



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The work of HM Passport Office, HC 238

Tuesday, 8 July 2014

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Written evidence from witness:

- [HM Passport Office](#)

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Ian Austin, Nicola Blackwood, Michael Ellis, Paul Flynn, Lorraine Fullbrook, Dr Julian Huppert, Yasmin Qureshi, Mark Reckless, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 190 – 276

Witness: **Paul Pugh**, Chief Executive, HM Passport Office and Registrar General for England and Wales, gave evidence.

Q190 Chair: This session looks again at the work of the Passport Office following the last appearance of the Chief Executive Mr Pugh. Thank you very much for coming in, Mr Pugh, to update us on what is happening with regards to the challenges and difficulties you are facing at the moment. Could I start by asking you: is there a problem in replying to the Select Committee's letters on time?

Paul Pugh: No.

Q191 Chair: So why was the last letter not replied to in the timescale that we gave you?

Paul Pugh: I think the last letter was replied to, Chair, in the timescale that you asked for it.

Q192 Chair: That is not my understanding and I think that when you get a request from this Committee it is very important that we get replies in a timely manner that will save the need for you to come back before this Committee.

Paul Pugh: My understanding, Chair, was that I believe that your requests were met within the time that you requested. If not, of course I apologise.

Q193 Chair: Thank you. When you last appeared before us the amount of work in progress was 483,000 applications. At the week ending 22 June it stood at 537,663, an increase of approximately 40,000 to 50,000. In addition, the number of passports printed and issued appears to have gone down but perhaps you will give us the latest figures for last week and the week before. Although the Committee wants to record its appreciation to your private office, because I have had universal praise for the fact that when we brought you cases your staff have dealt with them in a timely manner, that is not the feeling of the rest of the British public who feel that they do not have that kind of access unless they go to MPs, they are still being held in queues and their cases are still not being dealt with. Could you explain why, having put into place emergency measures, having brought the Home Secretary to the House on two occasions, keeping the Passport Office open for a very long time, up to midnight on some occasions, that work in progress is going up, the number of passports issued is going down and there are still numerous complaints?

Paul Pugh: Yes, I can update the Committee on all those issues. First, thank you for the recognition of my team within the organisation and I would like to echo that and put on record my appreciation of the exceptional commitment of many staff across the organisation. I would also like to start by reiterating my earlier apology to any customers if we have not been able to meet their needs in time for urgent holidays or business trips. I can update the Committee that work in progress is falling and output is rising substantially. We are now issuing over 170,000 passports each week. I expect that to continue and to rise over the summer, so in the summer period I expect us to be issuing probably in the region of 180,000 passports per week. Through a combination of the measures that the Home Secretary announced on 12 June and the existing fast track and premium services through our counters, I believe we are doing our best to meet urgent travel needs for all our customers. I am pleased to say that the vast majority of customers are continuing to get their passports within a reasonable period. To the end of June for straightforward renewals, 94% were within three weeks and 98% within four weeks.

Q194 Chair: Thank you. In respect of the people who are complaining, we will look at those figures again. Here are 180 e-mails from people who are waiting for their passports. I said that when you came to give evidence I would give you their e-mails so your office can chase them up and get the passports issued. Let us look at those figures; you said you expect these to go down. Work in progress, has that increased?

Paul Pugh: No, work in progress—

Q195 Chair: So these figures are wrong. 1 June you said 483,000?

Paul Pugh: No. In the week succeeding that we received—

Q196 Chair: No, tell us about 1 June, not other weeks. Tell us about 1 June. In the week ending 1 June, what were the number of applications that you had? We just want facts today.

Paul Pugh: I can give you the numbers for each week in June.

Q197 Chair: Give me the numbers for the week ending 1 June; that is what I want first of all.

Paul Pugh: I think that was the figure that I quoted last time I was here.

Chair: 483,000?

Paul Pugh: Yes, I think so. I cannot remember the exact number.

Chair: You said you had the figures in front of you.

Paul Pugh: I have the figures for intake during June, yes. I don't have the figures for levels of work in progress for every week during the course of June but I can confirm that work in progress is falling and is continuing to fall.

