday 40 times during one week, and each time she had the phone put down on her. What happened?

Thomas Greig: As I think I said, we accept that there were some quite severe shortcomings in our customer contact for a period. That did happen to people: they phoned up, and they were hung up on. We have done a lot of work to correct that since, but, yes, we accept that that was not acceptable and that the service that was being delivered at that time was genuinely not acceptable. To an extent, that is what drove customer contact.

On your other point, I think that a number of customers whose applications were going to be dealt with in good time lost confidence in the system, understandably, because of what they were hearing. That had a negative effect on the way that we had to handle inquiries and the volume of inquiries we had to handle. I totally accept that the customer contact in

that period of the summer was not up to scratch. It did not do what it should have done, and it left people in a very difficult position.

Tricia Hayes: May I come in very briefly? I totally agree that that was completely unacceptable. People should not be hung up on when they ring up to ask what is going on with their passport application. I am really sorry that that happened. Two things: as soon as we became aware that that was what our suppliers were doing, it stopped straightaway. It was clear to us immediately that that was unacceptable, and it stopped immediately. Secondly, for next summer, we are building a more resilient customer contact model and bringing in a second supplier, so that we will find ourselves with a much better service to offer people. So that should never happen again.

Q34 Nick Smith: One more question on Teleperformance and the company that was taking calls. When I had an urgent question on this topic in May, the Minister came to the Floor of the House and said that it was expected that Teleperformance would employ another 500 staff to help with inquiries. I am unsure about some of the analysis you have given on how many staff you have got to support you in this work. Were those 500 extra people then employed at Teleperformance?

Thomas Greig: Yes, they would have been. Teleperformance, at the height of their staffing this year, which included subcontractors who they used to get people on board more quickly, were employing about 1,900 people on our call line. I would have to look at the precise date of the question versus what then happened afterwards, but we certainly were able, through the use of subcontractors and through flexing people from other areas of work, to increase their headcount quite dramatically over that period.

Q35 Nick Smith: You are absolutely sure, are you, that Teleperformance did get another 500 staff in?

Thomas Greig: I would have to look at the precise time that the question was answered and compare that to our records in terms of the detail of the number of people that were working on the contract at that time. As I said, we did flex up to about 1,900 people. At the moment, they have about 450 people working on the line, but, at max, they had 1,900.

Q36 Nick Smith: I have one more number to ask about. Again, I went back to what the Minister said on the Floor of the House. On 12 May, he said: "Since April 2021, 500 new staff have joined and a further 700 will join by the summer." Then I looked at the NAO Report and found that there were 200 fewer staff employed by the passport department than had been indicated by the Minister. I am really trying to understand the churn and the actual number of staff that you have supporting you at any one time. Could you answer that question, please?

Thomas Greig: In terms of the increase in staff that we made, it was 1,200 staff over the period. I would have to check the precise timings and

the precise cohorts that are referred to, and whether the 1,200 staff that we referred to were examination staff—people engaged in passport examination. It might be a broader staff group referred to in the NAO Report. I would have to take that away.

Q37 Nick Smith: According to page 18 of the NAO Report, in March 2021 you had 3,700 staff working in the department on this issue. By September '22 you had 4,690—an extra 1,000. You are supposed to have another 200. Can you check that?

Thomas Greig: Yes, I will. I am confident that we met a plan to recruit an additional 1,200 staff. On the precise question of which cohorts of staff are referred to in that Report and which cohorts of staff I am referring to, I will need to look at the workings and the background and let you know.

Nick Smith: Thank you.

Q38 Chair: Can I just be clear? Were you talking about agency workers or contractors? In the past you had surge teams that would come for the summer rush. You are talking about a different cohort.

Thomas Greig: We use a variety of staff now. Over the summer we had permanent employees of HM Passport Office—fixed-term appointees. We had additional temporary staff and we had surge staff both from within the Home Office and from HMRC.

Chair: Okay, so the normal surge teams. Thank you. Mr Peter Grant is next.

Q39 Peter Grant: Ms Hayes, in your opening remarks you referred to the percentage of passports that were issued within a reasonable time and the percentage that were not. That is all very well, but we are dealing with human beings, not statistics. What have you done to assess the human impact on the 360,000 people who did not get their passports within 10 weeks?

Tricia Hayes: I totally take the point that even a small percentage of a very large number is a lot of very dissatisfied people. I also very much agree. One of the things that is frustrating about having this conversation is that the reputation of our service was sitting below the service that we were delivering over that period, because, for most people, we were doing a pretty decent job. We routinely capture information on feedback that we get from customers—from customer complaints and from their experience of working with us—and those are some of the inputs that we have been building into the service that we will offer next year.

Q40 Peter Grant: Out of those 360,000 people, do you know how many had to cancel their travel plans because they did not get a passport in time?

Tricia Hayes: I don't know that, no.

Q41 Peter Grant: Have you attempted to find out?

Tricia Hayes: Where people did have travel booked, and a passport had taken longer than 10 weeks for us to issue—which was our published service standard—we did, without any further cost to the person applying, accelerate the provision of their passport; we escalated them through our process. As soon we knew that somebody needed to travel, we moved very quickly.

Q42 Peter Grant: But you don't know how many people had to cancel their travel plans, and you have not made any attempt to find out?

Tricia Hayes: We have not collected information on that, no.

Q43 Peter Grant: Did it occur to you, for example, to ask the travel industry how many passport-related cancellations it had?

Tricia Hayes: Our main priority was to try to avoid people having to cancel travel, because we were trying to make it possible for people to get passports.

Q44 Peter Grant: Thank you. Another issue that arose with the 134,000 cases, I think it was, which you had to take off the new digital system and put back on to a paper-based system, was that you then reset the clock. I had constituents phoning up four or five weeks after they had put their application in and being told, point blank, that their application had only gone in a day or two previously. Have you thought about what that does to somebody? They had somebody in officialdom telling them, point blank, "What you are saying is wrong. You are telling me that you sent your application in six weeks ago. I know that it only came in today or yesterday." Have you issued personal apologies to the people who were given that wrong information by your staff?

Tricia Hayes: I do not think that I have given personal apologies, but I think I have been pretty clear that I am sorry about the people who had a

bad experience of using our service earlier in the year. I think that the Report is clear that, while our overall performance was strong, one of the most difficult things was the handover from passport applications that were being handled through our legacy system versus those being handled through our digital system. That is one of the operational issues that we have worked hard to resolve for when we come back to dealing with the surge that we are expecting next summer.

Q45 Peter Grant: Why did it take so long before you realised that there was a problem with the start dates on those applications?

Tricia Hayes: I might ask Mr Greig to come in and help me with that one.

Thomas Greig: We were aware that applications were moving between one system and the other at the start of the summer. I think that the standard operating procedure, at that stage, should have been for those applications to have been put at the front of the queue when they arrived into the paper-based AMS system, but we found that, in many cases, they were not. So, we discovered it— **Nick Smith:** Sorry, say that again?

Thomas Greig: The standard operating procedure should have been that, when cases came out of the DAP—the digital system—and were moved into the AMS paper-based system, they should have been put at the front of the AMS queue. However, we discovered that, in a number of cases, or a number of locations, that was not being done in the appropriate way.

Q46 **Nick Smith:** Was it a policy to put them at the front of the queue?

Thomas Greig: The policy should have been to put them at the front of the queue.

Nick Smith: So it wasn't policy to put them at the front of the queue?

Thomas Greig: The standard operating procedure should have been to put them at the front of the queue, but that was not always being followed. That was the issue. We believed, at the start of the summer, that those applications would not take a significant length of time more than they would have done in the digital system, because we believed that they would be handled more quickly in the AMS system. We thought that— or the management view was that—they would be put at the front of the queue, because that was the standard operating procedure. Clearly, in certain locations, the communication of that had broken down. That then meant that, initially, those cases were not being put at the front of the queue.

When we identified that—we identified it because customers raised it with us, and we needed to do something about it—we then developed new management information and new processes to ensure that we were then working the queue in date order and could move those cases to the right part of the queue. By around June, we had identified and started to resolve that problem, but, at the very start of the summer, we had not been aware that those cases were taking longer than we had expected, because we understood that the standard operating procedure was that they should have been put at the front of the queue.

Q47 **Nick Smith:** So you changed the policy, or made sure that the policy was seen through, in June. How many months had it taken you to discover that that problem was occurring?

Thomas Greig: It would probably have only been a couple of months at that stage. Prior to that, applications on both systems were being turned around very quickly, so it would not have really mattered where it had gone into in the AMS queue. In the quiet period of the year, the AMS queues were also very short, so even a case that came out of the DAP queue and ended up at the back of the AMS queue would been dealt with in two or three weeks anyway. The problem only became apparent when the AMS queue became longer.

