REPORT

Investigation into the performance of HM Passport Office

Home Office

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Investigation into the performance of HM Passport Office

Home Office

Investigations

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This investigation was prepared in response to public and parliamentary concerns over HM Passport Office's management of the surge in demand for passports in 2022.

Contents

What this investigation is about

1   HM Passport Office (HMPO) receives around seven million passport applications every year, and in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, demand was predictable. In 2020 and 2021, however, the demand for passports reduced significantly, as people chose to delay renewing or applying for new passports due to travel restrictions. HMPO estimated that around five million people had delayed applying for passports over the two years, and that these applications would return once restrictions were lifted.

2   The UK removed COVID-19 travel restrictions in early 2022, and passport applications began to increase. Between January and September 2022, HMPO received 7.2 million passport applications. About 95% of applicants received their passports within 10 weeks. However, some 360,000 applicants experienced longer waits, with possible consequences for their travel plans and their ability to prove their identity.

3   This investigation was prepared in response to public and parliamentary concerns over HMPO's management of the surge in demand for passports in 2022. It sets out the facts about how HMPO:

●   planned for the surge in demand;

●   managed the demand in 2022; and

●   is learning lessons from its experience this year and planning for 2023 and beyond.

4   We have focused our analysis on HMPO's planning for the surge in 2022 and processing of applications up to September 2022. We have not looked in detail at HMPO's digital transformation programme, other than where interactions between the programme and operations have affected HMPO's ability to process applications.

Summary

Key findings

Preparing for the increase in applications

5   In 2021, HM Passport Office (HMPO) started detailed planning for the expected surge in passport applications. It had initially expected applications to increase in 2021 and had put in place plans to manage increased demand in that year but, as the pandemic continued through 2021, the surge in demand did not appear. HMPO used historical data, surveys, and insights from the travel industry to estimate the 'missing' demand from 2020 and 2021 that would return over 2022 and 2023. Its forecast suggested it could receive 9.5 million passport applications in 2022 – around 36% more than a normal year – and that at peak times it could receive 270,000 applications a week (compared with an average of 205,000 at its busiest period in 2019) (paragraph 2.2 and Figure 2).

6   HMPO prepared to manage a higher demand for passports in 2022 (Figure 4)**.** Specifically, it:

- **increased recruitment**. However, it struggled to recruit people at the rate it needed. Between August 2021 and September 2022, HMPO's workforce increased by around 1,100, of which 200 were permanent employees and the rest were temporary. HMPO also recalled staff who had been seconded to work in other areas during the pandemic (paragraphs 2.10 and 2.11, and Figure 5);

- **worked with its suppliers to develop plans to increase capacity across the supply chain**. It held workshops with suppliers to outline the likely demand in 2022 and explore how this might affect supplier capacity in areas such as opening, scanning and returning documentation, and responding to customer queries. Suppliers provided HMPO with plans to deliver against the expected surge (paragraphs 2.8 and 2.9 and Figure 4); and

- **encouraged customers to apply for passports earlier.** However, these efforts had little impact until the middle of 2022. In April 2021, HMPO had changed its guidance for customers to allow up to 10 weeks to process an application (compared with three or six weeks in 2019, depending on the type of application). Throughout 2021 and 2022, HMPO sent SMS text messages to the public to remind them to apply earlier, but this had little impact on customer behaviour. In August 2021, HMPO started to develop an advertising campaign to reinforce this message and encourage customers to apply earlier to help smooth the peak. Part of its campaign needed approval from the Cabinet Office, which HMPO submitted in April 2022. Following discussions between the two organisations, it received approval in May. By June 2022, an HMPO-commissioned survey showed that 56% of people knew that a passport application could take 10 weeks or longer, an improvement from 29% in April 2022 (paragraphs 2.5 to 2.7).

Managing the increase in applications

7   **HMPO's plans relied on its new digital system, but this had not been designed to handle the number of applications expected during the surge**. The pandemic had delayed HMPO's completion of the digital system, and it could not yet handle all types of passport applications. At the peak in 2022, HMPO expected the system would need to handle up to 60,000 applications, which exceeded its capacity. To manage this, HMPO halted planned improvements to the types of passports it could process to focus on increasing its capacity, and it built a 'throttle' to control the flow of cases into the system (paragraphs 1.5, 1.6, 3.8 and 3.9).

8   **Between January and September 2022, limitations in the digital system meant HMPO had to move 134,000 applications to the less efficient, paper-based system**. The digital system does not allow applications to be prioritised or linked, for example for siblings whose applications rely on the same supporting documentation. In such cases, HMPO moved applications to the manual system. But weaknesses in HMPO's management information meant staff could not tell when a case had moved from the digital to the manual system. Therefore, the system recorded the true age of some applications incorrectly. Furthermore, HMPO trained many of its new staff to use the digital system, but as more applications moved to the paper-based system, which was more labour-intensive, HMPO needed more capacity to process these applications (paragraphs 3.9, 3.10 and 3.16).

9   Greater public awareness of delays increased demand, creating more difficulties processing a minority of applications. As news reports of delays reached the public, more customers tried to contact HMPO, increasing pressure on the provider of its telephone helpline, Teleperformance, which struggled to handle and resolve calls. To help manage demand for passports, HMPO opened more in-person appointments, which helped ease concerns for some customers, but took staff away from processing applications (paragraphs 3.15 and 3.16 and Figure 9).

10   HMPO responded to issues tactically as they arose. It resolved management information problems through workarounds, such as developing its own method of measuring the true age of applications. It introduced measures to prioritise applications where people were due to travel within two weeks. It added functionality to the digital system and retrained and redeployed staff to increase capacity to process paper-based applications and to deal with MPs' and customers' correspondence (paragraphs 3.8, 3.9 and 3.16 to 3.18, and Figure 3).

11   Despite these challenges, from January to September 2022, HMPO processed 6.9 million passports, 21% more than over the same period in 2019. While the total number of passport applications received was lower than HMPO had projected, there were considerable peaks in applications. Almost half of all applications received between January and September 2022 arrived between March and May 2022. This included receiving 1.26 million applications and processing more than one million applications in May alone. HMPO processed 95% of applications within 10 weeks, but some 360,000 applicants had to wait longer (paragraphs 3.2, 3.3 and 3.5, and Figures 6, 7 and 8).

12   By the end of September 2022, the average processing time for passports was 12 days for straightforward applications from within the UK and 29 days for non-straightforward applications. HMPO is identifying lessons and addressing known issues to prepare for a similar level of demand in 2023. This includes helping to prepare its suppliers, providing better options for customers that need support and continuing to develop its digital system so it can handle a wider range of applications (paragraphs 4.2 to 4.10 and Figure 8).

Concluding remarks

13 HM Passport Office both received and processed a record number of applications in 2022. While it put in place plans to help manage the expected surge in demand, and the majority of customers received a good service, a significant number did not. HMPO is committed to learning lessons from its experience this year, so it can better manage future spikes in demand. Based on the work we have undertaken and our experience of auditing operations across government, we would urge HMPO to focus on these areas:

a   **Integrating workforce and demand planning.** HMPO expects a similar demand for passports in 2023, but it is possible that demand beyond this will also depart from historical trends, due to shifting behaviour and the fact that the very high numbers of passports issued in 2022 will expire at the same time. Where demand is less predictable and subject to greater variation, it becomes harder to manage in an economic and efficient way. HMPO will need to develop a resourcing model – within the wider Home Office – which allows flexibility during quieter or busier periods and across different application channels.

b   **Managing customers and their expectations.** HMPO is already implementing plans to improve its handling of customer queries. Providing more regular updates to customers from the outset of the progression of their case could help avoid some of the telephone demand it receives. HMPO has also tried to influence customer behaviour to encourage earlier applications. As it continues to implement its digital transformation programme and reviews the cost of processing applications, there may be further opportunities to explore the impact differential pricing could have on demand.

c   **Improving management information.** HMPO has extensive and detailed management information, but much of this takes time and effort to compile and presents a picture of performance from HMPO's perspective. Agile, customer-focused decision-making would be better supported by moving towards real-time information from the perspective of those applying for passports.

Part One

Introduction

1.1	A passport is a national travel document that confirms its holder's identity. This enables travel across borders (with the necessary visas or entitlements) and establishes a traveller's entitlement to consular assistance in the event of difficulties while abroad. Within the UK, passports also act as important proof of identity.

1.2	HM Passport Office (HMPO) is part of the Home Office, within the Passports, Citizenship and Civil Registration directorate. Its primary responsibility is providing passport services to British citizens living in the UK and overseas.[1]

1.3	HMPO manages end-to-end passport processing services, although it contracts out much of the process. HMPO verifies and approves all applications (**Figure 1** overleaf) but uses third-party suppliers for: receiving and uploading supporting documentation (for example birth or marriage certificates, or previous passports); printing passports; delivering new passports and returning documents; and operating the telephone helpline. HMPO oversees all these contracts.

1.4	In September 2022, HMPO employed around 4,700 full-time equivalent staff. HMPO has offices in Belfast, Durham, Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Newport (Wales) and Peterborough. It also has several additional venues for interviewing applicants. In the 2021-22 financial year, HMPO raised £470 million in passport fees.

Applying for passports

1.5	There are two ways in which customers can apply for passports. Before 2018, customers could only apply by post, sending a paper form and supporting documentation.[2] In 2015, HMPO started a transformation programme to digitise the passport application process. The programme allows customers to complete applications online or at Post Office terminals, before sending supporting documentation to one of HMPO's offices. HMPO expects about 85% of customers to apply digitally, although some applications may subsequently be processed manually. Digital applications are cheaper than those submitted by paper form, reflecting the lower cost of processing applications digitally.[3]

1	HMPO also hosts the General Records Office, which oversees civil registration in England and Wales and maintains the national archive of all births, marriages and deaths.
2	Customers could also go to a Post Office to have documentation checked and for the Post Office to send on to HM Passport Office.
3	A standard adult passport for a British national resident in the UK is £75.50 for a digital application and £85 for a paper application.

Figure 1

The passport application process

HM Passport Office (HMPO) manages the end-to-end process but contracts out several parts of the process
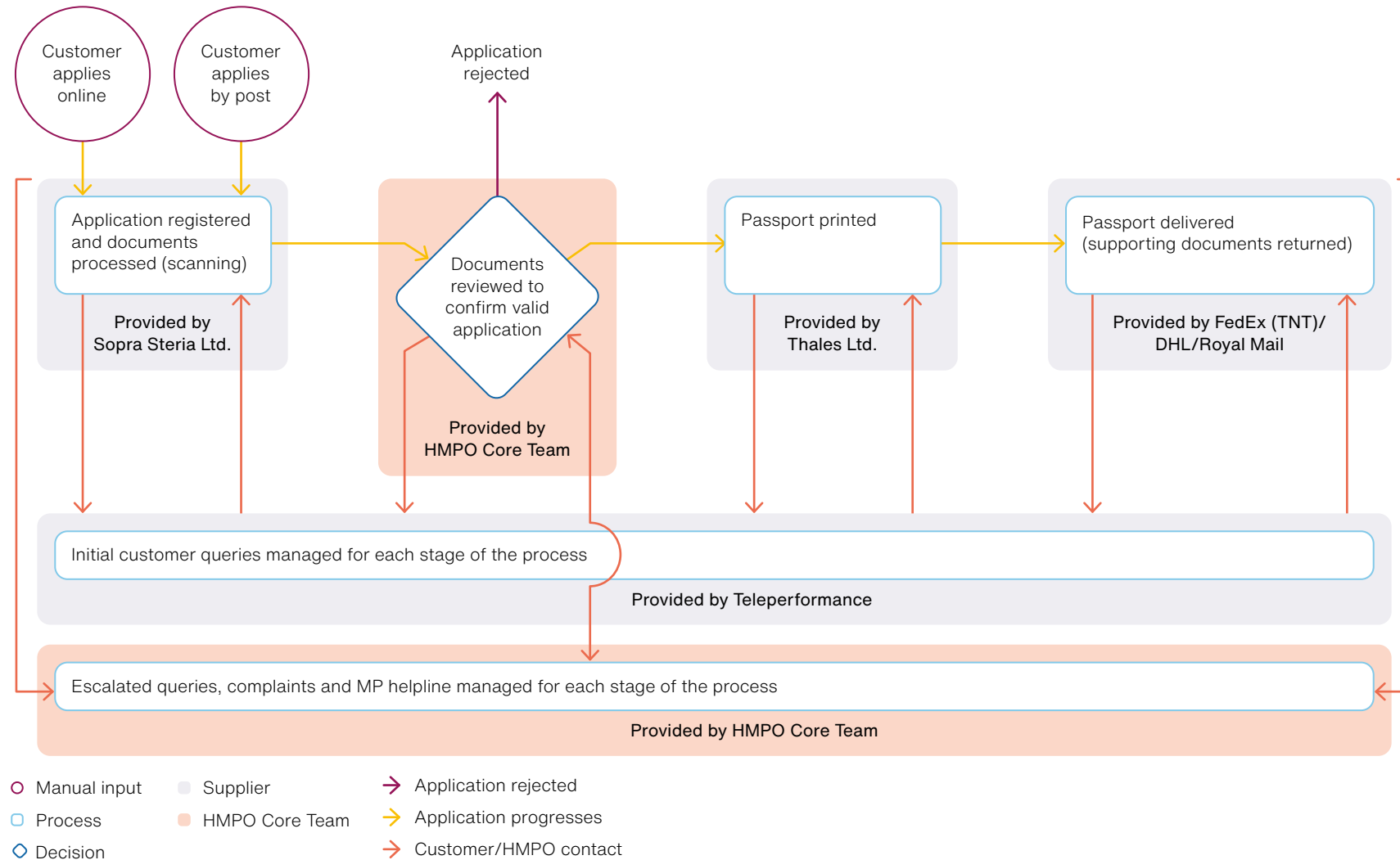
Note

1   At the stage of reviewing an application, HMPO can ask applicants for more documentation before approving their application.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office documentation

1.6 HMPO originally expected to complete its transformation programme by March 2022. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, HMPO expanded the scope of the programme to allow staff to work from home, making it easier to continue processing applications. However, this contributed to a delay in completing the programme. HMPO now expects to complete its transformation in 2024-25.

