A short inspection of Border Force queue management at Birmingham Airport based upon onsite observations

September 2021

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Independent Chief Inspector of
Borders and Immigration

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Our purpose

To help improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the Home Office's border and immigration functions through unfettered, impartial and evidence-based inspection.

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Foreword

As part of my 2021/22 Inspection Plan, I stated my intention to introduce different types of inspections to deliver a flexible and relevant programme, with increased reach across the areas I am mandated to inspect, which would be piloted with immediate effect.

A short inspection has a concentrated scope, with inspectors arriving on site within 48 hours of initial notice being given to the Home Office, and a subsequent report being shared with them six working days after that notification.

I chose Birmingham Airport as one of the smaller airports to inspect and, although flights were running at reduced capacity due to Covid-19, it had a sufficient number of international flight arrivals at the time of the inspection. An inspection was conducted into Birmingham Airport in 2013,[1] at which inspectors found issues with queue measurement.

Border Force is a law enforcement command within the Home Office and secures the UK border by carrying out immigration and customs controls for people and goods entering the UK. Therefore, it was alarming to discover that no Border Force staff were present in the customs channels during the course of our inspection. Instead, officers were deployed to passport control to prevent the build-up of long queues. It is not clear to me on what basis, or at what level, these deployment decisions were based.

Inspectors observed no issue with queue lengths, or breaches of the service performance standard, and the flow of passengers through the airport was generally good, despite the small size of the arrivals hall. However, there was an absence of a clear and consistent approach to queue measurement, which is integral to effective queue monitoring and workforce planning.

The impact of Covid-19 had resulted in a significant reduction in airport operator staff who would normally assist and direct arriving passengers into designated queue lanes, through the ePassport gates or to specific immigration desks. This resulted in Border Force Officers managing queues rather than carrying out their primary functions.

David Neal
Chief Inspector

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1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspection-report-of-birmingham-airport-february-2013

1. Background

Birmingham Airport

1.1 Birmingham Airport is the UK's seventh busiest airport; however, in the financial year 2020/21, it processed 980,576 passengers (inbound and outbound), a decrease of 91.9% on the previous year (12,120,236 passengers). This fall in numbers was a result of the Government's travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic.[2] At the time of this inspection the number of passengers was increasing gradually, with approximately 160,000 arrivals during August 2021.

1.2 The North Terminal is Birmingham's main terminal and has 9 Primary Control Point (PCP) desks and 15 ePassport gates. The South Terminal, which has 5 PCP desks and no ePassport gates,[3] was 'mothballed' during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, at the time of this inspection, it was being used for direct red list arrivals (DRLA).[4] Indirect red list passenger arrivals are disembarked into the North Terminal and escorted to the South Terminal for processing. All flights observed during this inspection arrived at the North Terminal.

1.3 Birmingham Airport is one of two airports in the UK which manages direct flights from countries categorised as being on the 'red list' during Covid-19, along with indirect arrivals who were escorted to, and processed through, the South Terminal.

1.4 Border Force staff at Birmingham Airport were involved in Operation Pitting, the well-publicised evacuation of people from Afghanistan in August 2021. Birmingham Airport processed close to 8,800 passengers into managed quarantine at short notice.

1.5 Border Force's priorities[5] are to:

- "deter and prevent individuals and goods that would harm the national interests from entering the UK

- facilitate the legitimate movement of individuals and trade to and from the UK

- protect and collect customs revenues for trade crossing the border

- provide excellent service to customers

- provide demonstrable effectiveness, efficiency and value for money".

1.6 Border Force Officers conduct checks on people and goods at the border, exercising powers under the Immigration Acts of 1971 and 2019, the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

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2 https://www.birminghamairport.co.uk/media/6663/annual-report-2020-2021.pdf
3 ePassport gates are regarded by the Home Office as an efficient tool to process large volumes of low-risk passengers through the immigration control.
4 Flights arriving directly from countries on the Government's red list – currently only 5–6 flights per week. South Terminal is one of only two terminals in the UK currently designated for arrivals direct from a red list country. Terminal 5 at Heathrow is the other. See: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-to-england-from-another-country-during-coronavirus-covid-19
5 https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/border-force/about

1.7 On arriving in the UK, a passenger must present a valid national passport or other document establishing their nationality and identity on request by a Border Force Officer. The officer may ask questions to establish the reasons for travel and any other relevant information and conduct a range of security checks.

