

# Transport Committee

## Oral evidence: Covid-19 outbreak at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, HC 1181

Wednesday 27 January 2021

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Members present: Huw Merriman (Chair); Ruth Cadbury; Lilian Greenwood; Robert Largan; Karl McCartney; Grahame Morris; Gavin Newlands; Greg Smith.

Questions 1 - 111

### Witnesses

I: Julie Lennard, Chief Executive, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency; and Louise White, HR and Estates Director, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Julie Lennard and Louise White.

Q1 **Chair:** This is a one-off session of the Transport Select Committee focusing on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the work of the agency and particularly the recent reports of a Covid-19 outbreak at the agency. First of all, I ask our two witnesses to introduce themselves for the record.

**Julie Lennard:** Good morning, Chair. I am Julie Lennard, the chief executive at DVLA.

**Louise White:** Good morning. I am Louise White, the HR and estates director at DVLA.

Q2 **Chair:** Good morning, Julie and Louise. Thank you for joining us at very short notice. It has always been our intention throughout this year to have every single organisation or agency in to speak with us. We have had the DVSA. You would have been on that list, but you have come on earlier than normal formalities would have had it, due to the reports in *The Observer* over the weekend about the Covid-19 outbreak. Perhaps we could focus on that for the first part of our session.

Julie, would you give an overview of what has been occurring inside the DVLA offices over the last nine months, and your response to the article at the weekend?

**Julie Lennard:** Of course, Chair. We really welcome this opportunity to be able to talk to you and answer your questions, and to put the record straight. There has been a lot of inaccurate reporting, both over the weekend and in the last few days.

To put it on the record and be very clear, DVLA does not have a mass outbreak of Covid at the present time. The media reports suggested that we do. It was very unfortunate that Public Health Wales put out a press release on Sunday that was also incorrect. The Public Health Wales press release stated that we had 527 confirmed cases of Covid among DVLA contact centre staff. That was not correct, and they very helpfully put out a correction as an annexe on Monday, making it clear that the total figure they talked about was across all DVLA staff, and included the 2,000 of our staff who are working from home. It is also a cumulative figure from March until now. In the correction that Public Health Wales put out, they made it very clear that it is likely to include a significant number of people who contracted the virus outside the workplace.

It is really important to establish that at the beginning and be able to put it up front. Just for information about where we are at the moment, the total number of cases since March 2020 until now is 546. That is for staff working at home and on site. We currently have six cases—four on our site, none in the contact centre at all and two at home. As I say, it is not the case that the DVLA has a mass outbreak. It is also not fair to



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characterise it as one of the biggest workplace outbreaks, which the original press release may have suggested by saying that it was over 500 people from the contact centre.

I would like to address a couple of the things that were in *The Observer*. They quoted anonymously from members of staff. There were things such as, "There are cases on every floor now." As I have said, that is not true. We have four cases among people at work at the current time. It was saying that there were lots of staff who are currently off with extreme stress. That is also not true. Having checked our sickness absence rates for the last two years, January 2021 is no different from January 2020 and January 2019. It is a pretty constant figure.

One of the other claims from a member of staff, again who spoke to journalists anonymously, it would seem—someone they called Jim Lewis—was that he had to self-isolate six times. We have been through all of our records. We do not have a single member of staff who has had to self-isolate six times. We have one member of staff who has isolated five times. We have had 14 people who have isolated four times, 40 who have isolated three times and 176 who have isolated twice.

That tells me two things. One is that the reports that staff were being asked to ignore track and trace advice, or to come in when they had symptoms, clearly are not borne out by those statistics. The other is that the member of staff who has self-isolated five times since March needs, I suggest, to look at whether they are adhering to all the guidelines both in and out of work, given the number of times they have had to self-isolate as one individual.

I think there was a lot in there that was inaccurate. DVLA has done huge amounts to make our site Covid-secure. I know that you will have questions about our response earlier, but when you look at our response from the first wave, absolutely, as it has been all the way through, staff safety is and always has been our main priority. At the beginning, when we were not Covid-secure and we really reduced the numbers on site, because like every business we had not had a chance to make our site Covid-secure, we struggled in terms of some of the delays that customers faced. I know that all of you have seen that from your constituents, with the correspondence that we received over the summer.

**Q3 Chair:** Thank you very much for setting the scene, Julie. I will come back on a couple of things and then invite Grahame Morris to come in.

With regard to the allegations that those with management responsibility had asked staff to turn off their mobiles so that they did not get pinged by the need to fall within the Test and Trace system, have you found that to be accurate or inaccurate?

**Julie Lennard:** We found no evidence that that has been happening at all. It is certainly not something that any of us in the senior management team has ever said. As I say, from the figures you can see the numbers



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of people who had self-isolated multiple times. When they self-isolate, staff are obviously at home on full pay. You can see from those numbers that clearly that is not the reality. People self-isolate when they are either pinged by the app or told to by track and trace.

**Q4 Chair:** With regard to work from home, there are allegations that people have been forced to come into the office unnecessarily. How does your situation compare to other related agencies with regard to the need to come into work, or the need to work from home?

**Julie Lennard:** It is really difficult to compare because different agencies have different roles and do different things. We have 2,000 staff who are working from home, and have been throughout. They have not set foot in the office since March. The only people who are on site are in operational roles that, for one reason or another—I am sure we will come to some of those reasons—cannot work from home. The only people on site are the people who cannot do their job from home.

We have spent time over the intervening months making some changes to roles, where we have been able to, and to have operational people who are able to work at home. In some cases, they can do the majority of their job at home but, if they need access to certain systems, they need to come in maybe once a week. We have done an awful lot to get as many people who were in operational frontline roles working at home as we can.

**Q5 Chair:** With regard to those who are required to come into the office, there are allegations that social distancing is not possible. There are not enough kitchens or toilets, and people are crowded on to floors. How do you find the reality of that?

**Julie Lennard:** The reality for any organisation, whether it is us, a supermarket, Parliament or wherever you have people on site, is that you are limited by how many toilets, kitchens and those sorts of facilities you have. What you then do, of course, is put in controls and mitigating measures to make sure that they are used safely. Our response has changed over time. We have worked very closely with Public Health Wales, Swansea Council's environmental health team and the Health and Safety Executive. We are grateful to all of those organisations for all their help and advice on how, with the constraints of our organisation, we can set it up to make sure that it is as safe and Covid-secure as it can be.

**Q6 Chair:** You told us that since March you have had 546 staff members who tested positive for Covid-19. The report in *The Observer* gave the number as 535 since September. Is that figure from *The Observer* incorrect on that basis?

**Julie Lennard:** It is. I think they were using some of the figures from Public Health Wales. It is absolutely true to say that that is the cumulative number from March until now. Our figures very much reflect what is happening in the local community. As you know, there was a very big increase all across Wales, especially in the south Wales region, in



November and December. Obviously, as Public Health Wales says, a lot of our cases would have been contracted outside the workplace in the local community. When local community rates were high—in December I believe it was around 900 per 100,000 for the case rate in the area—our rates went up as well because they absolutely reflect what is happening.

I think the current rate in our area is 146 per 100,000. We still have the same number of staff there, and our rates are also very low. What is happening in the community is what we also see happening with our staff figures, bearing in mind, as I say, that they are cumulative. That is for all 6,295 of our staff, including people working at home and on site.

**Q7 Chair:** At this stage, I just want to establish the facts. If it is the case that *The Observer* was reporting 535 cases since September, and you have given us the figure of 546 cases since March, that would suggest that between March and September there were only 11 cases.

**Julie Lennard:** The majority of our cases were between September and December, which exactly mirrors the really big spike in the local community. We have not been doing things that are different in that time. What it is reflecting is the wider community infection rate as well, so, yes, the majority.

**Q8 Chair:** I know that, but where I am struggling is with this really straightforward question. Have there only been 11 cases with your staff between March and September, with the other 535 cases from September? That would equal your total of 546. There is a discrepancy.

**Julie Lennard:** I am going to ask if Louise will come in there and give you those confirmed figures.

**Louise White:** Yes, that is right. We had very low numbers of cases during the early months. Most staff were at home. We do not know to what extent that was because they were not reporting it to us, but, yes, the absolute vast majority—the 535—was from September onwards.