Q198 Chair: That is not what I have here. You do not have the figures but the figures I have show that, for the week ending 22 June—and it is strange that I should have these figures and you do not since you head the Passport Office—the amount of work in progress was 537,663. Do you have a better figure for this Committee?

Paul Pugh: Yes and what I am now updating the Committee Chair on is that since that time—

Chair: No, tell me whether that figure is right, first.

Paul Pugh: That figure was right at that time, yes. It is no longer correct.

Q199 Chair: Fine. On 22 June, three weeks after you appeared before us, work in progress had gone up. By the end of last week what was the figure?

Paul Pugh: The end of last week was just over, I think, 508,000.

Q200 Chair: Right, so it has increased. I do not know why we are having this discussion about whether it has increased or decreased. 508,000, and I am not brilliant at maths, is an increase on 483,000, is it not?

Paul Pugh: It is, but we have also received in the month of June 775,000 applications during that period.

Q201 Chair: We will come on to what you have received, but it has gone up since you last came before us. Has it now gone down again?

Paul Pugh: It is now going—

Chair: What was it at the end of last week?

Paul Pugh: It is now 508,000 and it is continuing to fall.

Q202 Chair: It went up and now it is going down?

Paul Pugh: That is correct.

Q203 Chair: Tell us about the number of passports issued. How many passports were issued in the week ending 1 June?

Paul Pugh: The week ending 1 June? I am not sure I have that figure to hand but I can certainly let you have it. No, I don't have it immediately to hand.

Q204 Chair: But as head of the Passport Office, would you not know how many passports were issued week after week, bearing in mind you are in a challenging situation and Ministers must be asking you these questions on a possibly daily basis?

Paul Pugh: I do know it and I do know it on a daily basis. What I don't keep in my mind is the precise number for over a month ago. The most recent figure I can give you is over 170,000 and it is continuing to rise day by day.

Q205 Chair: Is that for last week, Mr Pugh?

Paul Pugh: Yes.

Q206 Chair: You issued 170,000 passports last week?

Paul Pugh: Correct.

Q207 Chair: Do you remember or do you have figures to let the Committee compare with the previous week?

Paul Pugh: The previous week I think it was in the region of 160,000. Yes, something in the 160,000s.

Q208 Chair: So you have increased?

Paul Pugh: We have increased and we are continuing to increase our weekly output and that output will continue to rise for another couple of weeks and then I expect it to be probably in the region of about 180,000 per week for succeeding weeks during the summer.

Q209 Chair: Did you hear the interview on the “PM” programme—I think it was yesterday—by a member of your staff who said this, “Her Majesty’s Passport Office is in total crisis. It’s a total mess and the measures that Theresa May mentioned and the measures that have been put in place aren’t really helping, in fact they are making things 10 times worse”? Did you get a transcript of that?

Paul Pugh: I have read a transcript of that, yes. Of course, I completely disagree with the comments that are attributed to this anonymous member of staff. I know from talking to my own teams day in and day out that I think the vast majority of staff across the organisation would refute what that member of staff was quoted as saying. The organisation is not in chaos. We are continuing to issue to our customers, as I have said, over 170,000 cases per week. The measures announced by the Home Secretary on 12 June have been successfully implemented and they are ensuring, together with our counter services, that we can meet the needs, both overseas and in the UK, of those who have an urgent need to travel.

Q210 Chair: The issue of statistics was also raised. Do you have a whole host of cases that you have not yet put on the system? I will tell you why the Committee is interested in this. It is because when we had your colleague Sarah Rapson in before us looking at UKBA, we found that there was a backlog of cases before they got on to the system. In other words, they do not get mentioned in the statistics. Do you have a number of cases?

Paul Pugh: All cases that we receive are scanned and entered on to the system within 48 hours of receipt.

Q211 Chair: So there are no outstanding cases. Some have put the figure as high as 100,000 that have not been put on your system. We just want to clarify and fact check with you.

Paul Pugh: What we record as work in progress is essentially work for us to do. There are cases entering each day, there are cases leaving each day, and in very, very high numbers, but the key figure is the level of work in progress, which is as we have talked about.

