



Department for Transport

Huw Merriman MP
Chair – Transport Committee

Via e-mail: transcom@parliament.uk

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Dear Huw,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence at the recent Transport Select Committee inquiry into the work of the DVLA. I agreed to provide some further information to follow up on questions from Committee members.

I would firstly like to put on record my thanks to the DVLA staff who have worked throughout the pandemic to provide essential services to motorists across the United Kingdom and who are working hard to clear the backlogs that have built up.

I would also like to reiterate that throughout the pandemic the vast majority of DVLA services have continued to operate as normal with documents reaching customers in a matter of days. It is paper-based services – which are the minority – that have been subject to delays.

As I said at the evidence session, the vast majority of DVLA staff have not participated in the unnecessary industrial action orchestrated by the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union. The strikes called in April were for all staff on site. The average number taking industrial action in the first week of the all staff strike at Easter was 750 people a day out of a workforce of more than 6,000. Most DVLA staff are working hard to clear the backlog and return the organisation to a more normal state.

Despite this, the delays caused by the PCS action are having a significant impact on people's daily lives, with 400,000 of DVLA's live queue of 1.5 million transactions directly attributable to the industrial action. Since May PCS has been deliberately targeting the areas of DVLA which will have the biggest impact on motorists, including the mail opening and processing

teams, the area that prints and sends driving licences and other important documentation and the teams that deal with driving licence applications from those with a medical condition. The PCS has repeatedly claimed increasing backlogs and disruption to people's lives as a 'success', which is disappointing when some of the most vulnerable people in society rely on the services the DVLA provides.

Of DVLA's 6,218 staff, 3,106 PCS members were balloted in February and March 2021. Of those, 1,561 cast a vote with 1,114 voting in favour of strike action and 442 against. Turnout was 50.3% which is just 0.3% above the legally required minimum 50% turnout for the ballot to be valid. PCS balloted its members on the grounds that the union was demanding that the number of staff on site should be reduced to the level of staff working on site at the very start of the pandemic in March 2020. This clearly did not take into consideration the substantial safety measures that the DVLA had put in place since that time to protect staff and make its offices as Covid secure as possible, including restacking existing buildings to use all space made available by the more than 2,000 staff working at home as well as leasing an additional building, and the successful roll out of the vaccination programme. PCS changed the emphasis of its demands during negotiations.

PCS has incentivised strike action throughout with a payment of £40 for each day of strike action taken. This applies whether the person taking strike action is part time or full time and is not paid pro rata. For staff at administrative grades, this means that they do not lose any money through taking strike action, in fact some are financially better off, especially as the incentive payment is also a tax-free payment. PCS has promoted these aspects to its members.

The first meeting between DVLA/DfT and PCS, in an effort to avert strike action, took place on 23 March 2021. PCS drafted and provided a document called "Agreement between Public and Commercial Union and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency regarding the current and future working arrangements of staff at the DVLA" which set out their initial demands for discussion. The document was received on 23 March and it formed the basis of ongoing discussions, although at no point was it agreed to – indeed, many of the demands went far beyond what was achievable or necessary. There have been six versions which have differed from each other significantly. The initial two versions from PCS in March focused on an immediate reduction of staff onsite while later versions omitted this and focused more on the return to work of staff on paid special leave. PCS has also made a number of proposals around pay and time off – which go far beyond the realm of the supposed safety concerns on which the strike is based.

As the committee is aware the full scope of the Deloitte work has not been released because the DVLA has applied exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act. However, I have attached at Annex A an extract of the

Deloitte report on a confidential basis which highlights the most relevant aspects the committee was interested in. The committee will note that from March 2020 when around 1,400 were working from home that number steadily increased to 2,187 in March 2021 and work continues to increase this figure where possible, which will increase the resilience of DVLA in the event of any further waves of the pandemic.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that the DVLA has an incredibly strong track record of outstanding public service but, just like every other organisation in the UK, it has had to adapt over the last 18 months. As a public sector organisation providing essential public services it has continued to deliver at scale for citizens throughout the pandemic while keeping staff safe. I am confident that with the mitigating measures in place, and if PCS agrees to bring the industrial action to an end, the DVLA will be able to rapidly start to recover the delivery of its paper services to the same high standards that its digital services have maintained throughout.

Yaws,
Charlotte

BARONESS VERE OF NORBITON