The changing demand for passports

1.7 Historically, demand for passports has been relatively stable. Patterns and volumes of applications have remained broadly consistent, with HMPO receiving about seven million applications a year (**Figure 2** overleaf). In 2020, when countries introduced travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of passport applications reduced by 41% compared with the previous year, to four million. This was because of people choosing to delay renewing or applying for a new passport.

1.8 Following the removal of COVID-19 travel restrictions in early 2022, passport applications began to increase. Between January 2022 and September 2022, HMPO received 7.2 million applications, 24% more than the same period in 2019. While approximately 95% of those who applied between January and September 2022 received their passports within 10 weeks, some 360,000 customers experienced longer waits.[4] This had possible consequences for their travel plans and their ability to prove their identity. This led to increased complaints to HMPO and members of Parliament and negative reports in the media.

1.9 In this report we set out the facts regarding HMPO's:

● plans to manage the increase in applications;

● performance in managing the increase in applications; and

● plans to learn lessons and prepare for future years.

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4   Between January and September 2022, the service level agreement for straightforward and non-straightforward applications made within the UK was 10 weeks. The agreement for fast-track applications was seven days and it was four hours for premium applications. For international applications, there are no formal service level agreements, but HMPO provides advice on how application times may vary depending on the country and type of application. These advisory times range from 'at least 13 weeks' to 'at least 39 weeks'. A straightforward application includes most renewals and requests for passports where all documentation is available and no additional material or clarification is needed. Non-straightforward applications refer to those where examiners must go back to the applicant for further information or clarification.

Figure 2

Passport applications, January 2015 to December 2019

Before the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), demand for passports was stable with consistent demand patterns

Number of passport applications

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
● 2015	656,714	698,894	825,191	777,816	713,576	740,981	611,314	427,698	451,185	402,040	361,935	279,160
● 2016	666,521	774,202	807,127	806,954	784,322	746,268	593,004	479,069	440,060	376,823	360,933	256,412
● 2017	657,802	697,915	840,488	673,443	781,209	724,254	630,445	507,883	418,649	391,123	363,676	245,037
● 2018	687,268	808,426	900,853	715,824	696,108	638,692	574,889	453,570	386,843	383,293	337,097	244,942
● 2019	685,156	711,100	907,077	689,081	650,227	586,219	595,857	446,396	493,861	484,350	338,042	278,272

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office data

Part Two

Preparing for the increased demand in passport applications

2.1   This part sets out the actions HM Passport Office (HMPO) took to prepare for the increased number of passport applications it expected to receive in 2022.

2.2   Following the low demand in 2020, HMPO began preparing for passport applications to increase again in 2021. In May 2021, with international travel restrictions still in place, HMPO realised expected demand for 2021 would not materialise and started to plan for demand returning in 2022 (**Figure 3** on pages 14 and 15). Its forecast suggested that it could receive 9.5 million passport applications in 2022 – around 36% more than a normal year. It based this forecast on historical data (which suggested there may be up to five million customers who did not apply for passports in 2020 and 2021) and surveys designed to understand people's travel intentions. Its analysis suggested that at peak times it could receive 270,000 applications a week.

2.3   HMPO subsequently began planning for the expected surge and considered a range of interventions. Some of the interventions it ruled out as not feasible included:

* automatically extending the validity of passports that had expired or were due to expire, as this would require bilateral negotiations with other countries;

* stopping paper-based applications, or limiting the number of digital applications each day, as this could disadvantage customers or create the wrong incentives;

* implementing a different fee structure to incentivise customers, for example reducing fees for customers who apply early, or increasing fees during periods of high demand, as this would require change in legislation; and

* not asking customers to send in their old passports as part of the application, as this could increase risks of old passports being used inappropriately.

2.4   HMPO instead explored other ways to influence customer behaviour and took steps to increase capacity across the end-to-end system to cope with the projected increase in demand (**Figure 4** on page 16).

Figure 3

Timeline of key dates affecting passport applications and HM Passport Office's decisions, January 2020 to November 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing travel restrictions influenced HM Passport Office's (HMPO's) decision-making

January 2020

The United Kingdom confirmed the first cases of COVID-19.

November 2020

The second national lockdown came into force in England, which lasted four weeks.

February 2021

British and Irish travellers arriving in the UK from high-risk countries required to quarantine for 10 days.

July 2021

The government removed the final legal restrictions in England. Scotland moved to 'level zero' restrictions.

March 2022

HMPO ran social media campaigns on Facebook and Snapchat, aiming to increase awareness of turnaround times. HMPO introduced the Pre-Examination Throttle (PET) to its digital system.[1]

May 2022

HMPO and Teleperformance introduced a self-service call handling system to provide customers with a progress update on their application. The minister for safe and legal migration issued a letter to all MPs to help MPs give accurate advice to their constituents. HMPO ran social media campaign on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, aiming to encourage early renewals. HMPO realised the age of some applications was recorded incorrectly and built a system to rectify this.

July 2020

Factors including increased demand from Hong Kong and social distancing measures reducing HMPO's operational capacity contributed to 400,000 passport applications waiting to be processed.

January 2021

England entered the third national lockdown. Scotland also imposed a national lockdown.

May 2021

The UK lifted quarantine rules for those arriving in the UK from certain countries.

October 2021

The first ministerial meeting on passport planning took place, supported by data dashboards.

2020

2021 Jan–Jun

2021 Jul–Dec

2022

March 2020

The first national lockdown came into force across UK. The UK Government confirmed the first death from COVID-19. The then Foreign and Commonwealth Office advised against non-essential international travel.

July 2020

Restrictions eased further. Quarantine rules relaxed for people arriving in the UK from certain countries.

March 2021

The government began to gradually lift lockdown restrictions in England and announced that travel to some countries, without quarantining on return, would be allowed from 17 May.

April 2021

HMPO set up a project to support planning for a surge in demand. HMPO published advice to allow up to 10 weeks when applying for a passport. HMPO began sending text messages to customers with expired or soon-to-expire passports, advising them to renew as soon as possible.

August 2021

The Home Office undertook demand modelling work, adopting a forecast of 9.5 million applications for 2022. HMPO prioritised applications from British nationals in Afghanistan.

March 2022

All international travel restrictions lifted.

September 2022

By the end of September, 360,000 customers waited longer than ten weeks for their passports since the start of the year. 84% of these cases were subject to the 10-week service level agreement.

April 2022

HMPO issued a press notice reminding customers of the 10-week turnaround time. HMPO experienced an increase in applications, which led to significant media and parliamentary attention on HMPO's performance.

June 2020

The first lockdown ended but with some restrictions remaining. Travel companies reported that holiday bookings had 'exploded' after quarantine restrictions were eased.

December 2020

More than 40 countries suspended flights from the UK due to the emergence of the Alpha variant. The UK vaccination rollout began.

December 2021

'Plan B' measures put into place in England, due to the emergence of the Omicron variant.

August 2022

The government formally responded to a public petition calling for an investigation into HMPO.

● HMPO

● COVID-19

Note

1   The Pre-Examination Throttle was built to control the flow of applications into HMPO's Digital Application Processing system.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office documentation and media coverage of COVID-19 events

Figure 4

HM Passport Office's preparation for the expected surge in demand in 2022

HM Passport Office pursued a range of options to prepare for the increase in demand

Area of preparation	Actions
Customers	Changed guidance for customers to allow up to 10 weeks for their applications to be processed.
	Sent SMS texts to customers whose passports had expired or were due to expire.
	Ran social media advertising campaigns to encourage customers to apply early.
	Reduced the number of first-time interviews by 50%.
Suppliers	Held workshops with suppliers to describe the challenge ahead of 2022.
	Brought in Royal Mail and DHL to increase delivery capacity.
Supplies	Stockpiled chips for passport personalisation.
	Procured Bank of England vault to store passport books.
Staff	Planned to recruit extra staff to expand capacity.
	Recalled staff that had been seconded to work in other areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.
	Engaged recruitment agencies to reduce time to recruit.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office's planning documentation

Influencing customer behaviour

2.5 From 2020, HMPO tried to encourage customers to apply early rather than waiting until they were due to travel. Specifically, HMPO:

- changed official guidance to say that customers should allow up to 10 weeks for their passports to be processed;[5]

- sent SMS messages to customers whose passports had expired or were due to expire informing them of the new 10-week turnaround time; and

- used social media and stakeholders in the travel industry to reinforce awareness of the new turnaround time.

2.6 These attempts to influence customer behaviour had little impact. For example, HMPO ran SMS campaigns between April 2021 and August 2022, but the SMS messages did not generate significant numbers of completed applications. HMPO sent 5.5 million SMS messages over this period. Of the 73% of these that were delivered, 3.2% of recipients followed the application website link in the text.

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5   Until March 2021, the service level agreement for all straightforward (properly completed and with no queries) applications was three weeks and for non-straightforward applications was six weeks.

2.7 In August 2021, HMPO began to develop an advertising campaign to improve awareness of the 10-week turnaround time and encourage customers to apply earlier. Part of its campaign needed approval from the Cabinet Office, which HMPO submitted in April 2022. Following discussions between the two organisations, it received approval in May. In April 2022, before the campaign, only 29% of people surveyed said that they thought it would take 10 weeks or longer to process a passport application, and 36% still expected a 1–4-week turnaround time. The advertising campaign ran from 24 May until 17 June. HMPO's survey at the end of June 2022 showed an improvement in awareness, with 56% of customers expecting a 10-week or longer turnaround time and 19% expecting a 1–4-week turnaround.

Preparing suppliers and ensuring supplies

2.8 As part of its planning for the anticipated increase in demand, HMPO engaged with suppliers to bolster its stock of passport books as well as its ability to deliver completed passports to customers. It stockpiled passport books and worked with Thales (passport printer, see Figure 1) to procure additional storage for these at the Bank of England. It also introduced a FedEx Express service for returning supporting documents and secured the use of Royal Mail tracked service as a contingency.

2.9 HMPO also worked closely with suppliers to share information and create clear channels for decision-making. For example, in August 2021, HMPO shared its demand forecasts with suppliers and held workshops during the autumn to support suppliers in preparing for increased demand. From the summer of 2021, HMPO held monthly planning meetings with Teleperformance and agreed several measures in preparation for 2022, including a significant increase in headcount and the use of sub-contractors. However, while HMPO and Teleperformance discussed proposals to set up self-service application progress checks for customers as well as the possibility of lowering security clearance requirements for new staff, they did not progress these during this planning phase.
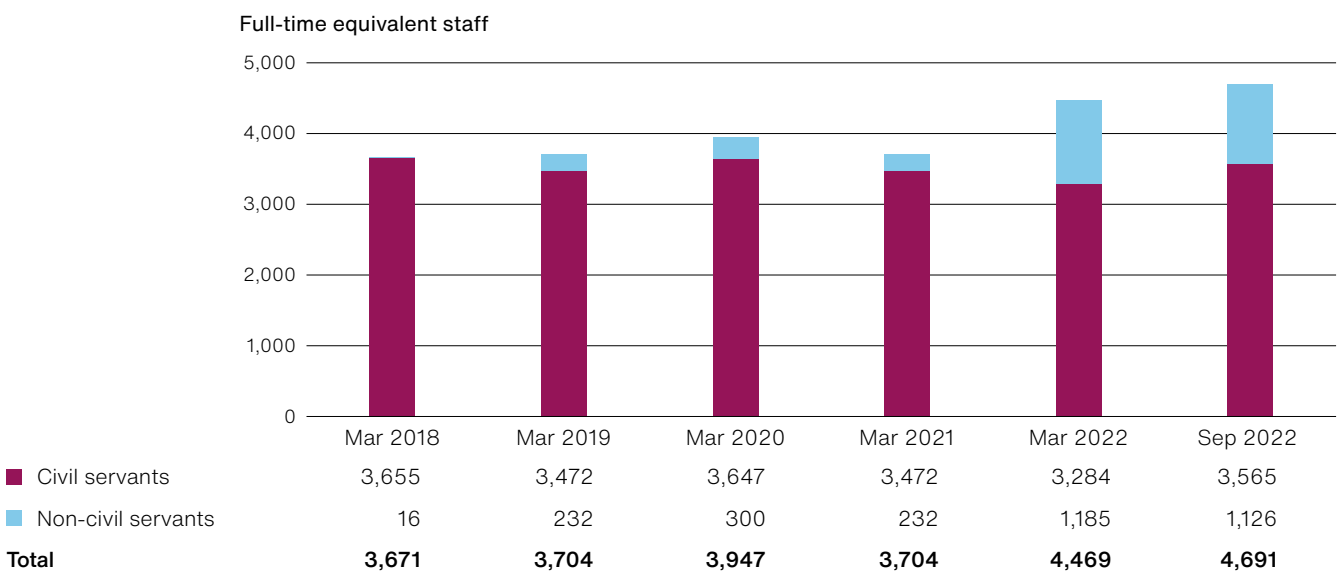
Increasing staff numbers

2.10 HMPO's demand forecast suggested that it would need an extra 2,100 staff to help manage the expected number of applications in 2022. In autumn 2021, HMPO recalled some staff who had been seconded to work in other areas during the pandemic and began to recruit new staff.

2.11 HMPO struggled to recruit people at the rate it needed – 47% of those offered a job between August 2021 and September 2022 did not take up the offer.[6] HMPO tried to mitigate this by engaging recruitment agencies and requesting support from staff in other areas of government. Between August 2021 and September 2022, HMPO increased its workforce by around 1,100 full-time equivalent staff, of which 200 were permanent employees and the rest were temporary.[7] By March 2022, as HMPO expected the surge to begin, it had almost 4,500 staff. By September 2022 it had nearly 4,700 full-time equivalent staff (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5

Number of full-time equivalent employees at HM Passport Office (March 2018 to September 2022)

HM Passport Office (HMPO) increased staff numbers to manage the expected surge in demand in 2022. Almost 900 were agency workers or contractors

Full-time equivalent staff

	Mar 2018	Mar 2019	Mar 2020	Mar 2021	Mar 2022	Sep 2022
■ Civil servants	3,655	3,472	3,647	3,472	3,284	3,565
■ Non-civil servants	16	232	300	232	1,185	1,126
Total	**3,671**	**3,704**	**3,947**	**3,704**	**4,469**	**4,691**

Notes

1   Civil servants include staff on permanent contracts, fixed-term appointments and staff on loan from other areas.

2   Non-civil servants include agency workers and contractors.

3   Data show the position at the end of the month.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office resourcing data

6   Across the Home Office's Customer Services Directorate there were more than 5,000 vacancies including those needed by HMPO.

