

David Normington's Blog comments: January – November 2009

Part 2

Hot topics (28 Jul 2009)

I promised to pick up some of the hot topics on the blog.

I am interested in the debate which has opened up about the new asylum model. Just to reassure you, these issues are very well understood by the UK Border Agency Board and they are regularly at the top of the agenda at my monthly performance review (known as 'operating reviews') with the agency. Our asylum performance has been under great pressure this year from increased applications, particularly from people from Zimbabwe. We are all clear that we must both meet the targets we have set for concluding cases AND continue to work at cases which are not concluded in six months. That is a tall order. But performance has begun to improve again and UK Border Agency senior management believe it can be done.

There have been lots of comments on the blog about the use of consultants. I share the general wish to reduce their numbers, where they are doing jobs which could easily be done by civil servants. But consultants come in all shapes and sizes and they often bring skills and expertise that we do not have inside the organisation.

On bonuses and the moderation process, it is important to stress that there is a 35 per cent limit on the number of bonuses which can be awarded. So inevitably there are judgments to be made about who are the best performers even within the top performers. That is one of the purposes of moderation.

On Senior Civil Service (SCS) pay, this has been much debated on the blog before. The system is set by the government on the recommendation of an independent pay review body. The rules are not set by me or the Home Office, and they apply all across the SCS. It has been government policy over a number of years to hold down consolidated pay for the SCS and to increase the number and size of SCS performance bonuses (which are non consolidated and not pensionable). The Home Office has never paid bonuses to 75 per cent of its senior staff. In 2006 neither the Home Office board, nor the (then) IND Board took any bonuses in recognition of the Home Office's poor performance in that year. Along with all Permanent Secretaries, I have forgone my own bonus again this year in recognition of the serious economic situation.

I am grateful to Denise McDonagh for coming in on some of the IT issues. I hope other colleagues will help me out by joining in on other issues, like temporary cover allowance (TCA).

Finally, Lin Homer and I have just announced the introduction of a long service award, a big demand of bloggers some months ago. Proof that, in the end, bloggers do get their voices heard – and in this case, you changed my mind. I'm expecting hundreds of approving comments on the blog!

David Normington

'You say and we listen' (3 Aug 2009)

Thanks for all the positive responses on long service awards. I really appreciated them. Next the Cycle to Work scheme, on which I am told news is imminent! I am also writing round shortly on the action we have taken since the last (2008) staff survey.

Someone commented on the blog that the long service awards were the first 'victory' for bloggers. But if you think of the changes we have made (and which I describe in my global) on moderation (dropping the 10 per cent requirements) and on core skills assessments – to take just two big blogging conversations in the last year – I think there are quite a lot more occasions on which you say and we listen and then act.

Of course, these aren't just achieved by bloggers. But sometimes the blog gives vivid expression to issues that are more widely held and expressed (for example, through the staff survey or in the many face-to-face meetings). And then – sometimes depending on the arguments and evidence – things change.

That's why it is worth colleagues contributing to the current consultation about civil service compensation arrangements, about which I wrote round last week. This is not a Home Office consultation, but civil service-wide. The issues are controversial. But, if you don't have your say, it is for sure you can't be listened to.

And finally... if you are going on holiday this month, have a great time. I am not off for a couple of weeks yet, so there is more blogging to come before I go.

David Normington

Welcome and thank you (5 Aug 2009)

I particularly wanted to blog today because it is the day when 4,000 customs staff formally join the UK Border Agency. I don't know how many of them can access this blog, but to those who can and do, welcome, not just to the UK Border Agency, but to the wider Home Office.

To mark the occasion I went yesterday to Gatwick, where I presented warrants to Border Agency colleagues and then spent three hours meeting a wide range of staff and visiting what I think we now call the primary and secondary lines (ie formerly

passport control and customs). The warrants are very symbolic because they confer, for the first time, the same immigration and customs powers on all frontline staff.

People sometimes think (and I sometimes suspect) that I am only shown the glossy end of our operations. Not yesterday. I particularly wanted to go to the South Terminal because I had heard how difficult the conditions there are at the moment. And it's true. The primary line (passport control) is a building site with scaffolding everywhere. The sight lines for arriving passengers is hopeless – it is a miracle sometimes that people find their way. The back offices are not much better. And the chaos is beginning to spread to the customs hall, making it crowded and hot. None of this is our fault. It is BAA's building site, not ours. But, of course, our staff pick up a lot of the frustrations from arriving passengers. I know senior UK Border Agency colleagues are doing their best to make it better, but it looks like a long job.