**Julie Lennard:** There was a step change in September for us.

**Q9 Chair:** I don't really feel that I have got to the bottom of that. The way it was focused to us in the letter was that, actually, that big number should be spread across from March last year all the way through to now, which is understandable. Now you seem to be suggesting that, no, the bulk of it is from September. In that case, it could well be that the reports of 535 cases are accurate from September, which is very large indeed, and therefore to get to your number there have only been 11 from March until September. Is that fair?

**Julie Lennard:** We had very few staff, as I said at the beginning. In the first wave, because we were not Covid-secure, we erred on the side of caution and had a lot of our operational staff at home. They were not working. They were at home on full pay for a long period in the early part. Yes, it is absolutely the case that the majority of the infections have



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been since the schools went back in September, which also reflects the rates in the local community. As I say, it is worth bearing in mind that Public Health Wales made it clear that out of that number—I think 534 was the number they gave—a significant number of those contracted the virus outside the workplace.

**Q10 Chair:** I appreciate that, but I think your letter gave me cause to point towards the fact that we should look from March all the way through and then assess that figure as 546, whereas actually you are yourself putting emphasis on the fact that there has been a large surge in recent months.

Just to get some figures—then I will hand over to Mr Morris—what numbers did you have working from home and in the office between March and September, and what are the figures now in that ratio?

**Julie Lennard:** In terms of working from home, it has increased. It was around 1,500 or so at the beginning. It is anyone in a support area. If you were not in an operational area, it was much easier to make the changes and the IT changes to allow those people to work from home. It was anyone in things like the finance teams, HR, commercials and comms; all of those people have been at home since March and have not been back in the office.

**Q11 Chair:** So 1,500 from home out of 6,295 as of March. What has the figure been since September?

**Julie Lennard:** Around 2,000. About a third of the staff are at home.

**Chair:** Thank you. It has taken a bit of time, but I just wanted to establish some of the facts.

**Q12 Grahame Morris:** I want to pick up on one point when Julie Lennard answered the Chair. I am still not clear, and I do not think we have had a clear answer, in relation to the 546 cases. I have a simple question. When was the first case reported?

**Julie Lennard:** Some of the figures are a little bit difficult because right at the beginning, in March, access to testing was very much more limited. We had people who were off with Covid symptoms, and then you get to a point where you have positive cases. I can check the numbers and write back to you with them.

**Q13 Grahame Morris:** Louise, do you know when the first case was reported?

**Louise White:** It was in March.

**Q14 Grahame Morris:** It was in March, not September?

**Louise White:** No.

**Q15 Grahame Morris:** I am going to come back to you, but I would like you to check on when that was because I think it is important. You have given the impression that the cases were spread over a nine or 10-month



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period, when in fact there has been an enormous spike since September, when I believe the first cases were reported.

I would also like to know, from Julie Lennard, how you assume that many of those cases came from the community rather than being spread inside the workplace. Is that an analysis of the test, trace and isolate data that has been provided by Public Health?

**Julie Lennard:** As I say, it is not my analysis. It is Public Health Wales's statement that a significant proportion would have been contracted outside the workplace.

We work very hard and very closely with the track and trace team. Obviously, we are looking to see whether there are examples where it is being transmitted in the workplace or whether they are isolated incidents where it is harder to see that kind of pattern.

Q16 **Grahame Morris:** It was just a general statement from Public Health Wales that transmission is coming from the community. It is not based on evidence from an analysis of the workforce at the DVLA. Can I—

**Julie Lennard:** Sorry, can I come back on that? It is very difficult to know exactly, definitively, where someone has actually contracted it.

Q17 **Grahame Morris:** No, it isn't. I am after the evidence. It is easy to find out when the first case was reported. If you don't know, please check and find out. I am not asking you to repeat general advice that comes from Public Health. I am asking you for the specifics to substantiate the statement that you have made that the majority of the transmission—

**Julie Lennard:** I suppose what I—

**Grahame Morris:** Please, let me ask my question and then you can answer. I am asking you to support with evidence the statement that you have made that the majority transmission is not from the workplace. You have not been able to do that to my satisfaction. Maybe you can check the evidence with HR and come back.

Let me ask another question in relation to your earlier comments about working from home. How many staff are working on site at the moment? What is different about the advice from Government compared with the original lockdown in March and April, when perhaps only 250 staff were working on site and there was no incidence of Covid transmission? What has changed in the workload and demands to bring so many more staff back on site to a workplace where, clearly, there is considerable evidence of Covid transmission?

**Julie Lennard:** Can I come back and pick up your question, Mr Morris, on workplace transmission? On the evidence, we are very much guided by Public Health Wales. Where they feel it is not workplace, they are treating it as incidents. Everything has been treated as an incident apart from when, in December, we had 60 cases in the contact centre. That is the only part of the DVLA estate, which is large and in different buildings,



that has been treated by Public Health Wales as an outbreak. As I say, it is that case in December where I am sure there would have been some workplace transmission, but in the rest of the sites for the rest of the time there is no evidence that we or Public Health have seen, or had concerns about, that [*Inaudible.*] on site, apart from a handful of cases where people told us that they had breached social distancing. We have evidence that the majority of cases are through community transmission rather than workplace transmission.

Can I come back to your question—

**Q18 Grahame Morris:** I want you to come back to all the questions. How many are on site at the moment? I would just like some answers.

**Louise White:** Just over 100—

**Chair:** Louise, can I stop you there, please. People are talking over each other. Can I ask for a pause? I know it is difficult with the IT, but I think Mr Morris was still talking. Perhaps, we could just give it a break. Grahame, do you want to come back?

**Grahame Morris:** Thank you, Chair. Could you answer my specific question? How many are currently working on site, and what has changed compared with the original lockdown advice, when the Government said, "Work from home, if that is possible," when only 250 people were working on site? What is the urgency that brought large numbers of staff back on site and which led to this transmission?

**Julie Lennard:** I can say that what has changed definitively is that at the beginning, in March, we were not a Covid-secure workplace, the same as any other. We had not made provision for that. We had not made changes to the estate, which we have done over the months in between. In March, we erred completely on the side of caution. We sent home large numbers of operational staff. They did not work. They were on full pay at home for several months while we made the site Covid-secure.

Where we freed up space for the 2,000 people who were at home, we were able to repurpose that space. We introduced things like one-way systems and Perspex screens. We had to wait to get Perspex because there was worldwide demand for it. We did not start bringing people back in until the summer months because we were making the workspace Covid-secure.

As we brought people in, we did it very gradually. We had the unions with us, who inspected and were content, before we brought people back in. It was a gradual process for us to be able to do that. There was a definite consequence of doing that. As you have all seen, backlogs grew because we had not been able to do that work in the intervening months. There were delays for people who were applying via paper routes.

The real difference between then and now is the huge amount that we have put in place, including renting another building, which is now



available, to make sure that we could spread people out enough and have enough space so that they can socially distance and meet all of those kinds of guidelines.

**Q19 Grahame Morris:** I want to ask about the work that is being undertaken— for example, issuing provisional driving licences. At the moment, it is not possible to have driving lessons. In fact, non-essential journeys should not be undertaken at the moment. Why is that work being undertaken, and hundreds of staff being brought into the site to do it in an environment that clearly is not Covid-safe and there were 500 people? Whether they got it travelling to work on the bus or in the broader community, it has put them at additional risk. Was that your decision or a decision above you?

**Julie Lennard:** We have worked very closely with the Department and with Ministers throughout in determining it. Certainly, the Government position is that essential public services should continue. That is what we have striven to do, and to put enough things in place to make sure that it can be done safely.

On the specifics, as I say, we have discussed at length with the Department which services we can do and which we cannot. It is worth bearing in mind that the DVLA is a digital organisation. The vast majority of our transactions are done online, which limits the number of people who have to be on site. That would include first applications, which are able to be done online.

**Q20 Chair:** Julie, coming back to the evidence again, you just told me that you have had 1,500 workers working from home since March, and that has gone up to 2,000 working from home since September.

**Julie Lennard:** Yes.

**Q21 Chair:** Your letter says that you have actually had 2,000 people working from home permanently since March. Which evidence is correct on that front?

**Julie Lennard:** It rapidly increased. A lot of our operational staff were at home anyway in March, but most of them were not working at home. It increased very rapidly. Every week, every day, we were able to increase it. I can look and give you date by date, if that is helpful.