7   HM Passport Office underwent restructuring between July and August 2022 which caused around 300 full-time equivalent staff to be moved out of HMPO to another part of the Home Office, although these staff did not routinely process passport applications.

Part Three

Managing the demand in passport applications

3.1 This part sets out HM Passport Office's (HMPO's) performance in managing the increased demand for passports in 2022. We have based our analysis, where possible, on performance up to the end of September 2022.

3.2 Between January and September 2022, HMPO received 7.2 million passport applications. While the total number of passport applications received was lower than HMPO had projected, there were considerable peaks in applications. Almost half of all applications received within the nine months arrived between March and May 2022. In May alone, HMPO received 1.26 million applications, 38% more than the highest month in any of the past five years (**Figure 6** overleaf). In the busiest week – the week commencing 16 May 2022 – HMPO received 340,000 applications, which was 66% higher than the average week in the busiest period in 2019 (205,000 during March 2019).

3.3 We estimate that at its busiest period, HMPO had around 900,000 applications in the pipeline, either awaiting documentation, awaiting a decision, or awaiting printing (**Figure 7** on page 21).[8] HMPO does not have a formal definition of a 'backlog', so we have defined this as the number of cases that have been awaiting completion for more than 10 weeks, which is the current service level agreement for UK-based applications. We estimate this number went above 30,000 towards the end of May (the week after HMPO's peak in applications) and increased to more than 60,000 by July.

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8 Of the 908,000 applications in the pipeline, approximately 60,700 (7%) were international applications. The advisory times for international applications range from 'at least 13 weeks' to 'at least 39 weeks'. See paragraph 3.5 for further details.

Figure 6

Passport applications (January 2018 to September 2022)

The pattern of applications has changed since the outbreak of COVID-19. In some recent months HM Passport Office (HMPO) has received more than one million applications

Number of passport applications
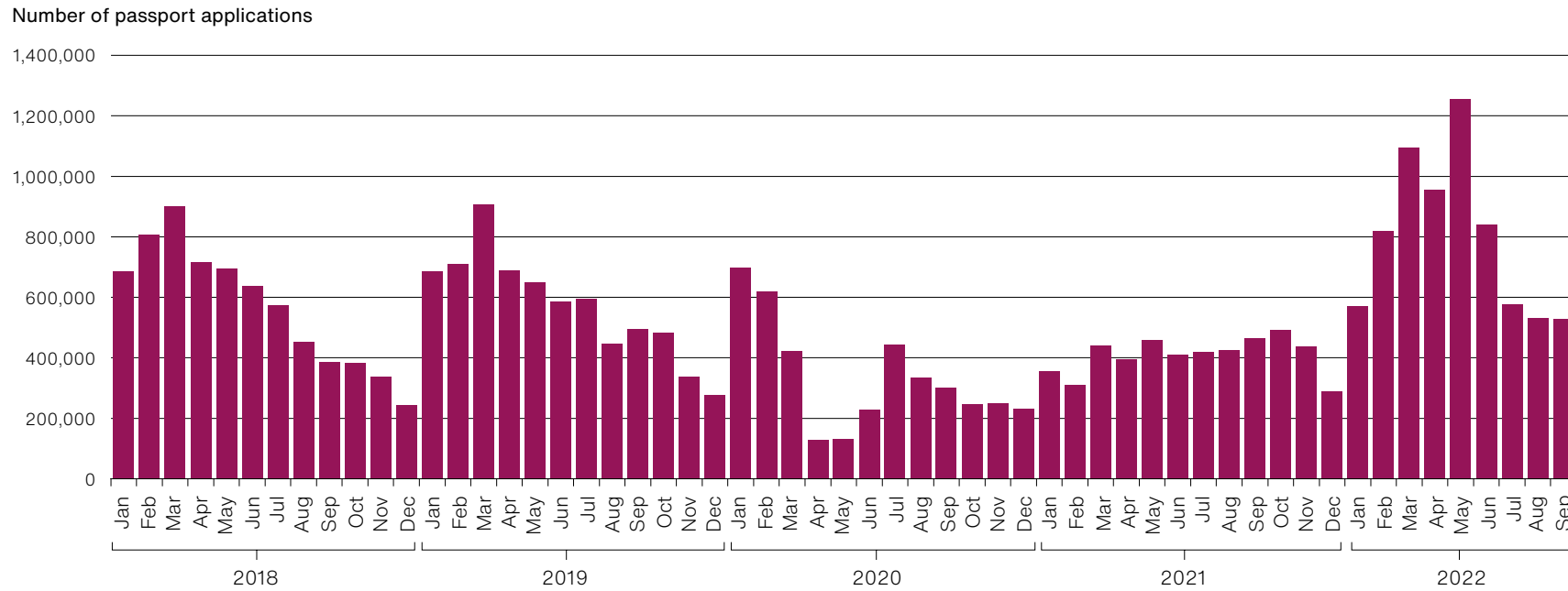
Note

1   The World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020 and a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office transparency data. available at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/migration-transparency-data#hm-passport-office

Figure 7

Estimated number of active applications, January to August 2022, by age of application

At the busiest time, we estimate that HM Passport Office (HMPO) had more than 900,000 cases awaiting documentation, decision or printing. In July 2022 more than 60,000 applications had been waiting for more than 10 weeks

