



Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

29 March 2022

Dear Dame Diana,

Thank you for your letter of 10 March with concerns raised by the Committee about Visa Application Centres (VACs) operated by TLScontact, on behalf of the Home Office. The Home Office has two suppliers contracted to operate the network of overseas VACs on our behalf, VFS Global and TLS Contact.

Our VAC footprint is driven by customer demand. Traditionally the VAC footprint in Europe has been small in line with demand, this reflecting the existence of Free Movement until 31 December 2020 and the fully digital application process EEA Nationals have been able to use since for key visa routes like Skilled Worker and Student. However, the Home Office works closely with both commercial partners to ensure sufficient appointments are made available in each location to meet demand.

In advance of the introduction of the Ukraine Family Scheme, we instructed our suppliers to significantly enhance capacity throughout Europe, from around 2000 appointments per week pre conflict up to a capacity in excess of 13,000 appointments per week as of today.

We note in your letter Zoe Bantleman, Legal Director at the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association raised a specific concern that the VAC in Hungary, which is operated by TLS, was only open from 9 until 2 each day. The VAC in Budapest is currently operating extended days and hours and is open from 8:30 – 16:00 every week Monday – Friday with additional opening on Saturdays. The VAC currently has appointment availability throughout. Zoe also mentioned Warsaw VAC was only open Mondays, Tuesday's and Wednesdays from 9:00 to 1:50pm. Our operations in Poland have increased from 130 appointments per week to in excess of 2,000 in the last two weeks. The Warsaw VAC is currently open 7 days a week and has been supplemented with a second site in Rzeszow which is also open every day to support Ukrainians fleeing the conflict.

There was also a concern raised that in Istanbul, TLS staff offered people \$100 per person for a walk-in appointment and assisted scanning. Customers have the option of submitting documents themselves via self-upload for free or at the VAC with assistance from the commercial partner for an additional charge. For those people applying to the Ukrainian family scheme, applicants are asked to make an appointment first so demand can be managed, there is no fee charged for anyone seen outside of an appointment or for any scanning of documentation.

Whilst our commercial partners may offer added value services (AVS) to customers, these are optional and aim to enhance the customer experience. We continue to work with our commercial partners to monitor their performance and ensure these services are designed and appropriately offered based on customer insight and demand. No-one applying to the UFS should be given the impression payment of a fee will expedite or enhance their application.

In the Home Office's response to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBIs) report into UK Visas and Immigration Front End Services (FES), we accepted a recommendation to 'review the communication by CPs and the Home Office on AVS in order to deliver a clear statement that 'free services' will not disadvantage applicants and what the service entails that applicants will receive if they buy the optional AVS.

We have been undertaking a review of the commercial partner communications around AVS in light of this recommendation, introducing standardised descriptions which make it clear to customers free services will not disadvantage their application and AVS are optional to those who would like added flexibility and convenience. We are in the process of making updates to websites and to communications within the individual VACs, and we aim to have this completed by the end of March.

There is a robust procurement process for appointing suppliers and we continually monitor their performance. Insight gained from a range of stakeholders, including the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, is being used to develop and improve future services.

Finally, our future vision for our migration system will see many more applications being able to be made fully online, without a visit to a Visa Application Centre. The expansion of e-visa capabilities will also bring with them the ability to confirm immigration status to carriers directly, without the need to issue vignettes to be shown when boarding and at the UK Border, further reducing the number of circumstances where a VAC needs to be visited.

*With our good wishes*  


**Rt Hon Priti Patel MP**  
**Home Secretary**