To make it worse, yesterday morning saw a power cut. And then we were all evacuated from airside by a fire alarm.

Agency colleagues I met were dealing with all this with great skill and cheerfulness. Just to say a big thank you to them for putting up with it. And for their unfailing politeness to lots of frustrated passengers. A great example of what the UK Border Agency at its best can be like.

David Normington

Olympic efforts (11 Aug 2009)

Thanks for the positive comments about my visit to Gatwick.

I went yesterday to the Olympic site at Stratford. As you probably know, the Home Office has the lead responsibility for Olympic Security and I wanted to see for myself some of the physical and personnel security challenges.

The Olympic security directorate in the office for security and counter-terrorism is in the lead for the Home Office, but this is a truly cross-Home Office, cross-agency effort – with the Met Police very much in pole position on operational matters. I was driven round the site itself by the lead inspector for the Metropolitan Police accompanied by our own Home Office director for Olympic security, Robert Raine and the deputy head of security for the Olympic Delivery Authority, which is building the venues. Tony Smith, the UK Border Agency's south east regional director was also there because this is a big priority for UKBA.

I was astonished at the scale of the site, even though I had seen lots of photographs. Until I had seen it, I had not really understood the extent to which the main Olympic site is in the middle of the local community at the intersection of four London boroughs. Railways lines, canals and roads run alongside – and in some cases intersect the site. Blocks of flats overlook it. A primary school is a few hundred metres from the huge media centre.

I had also not understood previously that at the Stratford side of the site, a huge Westfield shopping centre is going up, bigger in scale than the Westfield centre in west London.

The Met inspector was a mine of information, an example of an officer who really knows his locality and lots of trivia about the Olympics too. I also was very impressed with the team from UKBA who are checking the credentials of everyone coming onto the site to work. They have really deep expertise in forged documents and showed me examples of forged passports they had spotted. This is a Rolls Royce service for employers on the site, but, given the high profile and the iconic nature of the Olympics, it is more than justified.

A really great visit. And a reminder that the Home Office's mission of protecting the public faces us and our partners with some extraordinary challenges. The team in OSCT, which is leading the work overall, will shortly be located in Canary Wharf so that they can sit alongside the Olympic Delivery Authority and the London Organising Committee, who are responsible for running the games. Few other parts of the Home Office have such a precise target.

From yesterday, according to the clock at Stratford Station, there were 1082 days to the start of the 2012 Olympics.

David Normington

Challenging and fascinating (17 Aug 2009)

Thanks to colleagues who answered the question on the simplification project (still going), cloning of ID cards (media stories were wrong), property issues, TCA/TP, etc. It always helps when those who know the detailed answers provide them

I hesitate to join the debate on job titles and gradings. Over the years I have occasionally made attempts to move away from the Civil Service's obsession with grade. I much prefer job titles that describe what people do. And in a new organisation like UK Border Agency that seems particularly important. But I know this is controversial territory.

I must also pick up the comment by 'Tired of Croydon'. Maybe he or she is too tired to notice the development of local immigration teams, focussed on the job of enforcement and removals. I remember the need for this kind of effort being urged on me soon after I arrived in the Home Office in 2006. While there never are enough resources for everything we want to do, the importance of enforcing the immigration rules is recognised right up to the top of the office - and we are doing something about it.

And, finally by the time you read this I will have started my holidays. So this is the last blog entry from me until early September. Keep blogging in the meantime. And, while I always enjoy the lively debate with UKBA colleagues, whose work I find genuinely challenging and fascinating, it would be good to hear from some others in other parts of the organisation.

David Normington

Performance challenges ahead (21 Sep 2009)

I apologise that this is my first blog entry since my return from holiday. But I have been following the lively debates on a wide range of issues. I was surprised at the volume of traffic over the summer, but glad that you were all getting on fine without me.

Since I got back I have been concentrating on three things.

First, I am reviewing the performance of each part of the Department to assess progress and risks. I did two reviews of the UK Border Agency: one covering overall performance and risk; the other looking at performance in the priority areas of foreign national prisoners and failed asylum seekers. I can assure sceptical colleagues that these were tough, realistic sessions, looking at where we were doing well and what the problems are. It frustrates me to see UKBA staff questioning the motives (and knowledge) of their senior managers. It frustrates me too that there is not more pride in UKBA about real progress that is being made in one of the most difficult and intractable of areas of public policy.

