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8th July 2021

To: Home Affairs Select Committee

Dear Chair,

Re: Home Office preparedness for covid-19: management of the borders.

Thank you for the invitation to give written evidence to you on this subject.

Increased passenger numbers during summer 2021

The ISU has a range of concerns about concerns about the impact of increased passenger numbers as international travel becomes more accessible during 2021.

Delays in processing travellers at the Border are inevitably connected to an increased risk of transmission within the arrivals halls which almost without exception cannot be socially distant. These delays also impact the reputation of the UK both domestically and internationally. Further the rate of verbal abuse of Border staff, referenced in more detail below, has increased exponentially as a result of delays at the Border.

The reasons why Border Force has reached the point that it has are complex and intertwined with no one reason being a particular pinch point. The ISU has identified the following as reasons for the current situation and why the Border could be quickly overwhelmed this summer. Border Force were asked for their input into the accuracy of the data cited below but were unable to respond.

A. Lack of staffing investment at ports.

Border force as a whole has grown significantly in the last 20 months. However, the vast majority of that growth has been directed toward international trade to support the EU Exit process. In the meantime, the main body of Border Force has reduced at the “normal” rate of between 4 and 10% per year. ISU accepts that Border Force state that staffing loss is at the lower end of this range. However, they do not include in figures those who have left Border Force for other areas of Home Office or other Government departments. The ISU views the loss of any officer from Border Force as a loss of resource regardless of whether they remain in the wider Civil Service.

Although there has been, and is currently, a small amount of recruitment into the mainstream ports the slow pace of recruitment and on-boarding, combined with the need for detailed training and on the job assessment staff recruited at this point will not be operationally available until late 2021. Although staffing was low as we entered into the pandemic the change in demand at the border (see below) has meant that some ports, including flagship ports like Heathrow, struggle now and will fail completely with increased passenger numbers.

B. Change in the nature of demand

UK Government statistics show that in 2018 (The last year for which full statistics are available) only 14% of UK arrivals were not from the UK or EU/EEA. UK and EU / EEA nationals were subject to minimal border checks and were often able to pass through e-gates. The strain on Border resources from this significant majority of arrivals was minimal. Although 2020 / 2021 passenger numbers are a fraction of what they were in 2018, the requirement to check covid secure documentation is a significant change to demand.

An officer processing UK and EU / EEA citizens pre pandemic might take an average of 2 – 4 minutes per passenger; 25 – 30 passengers per hour. Post pandemic. With the requirement to check covid compliant documentation, this takes an average of 8 - 12 minutes per passenger who has their documentation ready and to hand; 4 - 8 passengers per hour. If a traveller does not have their documentation ready or has not complied in some respect this increases exponentially. The changed demands at the border post pandemic and post EU exit has had a crippling impact on staffing at many UK ports. The staffing profile we had even as late as 2018 simply does not fit the 2021 reality.

The ISU acknowledges that Border Force has sought to draw on a seasonal work force and staff from other government departments to try to support the work at the border. However retired staff recruited without fair and open competition and staff from other government departments with only minimal training cannot adequately support the work if the Border. Greater and greater pressure falls on the permanent officer whose numbers are reducing and whose morale is failing.

The ISU welcomes the efforts of Border Force to bring the e-gates back online to enable travellers to use them. However, the progress is slow, and it is not likely to have a significant impact on waiting times in the short term. The e-gates cannot check the pre departure negative covid test, or vaccination status should that become necessary.

C. Staff engagement at the Border

Reports from the Chief Inspector of Borders reference over and over again the willingness and commitment of Border staff to “get the job done”. Home Office staff surveys show that although Border Force staff are some of the most unhappy in the UK Civil Service (exceeded only by the Prison Service) they still have immense commitment to the team and to the work.

This intense commitment has carried Border Force through the last 18 months in a better shape than it would have been otherwise. However, this once resilient determination is now failing. Border Force staff have been at work throughout the pandemic as key workers yet have not been acknowledged in any meaningful way. The last act of the departing COO Emma Moore was to send out memorial coins costing less than £2 each to every officer. However, against the background of the uncertainty of face to face work in a pandemic, workplace outbreaks, the death of colleagues, the pressures caused by changed demand, the real wage impact of over a decade of public sector pay restraint, the erosion of terms and conditions and the continued failure of the Home Office to address the entrenched and systematic bullying of staff this has had little positive impact.

Reported verbal abuse of staff at the Border has increased over 100% since the introduction of the requirement to check covid secure documentation. Both ISU and Border Force recognise that verbal abuse is significantly under reported by staff and the true rate of abuse is in fact much higher. The ISU has called on Border Force repeatedly, but with limited success, to strengthen its response to staff in this regard and introduce a “zero tolerance” approach to those who abuse Border Force staff.