Q212 Chair: Yes. I understand that is the key figure for you but the Committee is interested in people who have applied for their passports and have not been put on the system. We have seen it before when dealing with the Home Office, and that becomes a backlog of its own. When Rob Whiteman was before us two years ago that had reached a staggering 200,000. I realise you have your own benchmark, which is work in progress, but how many

cases have not been put on the system? As head of the Passport Office, you must be asking these questions of your senior management team.

Paul Pugh: That will vary from day to day because we will be receiving an intake of probably in the region of, at this time, perhaps 20,000 cases per day. But I can assure the Committee that all cases that we receive are logged and entered on to our system within 48 hours. There is no long backlog of cases that somehow are not reflected.

Q213 Chair: Okay. You can tell us how many have not been put on the system yesterday?

Paul Pugh: I cannot tell you that off the top of my head, no, but they will have entered our system yesterday and, equally, there will be a large number that will have been printed and issued yesterday.

Q214 Chair: No, I understand the printing and issue point; I am asking about the logging point, that is all. When we have had people ringing us up, the concern is sometimes people can't find them on the system. Would you let us have those figures? If you write to us.

Paul Pugh: How many we received yesterday?

Chair: We just want to know on average. If you have the precise figures, that is even better. That would be splendid.

Paul Pugh: I may have the precise figure: yesterday, 22,998.

Q215 Chair: Excellent, you do have that figure. There are 22,000 waiting to go on.

Paul Pugh: No, those are ones that have been taken in. That is recorded intake.

Q216 Chair: Are there more, apart from that, that have not been recorded?

Paul Pugh: There will be some that will have arrived in the postbag, as it were, that will not yet be recorded on the system and I don't think I can give you a precise number for that.

Q217 Chair: If you could give us the number and write to us that would be great. I gave you notice of this question; I asked you and I asked my Clerks to contact your office. Which Minister made the decision to end the issuing of passports abroad for British citizens and when was it taken?

Paul Pugh: Successive Ministers. The original work flowed from reviews done by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee in 2005 and 2006. That led to an agreement between the two departments, Foreign Office and Home Office, I think in 2009.

Q218 Chair: In 2009 an agreement was made between the Home Office and the Foreign Office that the issuing of passports for British citizens abroad would end?

Paul Pugh: That is correct.

Q219 Chair: In 2009?

Paul Pugh: In 2009, yes. That was then subsequently confirmed by present Ministers in 2011.

Q220 Chair: Right. So the original decision was taken in 2009 and confirmed again in 2011?

Paul Pugh: Correct.

Q221 Chair: That relates to the 390,000 cases that are now being dealt with in the UK rather than abroad and you said, looking at your methodology, you want to look at it again because it was an overestimate?

Paul Pugh: That covers all passports issued to British citizens living overseas, yes.

Q222 Chair: The final question from me is: emergency travel documents. Has there been an increase in the posts abroad of those who have been given emergency travel documents? The main concern that seems to come to this Committee is from people with small children. It seems to be that young babies are holding up families travelling. That is the difficulty in getting a new passport. I gave you notice of this case before. If you are a British citizen mum and dad living in Nairobi as an expat and you have a child and you want to come over for summer holidays, it takes 12 weeks to get a passport for your young child. That is your service standard, three months.

Paul Pugh: It may do, depending on which country you are applying from.

Chair: I have just said Kenya.

Paul Pugh: Yes. I can give you the figure, Chair. The number of emergency travel documents issued to children since the Home Secretary's announcement on 12 June is 150.

Q223 Chair: Is that for those abroad?

Paul Pugh: Yes.

Q224 Chair: Right. Have you seen any increase in respect of adult British citizens abroad who are having to get emergency documents?

Paul Pugh: I don't have that information to hand, no, because that obviously was not generally covered by the Home Secretary's announcement on 12 June.

Q225 Chair: Would you write to us and give us those figures?

Paul Pugh: Certainly.

Q226 Michael Ellis: Mr Pugh, could I just ask you this: how many passport applications does Her Majesty's Passport Office, which you head, receive annually?