Q48 **Nick Smith:** We are trying to understand how good you are at listening to customers' concerns and MPs' concerns. You said it was two—possibly three—months, then, before you realised that there was a problem.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thomas Greig: Well, that is possibly true, but as I say, at the start, because those cases were moving through the system quite quickly, it would not have been a problem for the customer—for the applicant. We realised quite early on, from inquiries from MPs and also from customers, that there was a problem—that there was this relatively small cohort of cases where our understanding of where they were in the queue did not match the customer's understanding—so we developed a new management information report. We put a new process in place; effectively, we physically pulled all those cases out of where they were and moved them to another part of the system so that they could be pulled out at the right time. So, yes, it took a little while for us to realise that and then to work out the solution to it, but I think we reasonably—

Q49 **Nick Smith:** Listen, if you are a customer, waiting two or three months is not a little while when you want to go on holiday, but you cannot.

Chair: When you want to book your flights.

Thomas Greig: I would say, though, that those cases would not necessarily have taken two or three months. As I say, if you were moved out of the DAP system after two weeks and the AMS system was only taking three weeks at that stage, it would only have taken you five weeks in total. It was only as the AMS queue became longer that we started to realise there was a real issue, because the differential in how long those cases were taking became greater.

Q50 **Chair:** Having been a passports Minister, the processes in the Passport Office always used to be very clear and straightforward—they went through from A to Z in the way they should do—so I am very puzzled as to what has changed that meant somebody somewhere in the system did not understand what the normal protocol was. What lessons have you learned from what has happened, Mr Greig, and why did that arise? Have you really investigated?

Thomas Greig: The first thing that we need to do is reduce the number of cases moving between the two systems. We have done a lot of work to identify the reasons that cases are moving, and to mitigate them with process or policy changes, so we can reduce the volume of what they call return to legacy—RTL—cases. That is the first thing.

The second thing, which is the absolute key, is that we now have a very clear MI report, so we can see where every case is on the system regardless of—

Q51 **Chair:** That was always the case over a decade ago—12 years ago. It was possible to see every individual passport application, and the metrics that were presented to a Minister in Whitehall showed the exact flow-through of applications received and where they were in the system. The demand curve—everything—was really clearly laid out. Is that not the case now, if you're just doing it?

Thomas Greig: The root cause of this is the working across two systems. That is the problem: if you were just operating on the AMS system or just operating on the DAP system, you would have that very clear picture. It is about synthesising the queues in the two systems, which we have now managed to do, and also it is about being able to properly age a case—going back to Mr Grant and Mr Smith’s point—that has fallen from one system to the other. That is what we can do now, and we have been able to do for the last three or four months, but we could not do for the first couple of months of the summer.

Chair: We will get into more of this as we go through.

Q52 **Mr French:** The Passport Office official guidance highlights two ways to obtain an urgent passport: the online premium service and the one-week fast track. So far this year, given all the issues we have heard about already, how many people have paid for the express service to get their passport in time?

Thomas Greig: In total—these are not all paid for, but in terms of express service of one type or another—there have been 550,000 people that have used it.

Q53 **Mr French:** And that is year to date figures?

Thomas Greig: That is year to date figures, yes.

Q54 **Mr French:** How does that compare with 2019?

Thomas Greig: I think 2019 was around 380,000, but obviously we were in a different period of overall demand for passports. A slightly higher proportion of customers are using that this year than last year: I think it is 7% using it this year, 5% using it last year.

Q55 **Mr French:** In terms of revenue, how much did the Passport Office earn from that figure of 550,000 in total?

Thomas Greig: I do not think I have that number to hand, I am afraid, but I can write to you with it.

Q56 **Mr French:** If you can provide it, because *The Mail on Sunday* wrote a piece quite recently on those figures, which I assume was from freedom of information requests. They have suggested that just from that summer period, or from late spring to early summer, it is about £30 million, versus the same period in 2019. Does that sound about right to you?

Thomas Greig: That sounds plausible, yes.

Q57 **Mr French:** Okay, so you are going to send the figures to this Committee.

Thomas Greig: We can. I should say—just to repeat the point that the Second Permanent Secretary made earlier—that for people who either had an urgent or compassionate need for their passport or people whose passport was over 10 weeks and had imminent travel, that was a free

service. People were not charged under those circumstances; people were not charged where their need was urgent and compassionate.

Q58 Mr French: On that point, like you said, there was a free option—if we can call it that—for people who had been delayed or had urgent need. How did you communicate that with those people, given the communication issues we have discussed already?

Thomas Greig: In terms of urgent and compassionate, the information regarding that was on our website. In terms of the expedited and upgrade services, those options were obtained by contacting us. You are right that it would have been harder to understand those options initially, at the beginning of the summer, but later on in the summer, when most people were availing themselves of that service, they were able to get through to Teleperformance or to contact one of our offices in order to find that out.

Mr French: There is clearly learning from that.

Thomas Greig: Indeed.

Q59 Mr French: Moving on to compensation elements, we have heard already that the revenue and income from the express services dramatically increased—if I can say that—in that period. In terms of compensation for delays to people's applications, how much did the Passport Office pay out this year?

Thomas Greig: First, we do not pay compensation specifically for delays. The advice that is given on the passport website is that you should not book travel until after you have received your passport; as a result of that, our standard policy is not to pay compensation for delays. As I say, our approach throughout the summer was to prioritise caseworking for applicants who were travelling imminently. Where people contacted us and were travelling imminently and had had their passport in for more than six weeks, we were offering them either a paid-for service between six and 10 weeks or a free service over 10 weeks. Our focus was to minimise the number of people who were unable to travel.

Q60 Mr French: I understand that, but the guidance on your website to members of the Passport Office, which I read earlier, suggests that where there is a delay, particularly for the express service, the Passport Office will compensate the difference between the express service cost and the standard fee. For that period, how many refunds or compensation were paid to people who had paid for the express service but did not receive it?

Thomas Greig: I am afraid I do not have that number to hand, but I can find out.

Q61 Chair: Will you please write to us on that?

Thomas Greig: Yes, I will.

Q62 Mr French: When you write, can you also provide the breakdown for total compensation, showing how much was for delays in the express service and for mistakes? I am sure that that is another issue we have all experienced as MPs over the summer, where genuine mistakes were made, given the volumes. So the figure for compensation provided for mistakes would be helpful as well, please.

Thomas Greig: We will do that. There is also a degree of our compensation that is paid when people's payments have not gone through effectively or other things like that, such as if they have booked duplicate appointments through no fault of their own. The money that we pay back for that is also quite a chunk of the compensation.

Q63 Nick Smith: Mr Greig, you knew that you were going to have a problem and that there was going to be an extra spike in demand for passports in 2022 following the pandemic. You made some attempts to get people to apply for passports earlier by sending them text messages. Tell us more about that and how well it worked.

Thomas Greig: We sent over 5 million text messages to people whose passports were due to expire in the six-month period after that. We don't believe that worked particularly well. In the research we have done as a result of that, there have not been significant numbers of people who have said that that was what prompted them to make an application. There are a couple of things worth remembering. These are people we have not had contact with for 10 years, so we are using contact details that are 10 years out of date when we do that.

Q64 Nick Smith: So of the 5 million texts you sent, how many do you think actually got through?

Thomas Greig: I would not know the exact answer to that, but I would say—

Nick Smith: An estimate?

Thomas Greig: I think its impact was negligible.

Chair: It is in the Report. It is 3.4%, I think.

Thomas Greig: Sorry?

Chair: Some 73% got through and 3.4% actually led to an action, I think.

Thomas Greig: Yes, it was a very small proportion. Less than 5% of texts to people resulted in any action.

Q65 Nick Smith: What have you learned about your inability to communicate with your customers about renewing their passports?

Thomas Greig: My view—I touched on this earlier—is that most people get their information at the moment from social media. That is where I think we need to communicate more with applicants. We have not been forward-leaning enough on social media; we did not provide enough upto-

date information on social media during the summer. We should and will continue to do more in that area. We did some paid-for advertising over the summer, and we will continue to push awareness through our social media channels and do paid-for advertising where we need to. We need to communicate with the whole population, rather than trying to communicate with specific individuals. As noted in the Report, and as we have just covered, trying to communicate with specific individuals has not been effective.

Q66 Nick Smith: Just quickly, how much did the 5 million texts that you sent cost?

Thomas Greig: I do not know the answer to that, I am afraid. I do not know how much they cost, but I can find out. They would have been sent from a bulk application on a computer; I do not think it cost a huge amount of money to do. I will find out.

Chair: It is about 13p a text, actually, if it is a long one. We politicians know these things very directly.

Q67 Sarah Olney: I want to ask you, Mr Greig, about the timescales that you were communicating to the public. I was one of the MPs with a vast amount of case work on this, and we were hearing that the standard processing time was 10 weeks. Our experience was that if we called up, we were not allowed to chase any applications that had been shorter than 10 weeks, but more of a problem was that the 10 weeks seemed to start from the date that the application went on to the system. In some cases, that could be three or four weeks after the applicant had sent it, so if they were depending on a 10-week timescale, because they needed to travel within 10 weeks, they were being effectively misled by a communication that said they would receive their passport within 10 weeks of making the application. What would you do differently about that? Do you accept that that was happening and that the 10-week timescale that you were communicating was not accurate in terms of people's actual experience?