Secondly, I have been continuing to meet as many staff as possible. (This is how I try to ensure that I am absolutely in touch with the issues of the day). I had a really good session at the crime directorate's away-day. And coming up next is a session with HR grade 6s and 7s and the next half-day event for the whole Home Office Senior Civil Service.

Thirdly, the Home Office Board had a strategy session looking ahead to the challenges of the next 12 months. A lot of this inevitably focused on the public expenditure position. One colleague (on 2/9) asked on the blog why in my global about 'Improving Capability in the Home Office' I had said that we needed to be at the peak of our performance in the next 12 months with an election due. I agree with our colleague's general sentiment that the public deserve peak performance from us every day. But what the next 12 months brings on top of this is, I think, a heightened political scrutiny and debate about what we do and, in a period of public spending constraints, a likely questioning of every penny we spent to test whether it represents good value for money.

I also believe that an election year is when our core values as a civil service – our impartiality, our integrity, our commitment to serving the democratically elected government of the day – need to be most evident and trusted. So that's why I think there are extra performance challenges ahead.

David Normington

Monday 28 Sep 2009

A new Horizon

By the time you read this blog, we shall have begun the launch of new Horizon, a hugely improved and radically different Home Office intranet service. This will take a few weeks. But it should in due course provide better access to information and services to the whole of the Home Office and its agencies, the ability to personalise and target communications and services and – at last – the same access for all staff regardless of their IT network. Watch this space. I am sure bloggers will have a lot to say, but please give it a chance to settle down before you let us know what you think.

I seem to have stirred up a bit of controversy with my blog last week, but at least I re-entered with a bang! I don't resile from anything I said last week. I believe that UK Border Agency staff have a lot to be proud about and I would like to see more balancing of the positives with the negatives. I also believe the questioning of the motives of senior managers – albeit by just a few bloggers – is ill-informed. I also think it ridiculous to argue that you have to have been man and dog in the Border Agency (and its predecessors) to know what is going on or to be a senior manager. External recruits bring other professional skills, wider perspective and a capability to challenge outdated practices.

The best management is usually made up of a mix of external recruits and internal promotions. Does this mean that everything is fine or that the agency's management are universally competent? Of course not. But the ambition to make the UK Border Agency the best border agency in the world – in the interests of the UK – is a shared position for most of us.

I went to the National Police Memorial Service in Cardiff on Sunday. This is a service which remembers police officers and staff who have died in the course of duty. It is a very touching occasion and important for the families of the fallen above all. I was glad I had gone.

David Normington

Wednesday 07 Oct 2009

Long service awards

A number of colleagues have questioned why you have to self-nominate for long service awards. I agree this is a bit odd and have talked it over with HR. The self-nomination was proposed because of fears that some of the older data on our systems, particularly where people have moved round the Civil Service, may be inaccurate. So some people could miss out.

However, in most cases we should be able to trigger the process ourselves and that is what we now propose to do by writing to all those who we believe qualify. But there will have to be a self-nomination fallback for those who, for one reason or another, are missed out. I hope there won't be many; and in such cases it will be a chance to update the individual's personal data.

Thank you for raising it. I don't normally pick up things in such detail, but, having made the commitment on long service awards, I don't want us to spoil it.

David Normington

Friday 09 Oct 2009

Staff events

We have just begun the third series of events where Home Office Board members talk to and engage with Grade 6 and 7 colleagues in all parts of the Home Office and its agencies about our priorities. Big things this time are: value for money and resource constraints, working with partners and communicating with staff. Lin Homer

did the first of these last Friday. I did one this Tuesday morning in Croydon; and Peter Makeham did one in Croydon in the afternoon. I particularly enjoyed the one I did. The discussion was full of intelligence and insight, with lots of good feedback and ideas.

I have put out a global message about an event the Home Secretary and I are doing on 12 October for all colleagues at Church House in central London, again focusing on our priorities. This is a first come first served basis and places are obviously limited, but we will make a video of the event available on Horizon.

One of the best events of recent days was the Home Office diversity awards, which we held down in the staff restaurant in 2MS. There were some great winners. What I particularly liked were the winners who were line managers who had done something to change the way their team or office behaved, or had tackled some underlying issues of bad behaviour which was disrupting their team. The winner of winners (who got the Permanent Secretary's award) was XXXX from UKBA – and no one could have deserved it more.