1.8 There are 104.19 full-time equivalent (FTE) Border Force staff for Birmingham Airport, including a number who have been sent on detached duty to a nearby Inland Border Facility[6] following the UK's exit from the European Union. Staff work across 3 shift patterns operating as 6 multifunctional teams (each with an average of 11 staff), with separate casework and business support staff.

1.9 At all UK ports, Border Force is assessed against the following national passenger service standard for queue waiting times:

- 95% of EEA[7] passengers are cleared within 25 minutes, and
- 95% of non-EEA passengers are cleared within 45 minutes.

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6 Facility to check lorries en route to Northern Ireland in conjunction with HM Revenue and Customs.
7 https://www.gov.uk/eu-eea

2. Recommendations

2.1   The Home Office should review the balance of Border Force staff resources allocated to customs and immigration checks, to ensure adequate coverage of both areas, based on identified risks.

2.2   The Home Office should ensure that staff at Birmingham Airport follow a consistent approach to measuring queue waiting times, using approved data-gathering methods as set out in Border Force guidance.

2.3   The Home Office should ensure all Border Force Officers performing the 'Roving Officer' role are not distracted by having to direct queues and have received the full training necessary to discharge this role effectively.

3. Scope and methodology

Scope

3.1 This inspection focused on the efficiency and effectiveness of Border Force queue management at Birmingham Airport.

Methodology

3.2 The inspection team visited Birmingham Airport on 15 and 16 September 2021.

3.3 Inspectors:

- observed the flow of passengers in the North Terminal from the arrivals pier into the immigration arrivals hall, and through to Primary Control Point (PCP) desks and ePassport gates

- observed passengers arriving indirectly from 'red list' countries in the South Terminal

- spoke with Border Force staff across different grades, and Birmingham Airport Limited (BAL) staff and contractors

- were given a demonstration of the airport queue management system 'Blip Track'.

4. Key findings

Arrivals and immigration hall layout and signage

4.1   The passenger journey, from the arrivals pier to the Primary Control Point (PCP) desks and ePassport gates involves:

- passengers proceeding along the arrivals pier (long corridor between the arrivals gate and the immigration arrivals hall)
- entering a queuing system to present the Passenger Locator Forms (PLFs) to airport staff or contractors, a role formerly performed by Border Force
- descending one floor to the immigration arrivals hall via a flight of stairs or lift (escalator not in use) and either turning left towards the ePassport gates or right, towards other queue lanes, as directed.

4.2   The signage on the arrivals pier is on physical and digital screens and provides instructions on which queue to join when entering the immigration arrivals hall, what documents to have ready, how to take precautions against Covid-19 and other related information.

4.3   Overall, Border Force signage on the arrivals pier was well designed and written in plain English. Of the two digital screens in the corridor, only one was working at the time of this inspection. The one in operation switched quickly between several text-heavy information screens on topics including customs legislation, Covid-19 measures, travel document validity and changes to immigration rules post exiting the EU. It would be difficult for a passenger to fully digest the information presented, even if they were standing still and watching the screen.

4.4   All PLFs were being checked by airport operator contractors, at the end of the pier. This process appeared orderly and was supported by clear signage.

4.5   Upon entering the arrivals hall via stairs or the lift, passengers must quickly decide whether to turn left towards the ePassport gates or right towards the queues for PCP desks. At the time of the onsite observation, inspectors observed passengers being directed by a Border Force Officer or Birmingham Airport Limited (BAL) staff member or contractor.

4.6   Overhead signs (Annex A – Picture 1) use symbols to direct passengers; however, inspectors observed most passengers ignoring them and consulting a Border Force Officer or a member of BAL staff, or simply following the crowd in front of them.

4.7   The signage for UK, EU and other nationalities who can use the ePassport gates makes efficient and clear use of national flags (Annex A – Picture 2). However, the symbol to denote the rest of the world is an abstract white globe on an orange background, which inspectors felt was insufficiently clear to an arriving passenger. Inspectors observed passengers looking at this signage and subsequently asking a Border Force Officer or a member of BAL staff for assistance.

Airport operator staff

4.8   When dealing with flights, inspectors were told that there must be a minimum of four Border Force Officers in the PCP area for personal safety reasons. At Birmingham Airport, this might include a Border Force Officer monitoring the ePassport gates, one on the physical PCP, a Roving Officer and a Duty Higher Officer.

