



Public Accounts Committee

Patricia Hayes
Second Permanent Secretary
Home Office
Marsham Street
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29 June 2022

Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear Ms Hayes,

Thank you for giving evidence to the Public Accounts Committee on 23 May 2022 about managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic and other matters. We will be publishing a report on cross-border travel in due course, but I am writing to put on record specific points of concern to us and to ask for further information on a number of the issues that we raised during our evidence session.

Removal of individuals to Rwanda

We asked you how many people the Department had classified as inadmissible into the UK asylum system and attempted to remove from the UK to Rwanda. You told us that the Department had served its first notices of intent on individuals who could potentially be removed to Rwanda, and that the next step was to engage with the Rwandan Government, who would make the final decision.

You said that you could not tell us how many people had been included in this first tranche of individuals, could not give an indication of the scale of the number of people involved, or to tell us how many people were expected to be covered by the payments made so far to the Rwandan Government. You were also unable to fully explain why you could not share these numbers with the Committee.

We are both disappointed and concerned that for a scheme that is paid for by taxpayers' money, this basic information has not been made available to Parliament or the public and that you were unable to answer our questions on these issues. Given the various reports in the media of the numbers of people affected, transparency and clarity from your Department it is essential.

We asked you to provide a quarterly update on the number of people involved in the scheme. You told us that sharing some of the data would be constrained by the UK's relationship with the Rwandan Government, which included some controls on what management information and data can be shared. You agreed to confirm what data the Department was able to share and to come back with us with a proposal of what the Department could include in a quarterly update.

We remain firmly of the view that the UK's relationship with the Rwandan Government should not be allowed to outweigh transparency to the British taxpayer. I would therefore be grateful if you would write to us to confirm:

- What data the Department is collecting about the scheme;



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- What information, when and with what frequency, the Department will make available on the scheme to allow Parliament and the public to hold it to account for performance; and
- How much the scheme is expected to cost in each of the next three years, how much has been spent to date, and on what.

Given that you consider the scheme to be 'novel and innovative', it will be essential you plan and carry out robust evaluation. We would therefore also be grateful if you would write to us setting out:

- Details of the evaluation plans the Department has for the scheme;
- The scope of the evaluations, and
- When the evaluations will be completed and the results made available.

Support to Ukrainian refugees

We asked you about the support being provided to those who have opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme (the Sponsorship scheme) and the Ukraine Family Scheme, particularly the support provided to host families and local authorities.

You told us that the Department had received 128,000 applications for visas under the schemes, of which 84,000 were under the Sponsorship Scheme and 44,000 under the Family Scheme. Of these, you told us that you had issued 107,000 visas, including just under 69,000 under the Sponsorship Scheme and 39,000 under the Family Scheme, and that nearly 54,000 people were now in the UK as a result.

You recognised the impact that this was having on local authorities, and told us that you had set up a joint team between the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to deal with the practical issues facing the schemes.

We were concerned about what would happen to refugees if the arrangement with their host breaks down, including how the housing needs of refugees would be met. You explained that those entering the UK through the schemes would be granted three years' leave to remain, which was not connected in any way to the sponsorship agreement. You told us that it had not yet been decided what would happen at the end of the three years and this would be dependent on the situation in Ukraine. We would therefore be grateful if you would write to provide us with an update on this, or any other changes to the schemes, when decisions are made.

Immigration caseload

We noted that the Department's efforts to support Ukrainian, Afghan and Syrian refugees had resulted in large backlogs of cases elsewhere in the immigration system and asked what the Department was doing to reduce the backlog.

You told us that in order to prioritise the urgent casework needed to support Ukrainian refugees, you had moved some staff who would normally work on other immigration work and visa routes, such as marriage, work and visa routes, but that the Department had tried to be transparent with the public about the impact this would have on turnaround times. We were deeply concerned about the impact of delays on individuals who were reliant on these other immigration routes, including specific cases where individuals were being stuck in limbo as a result, which you agreed to look into.



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We would be grateful if you would write to us to confirm:

- What the Department is doing to get caseload levels back on track;
- What work you are doing to identify cases where individuals have been severely negatively affected by the backlogs, such as those we raised in our evidence session;
- Whether you intend to put in place any mitigations to support those affected by these cases, and
- When you expect normal service levels to be resumed in each category of visa and immigration route

Backlog of passports

We asked you about recent reports that some 500,000 people were currently waiting for passports, and the Department's plans to ensure that people received their passports on time, particularly where they were critical for job offers, weddings, funerals and study.

You told us that the Department was issuing more passports, more quickly, to more people than ever before, but recognised the difficulties being faced by people if they do not know when their passport will arrive. You explained that you had launched a new campaign to make people aware that they needed to allow up to 10 weeks to get their passports, and the importance of getting advice to ensure that their application was successful. You said that you were in the process of putting an extra 700 staff into the passport issuing team, and that "almost everybody" will get their passport within 10 weeks.

We asked you whether the 500,000 outstanding passports reported in the media were correct, and when the Department would be able to reduce the turnaround time for passports back to three weeks. We were disappointed that you were unable to tell us the current size of the passport backlog or when the turnaround time would be reduced. We are concerned about your inability to provide us with the information we requested, particularly given the Prime Minister's response to the House on 25 May that to the best of his knowledge everyone was receiving their passport within four to six weeks.

You noted that the backlog in passports was driven by a surge in demand as fewer people applied or renewed their passports during the pandemic. We recognise that staff within the Department are working very hard to make sure people receive their passports but are nonetheless concerned that this surge was entirely predictable once people were able to travel, and asked why you were so woefully underprepared. You told us that your performance compared favourably with most international comparators. We were unconvinced by this response, particularly that customer satisfaction levels are well below your target level, and that it would be reasonable to expect demand for passports to vary throughout the year regardless of the pandemic. In addition, as passports are funded at cost there shouldn't be a resource issue.

Based on the above, I would therefore be grateful if you would write to us to confirm the following:

- How many passport applications are currently outstanding;
- How long, on average, customers are waiting to receive their passports;
- Projections for the number of passports you expect to issue over the next six months;
- When the Department expects the average turnaround time for passports to return to three weeks;



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- What lessons the Department has learned about predicting and responding to surges in demand for passports to ensure that people receive their passports on time.

Given the urgency of some of the issues my Committee raised, I would welcome your prompt response on the issues set out in this letter in time for circulation to Members of the Committee before the Parliamentary summer recess.

I am copying this letter to the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, the Treasury Officer of Accounts, and the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Yours sincerely

Dame Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts