



Croydon Public Enquiry Office: Unannounced Inspection

04 February 2010



Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the UK Border Agency for its help and co-operation throughout the inspection. In particular we are grateful for the assistance in arranging interviews and focus groups with staff at short notice.

Chief Inspector:	John Vine
Assistant Chief Inspector:	Garry Cullen
Inspector:	Jake McClure
Inspection Officer:	John Cramer
Research and Analysis:	Aalia Shamji

Contents

1.	Foreword	3
2.	Summary of Good Practice	4
3.	Summary of Recommendations	5
4.	The Inspection	6
5.	Inspection Findings – Impact on people subject to UK Border Agency Services	8

1. Foreword

1.1 I am pleased to present the report of my recent inspection of efficiency and effectiveness of the Croydon Public Enquiry Office (PEO). This was the second of the programme of unannounced inspections that I intend to conduct, to which I referred in my Inspection Plan for 2009/10.

1.2 Public Enquiry Offices offer a same-day service, at a fee, for considering straightforward applications for permission to extend a stay in the United Kingdom (UK) or to stay in the UK permanently (known as 'leave to remain' and 'settlement'). The UK Border Agency also accepts postal applications.

1.3 The PEO in Croydon is the largest PEO in the UK. It is spread over three floors of Lunar House and can receive up to 300 customers per day. There are a total of seven PEOs across in the UK and customers can choose which PEO they attend.

1.4 In this inspection, I found staff were on the whole professional and committed to their work. However, they were hampered in the level of service they could provide to customers by IT failures, queues for office equipment and insufficient accommodation.

1.5 I was pleased to see a robust system in place for monitoring and measuring customer feedback. However, it was disappointing to find that information provided on the website and in the PEO with regard to customer waiting times was inaccurate. Fee paying customers often had to wait much longer than the approximate times provided by the UK Border Agency and seating provided was uncomfortable.

1.6 I have set out both a summary of the good practice we found together with four recommendations which I believe would strengthen the operation of this PEO. It is my hope that the UK Border Agency will address these areas as quickly as possible and I look forward to receiving their response.

John Vine CBE QPM

2. Summary of good practice

IMPACT ON PEOPLE SUBJECT TO UK BORDER AGENCY SERVICES:

- generally, staff demonstrated professionalism, a helpful and polite approach and were able to resolve disputes in a careful and considered manner
- staff were trained how to deal with children and young people, and demonstrated skill in handling customers who were dissatisfied with the service
- we observed a pro-active customer complaints, comments and compliments process which demonstrated the PEO's commitment to listening to its customers and acting on the information it received
- the reception and security area on the ground floor had recently been refurbished to a high standard and was clean, welcoming, well staffed and dealt efficiently with customers.

3. Summary of recommendations

We recommend that the UK Border Agency:

- sets a clear target for the end-to-end process, communicates this to customers and measures its performance against this target
- reviews the information on its website and in the Croydon PEO to ensure it accurately reflects the level of service being provided, with particular reference to waiting times
- takes 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.

4. The inspection

Methodology

4.1 The terms of reference for this inspection were:

‘To examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the UK Border Agency by way of unannounced inspection of front line services at the Public Enquiry Office in Croydon, to ensure that practice is consistent with policy and that the UK Border Agency is delivering fair, consistent and respectful services.’

4.2 We arrived at the PEO in Lunar House, Croydon, at 9.15am, and announced our presence to the relevant Assistant Director. There was no warning to the UK Border Agency in advance of our visit.

4.3 We inspected the operation of the Croydon PEO against criteria covering the key theme: Impact on people subject to UK Border Agency services. Details of the general and specific criteria are set out below. Full details of our core criteria are published on our website www.ociukba.homeoffice.gov.uk.

General Criterion:

UK Border Agency staff and staff of commercial partners are welcoming and engage positively with customers and other users.

Specific criteria:

Customer queuing and waiting times are as short as possible and adhere to UK Border Agency guidelines/ Service Level Agreements.

UK Border Agency staff are professional, courteous, and respectful when dealing with customers irrespective of their status.

UK Border Agency staff can identify and sensitively support vulnerable and distressed customers especially children.

General Criterion:

Facilities and services meet the needs of customers and are conducive to ensuring ‘business’ is progressed.

Specific criteria:

Accommodation, whether interview rooms, waiting rooms etc. are welcoming and clean.

The facilities afford customers privacy.

The cultural needs of the diverse customer base are taken into account when deploying staff.

The facilities are safe and secure with special care over vulnerable and distressed customers, especially children.

The environment fosters proper engagement with customers.

Provision of information via hard copy and websites is accessible, clear, easy to use, in plain language and accurate including self serve where available.

Customers are clear what the UK Border Agency expects from them in relation to documentation, use of latest application forms, and provision of information when requested.

General Criterion:

UK Border Agency staff are responsive to customer complaints/grievances.

Specific criteria:

Complaint/grievance procedures are simple, transparent and accessible and used by UK Border Agency staff.

4.4 We carried out an initial pre-site assessment of policy and procedural guidance available on the UK Border Agency's intranet and internet websites. We also reviewed information the UK Border Agency made available to customers through its website.

4.5 We examined a number of immigration related blogs¹ and noted a series of common concerns raised by bloggers. In order to further investigate these concerns, we carried out a mystery shopping² exercise of the service provided by both the online booking system and the telephone service provided by the Immigration Enquiry Bureau (IEB).

4.6 While onsite, we:

- toured the PEO to gain an understanding of its end to end processes
- observed a number of PEO processes in action, including:
 - > case consideration
 - > biometrics³
- interviewed a variety of managers and conducted two focus groups
- surveyed a number of customers in the PEO.

4.7 Customers were asked through our survey to provide their feedback on their experiences of making their appointment and of the services and facilities available on the day with regard to the following areas:

- waiting times
- appointment booking
- finding information for the appointment day
- rating of staff
- rating of the accommodation.

4.8 Out of 187 appointments that were booked for the day, 41 surveys were completed. Of these, 20 customers were at the PEO to extend their visa, 18 to acquire permanent residence and three for other reasons (replacing their visa or for Transfer of Conditions⁴).

1 www.immigrationboards.com; www.londonelegence.com; www.trackitt.com; www.ukvisahelp.co.uk; www.talk.uk-yankee.com;

2 Mystery shopping is a tool used to measure quality of service or gather specific information about products and services. In this situation, a mystery shopper posed as a customer using the online and telephone booking services.

3 The biometrics desks are where the customer provides fingerprints and a photograph

4 If a customer has a new passport and wishes to have their Limited Leave to Enter or Remain status transferred to it, they need to submit a Transfer of Conditions application form.

5. Inspection findings – Impact on people subject to UK Border Agency Services

General criterion

UK Border Agency staff and staff of commercial partners are welcoming and engage positively with customers and other users.

Specific criteria

Customer queuing and waiting times are as short as possible and adhere to UK Border Agency guidelines / Service Level Agreements.

5.1 We found that the UK Border Agency had set a target to process 90 per cent of premium applications within 24 hours. It was clear from our observations and interviews that it was in everyone's best interest for customers to be dealt with as quickly as possible. However, there were a number of factors which sometimes prevented this from happening, namely frequent IT failures and the speed in which checks were conducted on a customer by other areas of the UK Border Agency.

5.2 There was a system used to measure the process. It measured the time spent by a customer both overall and at each individual stage of the process – reception, payment, case registration, biometric enrolment (if applicable) and case consideration. From observation, it appeared to function well, but did not measure the complete customer waiting time – it only covered the process to the end of the case consideration interview.

5.3 It was with this in mind that we made two observations. Firstly, the estimated waiting times stated on the UK Border Agency website were shorter than is sometimes the case. For example, biometric enrolment was estimated to take between 10 and 30 minutes. Staff said that in reality, it could sometimes take between 30 minutes and three hours. The television screen in the PEO referred to a two and a half hour estimate for the process up to and including case consideration.

5.4 Our customer survey, observation and interviews with staff showed that the entire process does frequently take longer than customers expect. 41 per cent of all customers surveyed stated that they felt that they had to wait too long or that the wait was longer than they had expected. One customer waited five hours between case consideration and visa collection. According to Senior Management, customer satisfaction with the overall service as measured through the UK Border Agency's own feedback had dropped from 71 per cent of customers being 'very' or 'quite' satisfied in October 2009 to 52 per cent in January 2010.

5.5 Secondly, the system used to measure waiting times did not measure the process of inserting the vignette into the customer's passport when relevant. The website stated customers should allow 60 minutes for this process. However, staff and some customers we surveyed said it can take up to two hours, or even longer in certain cases. We found this part of the process was not measured. We also noted it was carried out by a different unit with different management and staff told us there was sometimes only one person dealing with this part of the process.

5.6 Staff also referred to the fact that due to a delay in biometric enrolment, many staff on case consideration duty had little to do until 10.30am. A common suggestion from front line staff was to open the biometric desks 90 minutes earlier than the case consideration desks – at 7.30am. This had been recognised by management and plans had been put in place for the biometric desks to open earlier commencing April 2010.

5.7 We also observed a lack of general announcements updating customers about progress of applications on a day when problems with the IT system meant all applications had been delayed. Two customers referred to this in the 'comments' section of our survey.

5.8 The final point relates to the difference between the high level target and a ‘same day service’. The target is for ‘90 per cent of applications to be processed within 24 hours’. However, information available to the public refers to a ‘same day service’. These messages deliver conflicting information to customers about the level of customer service they should expect from the PEO and we believe the UK Border Agency should take early action to clarify exactly what customers can expect when using this service.

UK Border Agency staff are professional, courteous, and respectful when dealing with customers irrespective of their status.

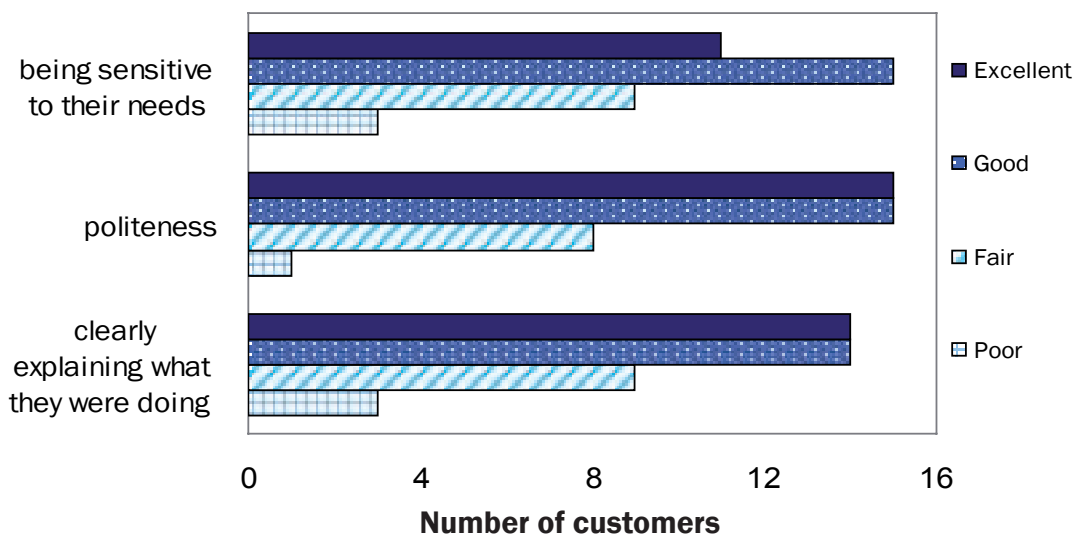
5.9 We observed staff demonstrating helpfulness and professionalism when dealing with customers. We saw a number of instances of good practice, where staff dealt successfully with dissatisfied customers.

5.10 We found that staff were patient and understanding, ensuring customers understood the process, and knew what would happen next. Despite the lack of general announcements, we observed staff being proactive with individual customers during the case consideration process in terms of explaining reasons beyond their control for delays. Staff at the biometric desks demonstrated a friendly manner and took care to support customers.

5.11 In our customer survey, customers stated staff were often sensitive to their needs, polite and were usually able to clearly explain what they were doing. Although very few thought the staff were ‘poor’ at any of these qualities, some customers surveyed felt there was some room for improvement. This can be inferred by the number of ‘fair’ ratings – see Figure 1:

Figure 1: How customers rated staff

How customers rated staff for:



Number of respondents: 38 (being sensitive to their needs), 39 (politeness) and 40 (clearly explaining what they were doing)

5.12 There was some evidence of a lack of specific customer service training for staff on the front line, and the UK Border Agency should consider refresher training for those staff who have been in post for some time.

UK Border Agency staff can identify and sensitively support vulnerable and distressed customers especially children.

5.13 Managers told us all staff had received ‘Keeping Children Safe’ training. This was substantiated in our conversations with staff. As stated above, we observed staff dealing with dissatisfied customers professionally and there was evidence of a proactive approach to keeping children engaged through colouring books and crayons.

We recommend that the UK Border Agency:

- sets a clear target for the end-to-end process, communicates this to customers and measures its performance against this target
- reviews the information on its website and in the Croydon PEO to ensure it accurately reflects the level of service being provided, with particular reference to waiting times.

General criterion

Facilities and services meet the needs of customers and are conducive to ensuring ‘business’ is progressed.

Specific criteria

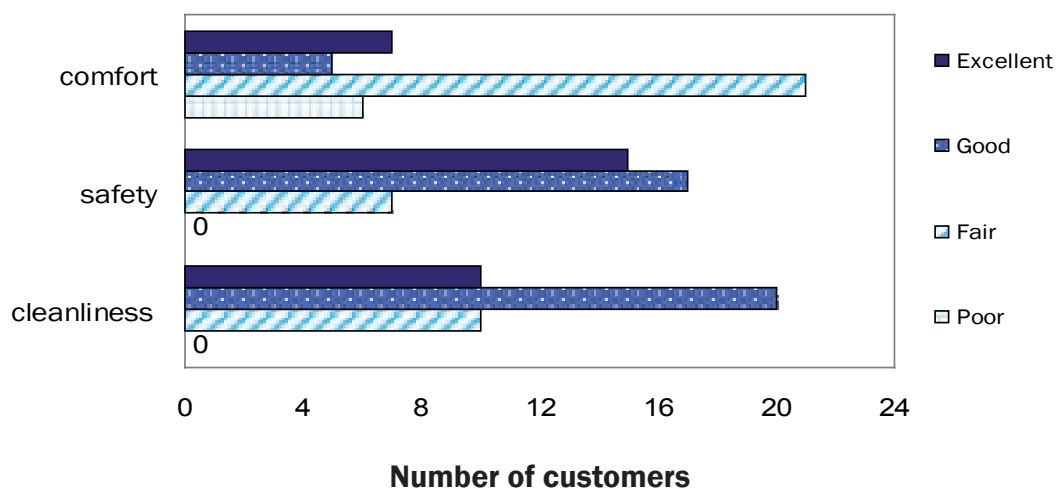
Accommodation, whether interview rooms, waiting rooms etc. is welcoming and clean.

5.14 We noted the marked contrast between the security and reception area (downstairs) and that of the first and second floor areas. The recently modernised downstairs area was clean, welcoming and professional. However, the first and second floor accommodation was criticised by both staff and customers we surveyed. Managers told us they had submitted plans for refurbishment of the first and second floors, and we noted that discussions regarding the viability of this project remain ongoing.

5.15 In terms of our customer survey, the waiting areas on the first and second floors were rated for comfort, safety and cleanliness. Figure 2 shows that the majority of customers felt the waiting area was ‘very’ or ‘quite’ safe and clean. However, 27 (69%) customers considered comfort to be ‘fair’ or ‘poor’.

Figure 2: How customers rated the waiting area

How customers rated the waiting area for:



Number of respondents: 39 (comfort, safety) and 40 (cleanliness)

5.16 There was clear signage throughout the PEO, and the majority of information boards and posters were correctly branded. There was disability access in the whole of the PEO along with toilets, unisex baby change facilities, vending machines, photo booths, a prayer room and pay phones. There were also refreshment facilities provided for customers which are usually open until 4pm. Some of the customers we surveyed provided negative feedback on the seating in the waiting area, particularly that in front of the booths. We noted these chairs were fixed to the floor but were too far away from the booths. This compromised privacy and we observed instances of customers standing or kneeling in front of the booths.

The facilities afford customers privacy.

5.17 We noted the facilities to take customers to a private room if necessary. The biometric desks also offered physical privacy as it had closing doors though conversations between booths could still be overheard. In our survey, 23 customers responded to questions about the cleanliness, safety and privacy of the biometrics facilities. For these qualities, customers felt that biometrics facilities were on the whole 'good'.

5.18 We observed the biometric staff shouting out numbers in the waiting area, even though they were displayed on customer information electronic boards. This was because their tannoy system was not working. Staff also said that defective microphones at the case consideration booths sometimes required them (and customers) to raise their voices. They considered this diminished their professionalism and impacted against customers' privacy. We consider both of these situations may be open to misinterpretation by staff and customers because they could be falsely perceived as conflict.

The cultural needs of the diverse customer base are taken into account when deploying staff.

5.19 We observed the very diverse staff base of the PEO, and the fact that equality and diversity issues were a regular feature of fortnightly 'Process Meetings' for all staff. Equality and Diversity Advisers (EDA) were in place, and staff had been made aware of equality and diversity events such as Black History Month, Religion and Belief, Challenging Behaviour, training and development and processes and procedures for issues such as bullying. The EDA also maintained a log of problems, solutions and time-frames for resolution. Staff Performance Development Reviews and the objectives contained within them also referred on a number of occasions to equality and diversity issues.

