



Huw Merriman MP  
Chair – Transport Committee

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Dear Mr Merriman,

Thank you for your letter of 18 January seeking an update on our pandemic recovery since the session of the Transport Committee on 21 July and my follow up letter of 1 September.

Our extensive suite of online services remains the quickest and easiest way of transacting with us. Our digital services continue to work extremely well, as they have throughout the entire pandemic, and are not subject to delays. With most online transactions, the driving licence or vehicle registration certificate (V5C) is issued within days. Most customers transact with us digitally and, since 1 August 2021, we have undertaken 1.65 billion digital interactions, including applications and large-scale digital record enquiries. We continue to use all communications channels available to us to strongly encourage motorists to use our online services wherever possible.

We have worked very hard to ensure staff safety whilst meeting the needs of members of the public who need the services DVLA provides. The paper application backlogs that built up during the first national lockdown were quickly reduced over the summer of 2020. Our progress following the second Covid wave was significantly impacted by the 58 days of industrial action orchestrated by the PCS who targeted the areas of the business which had the biggest impact on customers. Despite this, backlogs had been reducing at a steady rate since September when the action brought by PCS ended. However, the Omicron variant has had an impact due to the increased number of staff absences (in line with higher rates of infection in the local community and indeed across the UK) in December and January.

In addition, driving licence renewal volumes in 2021 were much higher than a normal year. This was due to the 11-month extension given to all driving licences expiring between 1 February and 31 December 2020 to allow motorists to continue to drive and to keep essential supply chains moving during the first wave of Covid and national lockdown. This meant that between January and December in 2021, we were receiving applications from customers renewing licences that expired in 2020 in addition to those whose licences were due for renewal in 2021.



## Application turnaround

- *How many applications are currently in the system?*

Since I last spoke to the Transport Committee, we had a further four weeks of industrial action and of course like many organisations, we were also impacted by the Omicron wave of Covid. I remain very grateful to all of our dedicated staff who continue to work incredibly hard to return to our usual high levels of customer service. The number of paper applications awaiting processing now stands at 1.1 million. This is a reduction from a peak of 1.6 million in September which followed industrial action by PCS members throughout August.

As discussed at the Committee session in July, we generally have around 400,000 paper applications being processed at any one time. This is because we are constantly processing tens of thousands of applications and receive around 60,000 items of mail each day creating a constant and large-scale flow of applications and correspondence in and out. In the six months since I last spoke to the Committee, 29 million applications were completed online. In the same period, we processed 6.4 million paper applications.

- *How many customers who have submitted a paper application are currently waiting more than 10 weeks for their applications to be processed?*

Most vehicle related paper applications are now being processed within normal pre-pandemic turnaround times. Paper driver applications are currently taking between one and 12 weeks to process depending on the transaction. Out of the 1.1 million noted above there were 254,396 individual cases that were older than 10 weeks. Included in this number are complex casework transactions, for example, those where ID documents are submitted to support an application or where we need medical information.

- *To establish a baseline, could you provide the pre-COVID average processing time of a paper application?*

Before the pandemic, we advised customers that paper applications could take up to three to four weeks to process. However, those involving a medical condition took longer as these cases are some of the most complex that the DVLA handles and many require investigation with external medical experts, including GPs or consultants. We aimed to process 90% of medical applications within 90 days.

In December, the Department for Health and Social Care asked DVLA to stop sending medical questionnaires (excluding vocational applications) to NHS doctors in December and January to allow the NHS to focus all efforts on the vaccination booster programme. While referrals to doctors have now resumed, this has had a further impact on our drivers medical turnaround times. It is important to note that the large majority of those renewing a licence where a medical condition is involved will be able to continue driving while we are awaiting the information we need to make a licensing decision under section 88 of the Road Traffic Act 1988.

## Vocational Licences

- *How many customers who have submitted a vocational licence application are waiting more than four weeks for their applications to be processed?*

By prioritising vocational licence applications to support the Government's response to the driver shortage, I am pleased to report that there are no delays in straightforward applications for vocational licences, including renewals, which are being processed within normal turnaround times of five working days. Our staff eliminated the backlog for these transactions by clearing more than 55,000 applications in a matter of weeks and halved the turnaround time from ten to five working days. This is a huge achievement in such a short time. Over the last six months, we have processed almost 230,000 vocational applications.

Applications for a vocational driving licence where the customer has a medical condition will take longer as, for road safety reasons, the required medical standards for driving large vehicles are higher than those for cars or motorbikes. This is because these vehicles are larger or carry passengers, and the driver will typically spend more time on the road and drive longer distances. These applications are therefore among the most complex cases we deal with and many require investigation with external medical experts, including GPs or consultants.

There are currently 33,853 vocational applications where one or more medical conditions are involved which are taking more than four weeks to process. As outlined above, many of these drivers will be able to continue driving under Section 88 of the Road Traffic Act while they are waiting for their application to be processed.