Thomas Greig: I will say a couple of things about that. I am aware of circumstances where that happened, particularly at the start of the summer. I will come back to what we were doing with individual customers, but when we were reporting data, we were adding the time period that we knew it was taking to log cases on the system, so not the standard time period but the time we knew it was taking. At certain periods in the summer it was taking up to two and a half weeks in certain locations for applications to be logged on the system, so we were adding that to our customer turnaround.

Q68 Sarah Olney: So in that circumstance, would you have been targeting a 12 and a half week processing period, because you had added the two and a half weeks?

Thomas Greig: No, we were adding it to the total time an application was taking to give the turnaround time that we were reporting. So if an application was taking six weeks internally in the Passport Office, we were adding two and a half weeks and our data was based on that being an eight and a half week application. We were adding that as a lead time.

Again, our general instruction from June onwards was that when applicants contacted us, the people they were dealing with—either within our operation or within Teleperformance—should have also been adding what we call the lead time when dealing with customers. We were also clear with our internal teams that they needed to be erring on the side of caution with applicants. For example, when someone got in touch with us and they had a case that appeared to have been in the system for nine and a half weeks, we were not regularly saying to them, “Well, it’s nine and a half weeks, so you have to come back in four days.”

How well that was always carried out in what was a very difficult and trying period at certain times, I cannot say, but for us the lesson we have learned is what we did, which is to make sure that we add that period on. Also, we work a lot with our contractor who puts cases on the system and we work with them to increase their capacity, so applications go on to the system much more quickly and that does not become an issue, where we have queues of mail. In fact, by the time we got to July, that process was working much better, and applications were being put on the system much more quickly.

I accept that would have happened in some circumstances. I would hope that would have been earlier in the summer rather than later, but we took a range of steps to try to mitigate against that, in terms of process, what we told our teams about how to approach individual applications and how we generated the data.

Q69 **Peter Grant:** Going back to the text messages that Mr Smith asked about, how were people supposed to know that they weren’t a scam?

Thomas Greig: We would have done our best to say on the message that it was from the Passport Office. There would have been nothing from that message that required you to do anything, I don’t think, that would have then caused you to do anything that could have been part of a scam.

Q70 **Chair:** Was there a hyperlink in the message?

Thomas Greig: There was no link and there was no request for people to do something or click on anything. People may have thought it was a scam, but it was not our only tactic. We were also saying publicly from 2021 to allow 10 weeks for a passport and that we were expecting a busier period. We undertook some paid-for advertising, both online and in print, so it was one of the tools available to us and it was something we thought that we should do, because we had a database of people’s contacts, but it proved to be a less than effective method.

Q71 Peter Grant: I am just trying to point out that part of the advice that your own Department and others give to people to avoid text scams is to not believe a text comes from who it says it comes from. I could send out a text that says it comes from the Post Office, the Passport Office or anyone at all.

Still on the question of communication, Ms Hayes, you mentioned earlier that when people got very close to the deadline of when they needed the passport to travel, they were able to get basically a free upgrade to priority. How did they know about that? Did they have to ask about it, or were you volunteering that information to them?

Tricia Hayes: We were making the availability of that upgrade known through all the channels that Mr Greig has talked about. I remember giving evidence to multiple Select Committees and making it very clear that people had the option of getting a free upgrade at the point where their application was about to hit the 10-week period. As Mr Greig has just set out, after the initial period where contacting us through Teleperformance was really difficult, for most of the summer it was possible to get in touch with us through those normal routes of contact.

Q72 Peter Grant: Thank you. The NAO Report has a summary of the performance of your main external providers. The performance measure for Teleperformance is the percentage of advice line calls answered within 30 seconds. It might seem like a silly question, but how do you define “answered” in that context?

Thomas Greig: Answered by a person.

Q73 Peter Grant: So if someone got electronic, tinny music and a recorded voice saying how important their call was, that would still be recorded as not answered.

Thomas Greig: That would be recorded as not answered, yes.

Q74 Peter Grant: If we look at the summary for January to August 2022, it is obvious that performance was tanking in some areas by February. If we look at the performance of Sopra Steria, the people who register the applications, they lost 50% of their performance between January and February 2022. The performance of almost all the external providers had deteriorated seriously by the end of March. Why wasn't that mentioned in your annual report for 2021-22?

Matthew Rycroft: The issue with Sopra Steria is that, by definition, the work that they do in the process, which is the scanning, the validating of documents and the storage, has to be done in the workplace. Unlike some other parts of the passport system, it is not possible to put it online and to do it while working from home. So that bit of the system had to be done in the workplace, and therefore earlier than that, in 2021, they had to ensure that they were abiding by the social distancing guidelines. That was the fundamental issue that affected their bit of the system.

Q75 Peter Grant: I was not asking what the specific issues were that caused a problem with that one provider. If we look at any of your providers, we see that, with one exception, which is the paper-based system—the printers saw their performance beginning to collapse in March. The performance of Teleperformance had collapsed by March. When you did your Department's annual report for the year ending 31 March 2022, it was obvious by that time that the system was in danger of almost complete collapse. Didn't you think that was something worth including in your annual report?

Matthew Rycroft: I think it is worth being really clear on the dates. As Mr Greig was saying, the issues with Teleperformance were between March and May, largely, in 2022. So that will be an issue for the forthcoming annual report, and I will make sure, when the time comes, that this conversation is—

Q76 Peter Grant: According to the figures that we have here, in January and February pretty much nobody was kept waiting more than 30 seconds; it is a fraction of a per cent. By March, 15% of all people who phoned were kept waiting for more than 30 seconds. Especially when taken with the fall in performance by all your other contractors, did that not tell you that the whole passport processing system had already started to go down?

Matthew Rycroft: I will have a look back to what we knew at the time, but I think probably it will end up being an issue for the next annual report.

Thomas Greig: May I just say a couple of things about supplier performance? The first is just that the problems at the end of the system, the brief problems in Thales and in delivery, were—I think we have to be honest—our fault. We processed applications quicker and more applications over a short period than they expected us to or than we had told them. Thales, for example, were moving from a model where they had four shifts working to five shifts working. We had to give them two weeks' notice to do that.

We gave them that two weeks' notice, but I think the first week of that two weeks' notice, we overdelivered, because the application mix that we worked on that week was a much higher proportion, in terms of applications that were renewals, than we had previously expected. We did about 250,000 applications that week, when they had been expecting about 200,000. That was because of what we had told them to expect, and they recovered very quickly, as did Fedex and the delivery companies. When we are talking about suppliers, it is important to put on record that that end-of-system problem was a result of something that we did, rather than a result of something that they did. It was actually a result of us over-delivering, rather than a result of us under-delivering.

On Sopra, the permanent secretary is absolutely right. They had some issues at the start of the summer, and they also had some delays to recruitment. What I would say is that they responded really quickly to

that. They dealt with it, they put cases on the system, and they were back in SLA towards the end of June or in July. Although the issues in Sopra caused frustration for customers and caused some of the issues around timelines that we discussed earlier, they did not impact the overall time it took for an application to be outputted, because there was still a queue once they got to our office. Even if they had put those applications on quicker at that point, we would not have got to them. There was an issue with Sopra, and it caused customer concern, but it did not impact the overall timeframe for an application to be delivered.

Q77 Mr French: My question is about process, Mr Greig. It is fair to say that prioritising passports based on travel date was a logical step taken by the Passport Office, but can you talk us through the impact that switching to the travel date policy had on staffing and on some issues in the process?

Thomas Greig: The first thing to say is that at the point I made that decision—I was the operational lead responsible for deciding operational priorities—we were in a situation where we were making least worst decisions, rather than best decisions. We were trying to manage a difficult operational situation and to work out how best to prioritise our work. What we chose to do was prioritise urgent and compassionate first, people waiting over 10 weeks with evidence of travel second, people waiting over six weeks with evidence of travel and who were willing to pay an upgrade fee third, and then the oldest first after that. We did not just prioritise cases by imminent travel. We do not know people's travel dates when they apply for a passport; it is only when people have approached us and asked us to expedite it.

Once we had been through those three higher priorities, we still had resource, which, by and large, we were directing to the oldest cases—that was the order we were working in. I still think that was the right decision to make at the time, and I still think it was the right thing to do, because at that stage we decided that we wanted to make sure that we prevented as few people as possible from being able to travel or from being able to prove their identity in the way that they needed to. The impact, though, was that it made us a slightly less productive organisation overall. Any process where we are required to pull cases out of the queue is less productive and more labour intensive, so it probably impacted our overall output—in fact, it did impact our overall output by a bit, I think—but our view was that what we needed to do at that stage was to try to get to as many people as possible who had imminent travel.

