



Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration Spot Check Visits

January – May 2013

John Vine CBE QPM

Independent Chief Inspector of
Borders and Immigration

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We provide independent scrutiny of the UK's border and immigration functions, to improve their efficiency and effectiveness.

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Contents

	FOREWORD FROM JOHN VINE CBE QPM	2
1.	Background to Spot Check Visits	3
2.	Croydon Public Enquiry Office	4
3.	Command and Control Unit	9
4.	East Midlands Reporting Centre	14
	Acknowledgements	18

FOREWORD FROM JOHN VINE CBE QPM INDEPENDENT CHIEF INSPECTOR OF BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION



In 2013 I decided to launch a series of follow up spot-check visits to assess how certain areas have changed, developed or improved since I last inspected them, as well as reviewing progress made against previous recommendations.

My first three spot check visits took place at the Public Enquiry Office in Croydon, the Command and Control Centre in Manchester and the East Midlands Reporting Centre.

All three business areas had made good progress against my previous recommendations. I also found staff and managers to be professional, enthusiastic and committed to driving improvement.

At the PEO in Croydon progress in implementing the recommendations from my 2010 inspection had been slow, but the pace had accelerated in time for my visit. The move to new premises in April 2013, combined with the enthusiasm and commitment of the management team are positive steps forward.

“All three business areas had made good progress against my previous recommendations”

The Command and Control Unit in Manchester was much improved and had a clearer idea of its purpose.

“The enthusiasm and commitment of the management team are positive steps forward”

The East Midlands Reporting Centre continues to be a well run and well managed centre with professional, committed and enthusiastic staff delivering a good service.

Progress has been made against all the accepted recommendations made in my inspection report.

These spot-check visits are an efficient and valuable accompaniment to my formal inspection programme, and I am pleased to see evidence that the Home Office is acting upon recommendations that they have previously accepted.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'John Vine' followed by a period.

John Vine CBE QPM
Independent Chief Inspector
August 2013.

1. Background to Spot Check Visits

- 1.1 The Home Office is ultimately responsible for implementing my recommendations, and is accountable to the Home Secretary, Ministers, Parliament and the public for improvements to service delivery. As such, I do not routinely undertake full re-inspections of areas of business that he has previously scrutinised.
- 1.2 However, this year (2013) I have initiated a series of follow up spot-check visits to assess how certain areas have changed, developed or improved since i last inspected them.
- 1.3 These spot-checks are arranged in advance with the relevant business area, and usually last no longer than one day.
- 1.4 Following each spot-check visit, I produced a brief summary assessment of progress, which was sent to the relevant Director General at the Home Office and copied to the Home Secretary.

2. Croydon Public Enquiry Office

Background

- 2.1 Public Enquiry Offices (PEO) offer a same-day service at a fee, for considering straight-forward applications for permission to extend a stay in the UK, or to stay in the UK permanently. They also accept postal applications.
- 2.2 The Croydon PEO, based in Lunar House, is the largest in the country, and can deal with up to 300 customers per day. I selected the Croydon PEO for the first of my Chief Inspector Spot-Check Progress Visits because it presents a very visible public face of the Agency, and is one of the main places in the UK, where it deals directly with the public. As such it was important for me to examine how progress against the recommendations I made in 2010 have improved the service for the public and whether there was more still to be done.

March 2010 Inspection findings

- 2.3 I published a report on the Croydon Public Enquiry Office in March 2010 following an unannounced inspection in the previous month.
- 2.4 In 2010 I found the staff at the Croydon PEO to be professional, enthusiastic and committed to their work. However, they were hampered in the level of service that they could provide to customers by IT failures, queues for office equipment and inadequate accommodation.
- 2.5 There was a robust system in place for monitoring and measuring customer feedback, but some information on the website and on display in the premises about the PEO, including about queuing times, was inaccurate.
- 2.6 Customers who paid a considerable fee for a fast-tracked service were often having to wait much longer than the advertised times, and the seating provided in the PEO was uncomfortable, poorly positioned and afforded the applicant little privacy.
- 2.7 I made three recommendations for improvement.

Progress against recommendations

Recommendation 1: The UK Border Agency should set a clear target for the end-to-end process, communicate this to customers and measure its performance against this target.