**Q22 Chair:** I am just referring to the letter dated yesterday. It states that there were 2,000 staff working from home permanently since March, but you have told us this morning that in fact that number was 1,500. At this stage, I just want to understand what the figure is from March.

**Julie Lennard:** It would have been somewhere between 1,500 and 1,800. I do not have exact numbers with me on that. I can find them and get them for you. It took a lot of work to roll things out—as I say, it was day by day—for additional laptops. I can go back and get it in a really precise format for you.



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Q23 **Chair:** Yes, please. We want assurance that you have the numbers at your fingertips so that our evidence is sound for our questions.

Secondly, I want to return back to this number. In your letter, I was certainly looking at the 500-odd cases as a cumulative number from March because you pointed that out for our attention. You said: "However, this is a cumulative number since March 2020"—that figure of 500. But you have just told us that really there were only 11 cases between March and September. Therefore, the press report of 535 since September is accurate.

**Julie Lennard:** Yes, and we have said that the majority were between September and December, but the total of 546, which is our total, is from March until now. That is the total.

Q24 **Chair:** If I had a grand total of 546, and 535 of those were from September, I would not write a letter and point to a cumulative number stretching back to March, when March to September is a grand total of 11. I found it rather misleading. We will leave it there.

**Julie Lennard:** I apologise if that was misleading, Chair. It is true, but I apologise if that was misleading. Obviously, we were doing things at real speed as we had very little notice to come and attend. I apologise if, in the haste to pull a lot of the evidence together for you, some of those things could have been clearer. I apologise.

**Chair:** What it is leading to in my mind is whether you actually have all of this information and have been recording it all the way from March, or whether it is harder for you to quickly get it together. The recording of information and data is key to how you respond in terms of workplace safety. I have taken up more time than I intended, so over to Karl McCartney.

Q25 **Karl McCartney:** My question is going to go back to March last year and some of the things that you have given in evidence already, both Julie and Louise. How many people did you send home in March, percentage-wise? Was it everybody?

**Julie Lennard:** Pretty much. Please do not try to pin me down to exact numbers day by day, because things changed very rapidly.

Q26 **Karl McCartney:** Was it 90%, 95%, 100%?

**Julie Lennard:** At the beginning, as I say, because we were not a Covid-secure workplace, we were down to around 100 staff on site in the early stages.

Q27 **Karl McCartney:** You sent home 95% of staff?

**Julie Lennard:** Yes.

Q28 **Karl McCartney:** How many of those carried on working at home, percentage-wise?



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**Julie Lennard:** It is somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000. I would need to check for you.

Q29 **Karl McCartney:** How many of those carried on working from home? You yourself have said that you carried on paying them full wage, but they were not working.

**Julie Lennard:** Yes.

Q30 **Karl McCartney:** How many of them were at home working in March, actually doing work for you?

**Julie Lennard:** It will be somewhere between the 1,500 and 2,000. Everyone in the support areas who was able to work at home has been working at home since then. It is all of our IT staff, HR, commercial and all those sorts of people. They have been working at home very successfully since March. It is the operational side of things, where people have to do their job on site. Those people were at home, and we had a group of people who were rotated in and out. Not everyone had to do the whole time. They might have done three weeks, and then three weeks of not being in.

Q31 **Karl McCartney:** What was your productivity like? From my constituents' experience, they could not get anything out of your organisation, your agency. People were told to email, and the email went into the ether for weeks and weeks on end, until people like their MP contacted you, and eventually we might get a response. What were your productivity levels from March to September?

**Julie Lennard:** This is the balance. I do not think it is fair to unpack productivity in that way because the staff who were actually working were working really hard. The problem we had were the operational staff, who could not work from home. They did not carry out that work. If you applied—

Q32 **Karl McCartney:** What percentage of staff were those people, and how much did that cost for those three months?

**Julie Lennard:** Again, I do not have that with me. I can work it out for you, and we can write to you and tell you. That was the choice that was made around putting staff safety first. It was the very difficult balance between staff safety and providing essential public services in March at the beginning of the pandemic. Those were some of the choices. We followed the civil service guidance on that in how we approached it.

Q33 **Karl McCartney:** Unfortunately, that is probably just like IPSA, but that's fine.

I would like to know those costs if you could forward to me what those are. Could you also tell me what you have spent as an organisation to make your buildings and the new rented building to be what you consider to be Covid-secure, to ensure that your staff can work on site?



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**Julie Lennard:** I can. Again, I will write to you rather than give you numbers now, knowing how precise the Committee likes me to be. As I say, we have taken on a new building. When you factor in the amounts we have spent on things like Perspex and fitting it across an entire site to make it Covid-secure—and hand sanitiser and all sorts of things—the numbers are significant in terms of what we have spent to make it Covid-secure.

Q34 **Karl McCartney:** My final question is this. Pre-February last year, comparing productivity then to now, how do you think you rate? Whereabouts are you? Fifty per cent? Seventy per cent?

**Julie Lennard:** I think staff are doing an outstanding job. The staff who have been working at home throughout—

Q35 **Karl McCartney:** That is not the question I am asking you. I am asking you what your productivity levels are at this point in time compared with prior to February last year. How do you think you are doing as a percentage? Just give me a percentage.

**Julie Lennard:** I think in the circumstances we are doing well. We are not doing the same level as in February because I have fewer staff on site, because of social distancing requirements. I have fewer staff on site—

Q36 **Karl McCartney:** You are the chief executive. Is it 50% or 75%? It is not a criticism. I am just asking a taxpayer-funded agency what your levels of productivity are compared with February last year. I am not trying to catch you out.

**Julie Lennard:** As a whole, I would say that we are not very far off what we would normally do. If you are applying online, you have had absolutely no problems. All the way through the pandemic, our online services have worked fantastically. Between March and December, we did 195 million transactions. The vast majority of those were online. Where we have struggled is with paper transactions. Anyone applying by paper is reliant on having people physically in the building because a lot of those are sent in with ID documents like passports or biometric residency permit cards and things like that. We get around 60,000 items of mail a day. That is the scale at which we operate, and it is that side of the business that has struggled more with social distancing.

If you take us as a whole, I would say we are doing extremely well and not far below our normal figures. If you are one of the people who is applying on paper, you will be experiencing delays. At the moment, we are saying to people that it is around six to eight weeks, whereas if you apply online you will get something back in a matter of days.

Q37 **Karl McCartney:** Has that six to eight weeks improved since last March to September, or do you think it has got worse?

**Julie Lennard:** It has improved since March to September, definitely.



**Karl McCartney:** I am pleased to hear you say that. Thank you very much indeed.

Q38 **Ruth Cadbury:** On the back of that, it would be really helpful, maybe immediately after this meeting, to understand the rates of turnaround. Rather than the word “productivity”, I think turnaround of different types of applications—the norm, how it was for the first few months and how it is now—would be a useful set of figures for customers.

We understand that staff who could work from home from the beginning have been doing so. We are trying to get a sense of how many staff have been in the offices, on site, as the pandemic has gone on. Obviously, we are concerned about workplace transmission of Covid. What has been the picture of the numbers on sites in those three big office premises in Swansea?

**Julie Lennard:** It is more than that: we actually have eight buildings now. We have taken on an extra building, so it is spread across eight different buildings. Three of them are in one big campus. The others are spread around. They are all close by in Swansea, but they are certainly not all walking distance from each other.

You are absolutely right about the turnaround times. That is what matters to customers. It is how long they are waiting for something. I am happy to provide you with some more information on that.

In terms of the numbers, I probably should have put this across at the beginning. I will caveat it. I will use numbers roundly rather than precisely, because the numbers are so large. It is quite hard to keep being pinned down in this format to exact numbers, so I am rounding figures up. Of around 6,000 staff, it is worth bearing in mind that about a third of those are part-time staff.

When you think about our staff and who is on site, if all of our staff were full-time, from a Covid point of view it would be much easier to manage. The fact is that, as an organisation, we offer lots of flexible working opportunities, particularly for women working around children and family commitments and work commitments. We have a lot of part-time staff. That is a really difficult thing to manage when you are dealing with Covid.