Q78 Mr French: From feedback I have received as an MP—like most colleagues here, I had a lot of cases coming in—the majority of residents who were on the urgent, severely panicking end of the scale in that period managed to get their passports 48 hours or so before their travel date, which was not very good for their health and wellbeing. We even had some residents who travelled across the country to pick up their passport.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In terms of the impact on staffing, the NAO Report highlights more experienced staff being taken away to do more face-to-face appointments, versus less experienced staff who were working online. Can you speak to the impact that had on staffing and how you are managing that going forward?

Thomas Greig: One of our general issues last year was that we did not have enough people trained and able to work on the legacy system—the AMS paper-based system—particularly at the start of the summer. That is mainly for two reasons. First, our recruitment was delayed to an extent, so while we had most of our people in on time, they had only been through training for the DAP system and were only able to work on straightforward cases on the digital system. Secondly, for reasons that the Report outlines very accurately, there were more cases on the AMS system than we had anticipated, so our training plans would probably not have been enough to get the right number of people on to AMS.

We did, and I have said this to the teams a few times, rely on a smaller group of more experienced examiners to carry out a lot of the functions that we needed, particularly where we were expediting cases, because such cases require people to have knowledge and experience of both systems. We have spent a lot of time over the last six months, in advance of next year, training our people to work across both systems and across all different application types. We have trained over 1,000 people in the last year to move from one system to the other. The plan for next year is to have a much more flexible workforce so we can move people between those two areas much more effectively.

In addition, because a lot of the processes we were using for the upgrades and expedited services were imperfect—they required people to physically print off documents and put them in boxes, and to email inboxes to get things done—we have moved those on to the digital platform. We will now have a digital front end. Previously when people were asking for an upgrade or an expedited service, they were emailing an inbox. They will now be able to log into the website like anyone else and ask for it, and that will come into the right place. What we are trying to do is a mixture of training staff across different types of applications and making the processes we use for those applications more straightforward and less labour intensive.

Q79 Mr French: A natural follow-up question, again based on experience, is: will that make it easier for Passport Office staff, who were generally trying to be helpful to my office, to locate exactly where a passport is? Often, the response we got was that they were not sure which office it was at.

Thomas Greig: Yes. We have done a range of things about that. I am hesitant to go into too much detail, but one is that, particularly on the AMS system, we now have something called multi-site access. At the start of the summer, most people could only look at AMS applications that were in their location. If I wanted to find out whether an application was in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liverpool or whether someone was doing something with an application in Liverpool, I would have to phone someone in Liverpool and ask them, and they would have to log into the system. We now have what we call multisite access, so an individual user can see all the different application queues in each of the different locations, so that should help. As I say, the improved MI we have, which allows us to see the queue, every case in the queue and where a passport is, makes it a much quicker process now than it was six months ago, definitely.

Q80 Mr French: I appreciate you will probably never have 100% confidence in this, but how confident are you that people were not seeking to game the system and jump the queue using travel dates, versus those who waited patiently?

Thomas Greig: Anecdotally, we heard of people who were booking flights for £9 or £10 and then applying for a passport. Our teams did have the option of saying no if they felt it was particularly egregious, but we asked our teams to be sympathetic and to err on the side of caution, given the difficulties some applicants had. Very few applications, if any, were refused upgrades on that basis, but equally we did not see as many of those applications. They make a good story when you talk about them, but there was not a huge number of them, to be honest.

Mr French: Trust in the British public—it's the right approach.

Thomas Greig: Indeed.

Q81 Mr Djanogly: What proportion of passport staff were working from home at the height of covid, and what proportion are working from home now?

Thomas Greig: The total of those working from home now across the whole of HMPO is about 21%. I think that when you look at people engaged in actual passport production, so people making decisions, that number falls to about 15%.

Q82 Mr Djanogly: And what was it at the height of the problems we are talking about?

Thomas Greig: It would have been around the same, if not less.

Mr Djanogly: So less working from home.

Thomas Greig: Less working from home. I think it was around 13% when I was in front of the HASC, but I would have to—

Q83 Mr Djanogly: So more people are working from home post covid than during covid.

Thomas Greig: Sorry, I thought you were talking about our problems over the summer.

Chair: We are talking about this summer. Mr Greig was not answering about covid, but you were not asking about it either.

Q84 Mr Djanogly: No, I just want to know the proportion of people working from home at the height of the problems we are talking about.

Thomas Greig: I think it was around 15%—13% to 15%; those were the numbers we gave to HASC. I should say that our decision about where people worked was based on the requirements of the organisation, so because this last year we have needed people to do AMS work, which requires people to be in the office, there has been a relatively small proportion of people working from home throughout the period.

Q85 Mr Djanogly: I am looking at a letter from the Passport Office to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee on 6 September. The question put to the Passport Office was: what are the “Productivity figures of people working at home and people working in the office?” The answer that the Passport Office gave was, “Productivity is measured in a number of ways. However, the data for productivity for home against office working is not currently held in a reportable format. Is that still the case?”

Thomas Greig: That is still the case, but I can take you through why we do not have concerns about the impact of working from home on the productivity of the Passport Office.

Q86 Mr Djanogly: Surely, given that this has been a national debate across every sector, it does beg the question as to why that is still the case.

Thomas Greig: The reason we cannot do that like for like is that there is no flag on the system that allows you to tell whether someone operating on the DAP system is operating from home or operating in the office. The DAP system functionality can be used anywhere; it is a cloud-based system, so you can do anything on DAP at home that you could do in the office. We could add that flag to the DAP system, but we are doing quite a lot of other things with the DAP system at the moment, so it probably is not something we would prioritise right now.

In terms of productivity, as I said to start with, my teams work very hard wherever they are. We have a very small—relatively small—proportion of people working from home, and people are only able to work from home when we have sufficient work of the right type for them to do that. When we have lots of AMS work, people are working in the office doing it.

Productivity on DAP this year has met all the expectations that we had for it; in fact, on DAP we are a little bit more productive than we expected to be. We have a limited number of teams that are only home working—purely home working—and we do not see any difference in their productivity versus hybrid working teams or other teams.

Q87 Chair: Just to be clear: it sounds like those home working teams are teams that always worked at home.

Thomas Greig: They are teams that we recruited during covid. We have not recruited anyone new to that kind of working model. It is very small

scale—I think there are three or four of them, so not huge numbers of people. However, we do not see any lower productivity from them.

Q88 Mr Djanogly: You talk about “sufficient work of the right type” but what I am picking up is that the most experienced staff were being diverted to deal with last-minute urgent cases, presumably in person in the office. Does that mean that the standard service meant having a less experienced person working from home dealing with the case?

Thomas Greig: Standard renewals done through the digital system are the first thing that anyone learns. Some of the people doing those types of case would have been working from home and some of them would have been working in the office. Our offices have been full all summer.

To go back to it, with our staffing mix we were up to over 70% of our staff working on the AMS paper-based system—not just urgent cases, but other paper-based cases as well—and they were all required to be in the office. We have talked about operational priorities; the first three of those operational priorities and most of the priority 4 work required someone to be in the office to do it. Those were the priorities that we used to deploy our resource, so we were deploying resource in that way, and then those priorities were driving the location of staff, other than the relatively small number of people who were specifically employed to work from home. That is why the vast majority of people were working in the office.

Q89 Mr Djanogly: Staying with process, if I may Chair, at the beginning of March 2022 my constituent applied for a passport for their child, using the standard service. A few days later, the constituent had a family emergency that required the whole family to travel outside the UK. The constituent contacted the Passport Office to explain their circumstances and was advised to withdraw the standard application and make a new fast-track application. They followed this advice and attended an interview for fast-track application a week later. The child’s passport was approved at the interview, but the Passport Office refused to issue the passport as their records indicated that the original application had not been withdrawn, which it had been.

The Passport Office then compounded this by refusing to withdraw the first application at the interview. The constituent exchanged numerous emails over the next few months to resolve the issue, but the passport was not received until six months after the initial application. Is that not an abysmal failure of process? And why couldn’t they withdraw the application on the spot?

Thomas Greig: To start with, I sincerely apologise to your constituent for that experience. If you provide details of the individual case, I will have a look at it. I will explain precisely what I think happened in terms of the withdrawal of the application, but none of that should have taken six months. Clearly something went very wrong in that case. I apologise for that and we will look into it at the appropriate stage.

At the start of the summer, people were being advised to do what your constituent did. The problem was that they were required to write in for a withdrawal to the office where their application was, which might not be the office that they had the appointment at; so when they arrived at the appointment, the application would not have been withdrawn and that meant that the member of staff during the interview could not have issued a passport, because you cannot have two applications live at the same time.

Q90 Mr Djanogly: But they were there, face to face!