- 2.8 The UKBA website¹ clearly states at the top of the relevant page (<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/contact/applyinginperson/>) that it offers a same-day

¹ At the time of this spot check visit the UKBA still existed and references to the UKBA website are correct. Prior to publication this has all become part of the Home Office.

service, yet further down the page it advises that the service standard is 90% of cases concluded within 24 hours.

- 2.9 During 2012 the Croydon PEO had been achieving 90% of decisions within 24 hours, but were not meeting that target on the same day. As such the staff and managers had been working to improve performance to meet the target.
- 2.10 I was pleased to note that the statistics for January 2013 showed that 91.5% of customers were now receiving a same day decision – this is commendable and is reflected in the results of the “Tell us what you think” survey of applicants conducted every month by the PEO. This survey of customers’ views had shown month on month improvements in satisfaction levels amongst customers with the speed of service.
- 2.11 Furthermore, staff were attempting to deal with individual cases within 2 hours. This is not a measured service standard and I cannot therefore comment on whether this informal target was being met.
- 2.12 Other targets, for example around caseload, and quality control had been reviewed and refreshed and were to be being met. 2% of the decisions being made by each case owner were being quality controlled. Moves were underway to ensure this quality control check took place before a final decision was given to the customer, without delaying the decision. It is worth noting, however that this 2% QA target was standard for all leave to remain decisions across UKBA and not particular to the PEO.
- 2.13 In terms of communicating targets to their customers I believe there is further work to do. In walking around the PEO I did not see a clear sign or poster telling people how long the process was going to take or exactly what they should expect from their visit that day. However, the Assistant Director of the PEO explained his intention to set out a customer charter somewhere highly visible in the PEO doing just this. I encourage this and look forward to it taking effect.
- 2.14 The absence of a single published and visible customer charter did not indicate that there was a paucity of information for the customer in general. On the contrary, there was a large volume of instructional messaging telling people what they could and couldn’t do. This messaging was cluttered and confusing. However, information on the actual process was sparse. This information is however, available quite clearly on the website (<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/contact/applyinginperson/happenontheday/>) and could be better presented in the PEO. The move to new premises might give an opportunity to rectify this.
- 2.15 Finally, I was told that the Croydon PEO was scheduled to be re-accredited for “Customer Service Excellence²”, demonstrating a commitment to delivering high standards which is refreshing.

Recommendation 2: The UK Border Agency should review the information on its website and in the Croydon PEO to ensure it accurately reflects the level or service being provided, with particular reference to waiting times.

- 2.16 I was advised that the new operating model that was being developed by the Agency, sought to standardise approaches and processes across all PEOs. I welcome this, as at present there are still differences in service standards available at different offices. This makes the website confusing as it tries to set out what customers might expect at

² A government standard of excellence <http://www.customerserviceexcellence.uk.com/>

each office. The website makes reference to decisions in Croydon being made within 24 hours, not the same day. This is the historical position, but not the target that the management is currently driving towards. I could see no reference to waiting times on the website.

- 2.17 The Agency's Performance and Compliance Unit (PCU) had provided me with a table showing what actions the Agency had taken against my recommendations. However, I found there were a number of areas where actions were said to have been taken but had not been, or where recommendations had been closed where I did not see that they had been acted upon.
- 2.18 For example, against recommendation 1, the UKBA grid which updates on progress against recommendations stated that, at the 6 month review, ambiguity about the same day service had been removed from the Agency's website. This was incorrect and the website still referred to a same day service at the top of the page. It was only further down that the website talked about a 24 hour service.
- 2.19 Furthermore, against recommendation 1, at the 12 month review, the Agency estimated that processes, including queue management processes and the provision of Management Information, would be much improved by the end of 2012, and as such they closed the recommendation. I found during my visit in January 2013 that these improvements had not yet taken place and as such it was unreasonable to have closed the recommendation.
- 2.20 The website also provided guidance on how people could make appointments to visit the PEO (via an online booking system), but this created its own problems. We were told that appointments, released 6 weeks in advance, were being dominated by block bookings from representatives trying to deal with multiple cases, therefore making it difficult for individuals to get an appointment. There was also anecdotal evidence to suggest some bogus appointments were made using the online system, which were then potentially sold on by unscrupulous representatives or individuals. The knock on effect of this was that many appointments booked turn out to be no-shows (currently running at approximately 30%), and that genuine customers could not get appointments in a reasonable timescale or were forced to turn to unscrupulous representatives to get appointments.
- 2.21 This is unacceptable, although I was pleased to note that the Agency recognises this and had been undertaking measures to try and combat the abuse. They should continue to address this issue, as a matter of priority.