I could give you numbers in terms of FTE—full-time equivalent—but that does not make any difference in terms of Covid because what I am worried about is the actual number of—

Q39 **Ruth Cadbury:** Let me ask the question a different way. How many people are working on site at the moment?

**Julie Lennard:** It is around 2,000 people at the moment across those eight buildings. Again, I am rounding numbers up.

Q40 **Ruth Cadbury:** As a proportion, how much lower is that than would have been the case before the pandemic started?



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**Julie Lennard:** Normally, we did not have a history of home working at all as an organisation.

Q41 **Ruth Cadbury:** So roughly a third of your normal staff are working on site at the moment, in a slightly bigger footprint.

**Julie Lennard:** Yes. It is a much bigger footprint, because all the space where the people who are working from home would have been has been repurposed for the operational staff. It is a much bigger footprint in terms of how staff are spread out.

Q42 **Ruth Cadbury:** Thank you. We have established that there was an outbreak that Public Health Wales was concerned about in December. What do you think are the key factors behind that outbreak?

**Julie Lennard:** It is hard to tell. A lot of it was the sheer rate of transmission in the community, which then caused us issues. It was only in one particular area. It was in the contact centre, so it was in one particular area over December. Those rates were escalating and they escalated to the extent that Public Health Wales decided that the building in itself would be treated as an outbreak.

As to what caused it, it is hard to say. We were not doing anything different from what we had been doing before. We increased the number of people. We really reinforced all the rules around social distancing. Things like meeting rooms were all taken out of commission, and restaurants and things like that. There is only takeaway service. A whole range of restrictions has been put in place.

We also have people broken up into zones. We have zone controllers who make sure that people are not mixing. We introduced a lot of more stringent measures, so it is hard to say. I cannot pinpoint one thing that I would say was the reason for what was happening in the contact centre. We have not had that feedback from either Public Health Wales or the Health and Safety Executive.

Q43 **Ruth Cadbury:** The PCS suggested yesterday that the air-conditioning may be a cause. Has that been checked?

**Julie Lennard:** It is absolutely not the cause. I think PCS raised that with the Health and Safety Executive and Public Health Wales. They are both content with what it is. The air-conditioning is set permanently to 100% clean air, so there is no air recirculated. We have had that checked. We have looked at it. As I say, the Health and Safety Executive and Public Health Wales are completely content with what we are doing in terms of air-conditioning. That is not an issue.

Q44 **Ruth Cadbury:** When were you last in the building? Were you happy with what you saw?

**Julie Lennard:** I was last in the building the Friday before last. That is when I was in there. Personally, I feel very safe when I am there, but I



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understand that anyone going into any workplace is going to feel anxious. I absolutely understand that.

Q45 **Chair:** Julie, I sound like a stuck record, but I need to look at the numbers again. I would be the first to admit that maths has never been my strong point.

You told me that there were 2,000 people working from home. You also said to Ruth Cadbury just now that, as of now, 2,000 people are on site, but you have 6,295 staff. I appreciate you were talking about full-time equivalent and rounding up, but we have 2,295 staff not accounted for in terms of work from home or working on site. Can you help me?

**Julie Lennard:** Yes, I can explain that. It comes back to the part-time thing. When I say that the numbers are on site, that is at any one time. I have a lot of people who are part-time who will not be working five days a week by a long way. We have evening shifts as well. I am looking at it from a Covid point of view. As I said to Ms Cadbury, my concern and focus is numbers of people, because that is where the risks are around transmission. I am looking at the total numbers I have on site at any one time. At any time anyway, with the size of workforce we have, we calculate that around 20% will be out for things like annual leave, sickness and other reasons. We have staff off now with the schools off, who are obviously at home because they have children at home.

With that size of workforce, at any one point, you will have about 20% off for one reason or another—leave and things like that and other reasons. On top of that, what makes a big difference is that people who are part-time might do only a day and a half a week. It comes out in those figures.

Q46 **Chair:** I appreciate that. You have 6,295 staff, and all of those staff members will no doubt know whether they should be working from home or working in the office. I appreciate that things can change.

**Julie Lennard:** They do.

Q47 **Chair:** You must have a record that shows how many are expected right now to work from home and how many are expected to work from the office. If you forget the FT equivalent, can you just split up the 6,295 staff?

**Julie Lennard:** As I say, at the moment there are about 2,000 who are working from home and they do not come on site. You can take those out of it. If you look at the others, as I say, I have a mix of people. They will all be working on site at some point. It depends on their working patterns. Anyone who is clinically vulnerable is clearly on paid special leave at the moment because of where we are. We do individual risk assessments on people who have health conditions. They will not be in work at all because, again, they would be at a higher risk.



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People know where they are meant to be, and when. The difficulty, as I say, is that, if I had just full-time staff, I would be down to probably about 5,200. That is what it would take out. If you did it purely on an FTE basis, we can work that out for you if it helps to get some clarity on who is doing what and where people are.

Q48 **Chair:** I was looking at it more in terms of the numbers of your workforce who expect at some point to be coming into the office, and those who know they can work currently from home. It appears that a third can work from home and two thirds will be needed in the office, taking into account holidays and the other matters you have mentioned.

**Julie Lennard:** That is true, because the majority of our staff are operational staff. We are an operational delivery body, so that is an absolutely true reflection.

Q49 **Chair:** I appreciate that. It is a heavy proportion perhaps compared with other workplaces. That is certainly what we would—

**Julie Lennard:** Which is one of the challenges. There was an earlier question about how we compare with other workforces. Different organisations have different roles and functions.

**Chair:** We will look more into the detail. I apologise to Members for taking up a little more time there.

Q50 **Lilian Greenwood:** Good morning, witnesses. I want to start by asking about the processes that you had in place from the beginning of the first lockdown for monitoring the Covid infection rate among your workforce. What was the arrangement for you finding out if someone had Covid?

**Julie Lennard:** I will hand that to Louise for the detail.

**Louise White:** We have set up a central team who take calls on symptomatic cases, because that is obviously where it starts. The central team is made up of people from my HR team. Staff are asked a series of questions around when they were last in work, where they have been, who they have been in touch with, did they social distance and have they come into contact with anybody who is positive, and so on, so that we can try to establish trends. They are asked what desks they sat at so that we can look at floor plans and see if there are any trends playing through there.

Q51 **Lilian Greenwood:** Can I check? There is a requirement that, if someone has a positive Covid test, they report it to you, and then there are a lot of questions that you ask. Is that right?

**Louise White:** Yes.

Q52 **Lilian Greenwood:** Is the reporting of a positive Covid test or symptoms a requirement for all members of staff, whether they are working at home or in one of your workplaces, or does it only apply to people who work on site?



**Louise White:** No, it applies to everyone.

Q53 **Lilian Greenwood:** Have you had that system of requiring people to tell you if they have had a positive Covid test or symptoms since the beginning of this problem back in March last year?

**Louise White:** Probably it was the setting up of the tracker with the automated process, because it kicks in to notify the environmental health team in Swansea Council. It automatically notifies the cleaners so that they can take action. That far more sophisticated process, with the centralised team, was put in place in August when numbers started to increase. Prior to that we were just marking it, and a couple of people in HR were dealing with it. It was less structured because, as we said earlier, the numbers were very small.

Q54 **Lilian Greenwood:** I understand that; thank you. If the Committee wished to see detailed information showing when cases were notified to you and how many there were, you should be able to provide that on a timeline going right back to March and up to the present day. Is that right?

**Louise White:** Yes.

Q55 **Lilian Greenwood:** Given the monitoring that you were doing, and the automated system or the more sophisticated systems that you put in place over the summer—you just mentioned it in relation to August—when did you become concerned that you were seeing a rise in infections among your staff?

**Louise White:** We obviously talked to environmental health in Swansea Council whenever we had concerns. When we were looking at data, we would look to see if we had trends. If we saw that there was more than one case in a particular area, for instance, we would talk to the environmental health team. The two key times when they got really concerned were in October when Public Health Wales did tests on one of our floors, because we had eight cases on that floor, and then in the contact centre on 21 December. Those were the two key points.

We were concerned about the rising number of cases, but in terms of finding connections, links and trends, those were the two things that stood out.

Q56 **Lilian Greenwood:** As I understand it from Public Health and Swansea Bay University Health Board, the number of cases in DVLA came to their attention in September, and there was an incident management team established, which met for the first time on 7 October. Is that correct?

