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15 July 2022

Public Accounts Committee Chair

By Email Only

Dear Committee Chair,

Digital Services at the Border (DSAB): Progress Update

I wanted to write to you and provide an update on delivery progress of the DSAB programme following your value for money report, "HC 1069 SESSION 2019–2021 9 DECEMBER 2020".

The programme delivery plan, which we shared with you, set out our as presented to delivery milestones for 2021, working towards programme delivery and closure by April 2022.

We have achieved many of the original delivery milestones including:
- The new Border Crossing (BX) capability at all Primary Control Points (PCP) by the end of June 2021
- BX to all eGates (six months early) by 31 October 2021
- Our first strategic data centre
- Additional capabilities were incorporated into the programme plan such as the automation of the Passenger Locator Form (PLF)
- Areas of technical complexity in delivering the new watchlist capability
- Lessons learned from the first data centre build and launch

However, we did not meet our goal of programme closure by April 2022. This was because delivery was more technically complex than initially thought and we also identified some additional dependencies during delivery. We underestimated the amount of time needed to replace complex Critical National Infrastructure (CNI), including the creation of new business products. The technical complexities have been highlighted as a significant risk by the programme, as have the challenges involved in delivering new CNI. Both are reflected in our IPA review, which achieved an 'Amber' rating in May 2022.

Because the strategic watchlist (Helios) capability will take longer to operationalise than we had previously forecasted, the Warnings Index (WI) will be required in full-service mode until February 2023. This is our revised date to deliver the DSAB programme outcomes, some ten months later than April 2022 as previously reported to the NAO and the Committee.

The WI contract ceases on 31 October 2023. We are working closely with the legacy supplier of the WI, to ensure adherence to all commercial steps, to end reliance upon the WI as quickly as possible once we are technically and operationally ready, but also to provide a robust decommission and exit process.

The Future Borders and Immigration Systems (FBIS) – Digitise programme has dependencies upon DSAB deliverables, and close collaboration continues with them to manage any impacts of the delay. Positive work has already started on the transition activity for when DSAB ends reliance on the WI and work moves into FBIS or to Product Lifecycle Management.
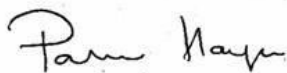
As we are learning lessons from all aspects of the delivery so far and as the known complexities are being embedded into planning for the remaining milestones, we are now confident in the revised delivery date.

The programme spent the allocated 21/22 budget within the acceptable 1% tolerance. We undertake detailed monthly financial analysis and continue to monitor where programme and additional costs can be absorbed or transitioned into other programmes or to product lifecycle management (PLM). An assessment of the allocated 22/23 budget as part of the HM Treasury Spending Review process indicates we can deliver to the end of the calendar year, and we are seeking authorisation to operate with a known over-spend pressure. Despite the delay to ending reliance on the WI, DSAB remains a critically important building block for delivery the border of the future. We have also learned some important lessons about optimism bias and dealing with complexity that will help us with other programmes.

The continuity of SRO leadership was a concern of the Committee back in February 2021 as Mr John Gillan, who has provided oversight throughout the full period of DSAB programme reset (since 2019), is due to retire in October 2022. I would like to reassure the Committee that we are seeking a replacement to provide continuity of cover and ensure an effective handover. We have also experienced changes in the senior leadership as a result of promotion and serious illness; neither of which could have been predicted but the programme continues to be led robustly.

I will be writing to the NAO to provide them with an update following their report in December 2020.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs P J Hayes

Background - Complexity

DSAB Programme is complex in its delivery of replacing Critical National Infrastructure (CNI) that includes Data Centres, local port infrastructure, end user devices as well as the creation of new business products such as eGates, BX, Helios and Advance Passenger Messaging (APM).

In March 2021 as the border started to open, the programme was asked to look at how the automated checking of the PLF at the PCP might be carried out. The fact that the programme was able to respond in delivering this in a relatively short period of time, is demonstrable real-world evidence of the adaptability of the new BX application. This would not have been possible with the legacy WI system.

To be wholly effective the automated process needed to be incorporated into the ePassport Gates as well as the PCP. This necessitated the accelerated integration of all ePassport Gates into BX. The original ePassport Gate integration schedule was for completion by March 2022, but the accelerated process saw that brought forward and delivered by the end of October 2021, some six months earlier than scheduled. This was a conscious decision taken in response to the Covid19 pandemic, to specifically address the Home Office's response for the need to incorporate the PLF and other health security checks. The importance of adding this new process into the programme plan cannot be underestimated. Heathrow Airport Limited have acknowledged that there would have been significant additional delays for passengers had the PLF checking process not been automated.

The impact of the additional inclusion of the automated PLF checks and the accelerated rollout of BX to ePassport Gates was not without consequence. There was reduced time in the test environment and the lower numbers of travelling passengers, meant the more rounded assessment at the early adopter sites was not possible. As a result, we have had to deal with initial teething issues in the live environment. In the main, the system issues have been the result of process and human errors rather than the technology. These are being effectively worked through with Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) colleagues. Though it should be noted that the additional monitoring of software release and upgrades, while essential to ensure frontline system performance, nevertheless impacts upon delivery timelines.

On 31 May 2022, the programme replaced the interim data centre with the new strategic data centre. This has already seen improvements to performance. The second strategic data centre is scheduled to come online at the end of summer 2022, at which point full resilience for the operating platform will be established. It should also be noted that full resilience, including bringing online the second data centre, was scheduled to be in place by March 2022, aligned with the original ePassport Gate timeline.

The most challenging workstream has been the progress on the development of the new strategic watch-listing capability, known as Helios. It is this capability that will enable us to take the final step to come off the legacy WI system. As the work on Helios has progressed, we have identified solution complexity that needs working through. Some of the complexity has been generated by the need to build new

interim data interfaces into Helios. This is because the end state solutions we had devised cannot be implemented as the connecting systems in other areas are not ready. For example, interim data arrangements are being made for PNC and HMPO.

In addition, and in common with many other technical programmes, it has been challenging to secure all the skilled technical resources needed to keep pace with delivery and those same resources are those utilised for any changes made as a result of Ministerial priority changes, thus impacting delivery of the DSAB programme: PLF is a prime example. Future Borders and Immigration Systems (FBIS) - Digitise programme has dependencies upon DSAB deliverables, and collaboration continues with them to monitor impacts of the delay, but positive work has already started on the transition activity for when DSAB ends reliance on the WI and work moves into FBIS or to the Product Lifecycle Management within DDaT.