Recommendation 3: The UK Border Agency should take steps to make improvements to its accommodation and facilities for customers and staff, in particular to:

- Ensure customer service desks are more visible and are used appropriately to support customers who access this service
- Improve office facilities for staff, especially photocopiers and printers
- Address consistent problems with IT, microphone and tannoy failures
- Make improvements to the accommodation on the first and second floor for both customers and staff

- 2.22 Accommodation issues formed a significant part of my inspection report in 2010 and I was pleased to see that significant progress was finally being made to address these issues with the planned move in April 2013 of the PEO to new, specially designed premises within Lunar House. I have no doubt that the benefits realised by the new premises will be considerable, but it is disappointing that this has taken three years since my report to manifest itself.
- 2.23 Until the move in April takes place, the office facilities, and seating (both for those customers at a booth discussing their application, and those waiting to be seen) continues to be poorly designed, uncomfortable and inadequate.
- 2.24 However, interim progress had been made on other accommodation related issues. The customer service desks, now clearly labelled have been relocated to be in front of customers as they enter each floor. Staff operating these desks have received specific customer service training.
- 2.25 The number of photocopiers and printers available for staff to use in the PEO had increased. A parallel piece of work to revisit and review the volume of material that needed to be copied and retained on each file was also taking place. We were told that this move towards reducing or eliminating paper copies would be formalised through standardised agency-wide training.
- 2.26 Display screens, which previously held incorrect information and had been turned off, were now back on with correct information but not with any performance data. We were told that no new information would be recorded or displayed in advance of the move to new premises.
- 2.27 It is obvious that the staff and managers at the PEO still had to cope on a weekly basis with inadequate or deficient IT. Regular IT outages still appeared to take place, but I was pleased to see resilient and pragmatic approaches to the IT failures being adopted. The team at the PEO appeared to be dealing with this well.
- 2.28 In addition, I was pleased to see that the PEO had changed the previous system whereby if there were IT outages that prevented pre-booked appointments being honoured, the customer was obliged to go home and rebook a future replacement appointment themselves. In such circumstances, PEO staff were now immediately re-booking appointments for these customers themselves.

Additional developments

- 2.29 The new Assistant Director of the PEO was enthusiastic and determined. His basic starting point appeared to be that he wanted his staff to enjoy their work and to take pride in what they did. To help lead this approach a series of staff meetings, town hall events, and 1-2-1 meetings were in place and he made himself accessible to all staff on a regular basis.
- 2.30 I was also pleased to see the seriousness with which the management team were taking complaints. The Assistant Director of the PEO told me that he reads all complaints that are submitted and takes a personal interest in how (and in what time scale) they are resolved. This personal interest from the management of the PEO is encouraging and can only help to drive performance.

Areas of concern

- 2.31 This new and enthusiastic leadership follows in the wake of a considerable period at the PEO where there appears to have been a lack of continuity of leadership, illustrated by the rapid turnover of managers and periods without an Assistant Director. In this period, the current Assistant Director believed staff not only lacked support and guidance, but also direction and discipline. This is clearly unfortunate, and was reflected in the staff survey results from 2012 which were poor.
- 2.32 However, the current management was identifying avenues for improvement and advised me that they would be extremely disappointed if staff survey results in 2013 were not considerably better.
- 2.33 My main outstanding concern however, is not directly attributable to the staff or the management of the PEO, but lies with the overall management and oversight in the Agency of the implementation of my recommendations. In advance of my visit to the PEO I was furnished with a copy of the latest evaluation from the Agency. It is this information that helps the Agency and Ministers determine whether or not my recommendations have been implemented satisfactorily, and ultimately closed. I was extremely concerned to note that the plan which was initiated as a result of my original findings and which was provided to me by PCU in advance of my visit noted that a number of actions had been completed when this was not the case.