Thomas Greig: Indeed, I understand that. That is why we did something about this. That was the stage at which we started to move to upgrades and expedited services—saying to people that, rather than having two applications and attending for a second one when you have one in train, you can contact us and we will do what we can to expedite the first application.

The case of the applicant you were talking about should have been an urgent and compassionate case. I would have expected that whoever was with that applicant to seek to resolve the problem on the day—that is why I would like to look into it and see what can be done. But on the general problem of people trying to withdraw applications at the same time as they were turning up to appointments, the solution was to introduce the upgrade service and the expedited service, which meant we were only ever working off one application rather than people trying to have two in.

In the case you described, it sounds like something went very wrong. If possible, I would like to have a look at it and see what we can learn. I would have expected the officer dealing with that, as an urgent and compassionate case, to resolve the application. In my experience, my teams were doing that every day—and you would have all seen people doing that every day—over the summer.

Q91 Chair: I want to flag that Alex Cunningham MP has sent in a range of cases that cover some of the issues that other colleagues have raised, particularly around documents being added to things and the delays. We have had examples from around the House, and that is just one of them.

I want to quickly go back to the issue about the text. On the hyperlink in the text, it does say in the NAO Report, paragraph 2.6 on page 16, that, “Of the 73% of these that were delivered, 3.2% of recipients followed the application website link in the text.” I had said 3.4% earlier—it is actually 3.2% of recipients.

Thomas Greig: Apologies if we were incorrect about that.

Q92 Chair: You can see the point that, these days, unfortunately texts are not always the best method. We reckon the cost of sending texts—you may have a cheaper method than is available to people like us—is a good half a million pounds, give or take.



Matthew Rycroft: I think Mr Greig has already said that we are very busy learning the lessons of this year so we can apply them to next year. To put it in context for the Committee, the covid backlog that caused the problem this year is way bigger in the future than it has been in the past. We have not got halfway yet. If you think that the total backlog was about 5 million on top of a normal year of 7 million, the extra we got this year was 1.5 million, so there is another 3.5 million to come. The problem ahead is twice as big as the problem we had. We have to learn every lesson.

Q93 **Chair:** But that is not a new problem. When the banking crash happened in 2008, I was the passport Minister looking at the dip in the curve in 2009. I meant to go back and look at my papers, but I did not have the time—for you to draw them out for me would have taken longer. At the time that the curve was down, we knew the curve was going to go up, and then there was a crisis after 2010 when people did begin to travel again. We have seen this whole thing happen before. As the NAO highlights, there is a weekly dashboard for Ministers on this. You have the data, yet in this circumstance we still saw problems. You predicted it, but there were still problems about the flow. Why, in over a decade, have we not learnt that the same problem might hit again with the next crisis, pestilence or banking crash?

Matthew Rycroft: I think the NAO Report was very clear and very good on that. We did predict there would be a surge this year. In fact, we thought it would be even bigger than it was. We thought it would be 9.5 million in total. That would be half the backlog—2.5 million of the 5 million, rather than 8.5 million, which is 1.5 million of the backlog. We were ready. What we were not ready for was the shape of that curve; there was a much bigger spike in March, April and May than we were predicting. That was the bit of the modelling that went wrong. The overall shape and size was broadly right, but not at that point. Because we went wrong at that point, as Mr Greig and Ms Hayes have set out, we were always running to catch up.

Q94 **Chair:** I think Mr Smith may come back on some of those points. The key thing is that there was also some publicity in the media and from politicians. Was there an element of panic buying at a certain point? Is that what caused the spike?

Matthew Rycroft: You can see that in certain weeks the numbers go up very dramatically. You can see that there are media articles and statements and see some cause and effect happening. We need to be ready for that and learn all the lessons in the NAO Report, and all the things we are talking about today, and apply them for next year, given that it is possible that next year will be even bigger.

Q95 **Chair:** A spike is not unusual. There is always a spike at certain times of the year. November is a good time to apply for your passport.

Matthew Rycroft: Now would be a very good time, for anyone listening.

Q96 **Chair:** Indeed. I know this from experience, having been in the job, but surely you must have recognised that there would be a spike. Travel restrictions were still around. We were still isolating in April, and even into May, I think. People were not quite sure what was going to be happening, yet you did not predict the spike. I am not saying that you could have predicted it precisely, but you could have been prepared for the possibility of a spike.

Thomas Greig: We predicted a degree of seasonality. There is a couple of things that I would say. The first is that you are absolutely right that at the point that this became a more prominent issue we did see a significant increase in page views on our system. There was a *Times* front page about the Passport Office. In the 10 to 15 days after that, we saw extremely elevated levels of applications. Some of that spike was driven. Again, it was driven by our initial failure. The root of this is where we had issues with that small cohort—that small group of cases—and then we had issues with our customer contact. That then created a bit of a cycle, and that then drove up demand because of the media coverage around it.

However, what we have also found, and what we have allowed for in our forecasting next year, is that we expect our demand curve to be more peaky and more seasonal. The shape of passport demand, and the volume of it year on year, used to be very predictable, because it was essentially a recurrent cycle, but what we have seen over the pandemic is that those people who would normally have renewed their passports during the pandemic and did not will now renew them only when there is a reason to do so, and therefore they do it just before the summer. If you look at our demand profile for next year, it is much more peaky and much more frontloaded towards the first couple of months.

Chair: You can see it coming. We will talk about what you are doing for next summer. I think that we have made the point.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Let's stick with that theme for a minute. You implied just now, Mr Rycroft, that you had 8 million applications this year. We know that there were 7.2 million between March and September, but you have said that it is 8 million for the full year. Is that correct?

Matthew Rycroft: It is 8.5 million for the full year.

Q97 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** My goodness. If the whole 9.5 million that you predicted had actually come forward, it would not have been a disaster for a large number of people; it would have been a catastrophe, wouldn't it?

Matthew Rycroft: It would have depended on the shape of the 9.5 million.

Chair: All at once would have been impossible.

Matthew Rycroft: Yes, if the extra million had all been in one of our busy weeks in March, April or May, that would have been very difficult indeed.

Obviously, we need to be ready for that extra million, if you like, to come out at some point in the coming year or two, and we will make sure that we are ready, as Mr Greig was saying, for that to be front-loaded in the early summer of next year.

Q98 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You have revised up the figure to 8.5

million this year. You say that there are a potential 3.5 million in the pipeline from the covid period. That is 12 million. Is the service really going to be up to coping with 12 million next year?

Matthew Rycroft: First, we do not think it will all be next year. We need to be ready for a significant bulk of it to be next year, and for next year to be even busier than this year. As Ms Hayes said at the very beginning of the session, this year was already over a million more than any other previous year, so we will be ready for that, and we will be learning all the lessons in order to seek to smooth out the curve—to encourage people to apply in parts of the year that are usually quieter.

Tricia Hayes: May I add something very quickly? I think one of the pictures that we have painted for you in our evidence this afternoon is some ways of working this year that have not been efficient. We have paid an efficiency price—I think this is really clear in the Report—for having to deal with people applying through multiple channels at once, having to sequence the handling of passports in order of travel date, and having to deal with failure of demand coming through MP contact.

There are a lot of different ways in which our ability to be as productive as we would have liked has been compromised by some of the things that we have talked about through the session. The measures that we have been talking about, the lessons that we have learned, the better customer contact that we have put into place, the different ways of dealing with applications, and the increasing maturity of the digital system should make us more productive and more efficient next year, as well as increasing our ability to deal with those higher volumes.

Q99 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Let's just test some of that answer. On page 29, paragraph 4.9 says that your digital system may be ready in 2024-25, but probably will not be until 2025-26. Yet you are going to have a record number next year. Furthermore, it says that your "paperbased system is due to expire in...2024." That is what saved you this year, so how is the whole thing going to work next year?

Tricia Hayes: I will make two points on that, and then I might ask Mr Greig to build on them. First, one of the efficiency-compromising things that we saw this year was people coming to us both through the digital system and through the paper-based system. That was one of the things driving the problematic hand-offs, which we talked about earlier in the session. That is absolutely something that we do not want to see again next year and we would not want to have to manage.



The growth of the digital system and the transformation are really huge prizes for us. The digital system both offers a better customer experience and requires a much lower number of staff, as Mr Greig talked through. The proportion of Passport Office staff working on the paper-based system is much larger than what we are putting into the digital system, so it is an absolutely huge prize. We will always need some paper-based system to deal with some cases—examples include armed forces and diplomatic passports—but the goal of our transformation is to bring that number down as low as possible by making the different kinds of cases that the digital system can handle as broad as possible. It is a big prize for us, and it is something that we are working really hard on.

Q100 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I get that, but with respect you have not really answered my question. The digital transformation may not be complete for three years and the paper-based contract runs out in 2024. How is all this going to work?