The facilities are safe and secure with special care over vulnerable and distressed customers, especially children.

5.20 The aforementioned reception area downstairs allowed for a well managed sift process at the outset. Signage was clear and staff floor walkers were clearly visible and engaged with customers in this area. According to our survey, customers felt safety was at best excellent and at worst, fair. Staff also displayed a sound awareness of dealing with vulnerable or distressed customers.

5.21 Although there were customer service desks, we believe they could be better utilised and more visible. At present, the customer service area is in the middle of a long line of case consideration booths, poorly signposted and not obvious to customers. We believe this presents an opportunity for the PEO to exploit. According to our survey, some dissatisfaction of customers comes from the fact that they have to wait longer than expected, and are not clear why. We believe a more visible customer service process on the first and second floors would certainly go some length towards addressing this issue.

The environment fosters proper engagement with customers.

5.22 The process and environment on the ground floor is to be commended; however, staff told us they felt the environment on the first and second floors was not conducive to facilitating proper engagement with customers. All staff we spoke to indicated the need for refurbishment. Problems cited included temperature issues, poor quality microphones, a broken tannoy system for the biometric area, routine IT failures, a lack of photocopying and printing facilities and poor seating for both staff and customers.

5.23 The comments made by staff were substantiated by our observations and some customers commented on the heat and uncomfortable seating. Staff told us of continual problems with photocopiers, which they considered were not as robust as they needed to be. On the day of our inspection we found that of two photocopiers available, one was out of order. As a result we observed instances of staff queuing to use the only available photocopier. This meant that:

- staff resources were not being utilised to best effect
- the level of customer service was diminished.

5.24 Office space was reasonable for staff on the first and second floors, though slightly cramped for staff on the ground floor. IT failures did affect service delivery and we saw a number of times when systems froze. Staff also mentioned that a delay in returning Police National Computer checks, done in a different UK Border Agency unit, sometimes slowed the application process.

Provision of information via hard copy and websites is accessible, clear, easy to use, in plain language and accurate including self-serve where available.

5.25 We conducted a mystery shopping exercise of the appointment booking system for the PEO. It took place between 22 December 2009 and 8 January 2010. We made online and telephone enquiries to check for availability of appointments; the time taken to obtain appointment information and to detect differences between the two booking systems. Over the period specified, we made 40 enquires to the telephone booking line and 40 on the online booking webpage. This was in response to comments posted on a variety of immigration blogs which suggested that the service provided could be improved. We found that:

- generally, it was easier and quicker to obtain appointment availability information online than using the telephone booking line
- on the whole, the online booking system also provided earlier appointment dates than telephone booking
- the online enquires quoted appointment booking dates on average 33 days away from the date enquiry
- the telephone enquiries quoted appointment booking dates on average 36 days away from the date enquiry
- while dates were always available using the online booking system, on three occasions there were no appointment dates for the Croydon PEO using the telephone booking system
- more information and assistance could be found using the telephone booking line from operators who were very polite and most of whom were very helpful.

5.26 We believe that the online booking system could be improved by making the website login details easier to remember – this would also speed up the process. We also consider a more suitable date format for appointment searches would help customers, as the current format is YYYY-MM-DD.

5.27 We believe the telephone booking system could be improved if customers were told:

- there is an online booking system which may offer appointments on earlier dates.
- they can call back another day if there are no appointments at Croydon as appointments are released regularly.

5.28 This information was substantiated through our survey which also showed customers who booked their appointment online tended to be more positive, whilst customers who booked their appointment by telephone had mixed feelings about how easy they found the telephone booking system to use – see Figure 3.

Figure 3: The extent to which customers found using a particular appointment booking system easy

	Very	Quite	A little	Not at all	Total
Telephone booking	3	3	2	3	11
Online booking	6	7	7	2	22

5.29 The UK Border Agency website also provided detailed information on the facilities available in Croydon. We found it to be easily accessible and online booking was easy to navigate. Of the 72% of customers surveyed that used the UK Border Agency website to find out how to book an appointment, the majority found it to be:

- ‘very’ useful
- accurate
- in easy to understand English
- easy to find.

5.30 Of the customers surveyed, none found the level of English used for booking information difficult to understand.

5.31 The website provided information about the length of time customers would have to wait if they choose to utilise this service. However, staff told us that the times given were inaccurate. The stages on the website which are relevant to this point are payment, biometric enrolment, case consideration and inserting of residence permit into the customer’s passport. The information on the television screen in the PEO was also said by staff and some customers to be inaccurate, referring specifically to a two and a half hour wait.