Paul Pugh: Annually?

Michael Ellis: Last year, for example, how many passport applications did it receive?

Paul Pugh: About 5.5 million, 5.6 million per year.

Q227 Michael Ellis: Right. How many has it received so far this year?

Paul Pugh: So far this year, up until yesterday, 4.2 million.

Q228 Michael Ellis: 4.2 million and we are seven months into the year?

Paul Pugh: That is up until 9 July, so six months and a week.

Q229 Michael Ellis: Are you saying that there is a massive increase in the number of applications that you are receiving for passports?

Paul Pugh: Yes.

Q230 Michael Ellis: I presume by this point in the last calendar year cycle you had not received four point whatever you said?

Paul Pugh: What we have received, particularly in the last four months, is in June, as I said, we received 775,000 applications, which I think is the highest number ever recorded in a single month; May it was 727,000; April, 681,000; March 706,000.

Q231 Michael Ellis: These are all massive increases on last year and the year before?

Paul Pugh: If I can give you, just by way of comparison, the highest month of all in 2013 involved 669,000; in 2012 it was 636,000; 2010 it was 665,000.

Q232 Michael Ellis: June tends to be your peak month, does it?

Paul Pugh: May or June. What we have seen in the last four months, every single one of those months, is the intake has been higher than the highest month of the year in preceding years.

Q233 Michael Ellis: So your department has been put under tremendous strain?

Paul Pugh: Indeed, yes. I would pay tribute to the exceptional dedication and commitment of our staff, which I think many MPs and others have recognised as well and acknowledged.

Q234 Michael Ellis: Yes, as I do. Do you know why it is that there has been such a phenomenal increase? You are almost on target for doubling your annual applications, I would have thought, by the end of the year at this rate?

Paul Pugh: Of course what we do not know yet is whether the overall intake will rebalance itself in the succeeding months of the year. Clearly our forecast intake for the year has been substantially exceeded during this period.

Q235 Michael Ellis: Do you know why that is, Mr Pugh?

Paul Pugh: We don't fully understand why that is. We believe it to be more to do with the pattern, the seasonality of demand rather than the total of demand.

Q236 Michael Ellis: You have a forecasting model, do you not, for how busy you are likely to be?

Paul Pugh: We do, yes.

Q237 Michael Ellis: Is it fair to say that forecasting model failed in this instance?

Paul Pugh: That forecasting model has been well exceeded during the course of this year.

Q238 Michael Ellis: So it failed?

Paul Pugh: It has been way out this year certainly, yes. We need now to go back to first principles and review what we learn from this experience about forecasting for the future.

Q239 Michael Ellis: Do you think that is the principal lesson, as far as the forecasting is concerned, so that you can prevent this strain from occurring again?

Paul Pugh: I think the difficulty is that in previous years over quite a long period, the forecasting model that we have used has been accurate to within 3% or 4%, at most 7%

or 8%, over the course of the year. It has also been generally very accurate month by month. Not only has it enabled us to plan our capacity overall for the year but to plan our capacity during different periods of the year. What we need to do now is to review what we can take from this year: how can we understand better what has occurred this year, and what will it tell us about the pattern of demand for future years and whether that involves a net increase in the overall intake? Given that the level of passport holding in the UK is already very high, I would be surprised if there was a massive net increase in overall levels of passport ownership in the country. It is more what it tells us about the pattern of demand during the course of the year so we can better plan our capacity to reflect that.

Q240 Paul Flynn: The amount of overtime you paid out in May was nearly £1 million. The amount that you will pay in overtime this year compared to last year, if present patterns continue, be an extra nearly £5 million. When 150 jobs at the Newport office went, the saving was anticipated to be £2.6 million. Do you think that those cuts were unwise and went too deep? Are you planning to reverse them?

Paul Pugh: Just on the point of overtime, I think it is important to see overtime costs within the overall context of our pay costs. Our staff and pay costs account for about 25% overall of our running costs as an organisation, so the overtime costs and what we have spent on overtime this year is a very small proportion of our overall costs.