Tricia Hayes: We have had to do a replan around some elements of the transformation programme. Our level of confidence about what we can deliver has increased over the last few months. We have just had the IPA back in again to have a look at it, and they have upgraded us from being a red project to being an amber project. That is not as far as we want to go, but it is progress in the right direction.

Q101 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: You read my mind. That was my next question. Paragraph 4.10 says: “By mid-October, HMPO was still putting in place an action plan”—this is the IPA’s action plan—“and a review date had not yet been fixed. As part of this, HMPO is working to respond to the IPA’s seven recommendations”. How far along that process have we got now? Is there further news since October?

Tricia Hayes: I don’t think our action plan is entirely complete, but we are making some good progress. We find the IPA’s recommendations really helpful and constructive, and they increase our confidence that we will deliver the reform that we want to see.

Thomas Greig: May I say a couple of brief things about our operational planning for next year? On your question about when the AMS system runs out versus when the DAP system will be ready, I believe we are taking steps to mitigate that risk. It is an element of the AMS systems contract—I believe it is the element where the data is stored—that runs out in that period, so we are talking steps to move that data potentially earlier, but also to extend if necessary the lifetime of the AMS system in order to mitigate that.

From an operational point of view, this year we are planning on the case mix between DAP and AMS that we had last year. Any additional cases that go into the digital system this year will be a bonus, rather than something we are relying on.

Q102 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am being chased up by the Chairman, so I need quick answers to quick questions. Can I take you to figure 9 on page 26—in particular, to the extreme right-hand column?

Teleperformance went down in May to a disastrous 14%. It was an absolute disaster. People could not get through on the phone. Other members of the Committee have said that phones were put down. I had over 90 cases that, one way or the other, involved passport queries during this period. What assurance can any of you give us that, with this new contract coming in to provide 25% capacity, the system is going to be much more robust for this record number next year?

Matthew Rycroft: I will start and then pass on to Mr Greig. First, without setting out the detail of what the contracts are, I can say that we have used all the clauses within the contracts that allowed us to use our leverage, if I can put it that way. We worked very closely with Teleperformance once we saw how off-track their performance was to get it back within the service level required. They did do that, and we have been working closely with them to prepare for next year. In addition, as Mr Greig said, we have some resilience through the second contact centre contract, which will be running alongside the work of Teleperformance next year.

Q103 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Okay. A final question for you, Mr Rycroft. Paragraph 1.4 on page 9 is about cost recovery. On the figure mentioned in that paragraph—£470 million of revenues—the NAO has helpfully provided me with an accountability report. In terms of cost recovery, in 2020-21 you only got 51% cost recovery against a 100% target. In 2021-22, you got 73% cost recovery against a 100% target. In case you tell me it was all to do with covid, I have compared it with the annual reports of the DVLA. Similar figures for the DVLA show that it got a cost recovery in 2021 of 120% and a cost recovery in 2021-22 of 150%. It actually made a surplus, and it had troubles too. What guidance have you given to HMPO on cost recovery for next year?

Matthew Rycroft: We might have to come back to you on that, not least because I think your page numbers are different from ours, so I apologise for not being able to follow exactly. It sounds as though the DVLA will have some very valuable lessons for the Passport Office to learn from, so we will—

Q104 Chair: The passport service cannot make a surplus.

Matthew Rycroft: Yes, that is the other point, and the fees are set by Ministers. But we will ensure, in our advice to Ministers, that we seek to get as close to cost recovery as possible.

Q105 Sarah Olney: I think you have covered a few of the points that I was going to make about planning and surge prediction. I want to know about voter ID coming in for elections next year. This is obviously new. Passports will be one of the ways that voters can confirm their identity at

the polling station. Are you anticipating a surge in demand in the early part of the year, driven by voters needing ID?

Matthew Rycroft: We have looked at that, and we are not anticipating very significant demand, partly because a very large proportion of people already have a passport, and partly because recently expired passports count for voting purposes. There are also a lot of other types of documents that also count for voting purposes. We are not anticipating that being a particularly large driver of demand, but we are seeking to understand further the precise impact it might have on our modelling.

Q106 **Sarah Olney:** If there are people who will be relying, for voter ID purposes, on a new passport that they are expecting to arrive, would that count as a reason to expedite?

Thomas Greig: It is not something that we have thought about. We will have to look at that. As the Permanent Secretary says, we estimate that about 85% of people who are eligible to vote have either a passport or an expired passport, and then there are a range of other things that people can do to get a different type of document to allow them to vote. But it is certainly something that we can look at. The policy belongs to us, so we will consider that.

Q107 **Chair:** Just to be clear for the record, an expired passport is still a valid form of ID.

Thomas Greig: I think it is within six months. We do not own the guidance for voter ID, but I believe it is within six months.

Matthew Rycroft: For voting ID, not for travel.

Chair: But if it is recently expired, it is still valid identification for voting, or indeed other purposes.

Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Chair: I think a lot of people do not appreciate that, and indeed people who receive it as ID do not always appreciate that. That is something to flag as a message.

Q108 **Nick Smith:** Mr Greig, what assurance can you give us that your new resolution hub will be able to handle customer complaints?

Thomas Greig: The first thing to say is the reason that we are doing the resolution hub and what we are doing there. We identified last year that there were too many hand-offs in process; if we had a query or an issue to resolve, it often had to be sent from one office to the other to be resolved. We are trying to build a centre where we can resolve cases first time. I do not think that that will be perfectly ready for February or March, when we are at our busiest, but we definitely will have people in place and they will be able to do a broader range of things.

Q109 Nick Smith: When you say it will not be “perfectly ready”, what do you mean?

Thomas Greig: There are certain system changes that will be required for us to be able to carry out one-stop resolution in all types of case. There are some types of case that are still linked to geographical location. There are some that are still in the digital system in such a way that they are harder to extract. But we are trying to drive a model for both the people in that hub and the people who will work in the broader offices such that they are not allowed to stop until they have resolved the case or got to the bottom of it. It might be harder for them to do that over this summer than we hope it will be in the future, but we certainly will have a much improved model, and the culture and ethos that we want people to work under will have changed.

Q110 Nick Smith: We understand why you want to do it and why it is important, but you have not given us confidence that you will have it ready by the spike that you are expecting.

Thomas Greig: A hub will be in place.

Nick Smith: Do better.

Thomas Greig: Sorry?

Nick Smith: Give us more confidence.

Thomas Greig: I do not want to oversell this as a concept, because it requires system changes that we do not have in place yet. The first thing is that I would hope that we will need it less, because our performance on delivering passports will be much better. We will have a significant number of staff, both passport examiners and contact handlers, based in the same location and whose job will be to resolve cases. They will be able to resolve the vast majority of cases that come to them. What I would not say is that in every case they will be able to press a button and resolve the issue, because that is not the way the systems will work at that stage. I do not think I can go any further on that.

Q111 Nick Smith: I have a related question. How have you ensured that your suppliers have sufficient capacity to meet the expected demand that Mr Rycroft and you have talked about?

Thomas Greig: We have done different things with different suppliers, but we have provided them with estimates that err on the side of caution in terms of the volumes we expect them to have next year. We are asking them to plan for higher numbers than we expect to get overall. We have a programme in place—a 2023 readiness programme—and a commercial workstream around that. Our service managers are working with them every day to test their plans and ensure their plans are in place. Then there is a load of specific things we have done, like getting the second provider in for Teleperformance, assuring that Telus have the right number



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of shifts and bringing in additional suppliers for delivery so that we have a range of people who can deliver parcels and can create extra flex.

Q112 **Nick Smith:** Do you have the second supplier to help Teleperformance yet?

Thomas Greig: They will be in place by the end of February, I think.

Q113 **Nick Smith:** So not yet, and only a month before you expect demand to spike?

The contract has been awarded, and they will be dealing with 25% of calls. As I say, we expect contact to increase over the year, but it will not particularly spike in February. They will be dealing with the simpler end of that, so we think it is achievable for them to be trained in time. Between now and then, Teleperformance also have access to the subcontractors they used last summer, and they have them on standby to handle any additional volume we would receive in the meantime that Teleperformance could not handle. So we think we have a good plan.

Q114 Nick Smith: One of the issues we talked about until now is whether or not your suppliers have got enough staff to perform the tasks you have given them. Will that happen with your suppliers in the year ahead?

Thomas Greig: It will, yes. We have worked through very carefully with them their plans, and we continue to do so. We do not know what we do not know yet, but we have spent a lot of time with them looking at their plans and working through them. As I say, we have put some very specific things in place and some very specific mitigations. For example, with Sopra Steria, they are moving to two big document handling centres, rather than handling documents in our locations. Currently they have seven teams based in our seven locations. They are now moving to two big document handling factories, but we have retained the network in our offices so that we have both available for next summer and so that we have extra capacity, should we need it. We are doing things like that all the time to try to increase our capacity and our mitigation against any future risk.

Q115 Nick Smith: My Rycroft, before this past calamitous year, there was a three-week turnaround for passport applications. This spring and summer it went up to 10 weeks. Are you going to be able to offer three weeks come this spring, do you think?

