



Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Work of the DVLA](#), HC 567

Wednesday 21 July 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 July 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

Questions 1–142

Witnesses

I: Sarah Evans, Branch Chair for Public and Commercial Services Union, DVLA, and Mark Serwotka, General Secretary, Public and Commercial Services Union.

II: Julie Lennard, Chief Executive Officer, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Minister for Roads, Buses and Places, Department for Transport.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Evans and Mark Serwotka.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Transport Select Committee's one-off evidence session on the work of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency—the DVLA—about which we have many issues and queries to raise with our witnesses. We have two panels. Will the first panel introduce themselves, please? We will start with Ms Evans.

Sarah Evans: My name is Sarah Evans, branch chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union at the DVLA.

Mark Serwotka: My name is Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union that represents the workforce at the DVLA in Swansea.

Q2 Chair: Good morning, Ms Evans and Mr Serwotka. Thank you very much indeed for being with us. As MPs we receive a large amount of constituency casework. MPs across the House are getting a huge amount of queries, anger and disappointment from constituents who are suffering from the backlog in the processing of their DVLA paperwork. Is there currently a health and safety risk to workers returning to the DVLA offices in Swansea? We understand that some of the backlog is down to industrial relations.

Mark Serwotka: The catastrophic state of the backlog at the DVLA in Swansea is primarily now down to the ongoing industrial dispute that exists between the workforce and the DVLA management. The background to that dispute is that the DVLA has had the single biggest covid outbreak of any workplace in the UK. It has operated outwith central Cabinet Office guidelines for handling the covid pandemic. It has taken management decisions that we believe put people at risk. There have been 643 cases so far, plus, tragically, a death. All of that led to a dispute between the PCS and the DVLA in Swansea. That dispute is regrettable, but the key cause of the backlogs now is that that dispute continues.

On 1 June this year, after months of negotiation between PCS and the DfT, including the permanent secretary Bernadette Kelly, an agreement was reached. I stress the agreement was reached after only eight days of industrial action had taken place at that point. In fact, weeks of industrial action was called off by the union because the talks were making such progress. That agreement, which we would have put to our members, was withdrawn on 1 June without any explanation, without us being told who had withdrawn it, and why, having put it forward, the DfT had now withdrawn it.

Directly as a result of that, 29 further days of industrial action have taken place, and a further 21 have been notified for August. The PCS believes that an agreement that would have protected staff's health and safety and given them further protection, respite and recognition for all that they



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have done, could have meant that our members would now have been clearing this backlog instead of taking industrial action.

We believe that the Committee really needs to understand why DVLA management have operated in a way that is clearly worse than any other management in the civil service; why they have not been able to have their staff working from home when Departments such as HMRC have delivered furlough, with over 90% of people working from home throughout the pandemic; and why, having told Parliament it was leaving it to its managers to sort the dispute out, when they had finally sorted it out on 1 June, it appeared that the Minister intervened to withdraw the deal without explanation. That is why there is a backlog, and that is why we believe there are still serious health and safety risks, because the DVLA are not following the agreement that they had previously committed to.

Q3 **Chair:** Ms Evans, do you want to add to that? Or has Mr Serwotka summed the case up?

Sarah Evans: I will just add that, yes, we think there are still massive safety concerns within the agency. That has been proven since the return of over 450 vulnerable staff. We have now seen a rise—again—in positive cases on site. That shows that the virus cannot be contained to just being outside of work; it is still in the workplace. And it is even greater there now than it has been during, for example, April and May.

Q4 **Chair:** Can you just give me some examples of where safety is at risk? We spoke to the DVLA back in January. I think it is fair to say that we had a thorough scrutiny session of matters that had gone on in the past, but we were given some assurances that matters have been rectified. I believe that there are currently two cases of covid at the DVLA, which seems to be quite low across 6,000 workers, but you may wish to correct me on that. Can you specify exactly what matters are a safety risk for your workforce?

Sarah Evans: It is the numbers that are on site compared to the capability of the facilities that we have got. So, each floor is set up at the minute now under covid restrictions to have about 100 staff. Each floor has three lifts that go to the floors, so you have multiple people using the same lifts. You have multiple people using the same facilities, such as the kitchens and the toilets. What we have seen as well is that when we get a positive case, that has a knock-on effect when it comes to other staff who have to isolate, either as a result of being sat immediately next to the person who has tested positive or because of the track and trace contact. These people are told to isolate and to segregate to the area of the positive case. They can be seen right across the floor.

That, to me, demonstrates that the virus cannot be contained in the zones, or on the banks of desks, that it started from. It is having an impact on staff right across the floor, from just that one positive case.

Mark Serwotka: The other thing I would add is that comparison is quite important here, because the DVLA, of course, is not in isolation; it is part of a UK-wide civil service. It is not the biggest civil service site in Britain;



HOUSE OF COMMONS

there is a bigger one in Newcastle upon Tyne, which is almost twice the size. With the DVLA, within a few miles there are other Government Departments. None of them have had covid outbreaks like this; none of them have required the same amount of people to be in work as the DVLA. All of them have been able to deliver their business, including DWP and HMRC, with staff working from home.

The reality is that in DVLA we were told that “the management did not trust the operational grades because they couldn’t supervise them unless they were in the office”, and directly therefore we believe the volume in the buildings is what has caused the huge amount of covid cases—more than any other workplace in Britain—and continues to be a problem. It has not happened anywhere else, which is why we believe that the key question is this: why have the DVLA managed the situation so differently to everybody else, with much more catastrophic outcomes?

- Q5 **Chair:** That is probably what we are keen to get the detail on, Mr Serwotka. Why do you believe it is the case that DVLA is different? I mean, Ms Evans just describes people having lift issues going up three floors; to be perfectly frank, we have the same issue here in Parliament. I walked down the stairs because someone was using the lift, but there aren’t as many people on site. Is there a particular issue that more people have to be on site at the DVLA due to the working practices, the IT and so on than other civil service organisations that you also represent?

Mark Serwotka: If I can try to answer that, first of all, then perhaps Sarah can give some local knowledge as well. If I can just be frank—

Chair: Please do.

Mark Serwotka: I have been general-secretary of PCS for 21 years, so I have been there under various Governments, with all sorts of permanent secretaries and Departments. I have never encountered in 21 years the level of incompetence and mismanagement that it is on display at the DVLA in Swansea. In fact, I meet the Cabinet Office every week with my colleagues in the unions to discuss covid issues across all Government Departments. It is an open secret among the people that we talk to that people are tearing their hair out about why this is happening at the DVLA and in the Department for Transport, and not anywhere else; why this appears to be a stain on the UK’s civil service’s reputation; and why senior managers at the DfT and the DVLA have allowed such a situation to take place.

Ultimately, I believe that it is, one, because they do not trust the staff they employ, which is not the case anywhere else in the civil service, and, secondly, having made mistakes that led to the 615 cases early on this year, any attempt to rectify it and do the right thing by definition would have pointed out that they had acted poorly in the first place. So I think they have bunkered down and are now refusing to engage in a proper discussion. The tragedy of that is not just that the public are suffering; our members, many of whom are quite low paid and very stressed at work,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are bearing the brunt of this. It is senior management incompetence, the likes of which I have literally not seen in 21 years.

I can confirm to the Committee that, for that reason, I took the unprecedented step of writing to the Cabinet Office, including Michael Gove, Grant Shapps and the Cabinet Secretary, asking them to revoke the delegated powers of the DVLA because of the way that they were putting their staff at risk. Crucially, I stated that in recent weeks the DVLA have breached civil service codes and values in allowing Sarah, an employee, to be abused online, accessible through DfT and DVLA social media platforms, and have told us that it was a matter of freedom of speech—that they would not protect her from vile, misogynistic threats.

The Cabinet Office knows that that breaches civil service values. We really hope that the Committee will ask: “Why in the DVLA and not in the Home Office, DfT, the MoJ, the Prison Service and HMRC?” Everywhere else, our union and the management have come to agreements that have delivered services and kept people safe. The DVLA is one notable exception.

Q6 Chair: Ms Evans, you work at the DVLA. Can you help me with the IT and working practices? What is it that requires so many people to be in the office, which then causes the safety issue that you are concerned about?

Sarah Evans: There is no need for as many people to be on site as there are at the minute. We know that we have the IT capability to allow a lot of the staff that are currently on site to do their jobs at home. However, the DVLA senior management have never allowed this to happen. They kept saying that it was system access, and then they changed it, and the exact words used were that it was a “supervision concern” that stopped them from doing it.

We know that the systems that we use, especially in my area, Drivers Medical—which I know is one of the areas being really hit hard at the minute—are such that I, along with the 700 other staff in my area, could do 95% of the job at home, without having to access a system that issues driving licences. That is where they say that the security issue comes in. The database that I use for the majority of my work is already accessed remotely by doctors, nurses and those in other areas of the agency who are in non-operative roles.

However, people who do my job at my grade are stopped from having this access remotely, which means that we have to be on site. If I was allowed to do my job at home, the same as others in my area and across other areas, it would free up space in the agency to spread out more staff to open the backlogs of mail. It would also mean that, when staff are told to isolate, they could still be productive; they could be at home doing the jobs that they are paid to do, rather than having to spend 10 days at home doing nothing. If this system was in place, we would see a massive positive impact on the backlogs and the delays that our licence holders are currently experiencing.

Q7 Chair: The chief executive of the DVLA, Ms Lennard, stated: “In March,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we erred completely on the side of caution. We sent home large numbers of operational staff. They did not work.” Are you saying that, actually, they could have worked, because they had the operational capability to work, but the DVLA effectively did not allow them to work?

Sarah Evans: That is exactly what I am saying, yes. They could have easily been set up to work remotely.

Chair: Interesting.

Mark Serwotka: The Committee may also want to consider as part of this that we know, because it was leaked to us—we were never told officially—that the DVLA commissioned a report in early summer last year, now known as the Deloitte report, specifically to look into how they could get more people to work from home. That report showed that they were asking questions and getting somebody in to look at them. It was not made available to us. They never even told us that they had had it done.

The report has now been subject to freedom of information requests. We were due to get that today, but it has now been denied to us by the DVLA. Again, the question that we would ask is, if an employer has commissioned a report to look at what it needs to do to keep people safe, why would it not reveal that to its staff? Why would they not negotiate about it? What have they got to hide?

Again, this is not something that has happened anywhere else in the UK civil service. It tells us that, at the heart of this, we do not appear to have people who want to engage to keep people safe, in an open and transparent way. We have people operating in secrecy, who are even denying us access to critical reports that would help us all get this dispute sorted. That is what we want, and that is what we had on 1 June, in a very comprehensive settlement that was withdrawn with no explanation.

Chair: We are also keen to get hold of that Deloitte report, and we will no doubt be asking the next panel about that. Thank you both for the opening.

Q8 **Grahame Morris:** You anticipated what I was going to ask, Chair. Good morning, Sarah and Mark. The Chair and other members have canvassed opinion and received responses from MPs, raising concerns about backlogs among key workers and so on. You responded earlier to the issue about the feasibility of home working. In a previous session of the Committee, the chief exec and head of HR told us it was not feasible, for reasons of security, system access, the need to process original documents, servers, software and hardware issues.

Why is the Department now apparently outsourcing some of that work, through an agency, where they have access to the systems, software and hardware? Why didn't they do that previously, without the requirement for outsourcing? Could that have made a significant inroad into the backlog? Sarah, do you have a view on that? Could you give an example, without giving away any confidence about a particular area, maybe key workers or something like that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah Evans: As for why it was outsourced and the capabilities never given to staff employed by the DVLA, I honestly couldn't answer. It baffled us all why an agency would rather spend money on outsourcing work than entrust their own staff to do it at home.

One thing I want to make clear regarding the work that was outsourced, people have been led to believe that that was things such as vaccine letters and stuff. It was 400,000 tax reminder letters that were outsourced. We pulled that area out on industrial action for three days. That work could have been delayed by a couple of days; it could have been delayed by a week or two, because they get printed quite early on to remind people of it. They never outsourced the critical work that they have tried to imply that they have, with the vaccine letters.

I honestly cannot answer the question of why we are not given the capabilities to work from home. Because the amount of, not even man hours that were lost, but the amount of weeks and weeks of productivity that has been lost by stopping staff working from home is incredible. I have no doubt we would not be in the situation we are in with the backlogs and the road safety issues, had we been given that capability. Money has been invested in things that have no benefit to our customers. Money needs to be invested into the IT systems and to get the equipment to workers from home. Because the capabilities are there; they just need to source the equipment, to allow the staff to have laptops and things to work from home, rather than blocking any systems being accessed by wi-fi.

We now know that staff who worked from home on these systems since March of last year have had their access to the systems blocked, unless they are in the office and connected to the office internet. There is no wi-fi access to these systems. That has happened within the last few weeks. Staff now have to work on site, who have been working from home for the past 18 months.

Grahame Morris: Maybe I should put those questions to the next panel, Chair.