Estimated number of active cases

- ■ 0–6 weeks
- ■ 6–8 weeks
- ■ 8–10 weeks
- ■ 10+ weeks
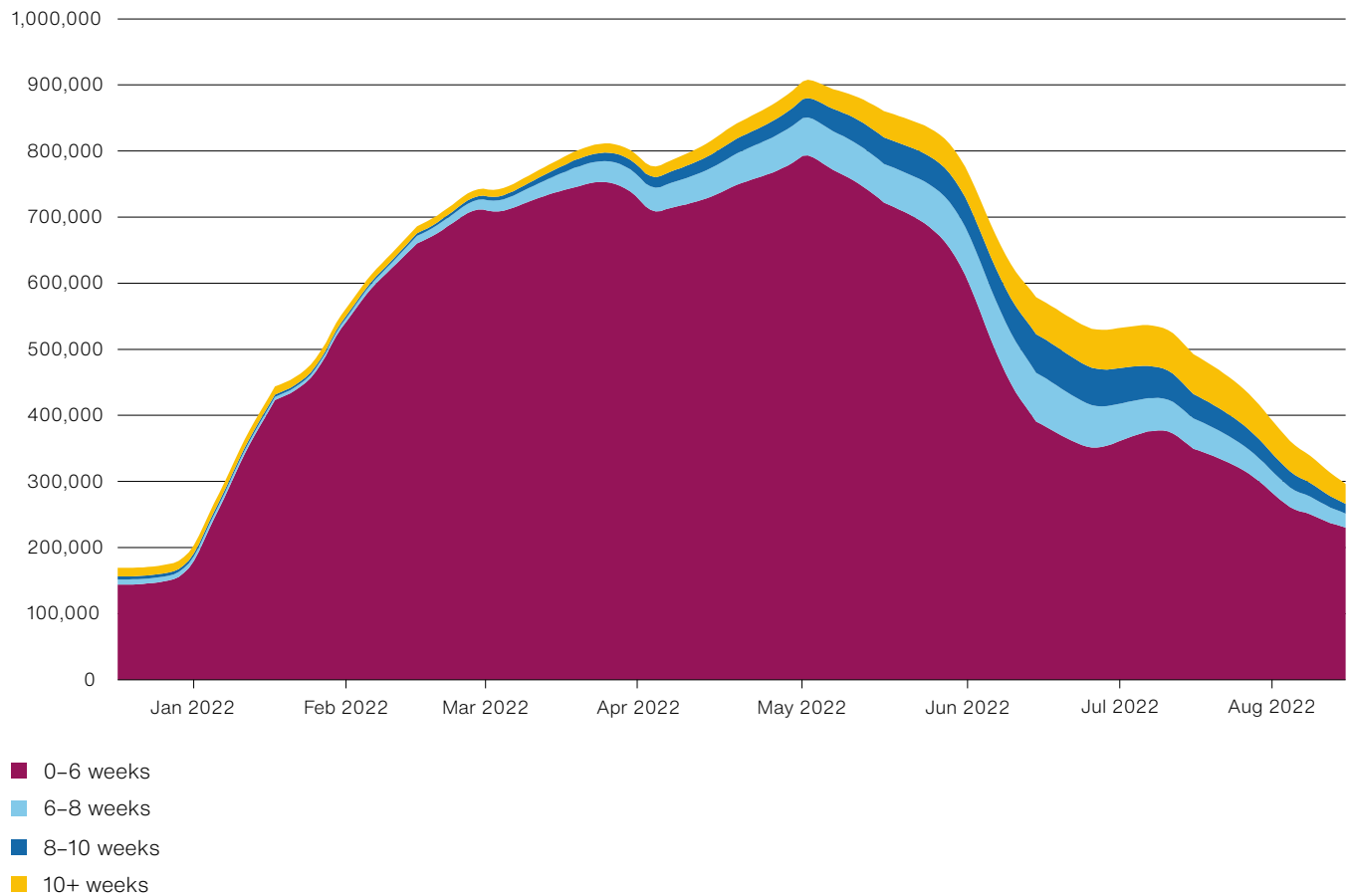
Notes

1   Active applications are those either awaiting documentation, awaiting a decision, or waiting to be printed.

2   Data for August are likely to be an underestimate, as this is based on completed applications only.

3   Out of the 908,000 applications in the pipeline, approximately 60,700 (7%) were international applications, whose service level agreements range from 'at least 13 weeks' to 'at least 39 weeks'.

4   Data are presented on a daily basis.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office data

Performance processing applications

3.4 Of the 7.2 million passports it received between January and September 2022, HMPO processed 6.9 million.[9] This is 21% more processed applications than the equivalent period in 2019. HMPO measures its performance using average (median) processing times.[10] Between January and September 2022, for 'straightforward' applications within the UK, average processing times have ranged from one week to 2.8 weeks and from 1.6 weeks to 3.9 weeks for those who apply internationally.[11] However, average processing times for 'non-straightforward' applications ranged from 1.9 weeks to 6.4 weeks for applications within the UK and 5.7 weeks to 11.7 weeks for those who apply internationally (**Figure 8** on pages 23 and 24).

3.5 Using average processing times masks considerable variation. HMPO also records data on the number of days it takes to complete passport applications, from which it is possible to assess the percentage of cases completed within service level agreements. For applications made within the UK, this service level agreement is 10 weeks. For international applications, there are no formal service level agreements, but HMPO advises overseas customers on how application times may vary depending on the type of application (renewal, first-time application, replacement) and country of application. These advisory times range from 'at least 13 weeks' to 'at least 39 weeks'.

3.6 HMPO could not provide a breakdown of its performance for international applications. For applications within the UK, the percentage of applications completed within 10 weeks declined from March this year before starting to improve in September. Processing for 'straightforward' applications from within the UK – which accounts for almost two-thirds of all applications – has remained above 90%, but in August 2022, fewer than three-quarters of 'non-straightforward' applications within the UK were completed within that timescale (Figure 8).[12] In total, approximately 360,000 customers (5% of all applications processed) waited longer than 10 weeks, of which 84% were subject to a service level agreement of 10 weeks or less.[13]