4.9   Inspectors observed both Border Force and BAL staff undertaking a queue marshal role in the passenger arrivals hall.

4.10   Normally, six BAL staff would be employed to direct and assist passengers into designated queue lanes, through the ePassport gates or to immigration desks. However, there was only one BAL staff member during the first day of observations, and two on the second day.

4.11   Inspectors were told that the reduced level of BAL staff was a result of them being furloughed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore Border Force had taken on a greater role in queue marshalling. Inspectors saw officers directing passengers into queues, but also having to gesture or verbally call for the next passenger to approach their desk, in the absence of a presenter[8] or an electronic call-forward system.

4.12   Although demonstrating collaborative working and agility during a time of crisis, inspectors felt that the redeployment of an officer to queue marshalling had a detrimental effect on Border Force resources. For example, the 'Roving Officer', whose important core responsibilities include safeguarding, looking out for vulnerable people (for example victims of trafficking), and monitoring the behavioural indicators and body language of arriving passengers, was most affected by having to adopt the queue marshal role at 'the decision point'.[9] A similar finding was made in the recent ePassport gates inspection.

4.13   It was also noted by inspectors that not all Border Force Officers acting as 'Roving Officers' had received the required training for the role.

Customs channels

4.14   Although out of scope for this inspection, inspectors were told by several Border Force staff, including managers, that the customs channels were not staffed for the duration of the inspection. Instead, the deployment of the multifunctional officers, trained in both customs and immigration functions, were prioritised towards immigration functions in order to prevent the build-up of long queues at passport control.

4.15   Border Force's Operating Mandate 2015 states that "where customs anti-smuggling deployments or service points cannot be resourced as planned, Border Force managers should work in partnership with HMRC, according to the particular circumstances and related contingency plans (for example a CHIEF[10] outage) to maintain anti-smuggling checks on specific targets, fulfil Border Force's obligations under UK and international law, and support HMRC and other authorities to maintain flows of perishable goods". Inspectors were not able to clarify whether this was the case.

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8 Presenters are employed by airport operators or contractors to direct queuing passengers to the immigration desk.
9 The decision point is a fixed position at the start of the immigration lanes where passengers are advised which queue to join based on documentation or eligibility.
10 CHIEF stands for Customs Handling of Import and Export Freight.

Dedicated queuing lanes

4.16   Five separate queuing lanes were in place as follows:

- the blue (PCP) lane ('UK/EU/EEA/Swiss/B5JSSK') including families with children under 12[11]
- the orange (PCP) lane ('All other passports')[12]
- the ePassport gates lane (in relevant ports)[13]
- disabled passengers and air crew
- Premium Fast Track.

4.17   To promote and improve the experience of disabled passengers at Birmingham Airport, Border Force displayed clearly visible signage showing an image of a sunflower, which represented hidden disabilities, alongside a sign which stated, 'proud to support hidden disabilities'. Passengers could use this lane if they showed the sunflower lanyard or card, on request, or as directed by a Border Force Officer.

4.18   A separate lane is set aside for premium paying passengers, who should have a wait of no longer than 15 minutes. Inspectors observed that this lane was rarely used by passengers and it was noted that the unmanned automated barrier was not working. There was no signage or staff member to direct these passengers to an alternative lane.

4.19   A PCP lane was in place for 'rest of the world' passengers who were not eligible to use the ePassport gates, and this lane was denoted by a white globe on an orange background, and a separate smaller sign with the wording 'All other passports'.

4.20   Those staff undertaking the 'decision point' role would, as standard, direct all eligible passengers to the ePassport gates.

4.21   Inspectors were told that there were no designated separate lanes for returning residents, for example those with indefinite leave to remain, those with visas to work in the UK, international students or for those travelling with children.

ePassport gates

4.22   Inspectors noted during observations that the ePassport gate referrals rate (passengers diverted to the PCP referrals queue, if their passport is rejected by the ePassport gates) appeared high with queues forming at the referrals desks, although these were quickly cleared. Figures provided for the first two weeks of September showed that the referral rate for Birmingham Airport was 15–16%.