On your broader point about do I feel that the restructuring of the Newport office contributed to the exceptional pressures that we face this year, no, I don't believe that to be the case. We have faced quite exceptional pressures and have had to respond with some exceptional measures, but the reduction in the passport processing capacity in the Newport office has been counterbalanced by increases in capacity in other application processing centres across the estate. I don't think that the restructuring in Newport contributed to what we have experienced this year.

Q241 Paul Flynn: If the 150 people who were sacked in Newport were still working, it would reduce the extent of the crisis. Isn't that true?

Paul Pugh: But I think, as I talked about last time, we have seen a substantial increase in the staffing of the organisation in the last two years.

Q242 Paul Flynn: I appreciate that, but I think my constituents are rightly angry when they see their jobs come to an end for no reason—there was nothing wrong with the work they were doing—and then see additional jobs created elsewhere and then a crisis in the service. Of course they feel that they have been badly used.

Paul Pugh: But I do not believe that the changes in the Newport office contributed to the position that we are in this year.

Q243 Paul Flynn: What do you think the other effects of excessive overtime are on staff, in terms of exhaustion, morale, additional mistakes, loss of efficiency? Are you happy to carry on with this freakish level of overtime that you are having to use now?

Paul Pugh: First, I would not disagree with the description of it as a freakish level of overtime. Every individual member of staff has a choice about whether they work additional hours or whether they don't. Some do choose to work additional hours, some choose not to work additional hours, and there are many people within the organisation in both those groups. The contribution that staff who have volunteered to do additional hours has made to the organisation has been really important. They have made a huge contribution to the organisation and I think it is an indication of their morale and commitment that they have been willing to do that.

Paul Flynn: I certainly go along with all the tributes that are paid to the frontline staff there, but you can't—

Paul Pugh: Sorry, Mr Flynn, I would just like to record that, in terms of stress on the organisation, I know all our managers are well aware of the need to look after the health and wellbeing of their workforce. What we have seen this year is the levels of sickness absence reduce during the course of the year.

Q244 Paul Flynn: I have looked at your forecast and some extraordinary things have happened there. In a recent month, I think it was last month, you forecasted the demand would drop and there was a very steep rise—it went exactly the wrong way. The level of overtime has doubled. Surely that is freakish. It is probably unprecedented. In May and throughout the year it has gone up. What are you going to do to ensure that this kind of crisis does not happen in the future and your staff will not be called on to do overtime on this level?

Paul Pugh: Partly in answer to the question from Mr Ellis, the first thing that we are doing is looking at the basis of our forecasting and modelling; what can we do to improve that to get it right next time and, therefore, make sure that we have the right capacity at the right times of year and in the right places to respond to the levels of demand? I would certainly accept that the level of overtime and the frequency with which overtime has been worked this year is more than would be normal and more than I would really want to work. But certainly I regard the use of overtime as a perfectly normal management measure to respond to fluctuations in workload in an organisation.

Q245 Paul Flynn: You have had a problem where the forecast has failed and failed dramatically, but you do not know why and you do not know how you are going to deal with it in the future. Is that a fair summary of the situation?

Paul Pugh: One of the first steps we have taken this year is introduce a significant additional contingent of staff into the organisation by very substantial redeployment within the organisation. Over 600 staff have been brought in as part of our contingency measures over the course of the last few months. I expect to keep those staff in place, at

least to make sure that we are able to meet our commitments during the summer period and then gradually to step them down. One of the things we are doing at the moment is continuing to recruit new staff into the organisation, not just to replenish turnover and natural attrition but to make sure that, come January next year, we are as up to full strength as we can be.

Q246 Paul Flynn: Just a final question, what areas are they being recruited from? What areas; what part of the country?

Paul Pugh: Geography? In all our major locations, I think. I think the greatest numbers are in those places where we have the largest contingents of staff.

Q247 Paul Flynn: Don't you feel an obligation, if you are going to recruit staff, to recruit them in the areas where you took the staff away a few years ago?

Chair: I think Mr Flynn is making a bid for Newport.

Paul Pugh: I did infer that, Chair.

Chair: I would imagine there will be some PQs on how many of your staff speak Welsh coming very shortly.