Q9 **Chair:** To be clear, you are saying that staff were able to work from home, were working from home, but now cannot work from home, because they have been blocked from doing so by the DVLA.

Sarah Evans: Staff in certain areas, yes

Q10 **Chair:** Do you know roughly how many—what proportion of the 6,000 that applies to?

Sarah Evans: I do not. It is a couple of teams who do the counter-fraud work and things like that, so staff of the highest security clearance within the agency have now had their capabilities to work from home blocked, but I do not know how many they are. They might be able to answer that in the next session.

Q11 **Chair:** Mr Serwotka, you have your hand up. Is that because you have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the answer to that?

Mark Serwotka: I do not have an answer about the numbers, but I wanted to make a short observation, if I could

Chair: Briefly, because I am hogging all the time.

Mark Serwotka: The point that I just want to make to Grahame's question is that the outsourcing has taken place since 1 June. On 1 June, all of this could have been settled, in terms of what the DfT put to us, which we would have accepted. It would have meant no outsourcing, no backlogs building up, and the dispute could have ended. Not only has that not happened, I think we should make the point that we wrote to the DVLA because we were very concerned as the dispute was going on that key workers would find their services disrupted.

We suggested that all work for keyworkers should be prioritised, and to work with them to ensure that took place. They refused that offer. If taken together, what we draw from that is the dispute could have been settled—it could still be settled tomorrow—but instead, we are now seeing firefighting and reactive decisions being taken to try to plough on when, actually, the productive thing to do is to get back to normal and settle the terms of 1 June. That way, civil servants could do the work they want to do and the backlog could be cleared.

Q12 **Ruth Cadbury:** Some of some of my question has been addressed. I want to ask Mark Serwotka about the difference in security issues and working from home between the DVLA and other Government Departments and agencies. Was the DVLA in a different place at the beginning of the pandemic in terms of IT capacity and security capacity in order to facilitate secure working from home? Secondly, was the DVLA in a different place through the pandemic? You already said that other Government Departments with secure access issues, dealing with key personal information such as birth certificates and so on, have coped with this pandemic in a covid-safe way for the workforce in a way that is different from the DVLA. Because we cannot see what is in the Deloitte report yet, what do you think is the distinction between the DVLA and other agencies and Departments in similarly security-critical work?

Mark Serwotka: We believe that if the Department for Work and Pensions can deal with 3 million universal credit claims, HMRC can deliver the furlough scheme, and workers in the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the devolved nations are working from home, handling in some cases much more secure data, so can the DVLA. The Chancellor praised HMRC workers for delivering the furlough scheme from their kitchens, dining rooms and living rooms. We know that there cannot be a security issue in the DVLA that is not the same in the rest of the civil service. So is the problem the lack of investment in technology? We believe there is an element of that, and we think the Deloitte report will give us the critical information.

We know that there are people who can work from home with the systems they have, but they won't allow that—Sarah just covered that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Fundamentally, the one time they answered this honestly in negotiations with us—it will be interesting to see if Julie Lennard will be prepared to say this again today—they told us it was about trust and supervision. They believed the only way they could be sure that operational grades, which bluntly are the people we represent who at the more junior end, are in the office to oversee them.

Ruth Cadbury: I understand that. Despite being behind in its IT investment in March last year compared with other Departments and agencies, are there other examples of Departments or agencies that were in a similar position, but are not in the same position now in terms of working from home and customer security?

Mark Serwotka: We know of no other civil service Department that is in any way comparable to what the DVLA are doing here. That is in the main part why we are so perplexed that they have chosen to do what they are doing. We know that they know that people can work from home, but they are choosing not to let them.

Q13 **Ruth Cadbury:** What do you think the impact of the industrial action has had on paper processing at DVLA? Probably more in terms of the security issue, if security and trust is an issue for staff at DVLA, how do you think that will be addressed if this work is outsourced? Will it be outsourced to home workers or to some kind of secure warehouse for postage handling?

Sarah Evans: That is probably something you will need to ask Julie Lennard. We do not know what their plans are for outsourcing. When we referred to working from home and things, what we wanted was that the staff that can work from home could be allowed to work from home. It frees up so much space to spread more staff out safely within the agency to allow more staff on site to open the mail, because we know not every job can be done at home. For the staff who open the mail to get on top of that, there obviously needs to be more of them to do that safely, and they can send home the people that they do not have to have there. A key thing with the whole working from home issue at the DVLA is that we are almost at the same point now as we were in March last year. Very little has moved forward for the operational grades with regard to home working, and it is these grades that are responsible for all the casework and applications and things that come through the agency.

Q14 **Karl McCartney:** I just have a couple of questions that can have short answers. I know we are not going to solve the dispute that you have at the moment, but if things were back to normal—I know Wales is slightly behind England with the rules and regulations—would everybody be back in the office working? Or does home working take place in normal times?

Sarah Evans: Typically, there was very little home working pre-pandemic. It tended to be more of the non-operational areas that had the option of home working, but it was considered the exception to allow staff from the non-operational areas to work from home.

Q15 **Karl McCartney:** You told us that the deal was in place, but why exactly do you think the deal was pulled? Can you give us any clue?



Sarah Evans: Because the people who had been sent in to negotiate did not have the authority to see a negotiation through until the end.

Mark Serwotka: If I could add to that, there are two possible reasons, and Sarah has just given one. I think that the Committee should know that we have raised all of this with the Cabinet Office and have tried to get the Cabinet Office to intervene. Indeed, as I said earlier, we asked them specifically to take measures to intervene. The key thing as we understand it is that either the negotiators were not authorised to put forward the deal, which, as Sarah has said, would be extraordinary and unprecedented at that level that management could do that, or they were authorised. We know the permanent secretary authorised the deal. That is a fact. She was in the room on 26 May and said, "I know we are very near agreement" and authorised the weekend to get it right.

In that instance, the Secretary of State decided that he would intervene to pull the deal, probably because he did not think that a deal should be done where the union would be able to say that they had got a satisfactory settlement. It can only be one of those two things.

I have written four times to Grant Shapps asking him to meet me, and unfortunately he has refused to reply, to meet or to confirm or deny that he is the person who ruined it. Whichever is the case, it has not happened in my 21 years of industrial relations in the civil service. It is extraordinary, and we would not be here today had it not happened. The backlog would be being cleared and services would be resumed.

Q16 **Karl McCartney:** Thank you for that, Mark. Very quickly, Sarah, nobody likes to be underperforming, so how is the morale of the staff you represent at this point in time?

Sarah Evans: Really, really low. Staff are worried because they can see the rising cases on site with increased numbers coming in. We are very aware of the impact that this is having on our customers. Even as a union, we do not want to be in this dispute. We are ready to end it. We could end it today, but what we keep hearing all the time is that the DVLA have done everything expected of them by Public Health Wales, environmental health and the Health and Safety Executive, but they have not done everything they could do for their staff.

This seems to be the message right across the board now. Staff safety and staff concerns are not being listened to. Nothing is being done to address them and reassure staff. It is a case of, "Get on with your work. Don't complain. Don't moan. Don't worry about things like that," but they seem to be forgetting that the biggest aspect of it is their staff. Staff have cleared backlogs. In September, we returned to work. We worked on the backlogs and got them reduced, and we can do it again. We want to do it again, but we want the reassurance—

Karl McCartney: I am going to stop you. Thank you for that answer, but I know that the Chairman has other people on the Committee who want to ask some questions. Thank you both.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q17 Lilian Greenwood: Good morning, Mark and Sarah. I have two very quick questions. One of the issues that is being raised in my constituency around backlogs and responding to driving licences goes back to the start of this year. We have had letters from DVLA management saying that that is down to industrial action. Can you confirm for me, Sarah, what date the first industrial action took place at DVLA?

Sarah Evans: On 6 April this year.

Q18 Lilian Greenwood: Just one last quick question. I know that here in Parliament and in other crowded workplaces, and workplaces in my constituency, there are lots of people off work at the moment due to having to self-isolate because they have been pinged by the NHS app. What is the current state of play among your members at DVLA? Are you seeing large numbers of people having to self-isolate as a result of that?

Sarah Evans: On a daily basis, we are having staff have to isolate, either because they have been in contact with somebody who has been positive, which means they are off for about 10 days, or because they have had the notification that they need to do so. These staff are at home doing nothing when they could be at home working. They could count towards the productivity, and we could be helping to get the backlogs down while we are doing what the Government tell us to do and following the advice given by the track and trace system.

Q19 Chair: I hope you don't think I am being crass here, but we represent a sector where people have been on the frontline and have put themselves at considerable risk in order to do their job. My understanding is that the DVLA safety concerns have been signed off by Public Health Wales, the Health and Safety Executive, the Welsh Government and the UK Government, so I am perhaps a little lost as to why you feel the need to take industrial action. If you were reaching an agreement, surely that means that your safety fears had been allayed by virtue of that agreement. What part of the agreement is not being put into effect but would improve safety?

Sarah Evans: Part of the agreement focused on the return of vulnerable staff to the workplace. It would have been done in a calm, controlled fashion so that we could then have monitored every two weeks how the return over phase 1 of the staff would affect the current situation with the cases and things like that. By allowing us to do it slowly, we could react to any change that happened.

As a result, we have seen a rise in cases, but that has been disregarded, and phases 2, 3 and 4 were started, despite us pleading with the DVLA to put a pause on it when both the Welsh and the UK Government delayed their plans for reopening and when we saw cases were increasing. They reduced the time of the two-week period between the return phases to just one week. They have now confirmed that, unless a cluster of cases is identified in the workplace, they do not plan on taking any action with regard to the increase in numbers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We also know that the Health and Safety Executive said that the DVLA were doing everything expected of them back in the middle of December, and then four days later an outbreak was declared. Although they may be doing everything that they are expected to do on paper, in reality that is not the case. Because our work site is very different from the majority of workplaces, as we have a high volume of staff in a small area.

Mark Serwotka: The agreement that we reached with them was very long and comprehensive. It covered a phased return, working from home, onward consulting review with further testing, special leave with pay, actively exploring more home working, dealing with long covid and dealing with post-vaccination sickness. It dealt with medium-term ongoing monitoring and with long-term investment and consulting the union on the introduction of IT.

It also contained recognition, via award of a payment to staff and ongoing time off from work, for people who had worked continuously through the pandemic. Both of those were suggested by the Department, and not by the union. Both of those were put forward because other Government Departments give time off and payments in recognition of the work that people have done. Therefore, the dispute is about the whole of that agreement.

If I can be honest, if the management come with a comprehensive agreement that includes time off and a recognition payment, and then withdraw it without telling you why and who said no, nobody could settle a dispute on worse terms than were being offered to you by the employer. If those terms were back on the table and authorised by the permanent secretary, the dispute could end.

The real question is, who took that off the table and why? Why is it good enough in DWP, HMRC, MoJ and Home Office but not for the staff at the DVLA, who have endured such catastrophic management, 643 cases and a fatality? It is an extraordinarily tardy way to treat hardworking civil servants. That is why the dispute continues. It could be sorted tomorrow. We call for an independent investigation and, finally, we call for the Cabinet Office to intervene, to bring in senior people with experience from other Departments, to settle this dispute. Because we believe the current management appear utterly incapable of doing so.

Q20 **Chair:** I take your point that it was not the PCS, or indeed the workforce, that suggested the additional payment and the additional holiday entitlement, if I could call it that. I was in the House of Commons Chamber when the Secretary of State responded to a couple of Swansea MPs who inquired. He said that “demands then switched to demands about pay and demands about holiday, which have nothing to do with being covid-secure”.

If you were willing to drop those demands—I take your point you did not demand them in the first place—but if they came out of the agreement, would you be willing to agree on everything else, seeing this is all about health and safety?

Mark Serwotka: The answer to that question is quite simple. We asked for the return to work to allow for rotations of staff, to give people who had been in for months the ability to have some respite at home. We were told that they would not in any countenance any reduction in the numbers. They said instead they would offer recompense and time off in the future. On that basis, as a compromise to settle the dispute, we accepted that other Departments had done that, so we would accept it.

Now, I would have to say, if they want to remove the money—the cost is £1.3 million and they have four times that amount in their bonus pot that they refuse now to use, so it is not about money. The money is there, four times the amount of money. If they do not want to give money or time off, they have to compensate with something else, to address the concerns of the staff.

I think most fair-minded people accept that, if you are offered something, and you accept it as a compromise, and it vanishes without explanation, how could anyone settle a dispute on worse terms than the employer had actually offered, when you are not even told what the reason is? That is why I think other civil service Departments have managed. Which is why, maybe here, we would benefit from that expertise being brought in to help out here. If it is good enough in the DWP, HMRC and MoJ, surely it is good enough for a workforce that has endured 643 cases of covid, a fatality and the catastrophic management of a situation that is directly responsible for a backlog of 1.4 million cases, which all could have been avoided.