David Normington

Thursday 15 Oct 2009

Have your say

I am sorry some people have had difficulty accessing the Staff Survey. But I hope it won't put people off from filling it in. One thing I hope we have created in the Home Office is the ability for colleagues to have their say and make their voice heard. I hope you will see the Staff Survey as a completely safe space to express your views. Early signs of take-up are really encouraging but it is early days.

Talking of people having their say, that certainly happened at the staff event with the Home Secretary on 12 October and some of the questions about pay, pensions, temporary promotion, and hot desking were quite challenging.

There seemed to be quite a lot of confusion about what the Government's position is on pay and pensions. So let me clarify.

First, there are no proposals on the table to change the pension arrangements, beyond those introduced in 2007 for new entrants. Second, the Chief Secretary announced recently that there would be a pay freeze for senior staff, but not for everyone else, although he envisaged small increases in the present environment. Our own pay deal for Home Office and UKBA runs out next summer and we will need at this point to negotiate a new deal. Thirdly, there are proposals on the table from the Cabinet Office for changing the compensation arrangements for early release and redundancy about which there have been a number of comments on the blog. The consultation period on this has closed. I understand about 18,000 civil servants have commented (along with the trade unions) and these are now being considered.

There is no doubt that times are very tough and, as I said at the event, public servants along with others will have to make sacrifices. I am under no illusions that some of the current changes (for example, the pilot on hot desking in 2MS) are not popular. But we have to be able to prove to the public that we are getting the best value possible for every pound of expenditure.

Monday 02 Nov 2009

A big response

We are entering the last week of the staff survey. The percentage response has been going up sharply, but the UK Border Agency still lags behind the rest of the Home Office. Why? I know from the blog and from my many meetings with Border Agency staff that you are not short of views. So please take the 10 or 15 minutes or so to fill in the survey. I would really appreciate a big response, so that we have an accurate view of the state of opinion all across the Home Office.

Thanks for all your comments on the blog about first-class travel. I don't think any of us should regard it as a right, whatever our grade. I personally never use first class travel for shorter travel (under 90 minutes or so) in the South East area, where it is never worth the cost. But here is a salutary tale. Earlier this year I took the train from Waterloo to Weymouth and back. It takes an age and stops everywhere. But I decided there was no point in travelling first class. A number of colleagues from other government departments were also travelling, but in first class. I subsequently discovered that their tickets were quite a bit (about a third!) cheaper than mine, because of a special offer. So it's always worth pressing our booking agent to get the best deal.

Finally, I got my identity card last week. The system is being tested out on a few Identity & Passport Service, Home Office and contractors' staff over the next few weeks before being introduced more widely before Christmas in Manchester. We promised ministers several years back that the first ID cards would be introduced before the end of 2009 – it is good to see IPS fulfilling that commitment.

David Normington

Monday 09 Nov 2009

Fascinating times

Thanks for the comments on the staff survey. I know we have gone on and on about it. But that's because we wanted a properly representative survey. And, to the one or two cynics, it is truly anonymous – there is no way we can find out what individuals have said (and, anyway, why would we want to?). We will publish the results in due course (including the final response rate, when we get it). And we will let you know how we propose to follow it up.

Thanks too for the comments on travel costs. For the record, I use the blog to give my views, never to change the rules. If you think about it, it would be a bizarre way to tell people of changes in process. So the current travel arrangements remain for the time being.

I had a fascinating week last week:

Another grade 6/ grade 7 event in Croydon, where we had a really good discussion about the issues facing leaders in the Home Office at the moment.

I addressed a group of chairs of public bodies from across government and 200 senior HR leaders from government departments and agencies about their

modernisation programme.

I opened the office of our Olympic security team in Canary Wharf, where they sit alongside the key Olympic agencies.

And I had a fascinating visit to the UK Border Agency in Croydon – I intend to blog separately about this later in the week.

David Normington

Wednesday 11 Nov 2009

Modernising and simplifying

I spent some of Friday morning in Croydon with the UK Border Agency team that is modernising and simplifying guidance on immigration and asylum. I was also linked by video conference to the Sheffield team (sorry, Manchester, that the link didn't work).

This is a programme very close to my heart. The aim is to get to one set of online guidance for frontline staff, easily accessible and in plain English. I know there will be plenty of doubters in UKBA who will believe it when they see it. But what I saw in Croydon (and, remotely, in Sheffield) was a team of people fantastically committed to their task. Their first product (on UK Ancestry) is out for road testing with frontline officers. And there is much more in the pipeline.