**Louise White:** Yes.

Q57 **Lilian Greenwood:** Cases first started to rise in September. Is that correct?



**Louise White:** Yes. In September, we had 23 cases. It was still fairly low, but most of those were later in September after the lockdown was lifted. In October and November, it increased to around 100. I cannot give you the exact figures, but it was about 100 in each month. That held steady. At that time, the firebreak came in, so I think that kept it under control to a certain extent. Then, in December, cases in the Swansea area shot up, as Julie said earlier, to 900 per 100,000, and they doubled with us as well. The majority of that was in the contact centre. The trends, not the majority, were identified in the contact centre, and that is when Public Health Wales came in and declared the outbreak.

Q58 **Lilian Greenwood:** I also understand that there was reported initial difficulty in engaging with DVLA management and getting senior management to understand the seriousness of the situation. That is in a report from Public Health.

Julie Lennard, what is your comment in relation to that? Why was it necessary for a formal notice to be issued under regulation 8 of the Health Protection (Local Authority Powers), Wales, Regulations 2010, requiring DVLA management to co-operate with the incident management team? Why was that necessary? That was issued by Swansea Council on 16 October.

**Julie Lennard:** Funnily enough, we were talking to Public Health Wales about that on Monday and they were saying to us what their definition of senior management was. They were saying it is quite a wide definition.

I think all of us were very engaged with it. I think all of our managers across the organisation were engaged. It is hard to explain from our point of view why Swansea Council felt that.

Q59 **Lilian Greenwood:** Are you not concerned that there is a perception among your staff, your staff trade unions and public health bodies that you did not take the situation seriously? They were so concerned that they had to issue an order requiring you to co-operate. What is your response to that?

When over 546 of your staff have been affected by Covid, you don't seem, even now, to be taking the situation seriously. Do you think you have made mistakes in the last 10 months in your handling of this situation?

**Julie Lennard:** I think it is a really unfair suggestion to say that we are not taking it seriously. All of us as an executive team have done nothing but live, breathe and focus on Covid and how we keep people safe, while at the same time providing public services and getting that really difficult balance for the last 10 months. This has been all that we have thought about. It has been all that we have focused on. I think it is a really unfair characterisation.

I cannot answer for Swansea Council as to why they thought that. I cannot answer for that. All I can tell you is that we have taken this



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incredibly seriously. It has been our entire focus now for almost a year to make sure we have kept people safe and that we still deliver the essential public services that we do.

Q60 **Lilian Greenwood:** Infection rates started to increase in September, and you were subject to incident management. Can you tell me when the outbreak was declared by Public Health?

**Julie Lennard:** That was 21 December in the contact centre.

Q61 **Lilian Greenwood:** But you acknowledge that case numbers were rising before that.

**Julie Lennard:** That is why they called it an outbreak. They based it on that. They had 62 cases throughout the whole month of December, and that is the basis on which they declared an outbreak in the contact centre on 21 December.

Q62 **Lilian Greenwood:** There were 62 cases in December out of a total of 546 from March and 535 from September. If there were 62 in December, how many were there in September, October and November?

**Julie Lennard:** I don't have those figures with me. As I say, I am reluctant to try to give you ballpark figures because I know that you are keen on accurate ones. I would rather give you those figures separately so that they are absolutely accurate.

Q63 **Lilian Greenwood:** Is 62 the total number of cases in December?

**Julie Lennard:** It is the number of cases from 1 December in the contact centre until Public Health Wales declared it an outbreak.

Q64 **Lilian Greenwood:** There were clearly lots of other cases as well. When you became concerned, and after an incident management team was set up at the beginning of October, what specific actions did you take to try to keep your workforce safe?

**Julie Lennard:** We are not invited to the incident team. That is done separately with Swansea Council, Public Health Wales and the health board. We are not invited. We are not privy to what is discussed. We do not have information on what is said at those meetings. All we can tell you is that we have advice from Public Health Wales, and then Swansea Council environmental health help operationalise that, as it were.

Our main contact day to day was with Swansea Council environmental health teams on what we could do to make things safer. It was absolutely acknowledged and said to Swansea Council and Public Health Wales that we were not public health experts, and this was new to all of us. We were open to any suggestions and any advice that they could give us on what we could do to make the organisation even safer.

We discussed with them and agreed actions that we would take. We had an action plan, and all of those have been completed. One of the big changes that we made in the autumn was around the seating, and how



we arranged people. On the basis of public health advice, we moved to more of a zig-zag seating. Louise, you might want to say a bit more because you were on those discussions.

**Louise White:** The first thing to say is that the environmental health team came in on 1 October and 13 November, and they came back on 16 November to look at cleaning in the evening. In December, they came back and the Health and Safety Executive came with them as well. On Monday just gone, we invited them to come and have a look at the new building and to help us look at the best way of reconfiguring the floors now that we have fewer numbers because of the vulnerable people.

Q65 **Lilian Greenwood:** Let me take you back to September when cases started to rise, as you have said. That was also when schools returned. I understand that. What specific actions, in collaboration with public health experts—although of course you are yourselves responsible for conducting health and safety risk assessments and for keeping your staff safe—did you take in September to keep staff safe, based on conducting that work and those risk assessments alongside public health experts?

**Louise White:** One of the things that they observed when they came in on 1 October—we had previously shared floor plans with them—was that people who were sitting back to back were not 2 metres apart. They were okay with that because they were sitting back to back, and the virus goes forward.

What they observed when they came in was that that was great as long as staff do not turn round and speak to each other. The only way to protect us from that was to reconfigure the desks completely, so that people who sit back to back are sitting diagonally back to back so that they are more than 2 metres away. That took out 400 desks—400 more spaces.

The other thing we have introduced is the concept of zones. The organisation is now broken up into 108 zones, with a zone controller who is responsible for making sure that people follow the rules. People cannot move across zones. They cannot mix with other zones. We have been very restrictive about movement within zones. We try, wherever we can, to give people a permanent seat. That is easier with the full-timers than the part-timers. With part-timers, we try to pair them, so that they are at least sharing with the same person. Obviously, the desks are cleaned before the next person comes in.

The signage was in corporate colours. We had lots of signage on the site saying, “One way up down the stairs,” “Wash your hands,” all sorts of things. “Don’t come in with symptoms” is everywhere. They said it would be better if it was in more standard colours, so we changed all the signage.

There was car sharing. Members of staff who were not in the same household were coming to work in the same car, so we stopped that.



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They can only do it now if they are in the same household. We had staggered start and finish times to better manage the flow of people coming in and out of the office at the beginning and end of the day. There were some smaller things like closing the vending machines. We have a Tannoy system where you can make announcements. We were putting out messages on the Tannoy to remind people about social distancing.

At a later visit, there was some stuff around cleaning. Our cleaning providers, Sodexo, were advised to change the way they used their cloths, so that they used only one disposable cloth for each workstation. They have been doing that. We have been recruiting more cleaners to give more visibility to staff during the day. They are going around cleaning contact points, and so on. We have all the hand sanitisers and all that kind of stuff.

**Q66 Lilian Greenwood:** You have set out a number of measures that were taken. Were those taken over a lengthy period? Were those all things that were done between September and currently, or were they all done in September in response to the rising cases?

**Louise White:** The significant changes—the reconfiguration of the desks, the zoning and the zone controllers—were all done very quickly. They were done in two to three weeks. We worked at weekends to make that happen.

**Q67 Lilian Greenwood:** Were you concerned, when case numbers continued to rise—obviously, there was the outbreak in December—that things were not happening quickly enough, as there were continued problems?

**Louise White:** In December, the conversations that we were having with the environmental health team were that we had implemented everything that was recommended and that it was still happening. There was not really much else, other than stuff around the edges, that was recommended to make a difference. Community transmission at the time was so high that we closed the site over Christmas for a long period to create a break. That is how we have got into the position in January where, as well as community transmission going down significantly, we have such a low number of cases.

**Q68 Lilian Greenwood:** I want specifically to ask about some of the things that are mentioned. I understand that there were issues around the agency-sponsored transport. Can you explain the arrangements around transport to work sites?