Chair: Thank you very much for the evidence, Ms Evans and Mr Serwotka. We have the Minister and the chief executive of DVLA next. You have given us a lot of material, which we can obviously put to both of them. I thank you very much for the time you have given us, and wish you and the workforce the best from us on the Committee.

Mark Serwotka: Thank you, Chair and Members. We appreciate it.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Julie Lennard and Baroness Vere.

Q21 **Chair:** We now have our second panel. The Minister was already in the room and will have heard part of the previous evidence, so perhaps I will ask the Minister to introduce herself first.

Baroness Vere: Thank you very much. Chair. I am Baroness Vere, the Minister for Roads, Buses and Places.

Chair: Welcome back. It's good to see you. We also have Ms Lennard, who is on the virtual screen. Would you like—

Julie Lennard: Good morning.

Chair: —to introduce yourself. Thank you.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Julie Lennard: Good morning. I am Julie Lennard, the chief executive of DVLA.

Q22 **Chair:** Good morning, Ms Lennard. Sorry about ruining your introduction—that's the peril of virtual proceedings.

We are going to talk about the performance and operational issues at DVLA. A lot of MPs, from across the House, have reached out to the Committee, giving us examples of their constituents' difficulties. It's great that they did so, but we are all constituency MPs and have a bucket load ourselves.

I will ask this question as a general opener. What is the difficulty at the moment? Is it an issue with industrial action, or with longer-term operational issues and inability to work from home? I don't know who wants to start. Shall we start with Ms Lennard, seeing as—the Minister is frowning at me, so we'll start with the Minister.

Baroness Vere: I just wanted first dibs! What I am hoping is that then Julie will come in with the operational detail that I am sure you want to cover. I, too, would first like to express my extreme gratitude to everybody at DVLA, who have been working so hard, and particularly to the 500 or so people who come in every weekend, on overtime, to try to reduce the backlog.

It is the case that we have a backlog, and the cause of that backlog is of course multifaceted. Part of the backlog is relating to the fact that, in an abundance of caution, DVLA reviewed a large number of members of staff back in January, so we lost about 500 staff for about five months. That is one of the causes of the backlog but, rightly, we had sent the most vulnerable people home; we went over and above the Welsh Government guidance.

Also contributing to the backlog is the 37 days of industrial action that we have seen so far. It's very difficult to estimate, but probably something around 400,000 items in that are attributable to the strike action. But clearly not all of it is; some would have accumulated anyway. And we will obviously work as quickly as possible to reduce it.

Q23 **Chair:** Thank you, Minister. Let's bring Ms Lennard in. Back in January, you told the Committee that processing paper applications was taking six to eight weeks. We put a parliamentary question in, and the response, on 5 July, was that it is now taking six to 10 weeks. Is that still an accurate statistic? Is it still taking six to 10 weeks to process paper applications?

Julie Lennard: It would be really helpful just to be able to flag that if anyone does transact with us online, our online services have worked perfectly throughout the pandemic and continue to do so. So if you transact online, you will get your documents—your new driving licence or your vehicle registration document—back in a matter of days. Paper documents are, as I said to the Committee last time, more challenging for us. Yes, it is taking around six to 10 weeks, but we do publish on gov.uk our processing dates for key transactions, so that members of the public can see the dates we are working to. So we are very open and transparent



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about that—in letting people know how long it will take. There is a difference for different transactions, but roughly, as a guide, we are saying to people, “Six to 10 weeks if you apply on paper.”

- Q24 **Chair:** I am just checking to make sure I am not going to career over someone else’s area, but why is it the case that you need so many applications dealt with by paper? We believe that people are required to provide ID that they would not have to provide to other Government agencies. Do you think there is a fundamental issue with your process that is causing this backlog?

Julie Lennard: Actually, a significant number of people send them to us when they don’t need to. We really do promote this: if you are just renewing your driving licence, all you need to give us are the details on your passport, your passport number. We have digital links to the Passport Office, and we can check it electronically. We do not need you to send the passport. It is in certain circumstances and for certain situations, like foreign licence holders who want to convert their licence to a UK one—obviously, we don’t have access to databases in other countries to be able to check, so those do need to be checked. But on the whole, for the vast majority of UK nationals, they would not actually need to send us their passport at all, and we have invested heavily in promoting our online services and also getting that message across to people.

- Q25 **Chair:** Okay. Apologies—I was just told to turn my microphone up, so I have done so. I hope you can now hear me better.

I want to push you on this. Why do people have to send in their passports? Why can’t they just get a scanned copy from a post office, as other agencies do?

Julie Lennard: Actually, I am not sure they do. With things like that, it really depends on what it is. Again, for a lot of transactions where there is a higher chance of fraud, we need to see that it is a legitimate, genuine document. That is often why we are asking to see it—to be able to check. The driving licence when you have it acts as a key to lots of other Government services and many people choose to use it as an ID document, so it is really important that we make sure the person who is coming in to transact with us is indeed the person they claim to be. But, as I say, for UK nationals, they shouldn’t need to be sending us passports.

- Q26 **Chair:** The problem is that a lot of people in this country are not UK nationals, so I suppose my question is why you can’t find a better process for them to evidence, rather than sending things through the post. It seems archaic.

Julie Lennard: Yes, but things changed post leaving the EU. We did previously have digital links to some other countries. We no longer have those. We have never had links into another nation’s passport data in the same way that other countries do not have links into ours. You are right, but it is quite difficult to get to those levels of agreement with other countries and the sharing of that level of access to digital records.

- Q27 **Chair:** I have a few more questions, then Lilian wants to come in. How



HOUSE OF COMMONS

many customers who have submitted a paper application are waiting more than 10 weeks for their applications to be processed?

Julie Lennard: There shouldn't be many. It is mostly going to be if there is a combination of factors with it, so if there is also some kind of medical declaration. The medical side of it is taking longer than 10 weeks. That can vary. We have had real challenges with the medical processing, throughout the pandemic. Of course, the NHS, GPs and consultants that we need information from clearly had more pressing things to focus on at the start of the pandemic and then during vaccine roll-out. Combined with that, the numbers of staff that we have had at home, as the Minister was talking about, on paid special leave in the second lockdown, as well as the 37 days of strike action—that combination is taking its toll.

On the whole for the straightforward transactions, they shouldn't really be waiting more than 10 weeks, but if there is anything there that is more complex, and that can be a range of things, then it can take more than 10 weeks, and we also make that clear on the website.

Q28 **Chair:** Sure, but as the chief executive, you will have your dashboard of management information. How many are waiting for more than 10 weeks, as paper applicants?

Julie Lennard: I can tell you that I have got 55,000 ID documents at the moment in progress in the building, but most of those are going to be in the one to 10 weeks. I would not be able to pull that out for you, because it will be in the other figures. If there is a more complex transaction, say if they are medical, they are not a straightforward transaction that we are tracking instead of having ID documents.

Q29 **Chair:** Sure, but I used to work in this type of process myself. I would always have figures—when it was first logged and currently outstanding—so it would instantly tell me how many matters I have outstanding. That is what I used to do in my last job. You must have that figure.

Julie Lennard: I do, but not in the breakdown you are asking for. The vast majority are being done within 10 weeks, so I can tell you that. I can tell you the date that we are working to. There will be odd cases around with ID documents where it might be taking longer, if there is some complexity in that individual's individual circumstance.

Q30 **Chair:** I would have more confidence if you had that figure at your fingertips.

What are you doing to make sure that those who do apply on paper when they do not need to, then go online? Do you instantly tell the applicant, "Do it online and we can sort it immediately"?

Baroness Vere: Of course, we try and communicate with applicants before they send the paper. Once they have sent the paper, it will go into the system and be processed. We will be working on a communications campaign going forwards. We are always trying to communicate with people to go online. Obviously, all the DVLA information on gov.uk encourages that. It is an ongoing issue. As Julie was saying, we have to be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

aware that this is a volume business, and the 60,000 pieces of mail a day represent a tiny proportion of the overall amount of business that is transacted. It is those 60,000 that are causing the issue, and we will continue to try to reduce it where we can.

- Q31 **Chair:** But then it surely makes sense, if it is so time-consuming when people put things in place on paper, to instantly go back to the person and say, "Look, I know you've filled in all the paperwork, but it is going to take up to 10 weeks, and maybe even more, so just fill it in online, and job done." Doesn't anyone do that?

Baroness Vere: I suppose it is something we can look at if we had all their relevant information. We will take that away and think about whether it is a feasible thing to put within the processing system. But most of the people who apply via the 60,000 pieces of mail a day do so because they need to.

- Q32 **Chair:** But I was just being told by Ms Lennard—and I think maybe you did, Minister—that a lot of people are applying on paper when they could apply online.

Baroness Vere: But of course, out of that 60,000, we would not know—we could probably try to do a guesstimate—the proportion of people who cannot apply online and the proportion of people who could. There is another route as well: if you don't have your own computer, you can go to the post office and do it. Julie, do you have an estimate of what proportion of that 60,000 might lie in both those buckets?

Julie Lennard: When we have done sampling before of some of key transactions, it is about 60%. But of course, just because you physically could do it online, as the Minister says, there are individuals who are not capable themselves or do not have access to do it themselves online. There will always be some people who, although the system is there for them to do it online, do not feel comfortable doing it online or struggle to do it online. There is a mix in there, and we don't shut off the paper channel to people because we are very inclusive in our approach to our customers. It would make life easier for us—absolutely, for sure—if we shut down paper channels, but that is not an inclusive approach for a Government Department to take to its customers. We do as much as we can to encourage people, and we are investing further in publicity campaigns to really get across exactly what you can do online and how to do it.

- Q33 **Chair:** In a given year, what proportion of your business is online, versus paper?

Julie Lennard: Last year, we had over 1 billion interactions, and over 90% were online, so it is a huge online business. Within that, it can vary. If you look at different workstreams, it can vary. To give you an example from when I last saw and wrote to the Committee in February, I can see that we issued 4.68 million driving licences in that time: 77.1% were from digital transactions; 17.8% were from postal; and 5.1% were from transactions at the post office. You can see from that that the vast



HOUSE OF COMMONS

majority of our transactions are online, but as the Minister said, when you are a volume business, as DVLA is, it actually doesn't take that many edge cases, as it were, to really start adding up in terms of numbers, and therefore the numbers of people you need to be able to open and process the 60,000 items of mail that arrive every single day.

Q34 **Chair:** Of the 10% that are paper, what proportion could be done online if the customers chose to do so?

Julie Lennard: A great deal of it, but as I say it is quite hard to give you a precise figure because I wouldn't know whether you have people who are simply choosing and prefer to do it on paper or whether it is for other reasons—they have poor connectivity or they don't have their own access online. We do a lot of work with customers and get a lot of customer insight to try to understand any barriers. We also have our own user experience lab. We test every service that we have and every new service to make it as simple and straightforward as we possibly can to encourage as many people to go digital as possible.

Q35 **Chair:** I suppose what I am trying to get to the bottom of with exactly how much is paper-based is why you need people in the office. What proportion of that is capable of being signposted towards the online world, which appears to be working properly?

Julie Lennard: You are right. We do signpost it, and there are things that we are doing to really signpost it more. We have had a big push over the last year to really signpost, but it is quite difficult to then reach some of those audiences who are not technically savvy, as it were. It is quite hard to reach some of those people, but we are really seeing what else we can do to get those messages across because, as I say, our staff have done an amazing job: the online services have run without any issues whatsoever over the last year.

Chair: Apologies for the noise; there are a lot of horns going outside. I am not sure what is going on.

Q36 **Lilian Greenwood:** My local bus company, Nottingham City Transport, is very frustrated by the service from DVLA and the delays in issuing provisional PCV licences. It is stopping my constituents from getting into a job, and of course it is bad news for the bus company and the people who rely on the services. What should the turnaround time be for a provisional PCV licence?

Julie Lennard: As I mentioned before, there are certain transactions—

Lilian Greenwood: What should the turnaround time be for a provisional PCV licence?

Julie Lennard: Usually, it is two to four weeks, and we are running more vocational licensing much more into the space of about five to six weeks.

Q37 **Lilian Greenwood:** So why can't PCV licences be submitted online?



Julie Lennard: Quite often, one of the challenges around some of the vocational licensing is the requirements around medical information, because of course, these are people who are behind the wheel for long hours in the day, driving big vehicles. Road safety is clearly a really key issue here, so the law requires that there are medical standards and medical investigations for people with vocational licences, and when you get that huge range of individual circumstances, it is actually quite difficult to build online services for that.

For those transactions where you have medical licensing—that will be a lot of those vocational drivers at different points, particularly with their first licence, because with that first provisional we really have to make sure that if there are any medical conditions, they will be safe to drive—that is a harder transaction to carry out online, because it requires consideration and a detailed look at it, particularly where people might have more than one condition.

Q38 **Lilian Greenwood:** I don't understand the difference between online and paper. Why can't medical documents be scanned and submitted online? I understand that it may take more processing—more thought about whether someone can be issued with a provisional licence because they have to consider their medical information—but why can't the documents be submitted online?