- *What progress has been made in updating your system to allow medical documents to be submitted online?*

We have an online service for drivers with certain single medical conditions to notify us of the condition or apply to renew a medically restricted licence. These conditions, which include the most common we are notified of, are diabetes, epilepsy, sleep apnoea, narcolepsy, Parkinson's, conditions affecting vision, heart conditions and stroke or transient ischaemic attack (TIA). We continue to investigate ways to further expedite the medical renewal process.

As discussed at the Committee session, our longer-term ambition is to receive the medical information we need to support a licensing decision digitally. We have discussed with NHS digital service providers how this could be taken forward and we continue to work with them on this. We have also recently consulted on changing the law to widen the pool of medical professionals who can complete and return our medical forms, which will help speed up the process and reduce the pressure on doctors. Subject to Parliamentary approval, we anticipate that this could come into force later this year.

## DVLA Business Plan

- *Can you set out the DVLA's current performance against the business plan targets?*

The business plan targets are agreed with Ministers in advance of publication. DVLA's performance against them is published at the end of the financial year to account for the full

year's performance. The figures to date reflect good performance across most measures and we are on track to meet or exceed all our targets relating to online services, which is the majority of our transactions. The targets for paper transactions and correspondence in 2021-22 were set in line with pre pandemic levels of customer service and we are unlikely to meet those this year. However, the business plan made clear that the targets had been set in the context of no further disruption to service through Covid or industrial action, which has clearly not been the case.

- *Where backlogs exist, can you set out your plans to tackle the deficits?*

Our approach to tackling the backlogs sits across a number of strands:

### **Moving more services online**

We have introduced new digital services at pace since the start of the pandemic. Our digital company card tachograph service, introduced at the end of 2019 resulted in 100% channel shift to digital, which allowed us to subsequently switch off the paper channel completely. We are also seeing significant channel shift to our new digital services for tachograph card holders, allowing them to apply, renew, update and replace tachograph cards online for the first time. More than 88% of all tachograph transactions are now completed online, with around 18,000 online tachograph transactions completed each month, and nearly 150,000 completed since the new services were introduced.

We re-prioritised our digital development plans at the start of the pandemic to accelerate the delivery of services that would immediately reduce the volume of paper coming into DVLA. Our Duplicate Vehicle Registration Certificate service allows customers to request and pay for a replacement vehicle registration certificate if the original is lost or has been destroyed. The service went live in September 2020 and currently sees over 30,000 transactions each month. As with online change of address transactions, these would have previously come to us as paper applications.

Our online service to allow customers to apply for a driving licence digitally links with HM Passport Office to download the passport photograph and signature from the HMPO database for use on the driving licence. As HM Passport Office has stopped capturing signatures with applications for use on a passport (they are now signed after delivery), we have developed our new Drivers First Application service at pace to enable significantly more first-time customers to complete the transaction online. The new service can capture a signature online, removing our dependence on the passport signature. The first public iteration of the new service went live in June 2021. As with all our services, we work in an agile way, iterating services as we go. In December 2021, we launched the ability to upload a photograph on a first application also.

We continue to promote online services to encourage more people to use our digital channels, thereby reducing the amount of paper applications we receive.

### **Recruiting additional staff**

To reduce backlogs and increase future resilience, we have recruited additional staff in Swansea and our newly leased office space in Birmingham, as well as additional evening shift staff.

## Overtime

Large numbers of staff in Swansea have worked overtime in the evenings and weekends throughout the pandemic in order to help process paper applications and continue to do so.

### Calls to the DVLA Contact Centre

- *What is the current average call waiting time?*

The average call waiting time in January was 10 minutes.

- *What were the total weekly unmet phone calls in each of the last four weeks for which figures are available?*

We are currently in the process of switching over to a new system which will transform our contact centre services by migrating our telephone services and our digital channels to a new platform, creating a more efficient user and customer experience. It will provide increased opportunities in the future for our customers to use more automated service options and will also provide our staff with a greater range of analytical tools to continuously improve the service we provide. Our unmet call demand and the number of calls answered in the last four weeks is in the graph attached at **Annex A**. It is important to note that the unmet demand numbers are not a reflection of the individual number of customers calling as most calls will be from a smaller number of individuals who redial or make multiple calls.

The last 18 months have been extremely challenging for DVLA and I am very proud of the way in which my staff have risen to the unprecedented challenges placed on our service by both the pandemic and the associated industrial action. We know that people rely on an efficient and secure service from us and the provision of an extensive suite of online services means that the disruption has not been more widespread during the pandemic. I would like to reassure the Committee that we are doing everything that can be done to reduce the number of paper-based applications as quickly as possible. However, due to both the scale of the business and the degree of disruption experienced, that is a significant undertaking. In the absence of further restrictions and no industrial action, I hope to be in a position of having recovered vehicles paper application services by the end of this month, drivers paper-based services by the end of May with the more complex drivers medical services returning to pre-pandemic levels by September.

I hope this information is helpful to the Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Julie Lennard  
DVLA Chief Executive

Annex A