Paul Pugh: We do have staff in Newport who provide for all our Welsh language needs and all applications in the Welsh language are processed in the Newport centre.

Q248 Chair: We have a few more quick questions. Just a brief answer, please, on costs: is it still the case that you are making £30 profit per passport?

Paul Pugh: We will be publishing our annual report and accounts shortly, which will set out what our unit costs for the year are.

Q249 Chair: I am asking for today. We can't wait for shortly.

Paul Pugh: They have not changed significantly.

Q250 Chair: What is it?

Paul Pugh: £57 and some pence I think is the unit cost.

Q251 Chair: What is the profit you make on each passport?

Paul Pugh: We don't make a profit. Our unit costs are related to our running costs.

Chair: Let's call it a surplus.

Paul Pugh: Any surplus that we recover in fees is returned to the Treasury.

Q252 Chair: Of course, but before you return it you know what it is. Before you return it to the Chancellor you will know what your surplus is. I am looking at page 42 of the annual report. It says, “Additional surplus income from HM Passport Office resulting from consistently high passport demand throughout the year provided a £10 million cost saving”. Do you want to be—

Paul Pugh: No, that is in Home Office annual reports and accounts, I think.

Q253 Chair: Yes, but it refers to HM Passport Office. That is you, is it not?

Paul Pugh: Yes, and that would be carried forward into our own.

Q254 Chair: Do you need to see this?

Paul Pugh: No, I have seen it, thank you.

Q255 Chair: So you made a surplus?

Paul Pugh: Yes.

Q256 Chair: Of how much last year?

Paul Pugh: In total, I think it was about in the region of £50 million.

Q257 Chair: £50 million surplus. I would imagine, even though you are having to pay overtime, you will also be making a surplus this year. Will you be making a surplus or a loss this year?

Paul Pugh: That will depend upon levels of demand and levels of cost. If demand remains very high this year then that, of course, will increase our income. One of the options that then may be open to us is reduction of fees to the customer.

Q258 Chair: We already know demand is high because you have told us that demand is high. If you look at the £50 million surplus you made last year, what is your expectation?

Paul Pugh: If it were to continue at this level, I would expect a surplus of a similar order by the end of this financial year.

Q259 Chair: Another £50 million?

Paul Pugh: Of that order, yes.

Q260 Chair: In terms of Teleperformance, who are answering your call centres—and the complaints to me have been about Teleperformance, as you will see in those e-mails—they do not have access to your files, do they? They are a call centre.

Paul Pugh: They don't have full access to our cases, no.

Q261 Chair: So they can't give information to the customers?

Paul Pugh: In some cases they can, yes. What they do not have is full access to our casework system for individuals but they do have, in some cases, access to basic information that they can relay to the customer.

Q262 Chair: Are you paying them more as a result of this challenging set of circumstances?

Paul Pugh: The volume of calls that they receive will determine the payment that they receive, yes.

Q263 Chair: The more calls Teleperformance receives, the more we would pay them?

Paul Pugh: Yes.

Q264 Lorraine Fullbrook: Mr Pugh, I think the last time you were before us, and today, it was accepted that you have to change the way that you forecast for the future demand of passports being issued, received into the system and sent out. Have you started the review process of how you are going to change the way that you forecast? No?

Paul Pugh: Sorry, I was waiting—is there more of the question or shall I answer?

Lorraine Fullbrook: There is, but I would like to know the answer.

Paul Pugh: All right. The Home Office's Chief Scientific Adviser, so independent of the Passport Office, has been asked to carry out that review.

Q265 Lorraine Fullbrook: Has that already started?

Paul Pugh: Yes, indeed.

Q266 Lorraine Fullbrook: What are the basic principles? There will be some basic factors that will be retained, irrespective of how you go on to forecast. What are the basic factors and principles you use in your forecasting model?

Paul Pugh: The things that inform the forecast are inevitably passport data. We know how many people hold a passport and, therefore, demographic and population data and how that is changing over the years. Then there will be some assumptions about the likely level of renewal rates in the passport system and how they will influence levels of demand, because not everybody who has had a previous passport is going to renew. Those are the key elements that have informed the previous forecast. What I would want to know from the Chief Scientific Adviser is whether there are different or additional or separate elements that would put us in a better place to have a more accurate forecast for the future.