Julie Lennard: You are absolutely right. That is exactly where we are going with our transformation programme, and we reprioritised in the last year for things we could bring forward. We have a CRM pilot that is underway in our medical licensing area. For me, the holy grail would be if you could have GPs and consultants who are able to go in and fill in those forms on behalf of their patients to get us the information online, because you are right: that would really make a big difference for that, but we do not have it at the moment. We are working on that. Again, it is large scale in terms of that type of change, but that is exactly where we want to be, and what we are looking at achieving through our ongoing transformation programme.

Q39 **Lilian Greenwood:** I feel like I must be missing something. If something exists as a paper document, why can't they scan it and email it to you? Why is that not acceptable for a medical document—a letter, or something from a GP—that exists in paper form? Why can't it just be scanned and emailed?

Julie Lennard: Again, this comes back to the question of scale for us as an organisation. Even with all the challenges last year for the NHS and for our own staff, we made over 500,000 medical licensing decisions, so we started an amazing job with that. However, just being able to email it in still means it does not ingest into the main system we have: the system of records, where of course you need everything related to that driver in with that information. Given where we are at the moment, you would end up in a position where you email it in and then it is printed out, so you are still then dealing with it on paper until we have our new system in place, which we are working on now—it is in pilot form.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Vere: It was important for us to prioritise those areas, because what happened during the pandemic was that DVLA have been able to bring forward 10 of their services that have now gone digital. It was really important to prioritise the highest-volume services and the ones that could be put in place really quickly. DVLA's transformation plan goes over several years. We have tried to accelerate as much as we can, but of course vocational licensing and getting the medical system attached to that up and running is vitally important. It is not ready yet, but it will be in future.

Q40 **Lilian Greenwood:** Are you saying that that has been prioritised—vocational licences—or that it has not?

Baroness Vere: I am saying that it is not up and running at this moment in time. They are working on it as fast as possible, but other things have been able to come online—for example, the online tachograph service, which is essential for vocational drivers.

Q41 **Lilian Greenwood:** The target time that you are telling me for processing a provisional PCV is two to four weeks, but people have actually given up jobs because they have not been able to get a provisional licence. Nottingham City Transport tells me that they are submitting an application in April and waiting until July to get it back. Why is it taking that long?

Julie Lennard: I cannot answer for the individual circumstances, because every driver will have different medical status—

Lilian Greenwood: This is multiple licences—this is a big bus company, which employs thousands of people.

Julie Lennard: And each one will have their own individual medical circumstances that have to be looked at individually.

Q42 **Lilian Greenwood:** One of the things they say is particularly frustrating, because they send off multiple applications at a time, is that all they have is a PO box number in Swansea. Why has DVLA not provided companies like NCT, which is a major customer of yours, a designated contact or account manager, so that they can chase applications—to improve customer experience? Is that something you are looking at, or have looked at?

Julie Lennard: We do offer a fleet management service. We offer a specific contact and a dedicated service for those managing fleets. I am happy to take contact details to get in touch with them, if they have not ever joined our fleet service, because that is an easier way to deal with it if they are dealing in volumes.

Q43 **Lilian Greenwood:** Does that require them to pay an additional cost?

Julie Lennard: No.

Lilian Greenwood: So it is just that no one has told them.

Julie Lennard: It is part of the service that we offer to fleet.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lilian Greenwood: Thank you for that. It seems astonishing that such a major company would not have been made aware of that, or been invited to join it, but that might be very helpful, thank you.

Q44 **Chair:** You must be getting huge amounts of queries. As MPs across the House, we have some extraordinary stories. Mark Eastwood's constituent, 31 weeks' waiting—the DVLA has confirmed that they have received all the information, but it is waiting for someone to look at it. Liz Truss has an issue back from June 2020. Philip Dunne had a case standing since February—the person heard nothing from DVLA, drives a mobility vehicle and is likely to lose independence.

I have a query myself: finally, a coach company got some work—they have been absolutely hammered during the pandemic—but they cannot get their driver licence extended, because they are currently stuck in the queue as well.

How are your staff coping, because it is not just the work, but all the follow-ups? We have examples from MPs of people who have called the DVLA 50 times and just given up. From our casework, it feels like meltdown.

Julie Lennard: There is definitely very high demand. With the country opening up again and restrictions easing, we are seeing a real resurgence in volumes coming back through. We are also seeing higher volumes because last year in the pandemic we introduced policy easements, which automatically extended everyone's driving licence for 11 months, but of course now we are seeing double the volumes coming through again. That is where the industrial action is really not helping with that sort of thing, as we are seeing on the driver licensing side.

Staff are coping incredibly well. I would say that the vast majority of staff are not taking part in industrial action; they are coming in and working incredibly hard. As the Minister said, we have 500 people roughly every single weekend, with people doing overtime voluntarily.

Staff here pride themselves on providing excellent customer service, and I can tell you—I am in the office now—when I walk around and talk to people, they are genuinely upset to see some of the negatives or comments in the media about things like this, because they desperately want to provide the best service that they can. They really work hard to do it.

Baroness Vere: I would wager that many of the issues coming through in MPs' postbags are Drivers Medical. I suppose that is one of the reasons why it is disappointing that PCS has chosen to target Drivers Medical specifically for this action, because of course it affects the most vulnerable and particularly hauliers and PSV drivers who have got a Drivers Medical issue. As Julie was saying, it is a volume business—half a million people a year.

What are we doing to try to fix that? We've been working incredibly hard on Drivers Medical. We are looking at recruiting new people. We are

looking at getting further office space to provide a Drivers Medical supercell in addition, because we obviously cannot take on more people in the space that we have at the moment.

I do recognise that there are going to be lots of cases coming through MPs' postbags. It is very difficult. However, it is always the case that those that come through will be the most complicated, and sometimes the DVLA cannot do it themselves. They need input from local GPs and from consultants, so one of the other things that we are doing is looking at the regulations around who can make the decisions on medical cases. In many cases, somebody who's not a GP but is equally qualified in a different field may be able to look at them. However, again, we have to change the regulations for that to happen, so we're looking at that work at the moment.

Hopefully, that will be able to come in in the autumn and will have a longer-term impact on Drivers Medical. To be frank, because of their complexity, even before the pandemic we were looking at something like an average of 36 days for the system to work and get the Drivers Medical applications through. We are absolutely focused on Drivers Medical. We are going to see a number of people contacting MPs, and of course we will try to deal with them as quickly as we can.

- Q45 **Chair:** There really is a lot of this in MPs' casework, which is a good barometer. Have you considered allowing licences that have lapsed to be extended—in the way that happened, I think, twice during the pandemic because of those operational issues?

Julie Lennard: Already the legislation under section 88 of the Road Traffic Act states that, if your application is with us, you are able to continue to drive as long as your GP or optician hasn't told you that you shouldn't. The vast majority of those people who are waiting for us to process documents will have cover to drive; they would need to speak to their GP or optician if they're medical cases. There is more information on the website.

Chair: That is very helpful.

- Q46 **Gavin Newlands:** The Chair referred to the written answer earlier—the six to 10 weeks—and you have already given a lot of the answers, Ms Lennard. How confident are you that the DVLA will, at some point in 2021-22, meet its target for processing 90% of postal applications for driving licences, vehicle registration certificates, tachographs and vocational driving licences within 10 working days?

Julie Lennard: If there was no more industrial action—if that stopped and there wasn't any more—I would be confident that we would do that. Our staff, as we've said before, have been absolutely amazing throughout this. After the first lockdown, we had a backlog. Staff worked incredibly hard and got that down.

I am confident that on the vehicle side it will happen sooner than on the driving side, because of the increase in volumes—as I said, before, we had double volumes coming in because of the easements from last year.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

However, if there was no further strike action, I am confident that our staff would get that back down this year.

- Q47 **Gavin Newlands:** This year? I should probably declare, incidentally, that I have just applied for a replacement driving licence, having just lost it at the weekend hiring a van. We will see how long that takes.

What effect, if any, has the industrial action had on the ability of the DVLA to meet its targets for processing the paper applications, in comparison to other issues that you've had, such as the pandemic? What proportion?

Julie Lennard: As the Minister was saying earlier, it is hard to attribute an exact figure, but those 37 days of industrial action probably added about 400,000 to our queue. It really does depend. Because the union is in different areas—

- Q48 **Gavin Newlands:** I appreciate that—so, 400,000. What is the overall queue?

Julie Lennard: At the moment, it is around 1.4 million.

Baroness Vere: Normally, there would be 400,000 in the system, just going through the processing. Of the million that are over and above normal, around 400,000 would be attributable to the industrial action.

Julie Lennard: It is also lower than last year, after the first lockdown.

- Q49 **Gavin Newlands:** Okay. You said you couldn't put a figure on it, but that is under 30%, from what I can work out. In your annual review you blamed the backlog and low productivity on industrial action, but that industrial action did not start until 6 April this year. Why was that put in your annual review?

Julie Lennard: I think we mentioned it rather than blaming it. Of course, what we were trying to highlight—

- Q50 **Gavin Newlands:** It had nothing to do with the previous year, did it? Therefore, what was it doing in that review?

Julie Lennard: To be honest, from the last time I was in front of the Committee in January the union has been particularly active. It was balloting people around that time as well, so of course all of that had an impact here, but we did not blame it on that in the annual report. We mentioned it because we felt that it would be remiss not to, being very mindful that—you are absolutely right—the industrial action started Easter week. The first industrial action was 6 April, so you are absolutely right.

I think the bigger impact in that year—the last financial year—was obviously the first lockdown. We talked about it at the last Committee session. In March 2020, in line with every business, we had not had the chance to make our building covid secure; that is something that we did between March and July. The measures that we put in place were extensive, and also getting the extra building. That is what we were trying



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to reflect with that, but it had an impact. As I said, in Drivers Medical there was an impact from the impact on the NHS in those early months.

- Q51 **Gavin Newlands:** Just to be clear, anybody reading your review and drawing an inference that the industrial action had anything to do with any poor performance in 2021 would be wrong to draw that inference, from what you are saying.

Julie Lennard: Yes. We felt it would be remiss not to discuss it, but actually I would say that our performance last year was incredibly strong given everything that we dealt with last year. We still met a lot of our targets, and we still managed to help a lot of our customers, so it was, in very difficult circumstances, a very strong performance.

- Q52 **Chair:** Gavin is either stunned or has frozen; I think it is the latter actually. Sorry, Gavin, if I am talking over you.

Can I confirm a bit of evidence that I think you just gave in answer to Gavin's question? Did you assure us that the backlog will be cleared by the end of the year?

Julie Lennard: I said it depends very much on how much industrial action is taken. If there is no industrial action, we would anticipate that we could, on the vehicle side of things, do so by the end of October, all being well. On the driver side, it is the end of the year into early January.

Drivers Medical is going to take us a little longer, I suspect, because we are also dealing with the impacts that the pandemic has had on the NHS and may well do again this winter, but certainly our intention would be to have dealt with the majority of usual driving licence applications without medical by the end of the year, if there is no more industrial action.

- Q53 **Chair:** Is that figure 1.4 million?

Julie Lennard: As the Minister said, we have 400,000 anyway as a work in process at any one time. There are 60,000 arriving every day, and an amount that we are sending out. There is that constant flow.

- Q54 **Chair:** I understand. There is an extra million, so basically you could say that 1 million people are going to have to wait until the end of the year to get something sorted.

Baroness Vere: No. Things are always moving through the system, so basically the six to 10 weeks will go down to where it should be. It is not the case that people will be waiting months and months for their licences.

- Q55 **Chair:** But we have called it a backlog. The evidence that we took is that the backlog will be cleared by the end of the year, so that means that it is already in existence.

Baroness Vere: The backlog at any particular time.

- Q56 **Chair:** Right. Let's say the backlog that exists right now.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Vere: That will be cleared within 10 weeks in the vast majority of cases. But, of course, the new backlog will arrive because you have 60,000 coming in every day.

Q57 **Chair:** I understand that. In that case that is not backlog.

Baroness Vere: What would you like to call it?

Chair: Future workload.

Baroness Vere: Perfect—excessive future workload.

Q58 **Chair:** So, the current backlog will be dealt with—

Baroness Vere: Six to 10 weeks, as published on gov.uk.

Chair: Good, well you can tell us about that in six weeks, on that basis. Has Gavin come back? It looks like he is trying, but I will bring in Grahame Morris anyway.

Q59 **Grahame Morris:** Correct me if I am wrong, but should part of the solution to the backlog of the future workload, or whatever we are calling it, and to speed up processing, be to allow as much work as can be done in the current circumstances, with the pressures on space, at home? Is that correct?

Baroness Vere: Absolutely, and that is what the DVLA does.

Q60 **Grahame Morris:** I want to explore that a little more. Minister, I don't think you were here for the first panel of the session, but the questions that we put to the PCS reps were about outsourcing.