Conclusion

- 2.34 The Agency had made slow progress in implementing the recommendations in my report in 2010, but the pace had accelerated at the time of my spot-check visit. The move to new premises in April 2013 combined with the enthusiasm and commitment of the management team could only help to drive forward improvement.
- 2.35 With the anticipated benefits that the new premises will bring, along with the obvious investment that has gone into developing them, I would expect the Croydon PEO to become a beacon of good practice during 2013, and will watch with interest to see if this occurs.
- 2.36 I remain concerned with the Agency's own monitoring of the implementation of my recommendations. The grid provided by the PCU is exactly the sort of work I would expect to see, but more needs to be done to ensure its accuracy.
- 2.37 However, overall my return visit to the Croydon Public Enquiries Office was a positive one. As in 2010, I found a staff team who were professional, committed and enthusiastic, and who were genuinely committed to delivering a fast, efficient and smooth service to their customers.

3. Command and Control Unit

Background

- 3.1 The Command and Control Unit (CCU) was set up in 2006, and was established to provide a single point of contact following the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers' tragedy³. At the time there was no established process for the then Immigration and Nationality Directorate to contact appropriate staff and partners to deal with such a situation, particularly out of office hours.
- 3.2 CCU was initially part of Immigration Group North West and sat within Enforcement and Compliance, but has recently been transferred to National Operations and Assurance. Originally the unit was a joint UK Border Agency and Police initiative, with staff from both organisations. However, it is now staffed solely with UKBA (now Home Office) personnel.
- 3.3 Following the split of Border Force from the Agency in 2012, CCU acted solely for the UK Border Agency and was no longer responsible for Border Force.
- 3.4 My spot-check follow-up visit on the 14 March 2013 took place shortly before the Home Secretary's decision to abolish the Agency and bring its functions back under direct Ministerial control in the Home Office.

November 2010 Inspection findings

- 3.5 I published a report on the Command and Control Unit in November 2010, as part of a package of five announced inspections taking place into UK Border Agency operations in the North West of England.
- 3.6 At that time I found that the overall purpose of the CCU was unclear. It was unable to accurately measure the demand placed upon it, although the work of the unit was demand driven. There was limited data analysis in terms of the identification of trends, forecasts and priorities.
- 3.7 Its published objectives had 100% target rates for compliance, however their ability to measure compliance against the objectives was limited, in part because of inadequate IT and telephony systems.
- 3.8 The CCU's relationships with its stakeholders were good, and sound working relationships had developed. However there were no written protocols or Memorandum of Understanding in place regarding the level of service to be provided.
- 3.9 I also had some concerns about the accuracy, handling and security of some information kept by CCU and about how up to date it was.

³ The Morecambe Bay cockling tragedy occurred on the evening of 5 February 2004 at Morecambe Bay, when at least 21 cockle pickers were drowned by an incoming tide off the Lancashire/Cumbrian coast. The cockle pickers were mostly Chinese, being paid a low wage, and were all illegal immigrants.

3.10 I made nine recommendations for improvement.

Progress against 2010 recommendations

Recommendation 1: The UK Border Agency should fundamentally review the purpose of the CCU and introduce call monitoring standards to ensure that callers' enquiries are handled effectively.

- 3.11 A considerable amount of thinking had gone into what the purpose and function of the CCU should be, since my inspection. I was made aware of a number of reviews that had taken place within the Agency during 2011, culminating in a more focussed and enhanced role for CCU which was agreed by the Agency's Board later that year.
- 3.12 I was also shown evidence of the fact that, within the unit, action was taken immediately after my inspection to identify changes that could and should be made quickly in response to my recommendations. This included identifying staff training needs and provision of development opportunities.
- 3.13 I was pleased to note that all staff I spoke to (many of whom I met whilst on inspection in 2010) confirmed that they felt the unit's focus was much more clearly defined now. They felt they were more aware of the purpose of the unit, as well as their own role in delivering that purpose. This is extremely positive.
- 3.14 I was advised that, to date, the quality of the IT and telephony provision had been an inhibitor to progress. I spoke to a member of staff whose role was to monitor the standards of call handling by CCU staff. It was clear that there was a well considered and effective process in place for call monitoring. However, I was advised that CCU were awaiting the implementation of new telephony services that would allow this process to be carried out more effectively.

Recommendation 2: The UK Border Agency should accurately measure the performance of the CCU against an agreed suite of performance indicators.

- 3.15 The implementation of this recommendation was reliant on the installation of new telephony equipment. My original report criticised the Agency for having 100% targets but no formal way of measuring performance against these targets. On this visit, managers advised me that the new telephony system would enable them to monitor performance in relation to the number of dropped calls, number of rings to answer calls, average length of call etc. However, until this is in place, any targets will still be redundant as they cannot be assessed.