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9   Both the 6.9 million processed and 7.2 million received applications are based on the position at the end of September. Therefore, some of those received in the last few weeks of the reporting period would still be awaiting processing. Furthermore, some passport applications will be withdrawn or refused.
10 The median is calculated as the middle value when data are organised into ascending order.
11 A 'straightforward' application includes most renewals and requests for passports where all documentation is available and no additional material or clarification is needed. 'Non-straightforward' applications refer to those where examiners must go back to the applicant for further information or clarification.
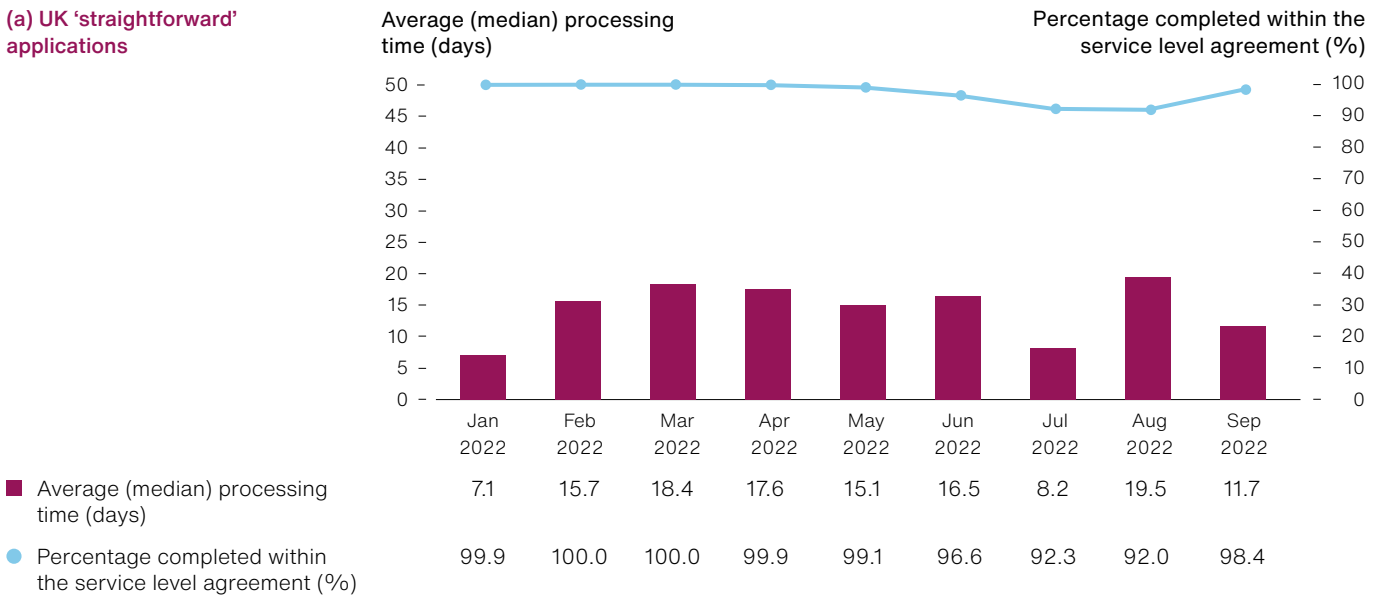12 See footnote 11.
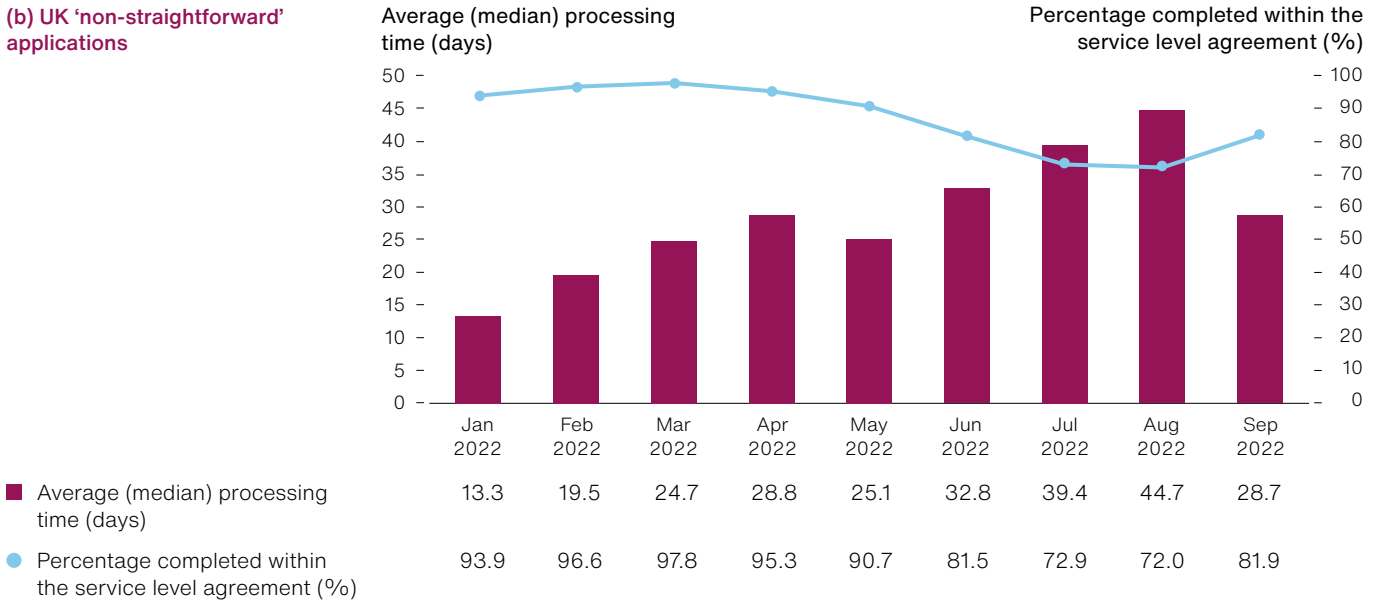13 The service level agreement is 7 days for a Fast Track application and 4 hours for a premium application.

Figure 8

Average (median) processing times and percentage of UK applications processed within 10 weeks, January 2022 to September 2022

'Straightforward' applications from the UK are the quickest to process. The percentage achieving the service level agreement of 10 weeks reduced between March and August 2022, before starting to improve in September 2022

(a) UK 'straightforward' applications

	Jan 2022	Feb 2022	Mar 2022	Apr 2022	May 2022	Jun 2022	Jul 2022	Aug 2022	Sep 2022
■ Average (median) processing time (days)	7.1	15.7	18.4	17.6	15.1	16.5	8.2	19.5	11.7
● Percentage completed within the service level agreement (%)	99.9	100.0	100.0	99.9	99.1	96.6	92.3	92.0	98.4

(b) UK 'non-straightforward' applications

	Jan 2022	Feb 2022	Mar 2022	Apr 2022	May 2022	Jun 2022	Jul 2022	Aug 2022	Sep 2022
■ Average (median) processing time (days)	13.3	19.5	24.7	28.8	25.1	32.8	39.4	44.7	28.7
● Percentage completed within the service level agreement (%)	93.9	96.6	97.8	95.3	90.7	81.5	72.9	72.0	81.9

Figure 8 *continued*

Average (median) processing times and percentage of UK applications processed within 10 weeks, January 2022 to September 2022

Notes

1 A 'straightforward' application is an application which requires no further information. A 'non-straightforward' application may require further information or supporting documentation.

2 These dates represent the completion date of applications, not the receipt date, therefore applications completed in one month may have been received in an earlier month.

3 Service level agreement for both 'straightforward' and 'non-straightforward' applications made within the UK between April 2021 and August 2022 was 10 weeks.

4 The median is calculated as the middle value when data are organised into ascending order.

5 This does not include delivery time, which is estimated as two days.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office data on processing times

3.7 HMPO's ability to process applications within expected timeframes was affected by three interlinked areas:

● Limitations in processing applications digitally, requiring more applications to be processed through the less efficient manual process and exposing weaknesses in management information.

● Some suppliers failing to meet service levels as demand increased. In particular, media reports of delays pushed more people to call the telephone helpline for reassurance, placing greater pressure on services.

● Responding to customer concerns by prioritising imminent travel and moving experienced staff to deal with customers rather than processing applications.

Challenges in processing applications digitally

3.8 In line with HMPO's expectations, almost eight in 10 customers applied for their passports online (see paragraph 1.5). HMPO's plans for managing increased demand hinged on the functionality of its new digital application system. When planning for the increased demand, HMPO realised its digital system would not have the capacity to manage the forecast number of applications. Initially, the system managed a maximum of 5,000 applications a day while in development. HMPO removed this limit as part of a series of adaptations to allow staff to work at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased the system's capacity to 45,000 by July 2021.[14] At the peak in 2022, the system needed to handle around 60,000 applications a day and HMPO focused its efforts on building more capacity into the system to accommodate the extra applications. In March 2022, HMPO introduced a 'throttle' to control the flow of cases into the system. The throttle acted as an additional storage space for applications before they entered the main system, and at the busiest times held up to 136,000 applications.

14 The figure of 5,000 represents work in the system, rather than the number of applications, taking into account productivity and throughput, and the likely number that would be in the system at any one point in a typical year.