4.23   Inspectors were unclear if this figure was in line with national averages, but staff attributed the main reason for referral to be passenger error. Managers advised inspectors that updates to the ePassport gates system had also contributed to the number of referrals. A further update

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11 UK/European Economic Area (EEA)/Swiss/B5JSSK (plus Registered Traveller Scheme (RTS)) passengers who are either ineligible or unable to use ePassport gates will continue to use the blue lane. In ports without ePassport gates, all arriving passengers of these nationalities should be processed in the blue lane.

12 This queue ('All other passports') will continue to contain: all visa nationals and non B5JSSK non-visa nationals. These passengers will continue to be subject to the same examinations as now. This change does not impact on the processes for dealing with these passengers.

13 All UK/EEA/Swiss/B5JSSK nationals and RTS members will be eligible to use the ePassport gates, provided they are travelling on a chipped passport, do not require a specific form of permission to enter to be granted by an officer, and are either aged over 18, or aged 12–17 and accompanied by an adult. Children under 12 and unaccompanied children aged 12–17 will not be eligible to use ePassport gates, as per the existing rules.

of the system was planned for the same day, which staff expected would reduce the referral rate (Annex A – Pictures 3 and 4).

Service level agreement for queue wait times

4.24   Border Force has a national service level agreement (SLA)[14] for border queue wait times which applies to all ports and airports. Inspectors were informed that this was suspended in early 2021.

4.25   Border Force, at all ports and airports, is required to submit passenger queue times using a weekly queue monitoring spreadsheet. This is submitted to the Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit[15] (PRAU) for collation and publication, as part of Border Force's transparency data. The data, which is published on GOV.UK, provides the performance for Border Force overall, but it is not broken down into individual airports.

4.26   Although inspectors were told that the SLA had been suspended in early 2021, they were provided with data on Border Force's performance at Birmingham Airport, against the national SLA, for the months March to August 2021 (see Table 1). The data shows that there were nil returns for a number of months, which inspectors were informed was due to the greatly reduced traffic flow and changes to reporting requirements.

4.27   The South Terminal has only been used for direct red list arrivals, with approximately five to six flights a week during September 2021. There were no such flights during the two days of observation for this inspection.

Table 1: Monthly queue performance against service level agreement*						
North Terminal	**Aug-21**	**Jul-21**	**Jun-21**	**May-21**	**Apr-21**	**Mar-21**
Non-EEA queues	100.0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100.0%
EEA queues	99.0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	60.0%	100.0%

* Home Office data extracted from local management information databases.

4.28   Guidance states that, as a minimum, for an airport of Birmingham's size, one queue measurement should be taken for every hour of the week that it is possible to do so.

4.29   Inspectors were also provided with examples of weekly queue monitoring spreadsheets for April to August 2021 for the North Terminal, which had queue start and finish times for EEA, non-EEA and ePassport gate queues, and eight wait time reports, over the same period, for each breach of the SLA, giving an explanation of the cause. From the data provided, breaches were for a combination of reasons including Border Force Officers checking PLFs, dealing with non-compliance with Covid-19 test requirements, staffing shortages and multiple flights arriving at the same time. Inspectors understood this was the reason for the drop in performance for EEA queues to 60% in April 2021 as shown in Table 1.

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14 All non-EEA passengers to be presented to a UK Border Force Officer within 45 minutes of joining a passport queue, 95% of the time, and the queue for the EEA control should not exceed 25 minutes 95% of the time.
15 PRAU is a unit in the Home Office that collates and analyses performance data.

Measuring of queue times

4.30   According to Border Force queue measurement guidance, airports with "regular passenger flow" are able to use a variety of methods to record border queue wait times, according to national guidance issued in November 2015.[16] These include use of CCTV cameras; queue monitoring cards handed to the passenger at the end of the queue; and picking out a passenger and tracing them until they reach the immigration desk ("spotting"). In addition, airport operators have adopted enhanced approaches to tracking passenger movements using new technology. BAL uses a system called BLIP Track that tracks the movement of passengers through the airport using their mobile phone signals. Inspectors were told that some Border Force Officers have access to this system for the purposes of queue management.

4.31   Inspectors were advised that this system is also used by other airport operators and BAL are looking to extend its use and reliability for their own commercial purposes. As it detects all mobile phone signals, whether or not Bluetooth or Wi-Fi are switched on, a data-cleansing process is required to remove the system's recording of airport staff and other anomalies affecting the data. Inspectors were told that Border Force Officers can also address any anomalies by cleansing the data.