As staff become increasingly disengaged the rate of staff churn increases reducing the number of experienced staff available at the border, placing increasing reliance on seasonal workers and less completely trained staff from other government departments. This presents a direct threat to Border security not only from the perspective increased waiting times increasing the risk of covid transmission; but also more generally.

D. Difficulties with new IT Infrastructure.

Border Force has introduced a new IT system in 2021. Because this currently runs in parallel with the existing system staff have to enter information twice. This increases the length of time that any officer must take away from the Primary Arrivals Control and contributes to the observed lack of officers available and to the length of waiting times.

The ISU recognises that IT change can be slow. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the additional processing time, sometimes up to an hour more per case than previously, contributes in a meaningful way to the delays in processing travellers increasing the risk of covid transmission; and to the burdens on staff increasing disengagement.

E. 100% checks on covid documentation at the border.

The current requirement for documentation checks is not as streamlined as would be ideal. There are potentially 4 separate pieces of documentation which the traveller may have to show; a negative pre departure test certificate, the passenger locator form, proof of quarantine booking (if applicable) and proof of testing booked on days 2 and 8 following return.

There is confusion amongst travellers about exactly what is needed by different groups. This is likely to increase should government introduce different provisions for those able to demonstrate vaccination status. Having the wrong documentation at the border increases queue times exponentially. The time it takes a Border Officer to correct the deficit and issue the notice of intention to fine can take in excess of 30 minutes per passenger, not only holding up that passenger but also depriving the arrivals control of the work of that officer.

F. Any requirement to establish vaccination status at the border.

Insofar as any measures might be introduced either this summer or later to have different provisions for those who can demonstrate their vaccination status, the ISU is concerned that this might create additional confusion for travellers. At this time, and recognising that it is only speculation at this point, the ISU is unsure how to verify the vaccination status of those who were not vaccinated by the NHS and / or cannot use the NHS app. Equally the ISU is unsighted as to how this requirement, if imposed, can be integrated into e-gates.

G. Fluctuations in the traffic light system.

When advance notice is given of the change in status of a country this results in a significantly increased flow of travellers seeking to avoid any increased measures. This places pressure on the

borders in terms of the numbers travelling and increases the risk that a new variant may be imported and then spread during the travel process. When Pakistan and then later India went onto the red list earlier in 2021 there was a significant increase in travellers including the use of private a dedicated charter flights, some landing only minutes before the deadline. When Portugal moved from green to amber there was an estimated 100% increase in commercial flights put on by carriers to return those who did not wish to quarantine.

The ISU recognises that there is a trade-off between public perceptions, any impact on the travel industry and border / covid security. However, the virus cannot tell the date and the increased passenger traffic that results from giving extended notice of a change in status does increase the risk that new variants would be inadvertently imported, and the border put under unnecessary strain.

H. Difficulties in separating red list arrivals at ports.

Although Heathrow now offers a dedicated “red list” terminal this only separates those who have arrived on a flight directly from a red list country. Other smaller ports do not have the option of a separate terminal for arrivals and have to do what they can to separate red list passengers from others. Those who have travelled indirectly from a red list country are not identified at all, other than by an honesty type system where a separate queue line is available.

The ISU recognises that this is a difficult issue for ports and physical infrastructure is what it is. However, this is a risk to the spread of covid and in particular new variants which needs to be identified.

The risk of importation of new strains in the medium term.

The ISU is not a scientific expert, and we rely completely on the testimony of those with greater expertise in this area. However, in addition to the short term issues identified above which will, if not addressed, continue forward into the medium term, the ISU does consider that there are two further elements which would impact the risk of importation of a new strain of the virus

I. Irregular migration.

The continued pressure of irregular migration is, in the view of the ISU, an obvious risk for the importation of new variants of the virus. Travellers though this route are not subject to any predeparture testing regime and any variant identified on arrival is already de factor within the UK. We recognise the significant practical and political difficulties in reducing irregular migration into the UK. However suitable measures are needed to protect staff engaged in these activities, to promptly identify any infected persons and the variant which they are carrying; and to suitably isolate them to minimise the risk of importation of a new variant.

J. Decisions on continued protection measures at the border

Only hours before the finalisation of this evidence the ISU was notified that Public Health England and the devolved Health Authorities had issued advice that protective measures such as face coverings, social distancing etc. would remain that the Border. Although Border Force staff will no longer be required to take these measures between one another, they will remain when staff are dealing with travellers to mitigate against the risk of the importation of any new variant. The ISU very much welcomes and supports this advice. The scientific advice will of course prevail but it appears prudent, in the view of the ISU, that such measures continue at least for the medium term.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to put evidence to you on this very important matter. The ISU is sorry not to be able to give evidence in person, but we remain available to answer any questions or points of clarification should the committee require.

Yours sincerely

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