**Louise White:** There have been two issues. For everybody's benefit, we have a number of works buses that bring people in from other parts of south Wales to the site every day. The first set of issues were around making sure that the distancing on those buses was sufficient. We were following Welsh Government guidance around that, but there was concern from the environmental health team that it was not enough. Every time we had a symptomatic case on the bus, we would have to



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isolate all those people. What we ended up doing was going much further than the Welsh Government guidance and reducing the numbers on the buses even more.

The second issue with the buses—I am not sure which ones you were referring to—was around staff. Because we had reduced the numbers, but staff needed to be able to catch a bus, we introduced a booking system. We went out to staff and said, “Let us know if you have no other alternative but to come to work on the bus.” A lot of people do it because it is good value. They have a car. It is not their only means of getting to work.

We have a priority list. Those people get priority tickets on the bus. I think that over 30 people get priority tickets on the buses because they have no alternative.

Q69 **Lilian Greenwood:** You reduced the numbers on each bus in order to improve social distancing. Did you increase the number of buses, or did you just ration the bus seats, effectively?

**Louise White:** Yes, we just rationed the seats, which is why we did the prioritisation.

Q70 **Lilian Greenwood:** Were all the staff who were no longer able to catch the agency bus able to travel by private car, walk or cycle, or did they have to use public transport?

**Louise White:** Not all of them have another way of getting to work. As I said, we prioritised them. We told anybody who was caused real hardship to get in touch and we would have a look at their case to see if we could sort something out. That is how we have been trying to manage it.

I think, off the top of my head, 13 or 14 buses run every day. Our ability to get another 14 buses, which may have two people on them, is very difficult. They are not all coming from the same place of course. We tried to manage it that way to see if it resolved all the issues.

Q71 **Lilian Greenwood:** Can I be clear? You identified that social distancing on the buses was a problem, so you reduced the numbers of passengers on each bus and prioritised who could use the bus. I am not clear what the other workers, who normally travelled to work on the bus, did in order to get to work in a safe way. Presumably, if they were using the bus, most of them did not have access to a car to get themselves to work, particularly as I understand you work shifts at DVLA.

**Louise White:** It is £2 a week, so it is incredibly cheap. A lot of people use it just because it is a good deal, but they have other alternatives. As I said, if people are really struggling to get to work, we ask them to let us know.

**Julie Lennard:** One of the reasons we offer the buses is that public transport is not great in some areas. It gives them that ability. One of the



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big issues is sustainability, because we do not have enough car parking on site, which is to Louise's point. A lot of people have their own car, but we are trying to reduce the number of cars on site. That is why it is a sustainability and environmental issue. A lot of people have alternative means. We have historically used the buses as a way to discourage people from all driving their own individual cars to the site.

**Q72 Lilian Greenwood:** From what you are saying, though, you did not check that all those who were no longer able to get the bus had a car that they could use, and encourage them to drive to work instead; or is that what you did?

**Louise White:** We did not check if they had a car. We asked them to get in touch if it was going to cause them a significant issue in getting to work.

**Q73 Lilian Greenwood:** How many staff have been in touch to say it was causing them an issue and they were then reliant on public transport?

**Louise White:** Just over 30 have got in touch and have priority tickets.

**Q74 Lilian Greenwood:** Thirty people got in touch and have now been issued with priority tickets.

**Louise White:** Yes.

**Q75 Lilian Greenwood:** Why didn't you consider increasing the number of buses rather than just limiting the number of people who could use the buses? I was not sure what you were saying.

**Louise White:** It would be quite difficult to get hold of another 14 buses. That is the first issue. The second issue—

**Q76 Lilian Greenwood:** Did you try to do that, and local bus companies said they could not facilitate it?

**Louise White:** We were trying the other solution first. We could not put on a bus just for one person. That is why we were trying this solution first. If it hadn't worked, we would have looked at it again, but currently we are not hearing that from people. The people who got in touch with us have got their priority ticket.

**Q77 Lilian Greenwood:** You have described all the things that you were doing, including zones. Were there any areas that you identified as hotspots or difficult places where people still ended up mingling? I do not know whether it is toilets, lifts or other communal areas. What did you do to ensure that those remained safe?

**Louise White:** I will give you a couple of examples. The kitchen was one area. We ended up having a one-way system. It was one in, one out. There were sanitising wipes to wipe stuff down before they go and when they arrive. We have two different sizes of lifts. In the large tower block, the lifts are very big, so two people were restricted to those lifts. With the smaller lifts in some of the other blocks, it is only one person. There is a



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queuing system outside the lifts with social distancing markers on the floor.

**Q78 Lilian Greenwood:** How did you ensure that social distancing was being observed? I understand that that was one of the issues identified by Public Health.

**Louise White:** It was. On the floors and in the office space itself, that became the role of the zone controllers. That made improvements very quickly because they had very specific roles to carry out there.

In the more communal areas, my security team did patrols internally as well as externally and monitored what people were doing. For instance, we had an issue with the smoking shelter. Even though we had put markers on the floor and lots of signage, people were not following the guidance. Security were dropping in periodically to make sure that people were following the guidance. In the end, even that did not work and I put out a message saying that if people did not follow the systems, we would have to close the shelter. It improved after that. When environmental health came back on another visit, they observed that.

**Q79 Chair:** I understand the concern that you fed back, Julie, with regard to the notice that was issued under regulation 8, which requires senior management to take action. One month after that, the smoking shelter—you touched on that—still comes up as once again identified as an area where staff are congregating. At the beginning of December, there were observations that staff were sitting in close proximity and were not being moved apart when doing so.

I do not understand why, for example, you had not closed the smoking shelter when it clearly kept coming up as an issue and taken more rigorous action, including disciplinary action, if you found that staff were congregating when they were not supposed to be. It seems to be that, even after that notice, they still kept coming up with breaches. Why did you not just shut the smoking shelter down? That would have dealt with that.

**Julie Lennard:** We would have done. We took the approach of trying to give people a chance. It is like everything in terms of rules. You expect people to follow them, but you also have to enforce them. We made changes where we could. People are now observing that. It is one of those things. Looking back, it was a couple of occasions when Public Health Wales were in and they observed that. We had observed it on different occasions and we put lots of messages out. That would have been our next step, had behaviours not changed, but they have.

**Louise White:** When we were talking to Public Health Wales and the environmental health team, one of the things they said to us was that we needed to be really careful in our messaging. While you need to be very firm with people and try to get them to follow the rules, you do not want to drive people underground so that they are not prepared to admit if they are symptomatic, where they have been, who they have been in



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touch with and whether they have breached social distancing. We were always trying to walk that line. If they had not improved, we would have closed the smoking shelter.

**Julie Lennard:** One of the other things with the smoking shelter as well, Chair, is that we did talk about it with Public Health Wales. If we were saying to people, "You can no longer smoke on site," would the risk be that people simply took a break if they were smokers and walked out, off site, where we have much less control about how people are congregating? That was one of the other factors we were talking to them about.

Q80 **Chair:** Given that there was a requirement for senior management action, were the two of you and your other senior management teams having daily meetings to discuss what the latest was in terms of numbers and what extra measures might be needed? Was that a formal, daily meeting that you were all at?

**Julie Lennard:** Yes, it was. It was daily all the way through. It dropped down in the summer to four days, then three days, but it was all the way through, and still is now. There are dedicated, extensive exec team meetings just focused on the Covid response and not BAU kind of work.

Q81 **Chair:** I meant more with regard to the notice under regulation 8 being delivered. From that time, were you yourselves—

**Julie Lennard:** Yes. We were having dedicated meetings around what we could do on tracking cases and tracking what more we needed to do.

**Chair:** Thank you for that extra evidence.

Q82 **Grahame Morris:** In relation to your answers a little earlier, when we were seeking clarification on the number of staff that were on site, it seems as if in excess of 2,000 staff are on site, plus we need to factor in the part-time staff as well. They are processing driving licence applications and vehicle tax renewals. It seems to me that that is a very high number and a very high proportion, given the Government's advice that, where possible, people should work from home to minimise the risk of transmission, especially since we have this new variant of Covid that is much more highly transmissible. That is reflected in higher transmission and infection rates.

Julie Lennard, is it your decision to insist that such a high proportion of the staff work normally from the site, or have you had some direction? I understand that DVLA is part of the critical national infrastructure, but by the same token so are HMRC and DWP. With the correct IT systems and encrypted computer systems, they seem perfectly capable and willing to carry out an excellent service from home. Given the very high level of transmission that we see in Swansea at the DVLA, how has that come about?