4.32   Inspectors asked several members of Border Force staff how they monitored and measured the queues and found a lack of consistency in their approach. This included differing accounts on the starting point for queue measurement, with inspectors either being told that it begins: at the point where the passengers line up for the PLF[17] checks, where the passenger queue ends in the immigration hall, or from the point that passengers were observed queuing on the stairs into the immigration hall.

4.33   Staff described a combination of methods for measuring queues, including CCTV footage, queue cards, spotting and BLIP. However, inspectors were also advised that queue cards had not been used for some time and only certain staff, responsible for measuring queues, were aware of, and able to use, the BLIP system. The BLIP system uses a fixed point at the bottom of the stairs where a Border Force Officer directs passengers to the appropriate queue (ePassport gates or queues for the PCP).

4.34   Inspectors did not observe any measurement of queues by staff during the inspection, although it may have been collected away from the view of inspectors. There was no clear picture as to how the information collected for the weekly spreadsheet was obtained. Furthermore, there was no clear instruction for staff about how to do this, and in at least one instance there was no management oversight of the methods used by junior staff recording queue waiting times, despite this being a Higher Officer responsibility.

Future changes

4.35   An ICIBI inspection[18] of Border Force operations at Glasgow and Edinburgh airports (January to March 2019) noted that an evaluation of approaches to queue measurement, including progress towards standardisation, consultation with stakeholders and publication of an SLA, was planned at that time.

16   Border Force Queue Measurement at the UK Border - Instructions.
17   A traveller to the UK has to show they have completed a Passenger Locator Form (PLF) when they arrive at the UK border. This is used by the Government to contact any person who has travelled on the same flight who develops Covid-19 symptoms.
18   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-border-force-operations-at-glasgow-and-edinburgh-airports

4.36   Inspectors were informed that the Border Force Strategic Capabilities and Planning team is looking at passenger flow and is in the early stages of considering whether the current SLAs meet operational and customer requirements, given the changes since the pandemic and Border Force's important role in controlling the spread of the virus.

4.37   Inspectors were advised that the Border Force Operational Assurance Directorate is also conducting a review of queue measurements, SLAs and reporting. The queue measurement practices at Birmingham Airport would benefit from the greater clarity this would bring.
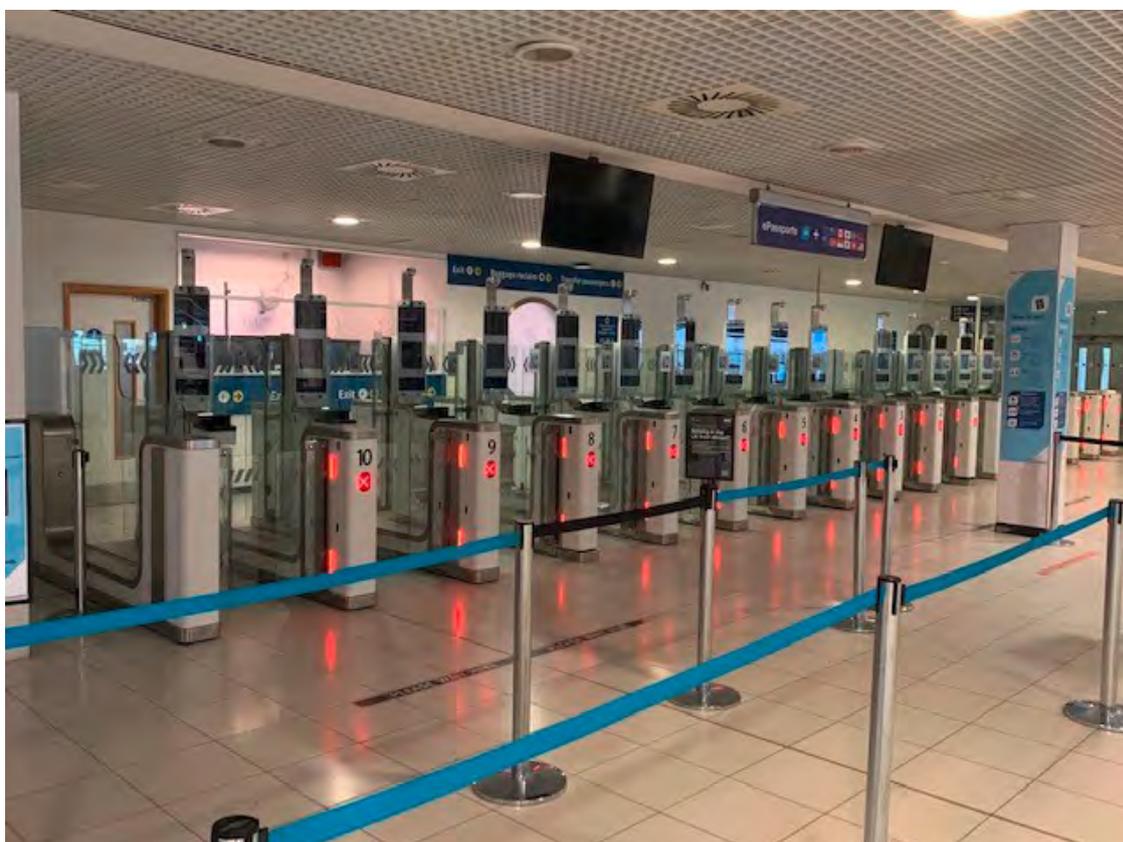
Annex A: Photographs