Matthew Rycroft: We have actually decided to keep it at 10 weeks, because we know that it will be spiky and there will be times when it will take the full 10 weeks. At the moment, it is only taking three weeks, so I repeat the suggestion to anyone that possibly can to put in your application as early as possible before you need to travel and at a quiet time of year, which is now and early into the new year. Formally, we are going to keep the 10 weeks, because we know we will need that flexibility at some point during the year.

Q116 Nick Smith: Mr Greig, for March-April next year, what is your estimation of how many weeks you will be taking to go through each application?

Thomas Greig: It will depend on which of our forecasts it is. We have a low forecast, a mid-range forecast and a high forecast, so it would depend.

Q117 Nick Smith: What is your best estimate?

Thomas Greig: It really depends on the season and the profile of demand.

Q118 **Nick Smith:** But you said you have a worst, medium and best?

What time period did you say?

Nick Smith: Well, would it be three weeks or 10 weeks?

Thomas Greig: For renewals I would expect it to be somewhere inbetween, but closer to three weeks than 10 at that stage of the year. It is very dangerous to give hypotheticals, because customers do listen and something could happen between now and then that would not allow for that.

Q119 **Chair:** So your message is to be cautious and allow 10 weeks?

Thomas Greig: Indeed, but we will endeavour to do everything we can to get people's passports to them as quickly as possible, and we expect that we will be able to do that in a much more effective way than last year.

Q120 **Peter Grant:** Mr Rycroft, there are a number of measures you could have taken—for example to incentivise people to apply much earlier for their passports. For various reasons, you decided they were not appropriate at that time. Have you considered whether the existing legislation is appropriate, given what you know now about the damage that can be caused by huge peaks, for example?

Matthew Rycroft: We have looked at all the different measures we could take to incentivise people to apply at quieter times of year. We have decided so far that there is not a silver bullet like that out there, but if that were to change we would obviously be very happy to consider it.

Q121 **Peter Grant:** Would it need a change in primary legislation if you were to be allowed to give 10% off for applying in advance? Is that something that can be done just through secondary legislation, or does it need primary legislation?

Matthew Rycroft: It would probably need primary, wouldn't it? We would absolutely be open to advising Ministers on all those sorts of potential solution if we thought that it would be worthwhile in terms of providing the best possible service to British taxpayers.

Tricia Hayes: We have done some work on the elasticity of passport cost. The evidence base that we have is that it would not be an effective way of really shifting the shape of that demand curve.

Q122 **Peter Grant:** That is based on your expectations of how the customers would respond?

Tricia Hayes: How customers would respond, yes.

Q123 **Chair:** Is it because they do not want to pay for an extra year when they do not need to?

Tricia Hayes: It is because it is something that they pay for only every 10 years. They are much more likely to choose when they want to get their passport based on when they need it, rather than if we make a relatively minor adjustment to the cost.

People do not think a great deal about it until they do it, in effect. They do not really click on to things that relate to it, in this circumstance.

Q124 **Peter Grant:** With respect, you do not seem to have known very effectively how your customers were going to react until now. You communicated with them in a way that 3.2% of them responded to; you did not see the huge, sharp spike of all your customers wanting the service at the same time that has caused this difficulty. How confident are you in the predictions you have made of how people would respond to an incentive scheme, for example, that was correctly designed? Have you looked at asking for permission to do that in a trial period for a couple of years to see if it works? If it does not work, it costs next to nothing; if it does work, you have maybe improved the service.

Matthew Rycroft: The specific answer to that factual question is no, we have not, but we are absolutely open to those sorts of ideas and to following the evidence and providing the best possible service that we can.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Mr Rycroft, now that your Secretary of State has completed her statement—

Chair: Can we wait until the end of the session to talk about that? It is not about passports.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I thought we were finished.

Chair: We will get a little confused otherwise, so could you hold the fort for a moment, Sir Geoffrey? Sorry.

Q125 **Sarah Olney:** I wanted to ask you about staffing. It is clear from the Report that the number of staff available to you was a significant issue in terms of getting on top of the problem. I particularly wanted to ask about retention. Obviously, there is a lot in the Report about your efforts to recruit and how successful they have been, but how successful have you been at retaining staff? In particular, what do you think are the issues with retaining staff in the Passport Office?

Thomas Greig: Our churn rate is fairly similar to the rest of the public sector, actually. I do not think we have issues with retention that are any greater than any other Government Department has at the moment. We continually look for ways to improve the experience of someone working in the Passport Office, because it can be quite difficult—certainly over the summer, it was really difficult for our teams in a lot of ways—and we are endeavouring to do that, but we do not have a particular problem with retention over and above what you would normally see in the civil service.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q126 **Anne Marie Morris:** I want to ask about the IT system. Sir Geoffrey asked you a number of questions to which I do not think we quite got a satisfactory answer. You have moved from red to amber—tick, that is great—but you have not got to green. Even with the reworked timetable, the paper-based system will expire before the new IT system comes into play. I do not think we have any confidence yet that the system will

manage with that gap. Mr Rycroft, are you able to give us a little more comfort?

Matthew Rycroft: We will absolutely ensure that there is no gap.

Q127 **Anne Marie Morris:** How are you going to do that? We need to know specifically what you will do if you have a system that has ended and a new one that is not ready.

Matthew Rycroft: We will ensure that the existing system is not turned off until the new one is absolutely ready. We have already ensured that we responded to the IPA's recommendations to get from red to amber on that programme, and we will continue to take their advice to get up toward green, as we do with all our programmes. Mr Greig, do you want to say anything else?

Thomas Greig: There are two mitigations to hand. As I said, the length of time that we have left on the AMS system is a result of a contract on where the data is stored. Our two options are either to extend that contract, or to move the data before we fully close the system. It is not the whole of the AMS system that would expire in 2024; it is just the element where the data is stored. We will need to get some more detail on this, though, because it is an area that sits outside my immediate operational command.

Q128 **Anne Marie Morris:** If you could write to the Committee on how you are going to plug that gap, it will give us a lot more confidence than we have now. How will you get to green? Clearly, that still must be the target. In theory, you still need to get there by 2025, so what is that gap?

Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely we want to get to green, which means high confidence that our programme will be achieved on time and on budget. I will happily write to the Committee with details of where we go next. We have only just got to amber, but I agree with your ambition that, having got to amber, we need to get to green. I will write with the detail.

Q129 **Anne Marie Morris:** In terms of the overall ambition, what is the date when you will have got your IT system up and running,? It is clearly not 2025.

Matthew Rycroft: I will have to write to you—I will write to the Chair.

Tricia Hayes: May I add to that? One of the ways we are managing the whole of the Home Office's investment portfolio is to have a really rigorous and relentless focus on scope. We will make sure that we are hitting the target dates for the programme by resisting any temptation to continue to add additional scope and make it more complicated than it needs to be. We are working very hard to bring real discipline to just delivering what we need to do to hit the dates we are trying to hit.

Q130 **Anne Marie Morris:** Which gives rise to a further question. Technology and the needs for documentation for transport always change. If you stay



HOUSE OF COMMONS

within scope and you do not take on board some of the things that keep changing—we may well be talking about some international changes—you are going to find yourself playing catch-up all over again. While I understand that discipline is good and not having scope creep is good, the world moves on. There is no point in designing something that was fine for the problem identified yesterday, but not much good for the problem you identify tomorrow.

Tricia Hayes: I definitely think it would be a mistake for the Home Office to be a waterfall organisation in an agile world.

Chair: Except there are plenty of other projects that have been done not very well, as you have learnt from experience. ESN springs to mind.

Tricia Hayes: We are increasingly professionalising our project delivery leaders in the Home Office: we have brought in an additional 200 project delivery experts and we are managing the portfolio very tightly. For projects like the HMPO transformation where we are trying to meet customer expectations, a key plank of how we do them is to keep the customer involved all the way through the process.

Q131 **Anne Marie Morris:** Is it realistic to do away with paper completely?

Thomas Greig: I do not think we will ever move to a system where we do away with paper completely. Ideally we would see less of it and we would rely more on verifying people's applications via information, not via documentation, but we deal with an extremely diverse range of customers and we need to be able to service customers' needs. There are some people who have all that stuff on paper, and that is the only way they can communicate it to us.

Q132 **Anne Marie Morris:** So what you are really saying is that there is not really an issue about turning off the old system and turning on the new system. You will have to keep this paper-based system running in perpetuity, so the gap that Sir Geoffrey identified is not a gap that you can allow to exist because you have to keep the paper mechanism working.

Thomas Greig: Ultimately, the digital system will allow us to deal with applications that are submitted on paper digitally. When we talk about paper-based or digital systems, we are talking about how the caseworker works on them—whether the caseworker is dealing with documents on a screen or documents in front of them. As we move to a fully digital system where applicants submit paper documents, they will be scanned on to the system and then be caseworked by an examiner looking at them digitally. When I said that we will still have to have paper, what I meant is that we will still have to allow people to submit paper, rather than we will still have to have that paper in our offices when we make decisions.

