

**Written evidence submitted by the Immigration Services Union (COR0185)**

1. Thank you for the request to offer written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on the subject of health measures at the border in the current pandemic.
2. The ISU represents staff from Border Force, Immigration Enforcement and UK Visas and Immigration. We are a certified independent Trade Union recognised by the Home Office for these areas. We are entirely apolitical; we are not part of the TUC or any other lobbying body. We do not make contributions to any political party.
3. The prospect of quarantine / health measures at the border were first announced by Boris Johnson on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2020 with implementation by the end of that month. There was much speculation and uncertainty over the following weeks with Priti Patel finally announcing some limited details on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2020 to take effect from one minute past midnight on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2020.
4. On behalf of members ISU made repeated attempts in the intervening weeks to gain some clarity for them. As late as Friday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020 ISU were still engaged with Border Force pointing out the damage to staff relations and the difficulty in implementation this continued confusion and secrecy would cause. ISU were assured on behalf of staff there would be adequate time to read and understand the new systems, staff would be fully briefed and that there would be a short online training opportunity available prior to implementation.
5. The lack of clarity as to the measures caused staff considerable anxiety and concern. As front line key workers they had already been subject to considerable anxiety arising from the lack of clarity over matters such as personal protective equipment, requirements to attend or not attend the workplace, disparities of treatment for staff defined as needing to isolate etc. For the avoidance of doubt, no particular blame is attached to this; the situation was emerging and fast paced. However, it does go to set the background against which staff received the information for health measures at the border.
6. In the week leading up to implementation there was considerable confusion, even amongst senior leaders, as to what the measures would contain. For example within one 24 hour period in that week staff at the Juxtaposed control (Dover / Calais) were told by local managers that they were exempted from the requirement to make a declaration, within hours directly contradicted by the Chief Operating Officer who stated that they must make the declaration on a daily basis. Only to have that information rescinded again the next morning with confirmation that they were not required to make the declaration. Staff serving in Paris, Brussels, Lille etc were notified by managers that they would not now be able to return to the UK for their scheduled rest days, medical appointments etc; only to have this varied within 24 hours to suggest that they could return to their homes in the UK without quarantine as long as it was only for scheduled rest days and not for leave. Dover based apprentices were put on notice to work from Calais to deliver the programme and only stood down from that duty on Friday evening when it became clear that we were not able to check health declarations on French soil. The inability to communicate a clear direction was very damaging to staff morale and confidence.
7. In the event the guidance, amounting to so 50 pages of some fairly technically dense material was not released to staff until after 5pm on Friday 5<sup>th</sup> June. Although Border Force front line is a 24/7 operation those providing policy advice and non-operational support for officers do not work weekends. Where

[COR0185]

queries arose, for example on the use of powers of arrest in the event of non-compliance, it was not possible to get a response prior to implementation. Further, as a result of reduced traveller numbers many front-line officers were also stood down at the weekend in order to save the additional cost of weekend working. As much as 1/3 of staff would have arrived for duty on or after Monday with only the knowledge obtained through the media of what this change was in practical terms.

8. At the point of go live there was no clear instruction as to what level of checking was expected. There was a clear understanding that this would vary from location to location and that all efforts should be made to avoid passengers congregating more than necessary to minimise any additional risk of virus spread. At South East Ports there was added operational pressure arising from the need to clear a ferry quickly to enable to the return journey to minimise any road transport delays or disruption to UK imports of essential items. The ISU was initially assured that the decision on whether to check and to what extent would be for the front-line managers to make enabling them to be agile and responsive to the situation before them. In practice this was then vested with regional management; local managers only having the discretion to reduce checking after telephone reference to the regional management team. This significantly limited the local manager's ability to respond to short term crowding.

9. On implementation the response was very localised. Some locations attempted to turn off their e-gates and conduct 100% checking. Others took a more pragmatic approach. Checking at the Northern Ireland Border was, entirely understandably, absent all together. The first 24 – 48 hours saw queues build in some locations. In particular in Heathrow which reported queues which in normal times would have been relatively unremarkable; but in post Virus travel with such significantly reduced numbers was unprecedented. Delays on the Northern French Seaboard resulted in freight traffic backing up beyond the secure areas of the port causing the Road Haulage Association to protest on behalf of their members at the increased risk of migrant incursion.

10. In place of adequate time to read the guidance, to receive detailed briefings or any online training initially promised operational guidance was made available to staff through an app called "Ocelot" viewable on a work issued mobile phone. This is a fairly intuitive "how to" system which is potentially adequate in terms of operational guidance but it takes time for an officer to work their way through the system; and is limited both by available internet signal and the inevitable constraint of looking at a web based application on a small mobile phone screen. The lack of time to become familiar with the formats and instructions, combined with the need to refer to instructions on mobile phones did contribute to processing delays and congestion at the border.

11. The guidance itself when released contained anomalies and illogicalities which, because of the late disclosure, staff were not able to challenge or understand. This further undermined the perception of the value of what staff were being asked to do. Staff are proud to be on the front line of national security and protecting the UK. As one staff member described to us, this felt like "keystone cops". For example, lorry drivers are exempt from the requirement to quarantine but not from the obligation to make a declaration. However, to reflect the peripatetic nature of the role a lorry driver can legitimately cite his cab as his place of residence. Staff understandably questioned how this would assist in containing the risk of infection. The provision did not allow for any reasonable credibility checking. The address given on arrival could not be checked; in accordance with instructions it should not even be challenged unless it was manifestly incredible. The guidance specified as examples where travellers gave their address as Buckingham Palace, or their name as Mickey Mouse.

12. There appeared to be a significant lack of public awareness of the measures, again more acute on the Northern French Seaboard. Where travellers had been told by carriers of the requirement to pre complete the declaration form this had apparently often occurred too late for the individual to do so. For those travelling by Eurotunnel or ferry the traffic is much more "turn up and go" with very limited opportunity for carriers to pre warn travellers. There was much heavier reliance on the tablets provided at ports than had apparently been anticipated. Additional tablets were procured by the end of the first week.

[COR0185]

13. The guidance does allow for hourly cleaning of the devices, but staff expressed considerable concern to the ISU that the high level of serial usage placed both travellers and the staff at increased risk of transmission. Initially the form was only available in English which caused additional delays and led to tablets and mobile phones frequently being passed back and forth between travellers and the officers as officers tried to help travellers complete the form. 10 languages were added within days and google translate a week later. Even where passport desks had front facing Perspex screens with the repeated handing back and forth of devices and other documents staff reported concerns that the 2m social distancing was impossible to maintain and staff were placed at further risk by the repeated handling of devices. However they were at that time actively discouraged at that time from wearing masks or face coverings as long as there was a screen in place.

14. In the event, other than localised queuing problems, there have been no reports of serious challenge to the system. Travellers appear quite willing to put some form of plausible address into the declaration although this cannot be checked or verified. No fines have been issued. The ISU has no direct knowledge of the level of in country checking which has taken place. Staff have reported repeated questioning from travellers about the value of the exercise, particularly when arriving from areas with lower infection rates than the UK. Understandably they are not able to provide any cogent justification.

If the ISU can be of any further assistance to the Committee please do let me know.

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