



Home Office

**The Home Office response to the
Independent Chief Inspector of
Borders and Immigration's report:**

**An inspection of UK Visas and
Immigration Front End Services**

(August 2020 – June 2021)

The Home Office thanks the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) for his report into UK Visas and Immigration Front End Services (FES).

We are grateful for the ICIBI's engagement with stakeholders, customers and with the Home office and commercial partner staff who operate UKVI's front end services.

As the report recognises, the Department has been transforming its visa application services over recent years through our FES and we were pleased to see a number of areas recognised positively in the report.

Whilst we have made significant improvements to our existing FES already, we are keen to continue developing and improving our services to ensure they are accessible to customers who need them and are able to adapt to meet customers individual needs. We have noted the feedback gained by the ICIBI as part of your call for evidence and will consider the feedback within our wider customer improvement plans.

We also welcome the recommendations arising from this inspection and have accepted 7 of the 8 recommendations contained in the report. We are also pleased to note that a number of the proposed recommendations are already in train or completed as part of our wider transformational work.

The Home Office is currently defining our requirements for future outsourced visa services from 2023 onwards as part of the Future Supplier Services programme and we will ensure that the recommendations and insight gained from this report are also used to help inform the FES we have in the future.

The Home Office response to the recommendations:

1. **Review the existing FES guidance on Access UK in GOV.UK and, building on stakeholder feedback, ensure that it is simple to follow and clear and consistent, in order to provide a positive customer experience.**
 - 1.1 Accepted.
 - 1.2 We accept that further clarity and consistency is needed with Front End Services guidance.
 - 1.3 Work is already underway to ensure all guidance, including specific FES guidance on gov.uk is clear, consistent and simple to follow. We aim to complete the review of guidance specifically relating to FES by April 2022.

2. **Regularly publish performance data on waiting times and the availability of free appointments across all the FES providers (nationally and internationally). Further to this, review the mandated proportion of appointments which are available to Sopra Steria Limited's customers at no charge (currently at 56% of core site appointments taking place in core hours) together with the range of locations at which these are offered, in order to ensure that demand is being met.**
 - 2.1 Accepted and completed.
 - 2.2 The Cabinet Office already publishes supplier performance against three relevant KPIs in each HMG gold contract on a quarterly basis. For the FES contract held by Sopra Steria Ltd this published information includes performance against the KPI for the percentage of free appointments and for the Next Generation Outsourced Visa services contract held by VFS Global and TLS Contact this includes performance against the KPIs stipulating appointment availability.
 - 2.3 Whilst data on wait times is available, as this changes regularly any published data would simply be a snapshot and wouldn't necessarily be reflective of a wider period, so we feel there may be limited value in publishing this data. Regarding wait times, our focus remains on ensuring appointments are available within 5 working days.
 - 2.4 With regards to reviewing the mandated proportion of appointments available to Sopra Steria Limited's customers at no charge, together with the range of locations at which these are offered, we are pleased to report that from November 2021 there will be an uplift of both free appointments and increased availability of free appointments across the entire UKVCAS service point network.

3. **Review and work with commercial partners (CPs) and stakeholders to enhance the technical competency of systems for accessing and uploading supporting documents, with a focus on the point at which an applicant is 'handed over' from the Access UK website to the CPs' respective websites in order to support customers more effectively.**
 - 3.1 Accepted.

- 3.2 We accept and agree that enhancements to the usability and resilience of systems for accessing and uploading supporting documents are continually needed and many improvements have already been made. For example, customers are now given the opportunity to self-upload their documents or have the option of choosing assisted scanning at a service point or visa application centre if they require further support. We have also recently made updates to the appointment management system for one of our commercial partners.
 - 3.3 We will continue to regularly monitor the functionality of systems to ensure they are working effectively both with our current FES and with future services procured as part of the future supplier services programme.
 - 3.4 We will hold a quarterly review meeting with VFS in December 2021 and TLS in early 2022 to identify customer pain points and to identify the specific failure points mentioned in the report and will introduce a plan for remedial fixes to deliver an enhanced solution for customers. We will also discuss this within the existing monthly meetings with Sopra Steria Ltd, where we routinely review and discuss any system issues encountered. As improvements to our commercial partner systems are ongoing, we will provide an update following those meetings, with a view to then close this recommendation.
 - 3.5 The Home Office and the commercial partners who operate the FES on our behalf use regular customer insight to make improvements to their systems and we welcome and will review any further feedback which we receive on website functionality. The Home Office have also assessed the Sopra Steria Ltd, TLS Contact and VFS Global websites against the accessibility requirements and are confident they all meet the required criteria.
4. **Review the communication by CPs and the Home Office on AVS in order to deliver a clear statement that 'free services' will not disadvantage applicants, and what the enhanced service entails that applicants will receive if they buy the optional AVS.**
 - 4.1 Accepted.
 - 4.2 We will undertake a review of Commercial Partner communications around AVS, introducing standardised descriptions which make it clear to customers free services will not disadvantage their application and AVS are optional to those who would like added flexibility and convenience. We will aim to complete this by February 2022.
5. **Undertake a review of the training provided to CP staff by the CPs themselves and the Home Office, including the monitoring that is in place to ensure effectiveness of the learning package. Expedite the safeguarding training package for all TLS and VFS staff in order to ensure that staff have the necessary knowledge to address these issues.**
 - 5.1 Accepted.
 - 5.2 For the UKVI contact centre contract held by Teleperformance, training reviews already take place twice a year, with the next review taking place in October 2021.
 - 5.3 For the contracts where regular reviews don't currently take place, we will undertake reviews of the training provided to CP staff, by CP staff themselves and by the Home Office and the monitoring in place to ensure effectiveness of the learning package as

soon as possible. It will not be possible to commence these reviews in the remainder of 2021, but we will aim to have all reviews completed by the beginning of August 2022.

