

Huw Merriman MP
Chair – Transport Committee

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Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

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Dear Mr Merriman,

Thank you for inviting me to a hearing of the Transport Committee on 27 January to discuss the recent press reports about Covid 19 at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). I thought it would be helpful to write to you in advance of the hearing to inform the Committee of the extensive range of measures the DVLA has put in place to ensure the safety of our staff.

The DVLA's core responsibilities are to maintain more than 49 million driver records and more than 40 million vehicle records. We collect nearly £7 billion a year in vehicle excise duty. We issue around 11 million driving licences and 11 million vehicle registration certificates each year. Around 47 million customers tax their vehicles annually with 40.3 million (85%) choosing to do so online. Our contact centre answers 10 million calls, over 250,000 emails and 476,000 webchats. Currently, 97.5% (over a billion) of our customer interactions are digital or automated allowing businesses and motorists to transact with us at a time and place that suits them. However, even with such a large take up of digital services, we still receive around 60,000 pieces of mail to our offices every day.

It is important to note that it is not correct to say, as media headlines suggested, that there are 500 Covid-19 cases currently at the DVLA's offices in Swansea. As of 24 January, there have been a total 546 cases recorded among DVLA staff. However, this is a cumulative number since March 2020 and includes both staff working on site and those working from home. There are currently no live cases in the DVLA's contact centre and six live cases across the whole of our workforce of more than 6,000 staff. The six live cases includes two people who are working from home. The safety of our staff is a top priority and we will continue to ensure they are supported while they carry out the essential public services we provide to motorists across the UK.

All staff who can work from home are doing so. Around 2,000 staff have been working from home permanently since March. We have identified additional operational roles that can be done from home, with changes made to roles and processes, and those roles are also now being carried out by remote workers. However, in view of the essential nature of the public services we provide, some operational staff are required to be in the office where their role means they cannot work from home. This is predominantly to deal with paper applications

or where access is required to our secure databases, which cannot be accessed from home for data security reasons.

An extensive range of safety measures have been put in place across all of the DVLA's sites since the start of the pandemic, I have provided more information about the measures in place in the attached annex. The DVLA has also taken advantage of a UK Government pilot scheme to test workers using rapid lateral flow tests of those without symptoms. Between 8 and 25 January, 2,211 of these tests had been carried out with contact centre staff at the DVLA, with no positive results identified.

We have made significant investment in making our estate Covid-secure, working closely with Public Health Wales (PHW), Swansea Council's Environmental Health team and the trade union. The Health and Safety Executive has also visited our site. Throughout the pandemic, we have implemented Welsh Government advice and legislative requirements fully, including the workplace guidance for offices and contact centres. We will continue to take full account of all relevant advice and make changes where necessary.

The number of staff on-site at the DVLA in the early stages of the pandemic was reduced to around 500 across the DVLA's main site and its contact centre. This was necessary because at that time the DVLA, in common with all businesses and organisations, had not had the opportunity to create a Covid secure, socially distanced workplace. During this period, we prioritised services for health workers and lorry drivers only, as they were critical to the UK's initial Covid response. With the very limited number of staff on-site, it was impossible to meet even that level of demand from lorry drivers and health workers across the UK and led to a significant number of applications awaiting processing. The demand for DVLA's services is much higher during this lockdown, as many more businesses have also become Covid secure. For example, 75,000 new vehicles have been registered so far in January, utilising car dealer click and collect services as allowed across the UK.

Following the input of PHW, Swansea Council's environmental health team and local Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union representatives, we spent several months during spring/summer 2020 investing in making our sites Covid secure. The number of staff on-site was gradually increased following consultation with PCS, as we put in place the stringent safety measures outlined in the annex to this letter.

All floors within our buildings have been divided up into zones that act like bubbles. Staff only work in the zone to which they are allocated and are not permitted to go to any other zone one the same or a different floor. Zones are clearly marked for all to see. The DVLA's staff have no face-to-face contact with members of the public and are limited to socially distanced contact only with colleagues in their own bubble.