One of their responses was that it would appear that some of the outsourced work—I didn't press as to which particular area it was—is being carried out by a private contractor, away from the main site, at home, presumably, whereas that work could be done by DVLA staff. Yet, access to the server to permit them to do that work is being denied. One might almost think that that is being done deliberately, to generate a backlog and generate public outcry. You look perplexed. Tell me—

Baroness Vere: I am trying to figure out why the DVLA would want to generate a backlog. Which outsourcing contractor are we referring to?

Q61 **Grahame Morris:** I do not know which contract it is.

Baroness Vere: Did you not ask them?

Q62 **Grahame Morris:** The question is about the decision to outsource some of the work currently done by PCS members, who are DVLA staff, to a private contractor, presumably with the aim of reducing the backlog and speeding up processes. If the management can agree that those tasks can be done away from the Swansea site, at home or at a secure location elsewhere, I cannot for the life of me understand why those arrangements that were previously in place in March don't apply now.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Vere: I am going to have to ask Julie to come in on the outsourcing. I don't have details of the individual contracts, but the DVLA is well aware of what is and what is not permitted to mitigate the impact of the strike and is working within those boundaries.

I am aware that some outsourcing has happened, particularly on things like printing the vaccination letters and other very important things that the DVLA does on behalf of third parties. I will ask Julie to come in and see if she can think of which contract this might refer to.

Julie Lennard: It might help to provide a few details on that. The only thing we have outsourced, at this point, due to the disruption is printing. That is done securely, at large scale. It was a print run of 400,000 vehicle tax reminders. It is not something that could be done at home. It is done on a secure print site and it is an existing contract, where we already used that. So, it is not something that could be done from home.

Q63 **Chair:** Is the Cardiff contractor APS doing that?

Julie Lennard: Yes. Over the last six weeks or so, the union has targeted certain areas for industrial action. They were targeting our print and production output centre. Our concern around that and our priority was to make sure that we were getting out driving licences and key documents that people were waiting for.

We also do so much in terms of vaccine letters for NHS trusts, and we didn't want to risk delaying those sorts of letters going out. So, on a temporary basis we used an external company to do a print run of 400,000 tax reminders for us.

Baroness Vere: For clarity, there hasn't been any processing of applications by any third party.

Q64 **Chair:** Forgive me, Grahame, but I want to get clarity here. When was APS brought in to do that task?

Julie Lennard: It was last month, when the strike action—so, it was in June.

Q65 **Chair:** And it was brought in to do that because of the strike action. You needed additional resource.

Julie Lennard: Yes. We wanted to make sure that we could protect the vaccine letters that we were committed to sending out, and print and produce the licences, which we are very conscious customers are waiting for, so it was to help us to meet our normal obligations on a temporary basis, due to that disruption.

Q66 **Grahame Morris:** Can I put something particularly to Julie Lennard, related to something we got from the first session? The PCS representatives told the Committee that the DVLA is allowing private sector workers who it has brought in to tackle the backlog of paper publications, which you have indicated is print runs, to work off-site, while the DVLA workers have not been allowed to do so. Is that the case,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

then, or is it not the case?

Julie Lennard: No, it is not the case.

Grahame Morris: So, if you are working on the site—

Julie Lennard: Sorry; they don't have access to any of the applications. The only thing we have used contractors for is a secure, large-scale print house, to be able to print a run of 400,000 tax reminders. That is it.

Q67 **Grahame Morris:** Okay. Can we just go back to the idea of home working, because we were asking the general secretary of the PCS union, who has members in HMRC, in DWP, in the Ministry of Justice and in all the Government Departments, which apparently are able to ensure that there is— I mean, this is very confidential information that they are handling, about benefit claims and tax affairs, and so on. But they can have secure access to the server to allow a large proportion of their work to be done from home. Why can't the DVLA do that, when you did seem to be able to do it back in March?

Julie Lennard: It might help if I set out to the Committee— I mean, you are absolutely right about March. On 6 April 2020, we had 1,382 members of staff able to work from home. We have increased that over the last year. By November, it was 1,935. As it stands today, I have got 2,173. So we have done a huge amount of work in this last year to increase the operational people who can work from home.

It also might be useful for me just to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that maybe the closest department to compare us to would actually be HM Passport Office, which is also dealing with original, secure ID documents and things being sent to them in the post. Actually, a large number of their staff are also working on-site rather than at home. So, we are probably a closer comparator to the Passport Office than to, say, DWP.

The Passport Office had the added benefit of having a network of offices and not being in one city. I think that although we have eight buildings spread across Swansea, we are, as we talked about last time, very impacted as a large employer in one region as to whatever the transmission rates are locally.

Now our rates are very low. We have seven cases of covid at the moment; three people working on site and four working from home. And that is reflected in the local figures as well. So, I think we are quite unusual within Government terms to be focused solely in one city.

Q68 **Grahame Morris:** Can I just clarify one more thing, Chair, before I hand back? I was going to say that it has been intimated, but actually the Committee was told that some of the permissions that were previously in force that permitted—well, I say "permissions", but it was access to the secure server that allowed home working. Some of that has been revoked, so that is no longer possible, which perhaps is contributing to a build-up of the backlog. Are you saying that that is not correct, Julie Lennard?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Julie Lennard: It is not correct, no. I think that what they were referring to, from my understanding of the evidence this morning, is that we are in a process of an upgrade—a Windows 10 upgrade. There were some changes around settings with wi-fi as part of that roll-out. It was a small number of people, but I have checked this morning during that evidence session and no one who was working at home previously has had access taken away.

Grahame Morris: That is interesting. We will have to look into that.

Q69 **Chair:** We were actually told by the unions that people had, so they were wrong.

Julie Lennard: I believe so.

Grahame Morris: Somebody is wrong, or misinformed and misinforming the Committee. We shall find out in due course, I am sure.

Q70 **Chair:** Just for the evidence, Julie Lennard, you are saying that that is not the case?

Julie Lennard: The information I have—I checked while the Committee was hearing from the previous witnesses—is that this is linked to a Windows 10 upgrade. We have a whitelist of people, and some names were taken off that, relating to the wi-fi, as part of that upgrade, but no one who was working at home has had that revoked as a result and been told that they must now work in the office.

Q71 **Chair:** How confident are you about the numbers working from home? I recall that, when you gave evidence previously, you said that 1,500 were working from home in March 2020, which went up to 2,000 in September. You told us—I think I have got this figure correct—that it is now 2,173. I know we have had the discussion about how many workers are actually there at any one time, but do you feel that you now have the maximum number of people being able to work from home from an operational perspective?

Julie Lennard: No, we are still making changes. We now have different pilots running for different areas, particularly related to vehicles. Over the last year, we have been testing whether we can increase that everywhere, whether we can make technical changes and whether we can make changes to the way people work to enable them to work from home. At the moment, with the vehicle casework side of it, we have a pilot of around 40 people working from home. They cannot print documents and pop down to the post office to send them out, so those are then sent back in, and those staff are buddied up with someone in the office so that the documents can get printed out back here. We are exploring every single option for how we can increase the numbers who work from home, because we are very conscious of resilience should this be a difficult winter. We are doing absolutely everything that we can.

Q72 **Chair:** We talk about the pingdemic, as it seems to be termed. How many of your workforce have been impacted by being told that they must self-isolate? Right now, how many have actually been told they have to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

isolate?

Julie Lennard: Right now, out of our 6,148 staff, there are 39.

Chair: Thank you.

Q73 **Mr Bradshaw:** Ms Lennard, you said a moment or two ago that you believe, based on the information you were given this morning, that no one who had previously been allowed to work from home was no longer being allowed to do so, in 100% contradiction to what we were told by your local staff earlier. Are you confident that you are being given accurate information by managers below you?

Julie Lennard: Yes.

Q74 **Mr Bradshaw:** Why won't you publish the Deloitte report?

Julie Lennard: It might help the Committee if I give a bit of background. We brought in Deloitte last summer to look at several things for us in relation to backlog reduction and what else we could do to get down the backlogs that had accrued in the first lockdown. One element of that was a feasibility study into greater remote access to our systems. It did not look at people aspects at all; it was just about whether, technically, we could actually provide greater remote access to our systems. The reason why it has not been released is that we are very careful about anything that contains details of our technical systems. Of course, we are the closest thing to an ID database in this country; we hold records on 49 million drivers. We take very seriously that we have to protect that data, so as a general rule, it is quite difficult to widely release technical reports that then expose quite a lot of the specific detail that sit behind some of our systems.

Q75 **Mr Bradshaw:** Wouldn't it be very helpful, in terms of increasing our understanding about the truth as to whether you could allow more home working, however technical that is, if that is what you commissioned it for— There are claims and counterclaims about how much more you can do to allow people to work at home. This report would seem to be fairly significant in that regard.

Julie Lennard: The union have had a summary, so the union know what it is in that report. We provided that when they first requested it under the trade union legislation. We provided them with that summary, and it identified that there are lots of barriers, but there is more that could be done. That is what we have been working through and why we have been able to increase by about 1,000, since last March, the numbers who are working at home, because we have been taking a lot of that technical action and process re-engineering in the background, to be able to do it.

Q76 **Mr Bradshaw:** Can you understand that people's natural suspicion would be that you don't want to publish this report because it pointed to what you could do to help staff work at home, which you have not done?

Julie Lennard: The one thing I would say is that we have taken staff safety incredibly seriously at every point in this. Had it been easy to have



more people working at home, we would have done it. Staff safety really has come first. As we made clear in the last Committee, that is how we ended up with a great number of staff on paid special leave for an extended period last year and this year, because of those difficulties. If I could have just magicked it up and been able to do that, I absolutely would have done it, but there were a lot of hurdles, and we are working through them. But at the end of the day, if we are receiving 60,000 items of mail every day, we will still need people on site to open and process those 60,000 items that are arriving each and every day, and that is a real challenge for us.

Q77 Mr Bradshaw: But we heard earlier that you are a massive outlier—the DVLA—compared with other Government Departments and agencies that are dealing with paper documents that are just as confidential, and that allow a lot more home working than you do. Wouldn't it help clear this matter up if you were to publish this report, or at least send our Committee a copy of it?

Julie Lennard: As I say, I am happy to share the summary document that the union have also had. There are difficulties for us with putting technical documents into the public domain, but I am very happy to take that away and have a look at the summary and what I can send to the Committee for further information.

Q78 Mr Bradshaw: What about sending us a copy in confidence?

Julie Lennard: I would need to take advice on that, because there are also probably some commercial confidentiality issues there as well. I will take some advice on that, but I am certainly happy to share the summary that the union have had, which lays out some of the challenges that we have with having greater home working.

Mr Bradshaw: Thanks. I will come back on safety at work in a moment, Chair.

Q79 Chair: I was just pondering with the Clerk. The thing I find strange is that you are a public body. It is not as if you are giving sensitive commercial information over to a competitor. I don't understand why you would not publish that document. Surely it has got a lot to lend itself as to what is going on.

Julie Lennard: As I say, the risk to us is the closest thing to an ID database, and the biggest concern is around cyber-security. If I give some of the technical details of how our systems work, that exposes us to a level of risk, so it is quite a challenge to be able to put that in the public domain.

Q80 Chair: Absolutely, so what you would do in those situations is you would redact the jargon stuff that no one really wants to read, in terms of how you can access the system. What people want to read is the conclusion as to whether that is a modern working practice or could be improved.

Julie Lennard: Absolutely. The one thing I would say is that we have made it clear to the union that the staff side of remote access was not part



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of that review. It was a feasibility study around remote access, so it was not around the people element of it.

Q81 **Chair:** Yes, so in that case it was about what more could be done in order to allow people to work from home—the type of thing that management consultants do on a regular basis.

Julie Lennard: I would imagine they do, yes.

Q82 **Chair:** I will tell you why. When people say they will not publish something, I think it is because they are concerned that there is something in there that people do not want to read. Automatically, I am suspicious as to why you would not publish something as rudimentary as this.

Julie Lennard: Really, it is not that. I am happy to share privately with the Committee the summary of it, so that you will be able to have that. You get a good sense, from the summary, of what is in that, and I am happy to share that. Then we will see, once I have been able to share that with you.

Q83 **Chair:** I think it is a pretty poor state of affairs. This is a Select Committee that scrutinises Government and their agents. You have a document that talks about how things can be improved, but you will not share it with Parliament. I actually think that is pretty—

Baroness Vere: We will endeavour to share whatever we can. You have my word, I will go away and look with Julie, we will take advice. I have seen the document—I couldn't understand it, but anyway. We will cross out the bits that none of us would understand, because it is all the technical bits, and hopefully we will be able to share the rest with you.

Chair: Super. Thanks for that.

Q84 **Mr Bradshaw:** The reason I was asking these questions is that we were told—you probably heard the evidence from the staff side earlier—that there is a cultural problem in the DVLA. The reason why you have been reluctant to allow more staff, particularly more junior staff, to work from home is that you just don't trust them. There is no trust. There is a cultural management problem at the DVLA. How do you respond to that?