Picture 1: Queue signage – three main lanes and waiting times display
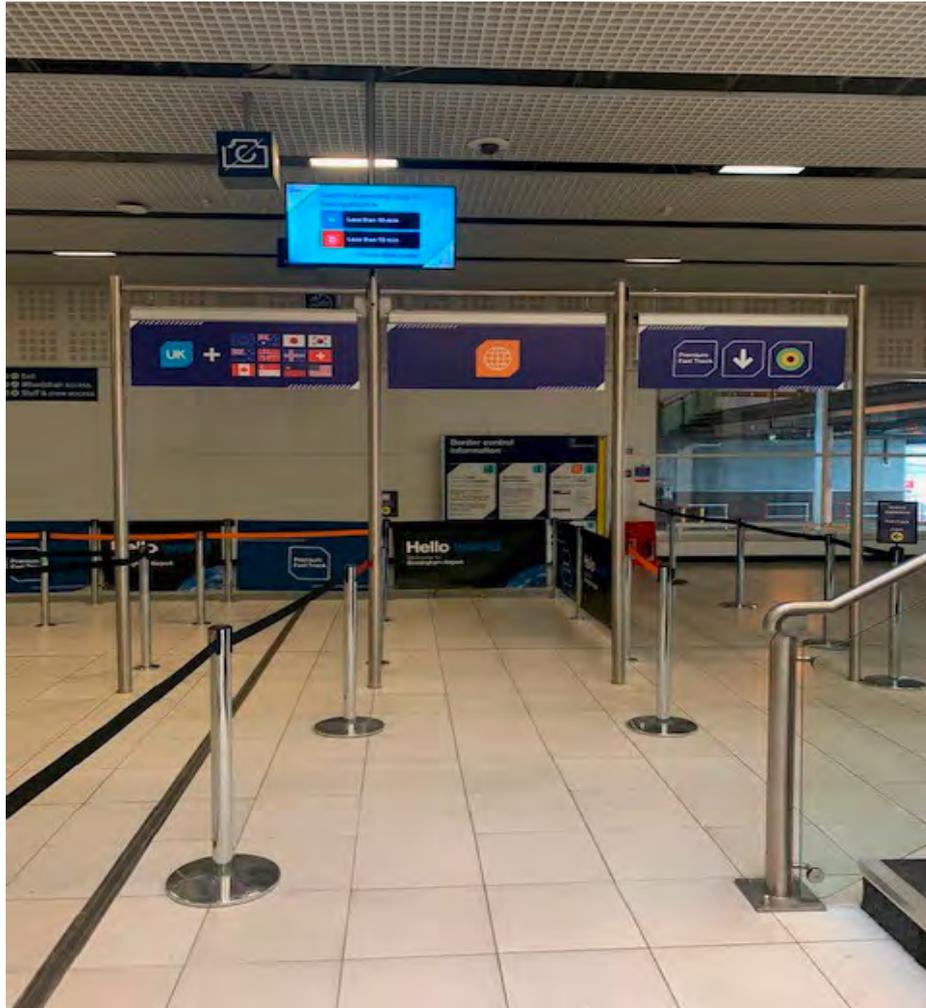
Picture 2: Queue signage – small sign for 'All other passports'
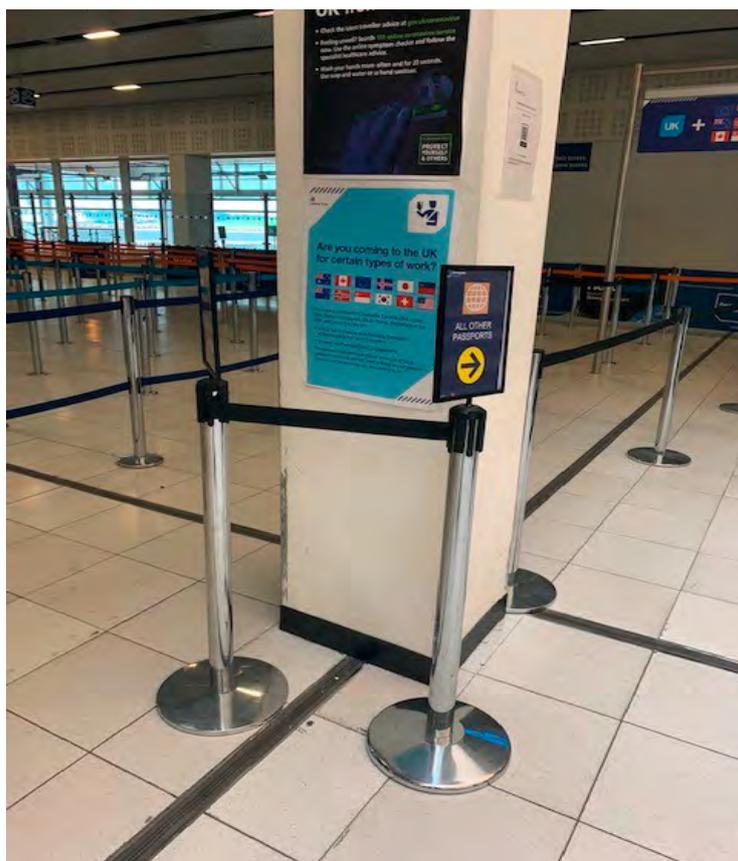
Pictures 3 and 4: ePassport gates