Recommendation 3: The UK Border Agency should implement a formal stakeholder engagement system in the CCU which informs performance and harnesses the expertise of the Police National Computer (PNC) Team.

- 3.16 A Corporate Partner Engagement and Communications Strategy was created in November 2010, and I was told on my visit that this had just been revised. Some memoranda of understanding had been established with key stakeholders which had helped to formalise arrangements with the CCU.

- 3.17 I noted that CCU's desire to achieve recognition under the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) scheme had been hampered by the inadequacy of the telephony system in operation. As a result, staff had been told that any bid for CSE accreditation was likely to have to wait until 2014. This is disappointing, and must be frustrating for staff who are clearly working hard to improve the service provided by the Unit.
- 3.18 The updating of Police National Computer (PNC) records has been moved to a new unit in Liverpool. As a result the core work of what was the PNC team is now offender tracing. The removal of PNC updating has resulted in a more focused approach to offender tracing. Staff voiced their satisfaction that their role had changed for the better because they were able to spend more time on tasks that provided greater benefit.

Recommendation 4: The UK Border Agency should introduce Information Sharing Agreements with client organisations so that responsibilities and levels of accountability are clearly defined.

- 3.19 There were a number of service level agreements established between CCU and its partners following my inspection. However, previous work undertaken by CCU with Other Government Departments has been transferred to a different part of the Home Office and is no longer the responsibility of CCU.
- 3.20 Work is underway with various external agencies such as Experian for access to credit reference checks and to include Home Office data on CIFAS⁴.
- 3.21 I was pleased that whilst I was talking to staff in the team responsible for arranging these SLAs, they received confirmation of another successful agreement achieved with another partner.
- 3.22 Further work is ongoing but overall information sharing appeared to be being well managed and carefully overseen by the team manager.

Recommendation 5: The UK Border Agency should immediately review the current information security procedures in the CCU.

- 3.23 This recommendation, relating to the way that the identity of callers to CCU was verified was apparently responded to swiftly. An instruction was issued to staff in July 2010 (and updated in August 2011), setting out procedures to call back a certain proportion of police callers to verify their identity.
- 3.24 I was made aware of a number of other strands of activity underway in this area. This included the recruitment of a secretariat team for CCU which would assume overall responsibility for information management and security in the unit. This is a positive change and should improve practice in this area.
- 3.25 CCU had recently been granted access to the Agency's own Security and Anti-Corruption Unit's (SACU) warrants database to help verify the identity of UKBA callers. I was surprised that this had not been authorised sooner, and was still required the installation of a stand-alone computer terminal in the unit in order to be useable. The installation was scheduled to take place a week after my visit.

⁴ The UK's Fraud Prevention Service

Recommendation 6: The UK Border Agency should ensure that all records currently held on the PNC are up to date, accurate and comply with data protection legislation.

- 3.26 CCU were unable to update me on this recommendation as responsibility for all PNC data was transferred to a different unit at the end of 2011.

Recommendation 7: The UK Border Agency should regularly test the CCU business continuity plan.

- 3.27 Speaking to staff on my visit I was reassured that the Business Continuity Plan (BCP), most recently update in January 2013, was well embedded in the unit and its culture, and that staff were familiar with its content.
- 3.28 I was advised that the BCP had already been tested and that the management at CCU were proactive in seeking opportunities to further test its effectiveness. This should be encouraged.

Recommendation 8: The UK Border Agency should use the expertise of the CCU to formally learn from critical incidents and subsequently inform regional and national risk register.

- 3.29 The CCU was in the process of developing a national Critical Incident strategy for the Home Office, embedding a lessons learned process within the organisation. This is a positive step and one which I would like to see adopted across the organisation.

Recommendation 9: The UK Border Agency should implement a more formal approach to quality assurance of the CCU.

- 3.30 The CCU were still having difficulty in adopting a more formal approach to quality assurance due to the lack of the new telephony system.
- 3.31 I was shown the interim data quality processes in operation in the unit and advised of the intention to adopt Control Assurance Reporting Exercise (CARE) methodology from 2013/14.
- 3.32 Line managers were still doing a manual check of the call log, but stated that the new telephony system would add considerable value to the process. It is vital the new telephony system is embedded as quickly as possible.

