



Home Office

The Lord Murray of Blidworth
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

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Dame Diana Johnson MP
Chair of the Home Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

17 May 2023

Dear Chair,

Thank you for your letter of 5 April which has been passed to me to reply in my capacity as Lords Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for His Majesty's Passport Office.

A record number of people applied for a passport throughout January to March 2023. With over 3 million applications having been received, this is half a million more applications than during the same period last year.

A substantial amount of work has been undertaken to understand and overcome the difficulties experienced with the passport service in the early part of 2022, which has resulted in a vastly improved performance. The latest figures (as of March 2023) show over 99.7% of standard passport applications are being processed within the published processing guidance of ten weeks, with the majority of those delivered to customers well under this timescale.

While we are disappointed that the Public & Commercial Services Union has chosen to target HM Passport Office given these successes, this high performance means that it is well positioned to manage an extended period of industrial action.

1) Given the five-week strike announced at the Passport Office, what steps have been taken to ensure that the three-week standard will be maintained in the run-up to the main holiday season?

Prior to April 2021, the published processing guidance for standard UK passport applications was three weeks, with the exception of adults applying for their first British passport who were advised to allow six weeks. With approximately 5 million people having delayed their passport application due to the restrictions upon international travel caused by COVID-19, since April 2021 the published processing guidance for all standard UK applications has been ten weeks.

In her letter to you of 27 March, the Home Secretary advised that, since November 2022, passport applications have typically been processed within three weeks, and as an indication of the level of performance it was noted that this was the pre-pandemic processing guidance. Please note, the standard is ten weeks, not three weeks.

Mitigations have been put in place to help ensure that customers can continue to expect the high standards of service delivered so far this year, and there are no plans to change the guidance to allow up to ten weeks to get a passport in response to industrial action. These mitigations include the use of trained and experienced team members who have previously supported HM Passport Office during seasonal surges in demand.

The vast majority of passport applications can be processed by any member of HM Passport Office's processing staff, from any office or via homeworking solutions. I can assure you that there is no impact upon customers based upon where they live, or the time at which they applied.

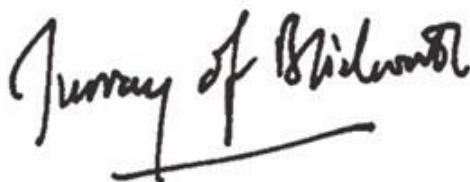
We will continue to seek to return the processing time guidance to pre-pandemic timeframes as soon as it is possible to do so. However, the pandemic was an exceptional cause of the ongoing elevated demand for passports, and this means the exact volumes and profile of when demand will arrive is less predictable than in a normal year. It is therefore appropriate to continue to advise people to allow up to ten weeks to get their passport.

2) What assurance can you give that its performance this year will be improved, and, in the absence of any publicly transparent information on what penalty was actually imposed on Teleperformance, what assurance can you give that the level of undisclosed penalty imposed adequately compensated for Teleperformance's atrocious under-performance and refusal to subject itself to scrutiny?

Our supplier contracts set out the requirements, alongside where a remedy would be applied should these not be met. The content of those clauses, and the value of any remedy invoked, is commercially sensitive and I am therefore unable to share information relating to this.

Since August 2022, Teleperformance have been consistently meeting the required standard. However, as part of lessons learned from last year, HM Passport Office has added greater resilience to its provision of customer contact services by appointing an additional supplier. Serco, who commenced this work on 22 March 2023, will handle approximately 25% of calls to the Passport Adviceline and provide extra resilience to Teleperformance, with the overall contact centre spend estimated to deliver circa £2m savings over a 2-year period.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Murray of Blidworth' in a cursive style, with a horizontal line underneath.

**The Lord Murray of Blidworth
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State**