**Julie Lennard:** In terms of the specific question around how much discussion we have had with the Department and with Ministers, we have



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kept in constant contact about what we are doing, the numbers on site and the numbers of people who are processing.

To pick up on your point about computer systems, DVLA is a digital organisation. The vast majority of our transactions are completed and done online. Where we really have difficulties in relation to numbers of people is with paper applications, particularly applications, as I said before, that contain things like passports. When those come in, you are checking that it is a genuine document. Often, there is specific equipment you use or information on site. You then process it and send it back out. There isn't a way to do a lot of that unless we send out paper to people's houses. The issue is that there are still a lot of paper-based transactions. That is our real challenge in DVLA in relation to Covid.

**Q83 Grahame Morris:** Looking back to the first spike around March/April time, a decision was taken, presumably by local management, to substantially reduce the number of staff on site and to have a larger proportion working from home. My information is that around 250 staff were working on site.

Given that we are not doing driving tests, that there aren't any driving licences and that new car registrations are done online, what is the difficulty with returning to that system, given our concerns about the transmissibility of this new strain of Covid and the evidence of considerable infection among your staff? Why can't we go back to that system of home working, which was quite effective in the circumstances in March and April? Is there an instruction to you to maintain normal operations at the site, or is that your decision?

**Julie Lennard:** Can I be clear? Anyone who was home working at the time still is. When people were off at that point, as I said earlier, they were not working at home because they were operational frontline staff who could not work at home. When it went down to those very low numbers, those operational staff were not working. That is the difference, and that is the impact that it then has on public service.

At that point, as I said before, we were not Covid-secure. There was a discussion with Ministers, looking at prioritising services. All we could offer at that point was services to NHS workers, health workers and critical workers, particularly lorry and bus drivers, to make sure that they had the right licences and that they were legal. The number of licences we normally issue each month is 1 million. Because we operate at a national scale, the volume and the numbers that we deal with are what then drive the number of people that we actually need on site. If you reduce the numbers, as we did in the first wave because we were not Covid-secure at that point, it has a direct impact on the level of service we can provide for people applying by paper.

As I said before, it does not impact anyone applying online because our online services have operated normally throughout, and have operated



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extremely well. This is predominantly an issue for people who were applying via paper, for one reason or another.

**Q84 Grahame Morris:** I will just ask this very quickly, Chair, because I am conscious that other people want to ask questions. The agency is very profitable for the taxpayer and the Government because of the fees they charge. Is it a fair criticism to say that the computer system is archaic and does not lend itself to home working, as perhaps the computer systems operated by HMRC and DWP do? Would that be a reasonable criticism?

**Julie Lennard:** I think that would be an unfair criticism. As I say, we are a digital organisation. A lot of our front-end digital services are state of the art. People in support areas are able to work at home. Where we have more challenges is with some of our legacy IT, but I do not think it is a fair characterisation to say archaic IT is the cause. There are many contributing factors, but one of the biggest is around paper transactions that are coming into the building.

**Q85 Chair:** The reason we asked about the IT system is that we all have staff who are required to work from home. Indeed, we work from home. We have sensitive information but we can still do so, as can our staff. I think your online service is absolutely fantastic when it comes to renewing. It is one of the best examples of that. You now have 85% choosing to renew the vehicle excise duty for their car online. I am just struggling with why you still need two thirds of your workforce in the office. Is there that much paper being generated?

**Julie Lennard:** Yes; 60,000 items a day get delivered to us, every day. It is at that scale. It comes back to the scale that we operate at. The work that we do touches on pretty much every household in the UK. With 49 million licence holders and 40 million vehicles, the numbers are vast and it is UK-wide. That is the challenge. It is around the scale.

**Q86 Chair:** Are the phones diverted? Our phones get diverted to our homes. Can that happen with your workforce?

**Julie Lennard:** It depends. If they are general queries, they can be dealt with from home. If they are trying to do a transaction that means they are accessing core databases, because people phone in and need changes made to that, those cannot be done from home. It comes back to the data security element. If you think of 40-odd million drivers, there are huge amounts of really sensitive personal data. We hold a lot of medical data on different drivers. You have to be able to have access to those systems to be able to deal with some of the queries. It is the scale of the data that makes us critical national infrastructure. It is the scale of the databases that are held on systems in the UK.

**Q87 Chair:** That was the last bit I was going to ask you in this segment. You are pointing to operational need, but in your letter you identified data protection needs as why that work cannot be handled at home. Again, we have data protection issues, but our staff can still work from home and



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handle data. They are not able to breach it, otherwise they are breaching other rules, not least their employment contract. Why doesn't that apply to the DVLA? Surely, you must have the same challenge as other agencies and employers, and their staff can work from home. What makes you different?

**Julie Lennard:** Part of it is around the scale and scope of the sensitive data we hold and how it is accessed. As I say, it comes back to some of our legacy systems. There are some elements there. There are multiple elements that make it difficult to have lots of operational staff working at home.

Where we have been able to do it, we have done it. There are certain operational staff who, a year ago, would have been on site. Just because of the transactions they deal with, and how they do that, we have been able to make adjustments so that they can be done from home. Where it is in the core systems, that is harder for us to do at this point.

**Chair:** Thank you for completing that part on the IT and working from home matter.

Q88 **Gavin Newlands:** You will be aware of the University of Strathclyde survey of more than 700 Swansea workers. It found that 70% of them said that they sat less than 2 metres from those seated in front of them, and that just over 20% were less than 2 metres from colleagues seated next to them. What is your response to that?

**Julie Lennard:** It is quite difficult to comment because that report has not been shared with us. I have seen comments in the media about it, but I have not seen the report. It is quite hard to comment on that report, not having seen it. I am aware that the PCS union commissioned it and had it sent out to staff. I was aware of it, but I have not seen any of the results from it.

Q89 **Gavin Newlands:** Those are the basic top-line figures. Are you questioning the robustness of the survey carried out by the university? Are you suggesting that perhaps the staff may not have been entirely truthful? What is your response? Is it true or is it not true?

**Julie Lennard:** As I say, I have not seen it. In terms of the distance, I have seen some of the questions, but I have not seen the results. I was on site the day it was sent out and staff were talking about it.

One of the things it did not ask was around the other mitigating factors. There are desks that face each other. I think the distance between those people is 1.8 metres, and then there is a Perspex screen. I do not believe the survey asked if there were other mitigating factors if the 2-metre social distancing could not be met. Again, I have not seen it, so I am guessing at the information I am giving you.

What I can tell you is that, if you are adjacent to each other, you are more than 2 metres apart, or you are back to back, in the zig-zag seating



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Louise talked about earlier. If you are face to face with people, it will be just less than 2 metres—I believe it is 1.8 metres—but there will be a Perspex screen in between. Again, those measures were all discussed when we were setting them up and putting them in place with environmental health and Public Health Wales.

**Q90** **Gavin Newlands:** Just over 20% of your staff say that they are not 2 metres distant from the people sitting next to them. To take your point about not having seen the actual survey itself, when you are in receipt of that survey, could you respond to the Committee and give a fuller response?

**Julie Lennard:** Yes, certainly, if it is shared with us and we are able to see it, and the full detail and the questions that were asked. Certainly, we would be able to respond.

**Q91** **Gavin Newlands:** Thanks for that. I think you said you are currently using or utilising eight buildings for staff in Swansea. Are there separate risk assessments for each building?

**Julie Lennard:** There are risk assessments in different areas. I am going to hand this to Louise because there is an overarching one and lots of different ones. I will hand over to Louise to talk you through the risk assessments.

**Louise White:** There is a general risk assessment that covers the whole organisation. In areas where there are specific challenges or, for instance, we have IT staff on site for desk-side services or security, they have specific risk assessments. It is not necessarily building-specific. Some of the buildings are on the same site. One of the buildings is a print and mail facility, so that obviously has its own risk assessment because the kind of work they do there is very different.

The general risk assessment is updated every time there is a change in advice or anything changes. We are on version 17 of the general risk assessment now. That is always shared with the environmental health team, with HSE and the trade union. We have regular meetings with the trade union where we discuss issues that might come into that.