Q133 **Anne Marie Morris:** Why?

Thomas Greig: Why will we have to allow people still to submit paper?

Anne Marie Morris: Yes.

Thomas Greig: Because we have customers who hold all their information on paper and do not have access to digital systems or to digital means of transmitting them to us. If we look at things like validating people's identity using other databases, we have people who will not be on those databases. We need to be accessible to a range of people, and where it is a document that many people need, to not force people down a wholly digital route. We don't want to do that at the moment, and I don't think we will in future. We can incentivise, but we still want to allow people to submit on paper, because it allows us to have an accessible service.

Q134 **Anne Marie Morris:** Certainly I would not want digital exclusion. That is absolutely right.

Mr Rycroft, given that there is a lot of data across Departments, does it not seem that it must be possible for all that data to talk to each other? I cannot conceive of many individuals for whom there is absolutely no data, or of a world in five years' time where all of those people will not have to have something on the system. This takes me back to the point that I made to Ms Hayes: the future will be different, and the system needs to prepare for that.

Matthew Rycroft: I totally agree with all that. That is what our digital system is doing. It is preparing us for that. Speaking realistically, for the foreseeable future, we expect that a minority of customers will continue to use some elements of a paper-based application process.

Q135 **Anne Marie Morris:** It would be helpful if you sent the Chair a little more explicit data about your digital strategy. I appreciate that that is not the focus today, but it is linked inextricably to today's discussion. Understanding that strategy and how you are progressing with it would make a huge difference to our understanding.

Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely.

Q136 **Mrs Drummond:** During covid, a lot of my constituents' supporting documents were lost. Will the digital transformation help, or will people be able to go somewhere else to get those scanned in and signed off, rather than sending them to the Passport Office? In the same way— **Chair:** Let us do one at a time, and get the answer to that.

Thomas Greig: At the moment, that is not the case. Physical documents are still required. They will be held in fewer places, so ultimately they will all be held in two locations rather than in seven or eight, and they will be held in a different way, which we think will mean that they are less likely to get lost. At the moment, however, we still require a range of physical documents. As pointed out, it is right that as we go forward we will look at where we can verify information using other Government databases and other things, but at the moment we are not there yet, no.

Q137 Mrs Drummond: The worst thing was that the 10 weeks only started when they actually found them, then. If that could be changed, it would be great.

My other question is about UK citizens born abroad—children born abroad to UK citizens. Is there any way to speed that up, because it has been taking between three and six months? Will the digital transformation help, or will people still have to get all their grandparents' passports and so on?

Thomas Greig: It depends on the circumstances of the individual case. I would have to see the individual applications we are talking about, but the things that can delay those types of application are the need to obtain the documentation to prove that the child is who we think they are, and that their parents are who we think they are, which is obviously important. Applications from overseas for passport renewals go through the digital system now, and they go relatively quickly, but it is the gathering of the information that takes time. We will continue to look at how, in policy or process, we can speed that up while not compromising on safeguarding, which is important when dealing with children born abroad.

Q138 Chair: When looking at this, we have this wave or spike that is not yet finished, but given what you have both said, Mr Greig and Mr Rycroft, about people only renewing when they need to renew at 10 years, we will see the same bulge coming through, won't we?

Thomas Greig: Indeed.

Q139 Chair: So do you have a long-term plan? We saw the bulge that came through in 2008, and we have seen this bulge. How are you going to manage that?

Thomas Greig: The Second Perm Sec might want to pick this up more, but the way we will need to manage it in the long term is by building on what we already do to use people flexibly across the whole of the Home Office. The Home Office is a big operational Department—

Q140 Chair: Using the surge teams?

Thomas Greig: Surge teams and, for example, flexing people between student visa applications that are out of season in January and then back into student visa applications. That is how we I think we need to manage these kinds of spikes going forward, rather than recruiting. We are already doing it a lot, but we need to do it more. That is how we manage those kinds of demand fluctuations.

Chair: Ms Hayes?

Tricia Hayes: That is exactly right. The Home Office has many peaks, but fortunately they do not always occur at the same time every year, so a more flexible workforce which we are able to deploy across a number of different casework teams is definitely a very high priority for us.

Q141 Chair: I know you do a bit of that already. Have you been discussing this with the trade unions? Are there any barriers?

Tricia Hayes: We already use two surge workforces quite extensively across the Home Office. The first is the HMRC surge team, and we are their No. 1 customer for bringing in people both for caseworking, such as in the customer services function, and to help us at the border; but we have also now created the first steps towards a small, internal surge team, which looks across the range of different Home Office casework functions and can be moved from place to place. We have not had any problems so far with the unions on either of those two fronts.

Q142 Chair: Just to be clear, you have a surge team from HMRC that help at the border. What do they do?

Tricia Hayes: There are HMRC surge teams that are trained to work at the principal control point and will be forming part of our industrial action resilience.

Q143 Chair: To be clear, they are standing there and—for the average customer, if they don't know—they will not be in a uniform.

Tricia Hayes: Yes.

Q144 Chair: So they're Border Force but not in uniform. They are doing the same job.

Tricia Hayes: They are civil servants, just like Border Force are.

Q145 Chair: But they are not wearing the uniform.

Tricia Hayes: They won't be in the uniform, no. Actually, I'm not sure whether they will wear a uniform. I could check that. We have many uniforms in the Home Office. They won't be wearing a Border Force uniform.

Q146 Chair: But they will be doing much the same as Border Force. How new is your use of those teams?

Tricia Hayes: We regularly used HMRC to help us with summer surges, so it is not new.

Q147 Chair: Thank you very much. We have covered a lot of the bases on passports. To reiterate, we have had a lot of correspondence from MPs who are very concerned. From some of the evidence we have had, one of the other things about the MP thing is that a lot of the demand you were getting was repeat calls. We will give you a free tip before we put our Report out—we do not talk about ourselves much in Reports—but one of the things it might be helpful to build into your planning is to have not just access to your staff from MPs' offices, but an ability for MPs' offices to have the confidence that one call or email is all they need to make. Currently, there are a lot of repeated calls because of the frustration we were all facing in trying to get our constituents' passports.

As the Home Secretary has now sat down, there is no reason, Mr Rycroft, that you cannot answer Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown's questions about the Rwanda strategy.

Matthew Rycroft: I have not been doing any multitasking, so I don't know exactly what she said.

Chair: Well, Sir Geoffrey is going to ask the question.

Q148 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I hope you know what your Secretary of State said, but let's try. An hour ago, Jake Kessler said in the *Evening Standard* that the High Court had said the Rwanda scheme was lawful. However, he quoted from the actual judgment, which said that you "must consider fully the circumstances of each individual claimant." He went on to say that "it raises questions...about...whether it is capable of working as envisaged". Will you now be proceeding with the scheme, or do you have to have a pause, pending a possible appeal to the Supreme Court?

Matthew Rycroft: Everything I say is subject to anything that the Home Secretary said in the House while this session has been going on.

Chair: We would be surprised if you had different positions on this, but it would be interesting for us if you did.

Matthew Rycroft: The legal process is not complete; there is another hearing in January, and of course it is possible for the claimants to appeal. It is also possible for this to go all the way to the Supreme Court, so there are plenty of other stages in this process for the lawyers before anything else can happen.

Q149 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** But are you still, as the Home Office, going to continue planning to do it, so that as soon as you have clearance, if you get it, from the Supreme Court or wherever it happens to end up, you will then be in a position to implement it? Or are you going to now put a pause on it?

Matthew Rycroft: We are not going to put a pause on it. We are going to continue to prepare to operationalise it.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Thank you.

Q150 **Mr French:** I have a follow-up question. Much frustration will be felt by my constituents and others about the delays in the legal process through the courts to what appears to be a democratic decision being implemented. As the Government has been deemed to have acted lawfully, will the Government pursue costs from the other parties?

Matthew Rycroft: That is one of the topics for discussion and decision at the hearing in January.

Chair: We will leave that for the courts to decide, because it is beyond our remit as the Public Accounts Committee.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I thank our witnesses very much indeed for their time, and Mr Greig for the tour de force in his first outing at the PAC. He is certainly a man who knows his systems. Whatever we say in our Report, we cannot fault you on your detailed knowledge of what happened over the period of time in question, and we know how long you take to prepare. I thank you, as a first-time witness, for that. That is the best Christmas present you get from the PAC.

Our Report, which may not be quite so welcome, will possibly be out as late as March, depending on recess dates and so on. I thank you again for your time. The transcript will be published on the website, uncorrected, in the next couple of days—a warm thanks to our colleagues at *Hansard* for their hard work on that—and as I say, our Report will be out in the new year. Thank you for your time.