Q267 Lorraine Fullbrook: Do you also take into account economic activity in any given year?

Paul Pugh: Generally not, no. The forecasting model was revised a few years ago, partly because it had attempted to include economic data but it did not prove accurate or helpful in predicting levels of passport forecasts. Therefore, what we have not yet been able to tell is whether the changes in the economy have had an effect on levels of demand. It is a supposition, and that is in part what our customers are telling us, but we don't have the evidence to support it.

Q268 Lorraine Fullbrook: But will you look at taking that type of thing into account in the way that you forecast in the future?

Paul Pugh: I would take the best available expert advice on what we should include.

Q269 Mark Reckless: I have been asked to pass on thanks and appreciation to the staff at your Victoria office for the extraordinary courtesy they are showing in very pressured circumstances.

You mentioned just now that staff were paid more if they answered more calls and I wondered if that might explain the problem one constituent of mine is getting when he calls. He gets his calls answered by the advice line operator and asks for an update on his case and then gets the phone put back down again without any information.

Paul Pugh: No, it is not correct to say that staff get paid more for calls. Teleperformance have increased the number of call handlers, I think from originally 350 to over 1,600. They are employing a—

Q270 Chair: Excuse me, Mr Pugh, since when have they increased the number of call handlers?

Paul Pugh: They have increased the number of call handlers incrementally over March, April, May, June.

Chair: Thank you. So it is 1,600?

Paul Pugh: Not in one big piece.

Chair: Sorry, please continue.

Q271 Mark Reckless: This gentleman applied on 25 May and was not able to get any update. My office finally managed to get an update for him this morning from Liverpool that said no progress has been made at all on his application since 25 May. Is that exceptional?

Paul Pugh: I think I was given advance notice of that case.

Mark Reckless: Indeed, and no progress was made until it was mentioned that I would be seeking to raise the case. Is that fair or—

Paul Pugh: I don't know. To be fair to our Liverpool office, no, I think it will be issued within the next few days and would have been, I think, regardless of whether I had asked for that update ahead of this discussion.

Q272 Mark Reckless: I am glad to hear that. What is your advice to people, given the difficulties with the high volume of work in progress you have at the moment, about applying online and applying by post? Which is likely to work better for people currently?

Paul Pugh: I don't think it makes a significant difference. The most popular service is the Check & Send service through the Post Office. That means they get a third party who checks whether their application is complete and guarantees its delivery to us via the Post Office rather than via the normal mail. But I think in terms of a postal application or an online application, it doesn't make a material difference.

Q273 Mark Reckless: Have you seen an upsurge in applications from Scotland in advance of the independence vote for British passports?

Paul Pugh: No. No significant change, I don't think, although I could not swear—

Q274 Mark Reckless: Would you anticipate one in the event of a "yes" vote?

Paul Pugh: I could not possibly comment on that.

Chair: I think we had better not rely on your anticipation, give your track record.

Q275 Nicola Blackwood: Mr Pugh, obviously we do not want to be delaying British citizens' holidays or trips on business, but the British passport is also a secure document and it does rely on certain checks being made and thoroughly made during the processing of passport applications. While you are receiving such a high volume of applications, and clearly these problems that have been ongoing at the Passport Office, I want to ask you and be assured that all those appropriate checks are being made and the security of the document is not in any way being compromised.

Paul Pugh: Yes. I can give the Committee the absolute assurance that there has been no let-up in the rigour of our scrutiny of applications.

Q276 Chair: Thank you and thank you for coming to see us today. I have given you a file of 180 e-mails that I have received in the last 24 hours and I am sure all those who have e-mailed will expect the same treatment as other Members of Parliament have received when we have raised cases directly with your office. We hope not to see you again before the summer recess, and I mean that in the nicest possible way. The best way that can happen is if work in progress goes down, more passports are issued and the Committee is kept informed.

Paul Pugh: That is a shared ambition.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you for coming.