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Chair, Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

09 July 2020

UPDATE TO ONE-HUNDRED AND SIXTEENTH REPORT OF SESSION 2017-19 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEST FOR OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Dear Chair,

Ahead of giving evidence to the Committee next week, I am writing to update you on the Department's progress against the recommendations that were made by the committee in the one-hundred and sixteenth report of session 2017-19 - English language test for overseas students.

Recommendation 3 – *The Home Office should, within six months of this report, review its arrangement with overseas partners, including redress mechanisms in the event of contractor failure, and write to the Committee with its results.*

In my predecessor's last update, we committed to writing to you with an update on our review of arrangements with overseas partners by March 2020. I apologise for the delay in responding.

I can confirm that this recommendation has been implemented in full. As mentioned in the last update, the Department has in place within its concession agreements, including overseas partners, governance structures that review performance and contract management each month. This includes identifying and managing any potential risks or issues that could arise during service delivery.

The Department has introduced a number of safeguards under the Secure English Language Test (SELT) arrangements, for example, SELT providers attend monthly performance review meetings held by the Home Office, submit monthly and annual performance reports and arrange for an independent auditor to undertake and confirm specific requirements set by the Home Office are being met.

In 2018 we started a procurement process for SELT. The new providers concessions were due to become operational in April 2020, however, implementation was delayed because of the impacts of Covid-19. The concessions are now becoming operational and tests are resuming in the UK and overseas in line with relevant government advice and with the necessary social distancing measures in place.

As a result of this procurement, UK Visas and Immigration now have an increased number of suppliers which mitigates any risk of single supplier failure.

For testing in the UK, the new concessions are for:

- Trinity College London
- IELTS SELT Consortium
- PeopleCert Qualifications Limited
- Pearson Education Ltd.

For testing overseas, the new concessions are for:

- PSI Services (UK) Ltd
- IELTS SELT Consortium
- PeopleCert International Limited
- Pearson Education Ltd

Recommendation 5 – The Home Office should address its lack of curiosity and establish safeguards to protect innocent people in the future, including ensuring that senior leadership do more to promote a culture of curiosity.

In the Department's response via Treasury Minute, we noted that we are marshalling our reforms under the themes of improving customer service, responding better to vulnerable individuals and ensuring the Department is an open organisation which listens and responds to its customers. We continue to do this, however, as I noted in my update to your report on the Windrush Generation and the Home Office on 29 June, we are also reflecting on the recommendations of Windrush Lessons Learned Review (WLLR) and what more we need to put in place to ensure we are protecting innocent people.

For instance, Recommendation 8 asks us to take steps to understand the groups and communities that our policies affect through improved engagement and social research. Furthermore, Recommendation 19 asks that we review the UK Visas and Immigration assurance strategy periodically, to make sure it is operating effectively. We are committed to becoming more outward facing so that we listen to, and act on, the views of external stakeholders.

As I set out in my letter of 29 June, the Home Secretary has welcomed the WLLR recommendations and will update Parliament before the summer recess on how we will approach implementing them. We will then make further substantive announcements after summer recess. As such we have adjusted the target implementation date of this recommendation to October 2020 to ensure consistency with the Windrush Lessons Learned Review recommendations.

I trust this goes some way to updating the Committee on our progress and I look forward to answering any further questions you might have when I appear in front of the committee next week.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Rycroft', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Matthew Rycroft
Permanent Secretary