5.4 We will continue to progress this and will ensure that all TLS and VFS staff currently in post have completed the safeguarding training package by the end of October 2021. Both Commercial Partners are building this into their onboarding training for new starters and this will be in place from December 2021.

6. Ensure that data on customer feedback and complaints and referrals relating to contractual requirements such as safeguarding, imposters and fraudulent documents are consistently recorded centrally in an accessible and reportable format. This will allow the Home Office to use complaints data to drive improvement, as well as improve monitoring and assurance.

6.1 Accepted.

6.2 We will work with our commercial partners who operate the FES on behalf of UKVI to ensure that data on customer feedback, complaints and referrals are provided in an accessible and reportable format. We will then ensure this data is recorded centrally and is used to drive forward improvement. We will aim to have consistency across reporting and central records by June 2022 at which point we will conduct a review.

7. Complete the full post-implementation review of the Front End Services programme as accepted in its response to the ICIBI published report on 'Home Office (BICS) policies and practices relating to charging and fees' in April 2019. To report by the end of 2021, to include consideration of the impact on vulnerable applicants both in country and overseas.

7.1 Not accepted.

7.2 We believe through the establishment of the Future Supplier Services (FSS) programme and the wider transformational work mentioned below and through the established customer insight and feedback loops in place, we are able to ensure any gaps in service provisions are addressed. As a result, there is no longer a need for a specific post-implementation review of the FES programme and would ask the duplicate recommendation in the 2019 inspection is also closed.

7.3 The Home Office accepts and agrees with the importance of reviewing its FES arrangements to ensure all customers, including those who are vulnerable are not adversely impacted.

7.4 The full post-implementation review of the FES programme has not been completed due to other pressures across UKVI and it being overtaken by other events such as the retendering of our FES contracts which required reviews of the current FES service offerings.

7.5 As an example, the FES contract with Sopra Steria LTD was reviewed as part of negotiations on a contract extension which brought significant contractual changes into effect from 1 November 2021. This includes making free appointments available at all non-premium lounge sites and increasing the percentage of free appointments from 56% of core site appointments within core hours to over 50% of total non-premium lounge appointments nationally. On average this will have the effect each month of offering over

5,000 additional free appointments to customers. We will also provide monthly pop-ups providing free appointments in underserved locations.

7.6 Furthermore, as part of the government's ambition to have the most effective border in the world by 2025, and building on the in-country tactical response to COVID-19 in which biometric reuse technologies were quickly deployed within front end systems, we plan to roll out reuse functionality to further customer cohorts. This would facilitate UKVI to reuse previously submitted biometrics in order to assess visa and citizenship applications, alongside removing the need for eligible customers to travel and attend a biometric appointment in person.

7.7 The Home Office separately reviewed the effectiveness of SSCs, run by UKVI, which provide a dedicated service for vulnerable customers to access direct support from trained UKVI staff. The review which was conducted in 2019 highlighted further operational and service improvements which will be taken forward as part of our future service improvement work.

7.8 In parallel, the Home Office is also considering our strategic ambition for our in-country FES and the transformation that will achieve that ambition and deliver a great customer service for all customers, including those who are vulnerable.

7.9 The Future Supplier Services programme has also been created to deliver on our future strategic ambition, defining requirements and procuring FES from 2023 onwards. A key part of this work has been to review current provision to ensure any gaps are addressed.

8. Ensure that any outstanding reviews of the Equality Impact Assessments relating to the operation of FES are completed by December 2021 in accordance with current best practice advice from the Home Office's Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) Team. Ensure that compliance with PSED is a regular agenda item at CPs' performance meetings going forward

8.1 Accepted.

8.2 We will complete a full review of the UKVCAS and SSC Public Equality Statement (previously named Equality Impact Assessments) relating to the operation of FES. It will not be possible to complete these reviews by December 2021, however we will aim to complete both reviews as soon as possible, by the end of February 2022.

8.3 For the UKVI contact centre contract held by Teleperformance, a new EIA was created in May 2021 and will be reviewed regularly in line with PSED guidance. For the NGOV contract held by TLS Contact and VFS Global and the Assisted Digital contract held by We are Digital, the Home Office regularly monitors that both suppliers are meeting their equality duties and their overarching contractual requirements around equality.

8.4 We will ensure compliance with PSED is a regular agenda item at all Commercial Partner performance meetings going forwards.