**Q92** **Gavin Newlands:** I appreciate, having had to do a few of them in the past, that there will be risk assessments for the overall function and for different areas. Is there a specific risk assessment for the contact centre?

**Louise White:** That is being developed at the moment. That was something that came out of the discussion with the trade union, and it is being developed.

**Q93** **Gavin Newlands:** So the answer is no.

**Louise White:** The particular challenge in the contact centre is that people are speaking. The office space itself is the same as any other office space, but what we need to focus on is the fact that people are speaking more than they are in other areas. That is under development.



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Q94 **Gavin Newlands:** To be fair, an office space can be marked quite differently from another office space, depending on how you are able to walk through and how the air flows through, with a different HVAC system for instance. In the contact centre, is the extract right next to the intake in the HVAC system, which would obviously mitigate the effect of having 100% outside air coming in?

**Louise White:** There is detail in the general risk assessment that covers the different areas, but in consultation with the trade union that was one of the things they were quite keen for us to do, to support them on that.

Q95 **Gavin Newlands:** Perhaps I could change tack slightly and go back to a point that Mr Morris was covering. Ms Lennard, you said that you have been in regular communication with the Department. Had you made it clear that productivity could be an issue with regard to Covid-19 and the regulations at any point? Was there an undertaking, or was it alluded to at any point that you would need to keep productivity up at the DVLA at officer level?

**Julie Lennard:** There is clearly a Government commitment to keep public services going during the pandemic. I have not been given a specific target or anything like that. They have taken a very keen interest in where we are and the turnaround times. As I say, I have had correspondence from pretty much everyone on the Committee on behalf of their constituents. People have taken a very close interest in the turnaround times, but, no, I have not been given specific targets to meet.

Q96 **Gavin Newlands:** I appreciate that. You did not feel under pressure at any point throughout these last few months to keep productivity up, or indeed to improve productivity, in terms of turnaround time?

**Julie Lennard:** There is a pressure that we put on ourselves. There is clearly a pressure. As I said, there was a lot of MP and media coverage at the time. There was a lot of ministerial and departmental interest in what we were doing, but were we at any point asked to meet targets or compromise staff safety? No, we were not.

Q97 **Chair:** Julie and Louise, since March, how many times have you been into the DVLA offices?

**Julie Lennard:** In March, I was still there every day, and probably in April because we were in the very early stages. After that, I was here more in the first wave and that peak than now, partly because the requirements and the legislation changed, but, also, as we increased people coming into the office and we had things like the zones in place, it was very difficult for me to be able to get around and walk and talk to people. If I go from floor to floor, I start introducing an infection risk by actually doing that. It has been less in recent months, but I was there the Friday before last and I was there just before Christmas and the times before that.

Q98 **Chair:** I will just go from the period of September, because we seem to



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have established that that is when the rates went up. How many times have you been in since September?

**Julie Lennard:** Six or seven.

Q99 **Chair:** Six or seven since September. While you were giving evidence, I was thinking to myself, "I wish I could go and see exactly how the layout works, because then we could see if this is really going one way or another." If you have only been there six or seven times, how can you be comfortable that the steps that you are required to take as a manager are being followed, in terms of the segregation and the isolation, and that people are working in the office only if they absolutely need to be?

**Julie Lennard:** I am confident about the layout, having seen that. We have also had a variety of video calls so that we have seen things. I am confident in terms of the layout, particularly with the zones. I have seen how that is working on the floors. I have seen the contact centre and how that is working. I have seen the new buildings. I have been to all our sites and seen how they are working, so I feel that I have a good understanding of what it is like at the moment on site.

Q100 **Chair:** By my estimate, it is about once every three weeks that you have gone in to check and use your own eyes as to how people are behaving. Louise, what about you?

**Louise White:** Very similar. Up until the point when we introduced the zones, I used to go in regularly because my estates team are on site and my security team are on site. Once we introduced the zones, any walking around or moving around the building was stopped. I was just going in to go and sit at a desk. I would not be able to go and see anything really.

Q101 **Chair:** Is your pattern about once in three weeks since September as well?

**Louise White:** I have not been there, probably, since about October. My estates team are there. They show me virtual videos. Just last week, they took me round to see the new lateral flow testing facility.

Q102 **Chair:** You have not been there since October. You are responsible for not just HR but estates. I would have thought that if you were responsible overall for estates you would want to go around the estate and have a look and use your own eyes to see, not just rely on your estate staff, who no doubt report to you but they are going in.

**Louise White:** I don't think it is appropriate for me to be walking around the site, potentially causing issues. I am not allowing other people to do that.

Q103 **Chair:** You said members of your estates team are doing that. You have a compliance role.

**Louise White:** They are doing it because they need to be on the floors to undertake activity. I do not. Not all of the estates team are there; only the ones that need to be there to do stuff.



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Q104 **Chair:** I am not saying that you should be going there to breach social distancing, but if I were responsible for the estate—those eight buildings—and there had been a major outbreak, with a notice issued under regulation 8 requiring management to take note and take action, I would pretty much want to go there and see for myself whether that action was being implemented. Did that not cross your mind?

**Louise White:** I would really like to go there. I would like to be in the office all the time, but I cannot give guidance to other people and then not follow it myself. I meet my HR and estates team every morning. We have a session every morning to talk about what has happened and where the issues are. I see things like floor plans. With security, I talk to them regularly about what they have observed going around the site. I don't think it is right to encourage staff to go in who do not need to be there.

Q105 **Chair:** I am not asking you to encourage staff to go in who should not be there, but I am perhaps surprised that you yourself, having overall responsibility, have not gone and taken a look since October.

Let me make a closing comment. It is about support from the Department. Julie, what support do you feel you need from the Department for Transport and/or the Welsh Government to manage the situation better?

**Julie Lennard:** I think we are getting support from Public Health Wales and the authorities. They continue to give us that support, because this is a changing picture. It is new to everyone. Helping us where we need that help is really welcome.

We get really good support from the Department. They have taken a very close interest in this, as have Ministers. I feel that there is already support from the Department.

Q106 **Chair:** We have discussed that you have about two thirds of the workforce having to go in, for operational or data requirements, to work in the office. Have you had discussions with Ministers about whether some of the work should be suspended or slowed down to get the balance right between staff safety and productivity?

**Julie Lennard:** Yes. We had those discussions right at the beginning, in March, at a very detailed level. We have carried on with those discussions. In fact, where we are now, work is being slowed down. We have reduced numbers of staff on site, particularly where people have childcare issues, people are home schooling and things like that. Yes, Ministers are aware and are supportive. They are looking at different areas of things that can be slowed down and things that still need to be priorities.

Q107 **Chair:** When did you have the discussions about slowing things down?

**Julie Lennard:** They have been ongoing. Right at the very beginning in March, after the 23 March lockdown, they started then. It was very clear



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about all the different services, and what could and could not be done with different levels of staff. There were different things we could do.

We developed new online systems over the summer so that that would reduce the number of staff we needed on site. They have been hugely successful. Ministers supported us with approvals for ad campaigns, to encourage more people to transact online and not on paper. It has been an ongoing process of discussions on where we are and what we are doing.

**Q108 Chair:** Maybe I will put it this way. Did you escalate the discussions and make requests that you would look to suspend certain work types following the September spike, or perhaps the notice under regulation 8 in October?

**Julie Lennard:** It has been more recent than that. The most recent Welsh lockdown was 20 December, so there has been discussion since then.

**Q109 Chair:** When is your next scheduled meeting with the Department for Transport on what to do next?

**Julie Lennard:** We update Ministers fortnightly, and have been throughout, on what we are doing and our progress. They are fortnightly updates.

**Chair:** You have given us a huge amount of your time, for which we are very grateful. We will be writing to you because there are a number of issues on which we want to get further and better information. We will write to you, and we very much hope that you will be able to provide that to us. I think it is fair to say, judging from the questioning of the Members, that there is concern to ensure that all these matters are being looked at with the seriousness that you have assured us they are.

We always say this. We send our best wishes to you and to all of your staff during these difficult and challenging times. We are aware how much responsibility and challenge you both have as well. We are grateful that you have given us so much of your time today, but we also want to make sure that things get a lot better. We send our best regards to you on that basis. Thank you again.