Annex B: Role and remit of the Independent Chief Inspector

The role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (until 2012, the Chief Inspector of the UK Border Agency) was established by the UK Borders Act 2007. Sections 48-56 of the UK Borders Act 2007 (as amended) provide the legislative framework for the inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of functions relating to immigration, asylum, nationality and customs by the Home Secretary and by any person exercising such functions on her behalf. The legislation empowers the Independent Chief Inspector to monitor, report on and make recommendations about all such functions in particular:

- consistency of approach

- the practice and performance of listed persons compared to other persons doing similar activities

- the procedure in making decisions

- the treatment of claimants and applicants

- certification under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum act 2002 (c. 41) (unfounded claim)

- the law about discrimination in the exercise of functions, including reliance on section 19D of the Race Relations Act 1976 (c. 74) (exception for immigration functions)

- the procedure in relation to the exercise of enforcement powers (including powers of arrest, entry, search and seizure)

- practice and procedure in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of offences

- the procedure in relation to the conduct of criminal proceedings

- whether customs functions have been appropriately exercised by the Secretary of State and the Director of Border Revenue

- the provision of information

- the handling of complaints; and

- the content of information about conditions in countries outside the United Kingdom, which the Secretary of State compiles and makes available, for purposes connected with immigration and asylum, to immigration officers and other officials.

In addition, the legislation enables the Secretary of State to request the Independent Chief Inspector to report to her in writing in relation to specified matters.

The legislation requires the Independent Chief Inspector to report in writing to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State lays all reports before Parliament, which she has committed to do within eight weeks of receipt, subject to both Houses of Parliament being in session.

Reports are published in full except for any material that the Secretary of State determines it is undesirable to publish for reasons of national security or where publication might jeopardise an individual's safety, in which case the legislation permits the Secretary of State to omit the relevant passages from the published report.

As soon as a report has been laid in Parliament, it is published on the Inspectorate's website, together with the Home Office's response to the report and recommendations.

Acknowledgements

Border Force staff at Birmingham Airport

Inspection team members

G7 Oversight: Posy Hartstone

Lead Inspector: Caroline Bradshaw

Inspector: Harry Palmer

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