Julie Lennard: We have got 2,000 of our staff who are working from home, so I would say that that is all evidence to the contrary. If it were the case, no one would be working from home. We have as many people working from home as we can have working from home. There are different levels of security. A lot of these databases contain huge amounts of personal data—sensitive medical data—on huge numbers of people right across the UK, so we clearly have responsibilities to make sure that we protect that personal data. We take that very seriously. So, as I say, we have over 2,000 people who are working from home, so I don't accept that there is a cultural issue or that we do not trust staff, or we would not be in a position where we are getting towards half the staff being able to work from home.



Q85 **Chair:** Again, may I probe you a bit there? You talk about sensitive personal data, but all our caseworkers deal in exactly the same manner, but they work from home. If they divulge anything, they lose their job. It is quite straightforward. You are not the only agency or employer whose employees handle sensitive information. They can work from home, and yet there is something peculiar about the DVLA which means that people cannot. I don't follow.

Julie Lennard: You are absolutely right about that. It comes back to the scale at which we operate and the way in which our systems work. There is access on site to the full scale of our systems. Given the 49 million drivers, it is a different scale to many other organisations.

Chair: Gavin Newlands is with us. We cannot see him, but we should be able to hear him. Then I will go to Karl McCartney.

Q86 **Gavin Newlands:** With a bit of luck, Chair. Apologies to all, especially the witnesses. My IT literally overheated and stopped.

To continue that chain, just to ensure that the record is correct on the annual report. It says in that 2020-21 report: "With a vastly reduced workforce available on-site for much of the year due to social distancing laws and industrial action, this was a significant challenge." I want to put that on the record, given the questions and answers we have had already. That was referring to '20-21 and is clearly misleading.

Moving on from that, on the proportion of the backlog and industrial action, can you tell me what proportion of the backlog stems from the eight days of industrial action prior to the agreement that was reached with the unions, and what proportion is related to the 29 days of action since that agreement was taken off the table?

Julie Lennard: It might help to give some sort of context to those figures. With the targeted action that the union has been taking over the past five or six weeks, it depends on the area. When they target the contact centre, clearly that does not add to the backlog; it is just incredibly frustrating and difficult for our customers, because they cannot get through. If they target the input services group, which deals with mail opening, then processing some or getting it through to the right teams, that can add about 20,000 a day. It depends on the areas that have been targeted by the union as to how that adds to the backlog. To go back to the earlier point, we estimate that about 400,000 of our existing backlog is due to industrial action.

Q87 **Gavin Newlands:** Moving on to my final point, which is on vocational licences, we are well aware of the issues in the haulage sector at the moment, where there is a backlog of about 90,000 drivers, with about 25,000 driving licence applications in the system. The DVSA are responsible for that application process in itself, but can you tell me what role the DVLA are playing in any backlog with getting licences to truckers, and what you are doing about it at the moment?

Julie Lennard: When drivers pass the test with DVLA, that test pass comes through to us electronically. As we touched on briefly this morning,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

due to HGV drivers needing medical data at certain points in their driving careers, that can take a little bit more time, because we are reliant on medical professionals as well for some of the information that we need.

Those are paper applications for those vocational licences, but they are something prioritised within the team here, because people absolutely understand how vital it is to make sure those are turned around as quickly as possible. We are probably around two weeks or so out of our normal processing time on that.

Q88 Gavin Newlands: You made the point, and the Minister has made this point as well, that you are a volume business—not a term I like for a Government agency—and I find it bizarre that the levels of data that you have available to you, or that you are willing to share, are so low for such a data-driven business.

Could you possibly write to the Committee with a breakdown on the mean time, or the average time, that all vocational licences are currently taking to go through the system, and also any medical-related licences as well? That is an issue that has been brought up already, in terms of the delays. If you could reply to the Committee as soon as possible on that, that would be very useful.

Julie Lennard: If it is helpful at all, certainly the figures that we are producing at the moment to apply or renew a vocational driving licence, we are working on those from 11 June.

Q89 Gavin Newlands: With respect, the answers you have given so far are vague windows. I want at this point in time, when you write to us, the actual average time it is taking for the applications, because some are obviously taking a very long time—months and months and months. Some are taking a matter of a few weeks, but I want to see the average time for each level, if possible.

Julie Lennard: Certainly we could look at that. As I mentioned before, the straightforward ones that do not have as much in terms of medical will be going through in that six-week window. Where there are more complex things to consider as part of that application, particularly medical, that will vary by individual, but we can certainly provide you with some more information and some more details on that.

Gavin Newlands: Thank you.

Baroness Vere: May I just add that as the Minister, I have never had a problem with getting data from DVLA; what I have had a problem with is defining exactly what I want, because there are so many different ways to cut the data of so many different workstreams.

I get updates from DVLA every two weeks. That suits me for what I want to know and I am interested in: what is the last week that is being worked on—which is why we tend to speak in these terms, because I am interested in it—who is having to wait the longest, and is that date coming forward as the process goes through more quickly? We can provide any



data you want: the key is to define exactly what it is, because we do have all of the data needed.

Gavin Newlands: Okay. Thanks, Chair.

Q90 **Karl McCartney:** Picking up on that point from the Minister, but asking Julie Lennard if possible, I would just like to ask about telephone calls. Just to counter some of my colleagues, I will say that my experience on behalf of my constituents has been that your staff have been very good; I asked earlier on about staff morale, and when I as an MP have contacted them directly, they have worked very quickly to help and assist my constituents, so do pass on my thanks for that.

However, I know that the biggest frustration for my constituents is when they phone up DVLA. During the past year, do you have any data about how many phone calls went unanswered, or how long the average was for them to be answered, and has that improved by now? That is my first question. You might not be able to give me the answer now, but I am quite happy to accept you writing to us to let us know.

Julie Lennard: I will write to you; I can let you know. I can give you that.

Our average call handling time at the moment, I believe—the time to get through—is around 11 minutes, but it is a case where you might not actually get through to get into that queue, because our system works out how many advisors are available and how many people are trying to ring through, and if it would mean extremely long waits, you do not actually join that queue. We do then have people who phone multiple times. I am aware that you have tested it yourself. I am very happy to write to you with more detail on that.

Q91 **Karl McCartney:** I realise that you and your organisation would like to push everybody to do things online, but lots of people still want to speak to someone.

Julie Lennard: Absolutely. I would like to pay tribute to our staff in our contact centre. The occupancy rates for the staff are phenomenal. In contact centre terms, you are looking at how much work they do and whether they are answering phone call after phone call without any kind of downtime in between. They are working ferociously hard under a lot of pressure. We have seen a real increase in people being really quite abusive to staff. They are trained to be able to calm people down and deal with it, but they are working under a lot of pressure and are doing a really phenomenal job.

Q92 **Karl McCartney:** I am sure they are, and I am pleased to hear you say that in front of the Committee. We have taken that on board.

In 2017-18, the DVLA crossed the threshold of over 1 billion enquiries and transactions in a year. Are the 6,148 staff capable of coping with this workload or would you like more?

Julie Lennard: Yes, because a huge amount of that is automated and digital, so yes, they are.



Q93 Karl McCartney: There are obviously areas where there are delays. The classic and historic vehicle sector, which employs over 110,000 people and generates £3 billion for the Exchequer with a £20 billion turnover a year, complains that dealing with the DVLA is frequently a frustrating and tortuous process, and it reports lengthy delays, poor communication, errors, inconsistencies and questionable application of the rules. What is your response to that, and how many of your 6,000-plus staff work on this area of your remit? Are there any specialists that you have? What number of specialists do you have?

Julie Lennard: There are specialists who work in this area. It can be quite a contentious area, quite often because of the value of those vehicles. I am happy to look into any specific issues. This is one of those areas where there can be really specific circumstances, but we have policy experts and operational experts who are able to deal with these kinds of queries and processes.

Q94 Karl McCartney: To perhaps take an example from other areas of Government services, would you consider the DVLA engaging more widely with stakeholders across the sector to explore collaborative ways of working in the future—maybe taking the clear precedent of the Civil Aviation Authority, which entrusts the Light Aircraft Association to assess ongoing airworthiness? Would you perhaps bring in associations like the HVA or the Federation of Historic British Vehicle Clubs, which obviously have expertise in this area and specialists who know their subject?

Julie Lennard: Absolutely. We have a corporate relations and stakeholder management team. We have lots of organisations that have a real interest in what we do. That includes medical charities, big fleet operators, big manufacturers and retailers, as well as classic car companies. We run lots of different user groups for those really dedicated, specific stakeholders. I am very happy to have another look at whether we need to do something very specific for the classic car industry and market. I am very happy to take that away.

Q95 Karl McCartney: I am sure those organisations will be very pleased to hear you say that, and certainly the editor of *Practical Classics* as well. This is the final question to you from me at this point. What further resources does the DVLA need, if any, to meet the targets in its 2021 business plan?

Julie Lennard: As the Minister mentioned earlier, we are looking at how we can have additional resource—a kind of supercell—to be able to really help us tackle some of those queues in the Drivers Medical area. We are also bringing in additional staff to work evening shifts, so that we are not adding to the number of people on site during the day. The Department has been very supportive in helping us with that so that we can have the resource to be able to tackle these short-term backlogs.

Q96 Karl McCartney: Thank you for that. A final curveball from me. I asked you the last time you were in front of us how often you had been on site. How often have you visited the site, or have you been working on site in the intervening time between when you last appeared in front of us and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

today?

Julie Lennard: I have been in about every three to four weeks. Obviously, I am on site today. As restrictions have eased, I am able to walk around more and be able to go across more of the estate than I was in January, at the height of the second wave.

Q97 **Karl McCartney:** Every three to four weeks? Are you in for a week, just a day or a couple of days?

Julie Lennard: It will vary. I will usually come in for a day at a time, but it varies, because a lot of my time is literally back to back Zoom calls—this kind of thing. It really does vary. It depends on which buildings I am in and things like that. We have eight different buildings.

Q98 **Karl McCartney:** Understood. Thank you very much. I have a question for the Minister. Separate from the DVLA business plan, Baroness Vere, have the Government set the DVLA a specific target to tackle the backlog of paper applications or any other aspect of their work?

Baroness Vere: No. Throughout the pandemic, we have worked alongside Julie to keep the backlog as low as possible. It has been an absolute focus of ours, so it is not about reaching a specific target. The target would have to be achievable and there are too many variables to set a firm target at the moment, but as we know from what Julie has already said, if there were no industrial action we can see the direction of travel and where it goes.

I reiterate that we work very closely with the DVLA. We listen to them and take forward their suggestions in order to try to reduce the backlog. It is one of our biggest priorities, and we really want to see all staff return to work, rather than continuing with industrial action, because we obviously feel that it is impacting citizens very substantially. Worse than that, it is targeted on the most vulnerable, which I feel is very unpalatable.

Q99 **Karl McCartney:** I understand that, but very quickly, are you aware of the historical and classic vehicles issues that have been ongoing for many years, which many of us involved with those types of vehicles are aware of?

Baroness Vere: I am aware of some of the issues. You would have to raise any specific issues with me. I recall there being some issues, but I am afraid it was too long ago for me to still have it in mind.

Chair: You touched on the health and safety matters, which we talked about back in January, Ms Lennard. Ben Bradshaw is going to ask for an update on that front.

Q100 **Mr Bradshaw:** Thanks, Chair. Just before I do, do you think going into the offices as infrequently as that enables you to have a clear view of what the staff think about being forced to come into the office themselves and general morale?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Julie Lennard: I do have a good feel for general morale. It is also worth reflecting that the vast majority of staff are not taking part in the industrial action.

Q101 **Mr Bradshaw:** What is the current covid situation among your staff?

Julie Lennard: Among the 6,148 staff, I have three members of staff who have been on site who have covid and four who are working from home, so I have more people working from home who have covid at present. It is a total of seven people.

Q102 **Mr Bradshaw:** You had more positive cases in June than in May, didn't you? You had 20 in June and I think you had single figures in May.

Julie Lennard: If you look at the figures, there were six on site in June, two in May, and one in April, so at the point the union took industrial action in April we had one case for the whole month on site. In May, it was two cases for the whole month. In June, it was six.

Obviously, when you add in the numbers of cases at home as well—people who are working at home and have not been on site for the best part of 15 months or so—in June there were 12 cases in total.

Q103 **Mr Bradshaw:** That is really helpful. You might want to let No. 10 have those figures because the Prime Minister said the opposite in an answer to a question in Parliament on 20 June from a Labour colleague of mine. He said that the numbers were going down when actually they are going up. I would imagine, with the general national picture now, they are going up in July as well, are they?

Julie Lennard: At the moment, up until 8 July, which are the most recent figures that I have, it was four on site, two working from home, and one who normally works on site but had not been on site in the 10 days previous, so it was seven at that point.