Additional developments

- 3.33 I was impressed by the commitment and integrity of staff in the unit who spoke to me enthusiastically and knowledgeably about the work they were doing. All the staff I spoke to seemed dedicated to the unit and keen to drive improvement in their fields. This is commendable. Staff gave positive feedback on how CCU has developed since my inspection.

Areas of concern

- 3.34 Other than the delays faced by the unit in being given adequate telephony services, I did not have any significant concerns about the Command and Control Unit. The telephony delays are unfortunate and echoed the findings from my spot-check follow up visit to the Croydon Public Enquiry Office, where the provision of IT and telephony services were causing problems.

Conclusion

- 3.35 The Command and Control Unit is much improved with a much clearer idea of its own purpose and goals. An enthusiastic and motivated team of staff, along with a much more considered and developed sense of purpose made for a rewarding, and reassuring visit. I am confident that the Home Office has taken my recommendations about the CCU seriously and that managers have worked hard to address the issues I identified.

4. East Midlands Reporting Centre

Background

- 4.1 The Home Office requires people who are liable to be detained, such as those who have made a claim for asylum which is yet to be decided, or has been refused, to report at specified reporting centres or local police stations. The Home Office uses reporting in order to maintain contact with, and to manage the compliance of, those liable to detention. Contact management also provides people who are reporting with the opportunity to raise any concerns they may have.
- 4.2 During the reporting process, Home Office staff confirm the person's identity, enquire about the person's current circumstances and reactivate the person's biometric identity card. People receiving asylum support also have their fingerprints taken.
- 4.3 The East Midlands Reporting Centre in Loughborough covers parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire.
- 4.4 My spot-check follow-up visit took place on 8 May 2013.

July 2010 Inspection findings

- 4.5 On 15 July 2010 I undertook a one-day unannounced inspection of the East Midlands Reporting Centre in Loughborough. No advance notice of the inspection was given.
- 4.6 At that time I found that the centre accommodation was clean, bright and modern. The staff were dedicated and professional, and keen to deliver a good service. People using the reporting centre were seen promptly and usually within local target times. Staff were welcoming and treated people with respect and courtesy.
- 4.7 However, I was concerned about a lack of provision of translation services. As a result, staff were sometimes using other reportees to translate during interviews. This was a clear breach of privacy.
- 4.8 I was also concerned about the lack of availability of complaints forms and information for reportees in the centre.
- 4.9 I made five recommendations for improvement, of which four were accepted by the then UK Border Agency.

Progress against 2010 recommendations

Recommendation 1: The UK Border Agency should ensure that people have access to interpretation facilities where necessary.

- 4.10 It had been decided not to pursue the provision of a telephone interpretation service in Loughborough for cost reasons; however I was pleased to note that all staff now have access to “Big Word” translation services⁵. In addition, there were notices visible to staff working on the counters reminding them of the availability of these translation services and explaining how to contact them.
- 4.11 Furthermore, I was impressed to learn that the two EO managers at the centre spoke several languages between them and were often able to provide translation services for free.
- 4.12 As a result, managers were confident that there were no longer any occasions when other reportees would be asked to translate during an interview or interaction at the centre. This is a significant improvement and it is right that this practice has been discontinued.
- 4.13 However, I found that there were no visible signs to inform reportees that translation services were available. I was advised by the management at the centre that it would not be practical to put up signs in various different languages announcing the availability of translation services. However, I would encourage them to think again about this issue and how it might be resolved.

Recommendation 2: The UK Border Agency should ensure that all staff have a clear understanding of their responsibilities with regard to recording complaints; and up to date literature is provided advising people how to make complaints.

- 4.14 The UK Border Agency appears to have responded quickly to this recommendation. By November 2010 all staff at the reporting centre had undergone training on dealing with complaints. Since then, staff have undertaken refresher training, and all new staff undertake an e-learning package about complaints handling.
- 4.15 Managers at the reporting centre showed us that complaints leaflets were readily available at the centre, although some branding still referred to UKBA. This was understandable given the only very recent abolition of the Agency, and the Home Office imposed embargo on printing.
- 4.16 The Home Office should ensure that essential documents like complaints leaflets are quickly updated and distributed to relevant UK sites. This will ensure that this important part of customer service (the ability to be able to make a complaint) does not suffer.
- 4.17 I was shown the complaints log maintained at the East Midlands centre. I noted that very few complaints are, in fact, made, and that when they are made they are handled properly and efficiently.