5.32 With regards to the telephone booking service, our mystery shopping exercise found an 80 per cent success rate in obtaining an appointment, and we also found the staff operating the phone service to be helpful and polite. However, during the inspection, staff gave examples of wrong information being given out over the phone and we also observed two instances of customer complaints about this.

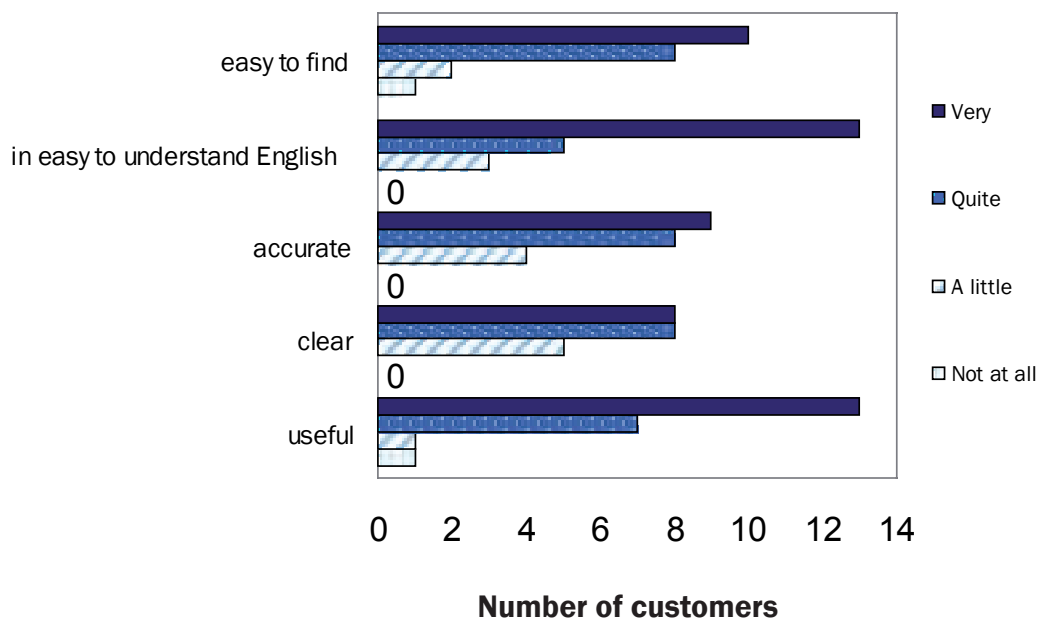
5.33 Branding was generally good with a few isolated exceptions of posters displaying Home Office or no branding which could easily be put right. We consider the UK Border Agency could also publish its performance data, relating to standards of customer service, in waiting areas through either posters or leaflets.

Customers are clear what UK Border Agency expects from them in relation to documentation, use of latest application forms, and provision of information when requested.

5.34 The customers we surveyed used a variety of sources to find information about what would happen at the PEO on the day. According to our survey, the most widely used source of information was the UK Border Agency website. The majority of customers who we surveyed found the information available on the website to be accurate. Of the 22 customers surveyed who used the website, the majority of respondents felt that the website was 'very' easy to find, accurate and useful. The same number of customers felt that the website was 'very' or 'quite' clear. Figure 4 sets out our findings.

Figure 4: Customers use of UK Border Agency website for information

The extent to which customers using the UKBA website for information about the appointment day felt it was:



Number of respondents: 21 (easy to find, in easy to understand English, accurate, clear) and 22 (useful)

We recommend that the UK Border Agency:

- takes 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.

General criterion

UK Border Agency staff are responsive to customer complaints/grievances

Specific criteria

Complaint/grievance procedures are simple, transparent and accessible and used by UK Border Agency staff

5.35 We observed a robust system to capture customer complaints, comments and compliments. We were shown a procedure whereby a customer had made a complaint and staff had conducted a full investigation. The individual concerned had the issue addressed by their line manager. We were told by managers that customers receive individual, detailed responses to complaints and we were able to observe a number of examples.

5.36 There was clear signage on the complaints process and customer survey forms were available at every booth. Staff said they had in the past proactively requested customers to complete these surveys, but had not done this recently.

5.37 The system appeared to be effective in gathering customer feedback in terms of complaints, comments and compliments. We believe staff should be reminded to direct customers towards the feedback form as a matter of routine.