As I say, we have 39 members of staff self-isolating at the moment, so yes, in line with everywhere else, as the country has opened up, and people are going to restaurants and bars and able to go on holiday, of course there is an increase, but then the vaccination rates in Wales are really phenomenal. It is a different case than it was before anyway due to the very high level of vaccination rates.

Q104 **Mr Bradshaw:** What covid safety measures do you retain in your buildings now that staff are coming back?

Julie Lennard: All of them. I am happy to run through some of the measures that we have. We have thermal imaging cameras to carry out temperature checks of staff on entry. We have one-way systems throughout the site. We have social distancing markers on floors. Communal areas, such as catering, seating areas and meeting rooms, are still closed.

Lift use is restricted. Perspex screens are still installed. Masks are still required if you are not sitting at your desk. Staff are still being provided

with individual hand sanitisers and there are sanitising stations all around the site. All floors are still divided into zones, with no mixing of staff between zones. All desks have been reconfigured to ensure staff have 2 metres plus between them, as in Wales it is 2 metres, not 1 metre. Every zone has a dedicated controller responsible for ensuring that all these measures are met.

We have additional cleaning staff. We have 101 cleaners across our estate, 34 of whom are housekeepers who are available on floors all day, every day, to deal with anything there and then, including any queries, and they keep cleaning high-touch areas.

All the air conditioning has been reconfigured to use external fresh air only, with no recycling of air. We have invested in quality HVAC systems that have CO₂ monitoring. We also have hand-held infrared CO₂ monitoring. We test against the external air, as well as the internal air, to make sure the air is as fresh as it can be.

Car sharing is still prohibited, unless people are from the same household. At the DVLA, we have a large proportion of people from the same household who work with us, but car sharing has been prohibited. We still have our full track and trace database. Travel on work buses is controlled through a bus booking app to make sure that social distancing can be maintained.

We still have some staff on paid special leave. We have not asked people who are clinically extremely vulnerable to come back in, at this point. Even though generally they will have been vaccinated, we have left those people and we have found something for the majority of them to do at home, but some are on paid special leave.

We have leased our additional building, which we are still using. That is still not at a maximum of even socially distanced capacity. Everything that we had in place remains in place.

In Wales, the rules are slightly different and there is level zero. The intention, I believe, is for Wales to move to level zero on August 7, but we will wait to see the specific announcement around that and work with that. We are not intending to lift our restrictions or restack our building before winter. My anticipation would be that our staff who can do their normal jobs from home will remain working at home into next year, because we will not restack this building and change all of that before the winter.

Q105 **Mr Bradshaw:** Are you confident that all those measures are actually being implemented and adhered to? That is a very different picture from the one that has been painted to us, both as individual MPs and as members of the Committee. It has been suggested to us, for example, that people are having to share desks on every floor and an independent academic survey of staff said that 70% were not able to properly socially distance. There were a number of other things going on that paint a rather different picture from the one you have just painted.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Julie Lennard: Yes, but all I can say to that is that every regulatory body that has visited us—they have often visited, over the last year—is absolutely content. I notice the union said earlier that they dismiss the HSE reassurance that all processes and controls were in place, were adequate and were being followed. The union dismissed that in their evidence to you earlier.

We have had HSE, Swansea Council environmental health and Public Health Wales, who we still meet regularly, none of whom has any concerns about any of the covid controls. They are all content with the covid controls we have in place, from which I take great reassurance. We also had our own independent review in March that we commissioned ourselves. I feel that we have had a lot of independent review and we have not been found wanting from that.

Q106 **Mr Bradshaw:** And nobody is being encouraged or asked, with a nudge and a wink, to delete or ignore their pinging app?

Julie Lennard: Absolutely not.

Q107 **Mr Bradshaw:** It has been suggested that you have a risk assessment for each of your buildings, but that does not contain a maximum number of people who should be in the building at any one time. Is that also not true?

Julie Lennard: It would help, because my system was buffering, if I could go back and listen to that allegation, if that is okay with you, so I can make sure that I give you the right information. I am happy to write to you on that.

Mr Bradshaw: I think it might have been in written evidence, rather than the oral evidence at the beginning of the hearing. However, that would be great.

Chair: I think we want to now move to the industrial action. Obviously, if everything is as positive as you just mentioned, Ms Lennard, it raises the obvious question of why industrial action has taken place. Grahame Morris would like to lead us through.

Q108 **Grahame Morris:** I will put this question directly to the Minister. I do not think you heard the full evidence from our staff side witnesses. What was the Department for Transport's response to the proposed agreement negotiated by PCS, on behalf of the staff side, and the DVLA to settle that dispute at the end of May? What was the Department for Transport's view of that proposed agreement?

Baroness Vere: There were obviously a number of discussions, and there was dialogue, whenever strike action was not happening, throughout April and May. Certainly, having now had access to some of the discussions that happened—neither I nor Julie were a principal in the room at the time—it is really clear to me that the goalposts moved around quite a lot as to what was in for discussion and what was not and so on. It is the case that, towards the end of May, a number of things were put on the table. It is not fair to say that there was a deal agreed; of course, you cannot agree a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

deal until both sides have agreed. First, towards the end of May, I note that PCS sent a notice of further action, so it is not entirely clear to me that they were about to reach an agreement. Secondly, they told their members that they were looking for more. That is very much where we got to.

Q109 **Grahame Morris:** Can I just push you a little more on that in the limited time we have left? You just replied that there was not a deal—

Baroness Vere: There was a series of proposals, I think, that had been put forward by various people.

Q110 **Grahame Morris:** The impression the Committee had—in fact, the general secretary of the trade union said that, in his 21 years, he has never known anything like this before. Having negotiated a whole raft of measures, including a phased return to work and some of the issues we have been talking about today, at the 11th hour and 59th minute, the deal was pulled, not by the on-site management but because of interference—that was the inference—by the Department for Transport. Do you have any knowledge of that?

Baroness Vere: Of course: I am the Minister.

Q111 **Grahame Morris:** So it was your interference that ended the agreement that would have ended the strike that contributed to this backlog?

Baroness Vere: Let us go back to why the strike happened in the first place. When it was balloted back in February and March, it was on the basis of covid safety and safety for staff. Safety for staff is our absolute priority. At that time, PCS was demanding that the number of staff on site should be reduced to 250 to 500. There was no evidence to support that thinking. It did not take into account the extensive measures that had been put in place by DVLA in order to keep staff safe. So when, all of a sudden, we were presented with proposals that included bonuses and extra holiday, I struggled to reconcile that with the reason for the industrial action in the first place. While it may be for Mr Serwotka to say that, in his 21 years, he finds this extraordinary, I would also say that he is long enough in the tooth to know that, in all these circumstances, it would always have to go back to the principals for decision.

I would say that, although the goalposts were moving between March and April about what sort of covid safety measures we would put in place—of course, the DVLA responded really well to that, in terms of the phased back-to-work period—when we got to the end of May, we were not shifting the goalposts anymore but literally changing sport. All of a sudden, we were talking about bonuses and holiday. That was not part of the industrial action, so I would absolutely say that DVLA has done what it has been asked. I would also like to point out that, of 6,148 staff at DVLA, only 18% of them—fewer than one in five—actually voted for strike action. The vast majority have nothing to do with this strike, and I think they would probably just want it sorted out.

Q112 **Grahame Morris:** I think everybody wants to have the matter resolved in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

a sensible, negotiated manner. But with the 650 staff who contracted covid, with the one fatality that sadly took place on the site, and with the ongoing increase in infections, I am sure you would agree that the health, safety and wellbeing of those who work on site, as well as the service that they provide, is paramount.

Your contention is that this is about money, but that is not the case, is it? That has been introduced as a bit of a red herring. The evidence that we received from the general secretary in the earlier session was that it was actually the management side that introduced the idea of some kind of payment, to mirror similar payments that were made by DWP, HMRC and other Government Departments, such as the MoJ, in order to reflect people's commitment and the efforts that they were making in delivering the service from home and, in difficult circumstances, from the site. Is that correct?

Baroness Vere: What is correct is that a number of proposals were put together and presented to Ministers: "Ministers, would you like to do these different things?" But as I have already said, we were asked specifically about responding to the industrial action. As I have already said and you have agreed, covid safety is an absolute priority, and that is why the industrial action was undertaken. We do not agree that it should have happened. However, we have worked very closely with PCS to put in all these measures. Therefore, I'm sorry, but introducing—these two are linked—a bonus and holiday in order to end industrial action, which is not about pay and is not about holiday, is not right. We know that at the end of May, PCS was telling its members that it was looking for more. How much more? We were thinking, "Where will this end? We are being held to ransom, and it is the most vulnerable in this country who are being held to ransom."

Q113 **Grahame Morris:** Just to clarify, the elements of the deal—although you say there was not a deal, so of the negotiation—are the elements related to pay and bonuses. Those are the parts of the deal—or the negotiation—that Ministers could not agree with, and that were negotiated by managers on site in Swansea. Is that correct?

Baroness Vere: I think you have just summarised correctly. It was the case that there was ongoing dialogue, which I think is fair to say. We prefer to call it "dialogue" rather than "negotiations" per se. I would prefer to call them "proposals" rather than "a deal". I accept that, on both the union side and the Government side, it will always come down, eventually, to the principals. Mr Serwotka was not in the room, Ms Lennard was not in the room, and I was not in the room, but I will reiterate that this industrial action is about covid safety. It is not about bonuses, and it is not about holiday, and to link those seems wrong. Given what they are doing now, we would not know where it would end.

Q114 **Grahame Morris:** Of course, the trade unions contend that they never linked those things in the first place. But I have heard your testimony, and I am grateful for that.

One final question, if I may. It follows on from your statement, Minister.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Are you absolutely confident that there is currently no risk to the safety and wellbeing of employees at the DVLA in Swansea—the ones who are now being asked to stop working remotely at home and to return to the DVLA office in Swansea?

Baroness Vere: I am content that the DVLA has shown an abundance of caution. It has sent people home—the 500 people who were sent home—who did not have to go home under the Welsh Government guidance. Certainly, the things that it has put in place, which Ms Lennard went through earlier, are comprehensive. It has had more independent checks than possibly any other workplace in the country, because of the focus. Therefore I am confident that all appropriate measures have been put in place to keep the staff safe.

I would just like to mention—because you did mention it, and indeed it came up several times this morning in a rather unpalatable way—the very sad loss of life that happened at the DVLA. It was a man who died within 28 days of a positive covid test. Obviously, that is very concerning. The Health and Safety Executive carried out an inquiry into his death that ended on 23 April. The case was closed, with no further action, as HSE found no evidence to suggest that anything was amiss in terms of coronavirus controls at the DVLA. It is therefore wrong, and possibly hurtful to the family, to keep mentioning that death, and I find it very upsetting.

Grahame Morris: It is not my intention, or that of any member of the Committee, to cause hurt to anybody. We are trying to ensure that it is a safe workplace, that procedures are in place and that both Ministers who are responsible for the work of the agency and managers are doing everything that they can and are being honest and truthful with us in the responses that they give. I appreciate that.

Q115 **Chair:** Coming back to this agreement in principle, can we call it an agreement in principle, Baroness Vere?

Baroness Vere: I would rather call it a series of proposals. There were quite a lot of things being discussed at that time, all sorts of things around long covid and phasing back to work—lots of different things. I received specific advice on these elements of the bonus and the holiday.

Q116 **Chair:** Mr Serwotka, who obviously is very experienced in these matters and in negotiating, seems to think that there was an agreement and that agreement was reneged on.

Baroness Vere: Why does he tell his members, then, that he was going to try to get more, if he thought there was an agreement?

Q117 **Chair:** Equally, you yourself said that you did not like the aspects related to holiday. In that case, there must have been something that you did not like—i.e. an agreement in principle.

Baroness Vere: Yes, those two things. I am really clear. It may be that, in the future, bonuses are paid, but I object to a payment of a bonus and extra holiday in order to end a strike that is basically being undertaken by



HOUSE OF COMMONS

fewer than one in five people who work at DVLA. The two things, in my mind, are not linked. You do not ballot your staff on the basis of covid safety, and then suddenly not just move the goalposts but change the sport—talk about pay and benefits. It is not right.

Q118 **Chair:** I understand that. I am not going into what is objectionable or not. My point was that someone must have brought you an agreement that they thought they had reached in principle, and then you would not sign off on it for the reasons that you have just stated.

Baroness Vere: Well, there were some proposals, and we did not sign off on those two proposals—correct.

Q119 **Chair:** But my point is that they would not have brought you a series of negotiations. That would have been a waste of your time—there is nothing for you to sign off on or not. They must have thought that they actually had an agreement in principle but perhaps overreached themselves in terms of what was going to be palatable to Ministers.

Baroness Vere: All I can say is that obviously a decision was put to Ministers—and rightly so—because it had nothing to do with the original reason for the industrial action.

Q120 **Chair:** Ms Lennard, if it was not you doing the negotiations, who was negotiating under your authority?