Recommendation 3: The UK Border Agency should ensure that all relevant factors are considered (in line with published policy) when assessing people’s eligibility for travel expenses.

- 4.18 On my visit I observed the handling by a member of staff of an application for travel expenses. The staff member was confident in dealing with the application and followed

⁵ Big Word is a telephone translation service used at various different locations by the Home Office.

the process for authorisation (by the EO manager) properly. The EO manager told me that she was confident that all relevant staff at the reporting centre were now familiar with, and confident in using, the travel expenses policy. The EO manager must sign off every decision relating to an application for travel expenses, which provides a good level of quality assurance in this process.

- 4.19 The manager also explained to me how she, personally, had negotiated best value rates for bulk buying of bus tickets from a number of the local bus service providers. This use of initiative is commendable.

Recommendation 4: The UK Border Agency should ensure that all people using the centre have access to drinking water.

- 4.20 In 2010 this recommendation was rejected by the UK Border Agency on the basis that:

- **the installation of a drinking fountain was prohibitively expensive;**
- **people attending the reporting centre did not usually have to wait very long to be seen; and**
- **people could bring with them their own drinks (subject to security).**

- 4.21 Furthermore drinking water is available on request from any member of staff, and a sign has been put up on the information wall (see below) to advise people of this.

- 4.22 As such I believe that access to drinks at the East Midlands reporting centre is satisfactory.

Recommendation 5: The UK Border Agency should ensure that information on display is up to date, consistent with the UK Border Agency's branding and informs people that private interview rooms are available if required.

- 4.23 There is a considerable amount of work to be done by the Home Office to rebrand immigration and border functions across the UK in light of the recent abolition of the UK Border Agency. Therefore, it is understandable that some information available at the Centre was incorrectly branded. However, it was clear that attempts had been made to ensure incorrectly branded information was minimal, and the majority of front-of house branding had been updated.

- 4.24 Furthermore, in the waiting area at the reporting centre, a dedicated "information wall" had been designated. This gave reportees information about things like Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR), the availability of drinking water and how to make a complaint.

- 4.25 The creation of the information wall is a good idea and it makes it easier for reportees to access information. However, I was surprised not to find any information about the availability of translation services (see recommendation 1) or the availability of a multi-faith prayer room. This room is not immediately visible, therefore people in the waiting area, would not be aware of it unless they had seen or used it before.

Additional developments

- 4.26 I was pleased to be told on my visit that the Home Office had decided to create a Head of Profession post for reporting. This person, once appointed, will take forward the recommendations from an internal review of reporting centres across the country and

will help ensure consistency and develop good practice across all reporting centres. They will co-ordinate the development of a performance framework for reporting centres across the country, which should help improve performance and management oversight. The creation of a Head of Profession in this field is an encouraging step and I look forward to seeing the positive impact that this development will have.

- 4.27 Staff at the East Midlands centre were understandably proud of the considerable increases (up by almost 50% in a year) they had achieved in the number of people choosing to take up Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR). There is a dedicated AVR champion on the team and all team members seemed well briefed on AVR, although it was recognised that some were still more comfortable promoting it than others. I was pleased to see the progress being made in this area and commend the staff for their achievements.

Areas of concern

- 4.28 Whilst queuing times at the East Midlands Reporting Centre were usually below the intended 20 minute target, I was surprised no record was kept of queuing times to be used as Management Information. I don't believe that full use was being made of the Queuematic queue monitoring system and would encourage local managers to interrogate the system more fully to develop and draw off useful Management Information. This information would also be useful for reportees waiting to be seen, to give them an indication of the length of wait.

Conclusion

- 4.29 The East Midlands Reporting Centre continues to be a well run and well managed centre with professional, committed and enthusiastic staff delivering a good service. I was impressed to learn that even despite a reduction in staff numbers (from 11 to 8) the centre still provided this level of good customer service, and had achieved a considerable increase in uptake of AVR.
- 4.30 Progress has been made against all the accepted recommendations made in my inspection report. Staff and managers seemed genuinely determined to respond to my inspection findings positively and proactively to help improve the service they provide.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Home Office for its assistance and co-operation in helping to arrange and schedule these spot-check visits, and to staff at these locations who provided me with information to complete my checks.

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August 2013