While our online services have continued to work well throughout, and we have and continued to strongly encourage customers to transact with us online, significant numbers of people, often those without online access, have continued to post applications. Opening and processing this mail requires staff to be on-site. For many transactions, access is required to the main drivers and vehicles databases, which are part of the UK's critical national infrastructure and as such subject to more stringent security requirements limiting remote access. Also, due to the legally required social distancing measures we have in place, members of the public who post applications to us have seen significant delays in the processing of their applications as our capacity has been severely curtailed.

We continue to work closely with PHW, Swansea Council's environmental health team and the Health and Safety Executive. These organisations regularly review the measures in place and when advice is revised, it is acted upon and changes made quickly.

The DVLA's risk assessments are regularly reviewed and all relevant guidance is monitored and quickly built into working practices. The Welsh Government's guidance steers the approach as we are based in Swansea and we will continue to adapt as that evolves. We meet regularly with the union to discuss health and safety matters, including changes to risk assessments. The union is also invited to take part in visits from the environmental health team and the Health and Safety Executive.

Cleaning arrangements at the DVLA have been revised in consultation with PHW and the environmental health team. The DVLA's cleaning contractor has recruited additional staff and regular audits are taking place to ensure that practices are as set out in the agreed operating instructions.

The DVLA is following advice from the Health and Safety Executive on air conditioning and detailed advice from the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers. This includes setting the air conditioning system to fully fresh air with no recirculation and turning on the system at a recommended speed before staff start work for the day.

The health and safety of our staff is, and has been throughout, of paramount concern. I can assure the Committee that it will remain our priority while we also balance the needs of ensuring continuity of the essential services we are required to provide to motorists across the UK.

I hope this information is helpful to the Committee in advance of the hearing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julie Lennard', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Julie Lennard
DVLA Chief Executive

Annex – DVLA on site safety measures

In accordance with the relevant guidance and advice, the DVLA has put the following measures in place:

- Desks have been reconfigured to ensure all adjacent and back to back seating is a minimum of two metres apart. Perspex screens have been installed to provide additional protection. Floor plans have been shared with PHW and Swansea Council's environmental health team has also visited the site.
- All floors have been divided up into zones (or bubbles). No mixing of staff between zones is allowed and each zone has a dedicated controller who is responsible for ensuring that rules are followed and that social distancing is maintained. Movement within zones is severely restricted.
- One-way systems are in place throughout the DVLA's site and social distancing markers are on the floors, especially in areas like lift lobbies and catering outlets, which are only providing takeaway food.
- Communal areas, for example rest areas, catering seating areas and meeting rooms, are all closed.
- Lift use is limited to a maximum of two people at a time in large lifts and single use where the lifts are smaller. Staff are encouraged to use the stairs where they are physically able to do so.
- Shift working and staggered start and finish times are in place to reduce the number of staff on-site at one time.
- Air conditioning has been reconfigured to use external fresh air only with no recycling of air.
- Cleaning regimes have been put in place in line with Welsh Government guidance and manufacturer advice is followed for the World Health Organisation's recommended cleaning products. Housekeepers are in place to clean high contact points throughout the day and a card system is used to provide visible evidence to staff that cleaning of a desk has taken place. Recent recommendations by the environmental health team have been implemented and additional cleaning hours are being introduced with more cleaning staff being recruited by the DVLA's cleaning contractor.
- All staff have been provided with individual hand sanitisers, sanitising stations are in place across all floors and staff can also access disinfectant wipes to use as they wish. Staff are advised to wipe down handles in the kitchen area after every use in addition to the normal cleaning regime.

- All extremely vulnerable operational staff had already been offered a role that can be done from home and have been mandated to work from home following the change in Welsh Government guidance.
- Any notifications of symptomatic cases are channelled to a central team. When a notification is received, details are captured of where the individual has been and who they have been in contact with. This information is shared with the local environmental health team to help them with their track and trace activity and anonymised information is also shared with the trade union. All these notifications are analysed and if potential risks are identified, they are quickly addressed.