Julie Lennard: It was dedicated, working-level teams on both sides, both from PCS and from DVLA and DfT.

Q121 **Chair:** So DfT were involved in the negotiations.

Julie Lennard: They were discussions. As the Minister said, they were discussions. Obviously, at working level, the remit is to discuss pretty much everything—to see what it is going to take. We do want to bring this to an end. The discussions were really quite wide-ranging and intensive over that time. From 23 March, when they went into intensive negotiations, into June, that group met 24 times.

Q122 **Chair:** I still find it odd that you refer to them as a series of discussions, a series of negotiations. First, the union is pretty reliable when it comes to saying, “We know what an agreement in principle looks like, because this is what we do.” Secondly, you had to have had something tangible for you to react to, so you could say, “I don’t like those bits.”

Julie Lennard: As the Minister said, it was that series of proposals.

Q123 **Chair:** I am amazed that anyone would bring a Minister a series of proposals—what a waste of time. I mean, how are you supposed to react to that? “Do we know they are going to accept it? Do we not?” “Yes, Minister, because we’ve agreed it in principle.”

Julie Lennard: The difficulty, of course, is that PCS were very clear, in all their discussions, that anything they got they would take back to ballot their members on anyway. So, the PCS was not in a real position to do that, because they would have balloted their members on whether to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accept any agreement—any end to the dispute. That would have gone to their members.

Q124 Grahame Morris: Ms Lennard, to be fair, if I might say so, isn't it correct that your negotiators, or whatever you want to call them, were given an assurance by the PCS negotiators that, yes, they would ballot their members, but with a recommendation based on that draft agreement to vote in favour of it? I mean, that is correct, isn't it? And that is your understanding as well.

Julie Lennard: All I can say is that there was a meeting on 26 May that I was in, and that Mark Serwotka did actually say, "We're not here yet", and that he was saying particularly around respite, which is something the union particularly wanted, that if the position is held—to rule out respite—we would need to go further on the other issues that were there in that proposal.

So, that meeting on 26 May was still very much talking in the round about a range of proposals, and as the Minister rightly says the union position was that they were still looking for more.

Q125 Grahame Morris: All I can reiterate is the evidence that we have received from the trade union that they were prepared to offer a recommendation in the ballot for their members to approve that and settle this dispute, and then there would not have been any need for any further industrial action. I just want that to be clear.

Baroness Vere: But that agreement, or those proposals, or whatever it was that they would take to their members had not been signed off, and I cannot help it if people potentially jump the gun—

Q126 Grahame Morris: With all due respect, Minister, this is semantics. We are not calling it an "agreement"; we are calling it a "negotiation". We are not calling it a "draft agreement"; we are calling it "a series of proposals". But whatever it was, there was a basis for a settlement that would have avoided this disruption, which the trade unions and local management presumably had negotiated in good faith, and because of interference from yourself, Minister, or from other Ministers, that was stopped, on the basis of an issue over remuneration and bonus payments. So we should be clear on that—and you have told us that. You said they were the two elements you were not happy with—the bonus payment and the holiday element of it.

Baroness Vere: Because it is not related to the industrial action and therefore should not be part of any agreed settlement. But also I take issue with the word "interference". It is my job to look after taxpayers' money and to look after all the people who are trying to access the DVLA services.

So, of course, I absolutely want to bring this industrial action to an end. And I know that in terms of covid safety at DVLA, we will do whatever we reasonably can in order to ensure the safety of the staff. But I just do not think that we should set a precedent whereby things such as bonuses and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

extra holiday are used to settle an industrial dispute that is about safety—just not related. So, it is not “interference”; it is protecting taxpayers’ money.

Q127 **Grahame Morris:** The interesting thing there, Minister, is that the evidence we have had heard is that those provisions or proposals in relation to bonus payments were not asked for by the trade union but were raised by the management side. That is the evidence that was presented just two hours ago.

Baroness Vere: And I am sure lots of things were raised by both sides to consider.

Q128 **Chair:** The thing I find odd about all this is that I used to work as a negotiator and I had the joint administrator appointed by the court, who gave me a mandate to negotiate. Some of my negotiations took 18 months. I would always either get his steer, in terms of what he was willing to do, or I would always make it absolutely clear that that was contingent if I was negotiating.

Either of you has to concede that something has gone wrong here. Someone has either overreached themselves and actually perhaps reached a point in principle that was not going to be palatable to the sign-off—being you.

Baroness Vere: I think you have just said it.

Q129 **Chair:** Yes—so that is exactly what happened?

Baroness Vere: No—steer. That is why we got the submission. It is because it was time for a ministerial steer, because these things were unusual. Whatever Mr Serwotka says, it is not the case that there was an agreed piece of paper that was ready to go. They had to get a ministerial steer and the ministerial steer was that the two are not related and therefore should not be considered in terms of ending the industrial action.

I am not ruling out potential payments to staff in the future for bonuses or in terms of extra respite—it would be stupid to rule that out—but I am just saying that we have to look at this one thing that we are trying to fix here. You are quite right. They came to Ministers for a steer and our steer in return was, “No, that doesn’t feel right to us and that is not good for the taxpayer.”

Q130 **Chair:** I just find it odd that a union would say that they had reached an agreement and they felt they had got a deal when, actually, that was nowhere near and it was just discussions.

Baroness Vere: Me too, but I think we also know that Mr Serwotka also felt that he could get more. He said/she said—if he felt that, that is fine, but I didn’t feel that.

Q131 **Chair:** The only way to get to the bottom of this is to see what the negotiation document or draft agreement or whatever you want to call it actually looks like. Would you be willing to provide that to us?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Vere: I have no idea, but I am not entirely sure that that would be helpful, because, if they were seeking a steer from Ministers, then it wouldn't be a final document.

Q132 **Chair:** But it would actually demonstrate whether they thought they had got some form of agreement—otherwise it would have been a complete waste of their time. I am sure they will probably provide it to us, because if they are listening to this and think, “I know full well—I spoke to somebody who said, yes, we have an agreement in principle here,” then they will probably provide it to us.

Baroness Vere: They may well do and that document—we can call it whatever you like—had not been subject to ministerial steer for those issues and therefore it could not have been given the status that it potentially was in Mr Serwotka's mind. I cannot comment on that, but I would say that we know that he felt that he could go further. So, you know.

We have got to make sure that we don't set a very dangerous precedent here. We are going to have challenges all across the public sector as we come out of lockdown. This industrial action is making it worse for a large number of people and we cannot allow that to become the norm. It would set a dreadful precedent.

Q133 **Chair:** I completely understand that. I have had representations from the police, who have been right on the frontline. They are not getting what has been done there. I happen to agree with your point. My issue is more how we got to where we got to.

Certainly, in all my years, when Chris Grayling would sit there and we would talk about drivers operating doors and what-have-you, his point was, “I am not involved. It is not a strike between me and the unions; it is between the train operators and the union.” Now, you have taken control. You have said, “We are not willing to sign off on that.” Therefore, the industrial action is on you.

Baroness Vere: Train operators are private companies, or were.

Q134 **Chair:** Actually, this was Southern, so it was a farebox arrangement. The money went straight back to the Treasury, so in effect it wasn't.

Here we have politicians that have intervened and therefore are willing to take responsibility because it appears that the industrial action could be settled, but the politicians—for the reasons you say; they are entirely justified—have decided that is not palatable, so therefore the politicians own the strike.

Baroness Vere: We absolutely have to be clear that we believe that this industrial action should end now, because we believe that we cannot do anything more in terms of covid safety. This was entirely about covid safety. I would call upon the PCS to end this. It is not helpful. For the staff at DVLA, it is really divisive, and I am really sorry for that. Fewer than one in five actually voted for the strike. They want to get on and do their jobs and they are so good at doing their jobs. We talk about whether they are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

comparable with any other organisation in Government. I don't think they are. We don't even see or talk about the vast majority of work the DVLA does. All we talk about is the paper stuff. Of course that is important, because, in itself, that is a huge volume of work, but above that is this cloud of extra work that goes on that we don't discuss.

I think we have got to a situation now where we have moved significantly on covid safety, in terms of the phased return to work. We have delayed that by at least a couple of weeks. We have worked very closely and will continue to consult the union on everything that we do in terms of health and safety, but we are at a stage now where the vaccination rates in Wales are very high and, fortunately for the time being, the covid rates are relatively low, and we have had many independent reviews of the covid safety measures. I just do not feel that it would be right to create such a precedent as we were being asked to create, and so we did not.

Q135 Chair: If the unions took off the holiday entitlement, let's call it, and they took off the bonus, could the action be settled?

Baroness Vere: Absolutely. I don't believe that there is anything else that needs to be agreed. Again, there wasn't a formal "everything is completely agreed", so I have not seen a final document with everything in it, but I believe that we would be in that circumstance, or very close to that circumstance. I am sure that we would be able to do that.

Q136 Mr Bradshaw: To be clear, the Minister talks about negotiations and proposals, but the document that we have seen is actually called a "proposed draft agreement". Did you see it, Minister?

Baroness Vere: No, I don't believe I did.

Q137 Mr Bradshaw: You say that it would be unprecedented to include in a package that included asking people to come back to work in an office some sort of recognition through bonuses and holiday entitlement. It wouldn't be, though, would it? Many other Government Departments and agencies during covid have done exactly that for their staff, and none has been so badly affected by a covid outbreak as the DVLA in Swansea.

Baroness Vere: As I said, I am certainly not ruling out either of those things in the future, but we are in a circumstance where we have had shifting goalposts on all sorts of things over a period of time. The original strike ballot was on an outcome that was not supported by evidence and which was frankly unrealistic. The way that this entire industrial action has been proceeded with has been interesting to say the least. I cannot think about what possible motivations there may be here. All I will say is that the impact on the citizen is very significant.

Mr Bradshaw: Yes, and we heard that the staff are desperate to get back to work. If you say that you will be prepared to accept these things in the future, why not—

Baroness Vere: Most of them are going to work. Most of them are not striking.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q138 **Mr Bradshaw:** That is because it is a targeted strike. If you say that you will be prepared to consider these things in the future, why on earth won't you do it now? You could end this dispute, and all the disruption to our constituents, and get these people back to work by signing up to the document that your own departmental officials recommended to you.

Baroness Vere: Because this is a strike about covid safety. We have done exactly what we could to improve and have independently reassured covid secure measures. That is what the strike was originally about, and we have to make sure that the outcome that we achieve actually deals with the complaint that was brought to us, and that is what we have done. You have to link the two, otherwise it would be madness. It would be fair game for anything to be included. It's just not right.

Q139 **Chair:** Ben has the document that I was asking about. I suspect that you got it from the unions, because I do not think that we have it as a Committee. Ms Lennard, have you seen the proposed draft agreement as well?

Julie Lennard: I have seen that.

Q140 **Chair:** Did you sign off in principle on that or was it at your level where you decided that that was just not palatable?

Julie Lennard: As the Minister says, the negotiating teams were tasked with exploring what it would take and exploring all options. Once we knew what those were, it was a case of going back to Ministers and saying, "What's the steer?"

Chair: I still find that amazing because it is not really a—

Julie Lennard: Sorry, Chair—I was just going to say that it is not uncommon in these kinds of things to have as a straw man some kind of "put it down on paper and see what things look like" and for it to go back and forth. There are multiple versions of that document. There are at least six versions of that document, and it changed quite a lot over time.

As the Minister says, the original ballot was calling for an immediate reduction in the number of staff on all eight of our sites, down to, in total, between 250 and 500 people. By the time we got to April, we were not talking to the union about reducing numbers; it was around how we bring back people who had been at home on paid special leave at the height of the second lockdown. Across all the different versions of those documents it changed a lot.

Q141 **Chair:** I accept that. I am used to that as well. What normally happens is, as the Minister said, you have a series of negotiations, you then ask for a steer, you get the sign-off, and if you get the sign-off you then start drafting the agreement. I do not accept that it was just a series of negotiations. I put it to you that there was an agreement reached in principle, but it was not palatable for the wider politics, for reasons that I completely understand, and that is where we are.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Julie Lennard: Actually, the document was used in that way—to get on paper and refine what the issues actually were, because it was quite nebulous at times, rather than in discussion. That is how those discussions took place. That is what those six versions were used for—to try to refine it down and see where the two sides could meet within that.

Q142 **Chair:** In the interests of fairness, I put it to Mr Serwotka that if he just took those two matters off, which he claimed were brought in by the DVLA and not the PCS, perhaps an agreement could be reached. I am not entirely sure what the answer was, but you have been very clear, so hopefully we can march on in a better place.

Baroness Vere: I would hope so.

Chair: I think we have probably reached the end of proceedings. Big thanks again to you, Julie Lennard, for giving us so much of your time. That is twice now you have done so in a year. Baroness Vere, thank you very much. You have been with us a lot as well. Obviously, for all the constituents impacted we very much hope that life can return to normal for you all, and for your workforce. Thank you very much indeed.