I have long believed that at the core of transforming the Home Office and its agencies was simplifying the law and regulations, simplifying and standardising the guidance, and introducing modern IT, particularly a new case-working system in UKBA. It is a long haul, but, as long as I am Permanent Secretary, I will never give up on that modernisation programme.

David Normington

Friday 20 Nov 2009

Putting an end to the rumours

Thanks for the comments on how the blog works on new Horizon and how difficult it is to find it. I am looking into this (including the point about moderation) and will see what can be done. The aim is that Horizon will eventually make information more accessible: if it doesn't achieve that, it will obviously be unsatisfactory.

I was reading in one of the newspapers at the weekend (The Times, I think) a story of how a text message from a Canadian Minister to a friend which said "Thatcher has died". This message spread like wildfire first around a big dinner which the friend was attending and then to the Canadian Government level, with calls to London to check whether Lady Thatcher has indeed died. But Thatcher was the Minister's 16 year old cat, named after the former Prime Minister. Lady Thatcher remains alive and well.

I tell this story because it is a bit like the rumour spreading in UKBA that Christmas has been cancelled. As I understand it this started with a request from senior

management in Immigration Group to look at what level of resourcing might be necessary to ensure some operational cover over the Christmas period.

It seems to me entirely reasonable that in a 24 hour/ 365 day business like UKBA's a certain level of Home Office and regional level cover is needed to back up front line staff. Business units are trying to work out, in difficult economic circumstances, the level of cover they need over Christmas but, hopefully, will be able to rely on volunteers. UKBA management will be providing more information shortly.

Tuesday 24 Nov 2009

Constructive and cooperative

I am sorry that my last posting about the 'cancellation of Christmas' controversy was delayed, but I was in Washington (DC, that is) for much of last week – and it was difficult to keep up with all the twists and turns in the story.

One of the constant challenges of being Permanent Secretary at the Home Office is the range. A week last Friday, I was in Croydon looking at the programme for modernising and simplifying guidance in the UK Border Agency. The following Monday, I was in Washington (with Lin Homer, Charles Farr and others), discussing organised crime and counter-terrorism with the US Department of Justice. On the Tuesday and Wednesday, we had our six monthly joint contact group with the Department of Homeland Security, where border and immigration policy and countering violent extremism were major topics. There were also visits to the FBI, various agencies responsible for coordinating the US approach to counter-terrorism, and to the White House. It was very productive; relationships remain warm, constructive and cooperative.

The visit was particularly packed on this occasion. I had just 30 minutes on the final afternoon to walk up to the Washington Monument on the Mall, from where you can see the view in one sweep to the White House, Capitol Hill, the Lincoln Memorial. I promised myself a return visit one day under my own steam to enjoy it as a tourist.

Finally, apologies to people in Status Park. My understanding is that the failure to observe the two-minute silence was a mistake, not malicious. But either way, it is important to me that we give everyone on 11 November the opportunity to observe the two-minute silence. In 2MS we held our usual ceremony and laid wreaths at the war memorial. The two minutes of silence was deeper, more observed and more profound than any I have experienced.

David Normington

Monday 30 Nov 2009

Celebrating the positives

Someone commented a couple of weeks ago that the number of blog entries had gone down since the start of new Horizon. But there's no evidence of this. Volumes of entries have always fluctuated in line with current controversies. At the moment the 'Christmas controversy' has pushed postings above the weekly average.

And on that subject, my last word on this. We run the UK Border Agency (and, indeed, the Home Office) for the public and the taxpayer - and I get most worried about the bloggers who seem to think the department is run for them. Having said that, I want us always to be respectful of the needs of our staff and (in the case of Christmas cover) to do everything we can to provide that cover with volunteers. I also don't mind saying that, exaggerated as some of the comments on the blog and elsewhere have been, I think management could also have handled it better.

By the way I felt really positive about UKBA last week because I presented some of the awards at it's 'Recognising the best' ceremony. Great stories on customer service, managing projects and team working - it is good to celebrate the positives sometimes.

I also went last week to the Network's 10th anniversary celebration. It was a chance to reflect on how far we had come in the last 10 years in embedding race equality in the Home Office, but how much we still have to do to combat unconscious bias and to get black and minority ethnic staff properly represented at senior levels. Happy birthday to the Network and thanks for the leadership you have shown.

Finally, there so many subjects covered on the blog at the moment (IPS consultants, Tier 4, the Guardian article on relocation, the future of CRD), that I can't comment on this all. But I have read them all (even the ones about beer mats) and I will return to some of this in future postings, if there is an interest.

David Normington