3.9 As a result of limitations in the functionality of the digital system, HMPO had to transfer some 134,000 digital applications to the less efficient, paper-based system. These limitations included not allowing applications to be prioritised or linked, for example for siblings whose applications rely on the same supporting documentation. Additionally, the digital system could not handle all application types.[15] When applications are transferred, Sopra Steria (see Figure 1) extracts the application from the digital system, creates a new paper file and transfers the file to the correct office for processing. HMPO had not planned for the large number of applications that needed to transfer to the paper-based system. As it transferred more applications to the more labour-intensive paper-based system, HMPO retrained staff to provide the capacity needed to process these applications, reducing productivity.

3.10 HMPO also discovered weaknesses in its management information, which meant it did not have an accurate record of the age of all applications. For example, if a case transferred from the digital to the paper-based system, the systems recorded this as a new case starting on the day of transfer and did not account for the full time the application had been with HMPO. At the peak of the demand, this may have been up to four weeks more than the system was recording. This created confusion and frustration for customers who phoned for updates, when they were wrongly informed their applications were still within the 10-week application period. Once it had identified the issue, HMPO put in place a manual system to calculate the true age of applications, while developing a more tactical solution.

Performance of suppliers

3.11 Throughout the surge most suppliers managed the extra demand within their service level agreements (**Figure 9** overleaf). But some problems arose when demand for services increased significantly.

3.12 Sopra Steria did not achieve its service level agreements in some months. Sopra Steria is responsible for opening and scanning paper applications and supporting documentation for digital applications. Between March and July 2022, Sopra Steria did not achieve its target of having 95% of actions completed within 48 hours of receiving an instruction (Figure 9).[16] Its worst performance was in April, when it achieved an average of 42% of applications within this timescale, and it sometimes took up to two weeks to register an application on HMPO's digital system.

3.13 Teleperformance, which runs the customer support telephone line, also did not manage demand at the busiest times. Its difficulties were compounded by media reports of delays prompting more customers to contact it for reassurance. From April to July 2022, Teleperformance did not achieve its target of answering 80% of calls within 30 seconds. In April, it received 625,000 calls in one week, nearly 350% above the forecast.

15 For example, the digital system will automatically return an application to the paper-based system if: an applicant requests a braille passport; a passport has been declared lost or stolen; has an old-style blue hardback passport; if digital referees answer no to questions or if customer services flag the passport as urgent.
16 Sopra Steria's 'instructions' could include returning documents to a customer, storing documents, or gathering paperwork when an application moves from the digital to the paper-based system.

Figure 9

Performance of HM Passport Office's suppliers (January to August 2022)

Most suppliers performed well throughout the 2022 surge in demand. Sopra Steria and Teleperformance did not achieve their service level agreements in some months, but have now mostly recovered

Supplier	Sopra Steria (Digital system)		Sopra Steria (Paper-based system)	Thales	FedEx	Royal Mail	DHL Parcel UK	Teleperformance
Metric/ Service level agreement	Percentage of applications registered on the digital system within 48 hours	Percentage of actions completed within 48 hours of receiving an instruction	Percentage of applications cleared on HM Passport Office (HMPO's) paper-based system within 48 hours	Percentage of items printed within 48 hours	Percentage of items delivered within 48 hours	Percentage of items delivered on first attempt	Percentage of items successfully delivered	Percentage of Adviceline calls answered within 30 seconds
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
January	75.1	99.8	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	–	99.3
February	37.3	99.8	99.8	100.0	100.0	–	–	99.1
March	28.5	66.8	99.8	85.1	100.0	–	–	86.7
April	40.1	41.6	100.0	56.2	100.0	99.6	99.4	55.0
May	34.2	52.4	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.7	99.4	14.0
June	88.7	80.3	99.9	100.0	100.0	99.7	99.5	41.9
July	100.0	94.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.6	99.3	77.0
August	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.6	99.2	99.0

Notes

1   Data are taken from weekly HMPO ministerial dashboards, and a mean average is calculated for each month.

2   Royal Mail and DHL were brought on to help with UK deliveries at the end of April.

3   Data for the last week of August are not available.

4   Sopra Steria's 'instructions' could include returning documents to a customer, storing documents, or gathering paperwork when an application moves from the digital to the paper-based system.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of HM Passport Office data

Customers' experience

3.14 As customers' concerns grew, they increasingly sought to attend face-to-face appointments at HMPO offices to try to speed up their applications. However, demand for these appointments remained high, as people applied late for passports ahead of travel and as customers thought this might provide a quicker application route. At times, customers had to wait up to four weeks for an in-person appointment.

3.15 This started to attract media reports of delays, which consequently encouraged more people to call the helpline. Teleperformance observed that many of the calls it received were from customers seeking assurance that their application was being processed, and that customers were calling more often (see paragraph 3.13). To alleviate the pressure from those calls, in late May 2022, HMPO and Teleperformance introduced a self-service call handling system to provide customers with a progress update when they called. This allowed Teleperformance staff to focus on more complex queries.

3.16 To respond to demand, HMPO opened additional in-person appointments, and introduced new priority services for people travelling within two weeks. HMPO told us that its decision to prioritise cases by need helped to alleviate pressures for those needing immediate travel, but it meant that those applicants who did not indicate immediate travel may have waited longer. Additionally, as HMPO had trained most of its new staff to use the digital system for simple applications, it had to move more experienced staff to deal with customers face-to-face. This meant fewer experienced staff were able to help process applications.

3.17 HMPO tracks customer experience monthly. It asks customers to give a score from 1 to 10 for their overall experience with 10 being the highest. In April 2021, when HMPO issued its guidance on the 10-week turnaround time, 80% of customers gave HMPO a score of at least 9 out of 10. In June 2022, this reduced to 55%.

3.18 HMPO also moved staff to deal with complaints and correspondence. The Home Office received 11,400 letters from members of Parliament regarding HMPO business between January and July 2022. More customers also filed complaints to HMPO through this period, from fewer than 1,000 in April 2021 to 1,741 in June 2022.

Part Four

Learning lessons

4.1 By the end of September 2022, HM Passport Office (HMPO) had handled record numbers of applications. But it still processed fewer than it had forecast, and HMPO estimates that there are at least three million customers who still need to either renew or apply for passports from the suppressed demand in 2020 and 2021. This part sets out how HMPO is learning from its experiences to inform how it manages future demand.

4.2 HMPO is undertaking work to learn lessons from its response to the surge in applications during the summer of 2022. It has involved staff and its suppliers in a series of workshops, facilitated by an external crisis management company. These workshops have focused on learning lessons across a range of areas including staffing, IT systems, and customer and stakeholder management.

4.3 HMPO intends to use the lessons identified through its workshops to support readiness planning for 2023, and has developed a programme of work. It estimates that it could receive 9.8 million passport applications in 2023. It received formal sign-off of the forecast in November 2022, three months later than the equivalent sign-off last year.

Improving contact with customers

4.4 When a customer calls HMPO's advice line, their first interaction is with Teleperformance. At the peak of HMPO's demand, Teleperformance was unable to deal with the volume of calls (paragraph 3.13). HMPO has been working with Teleperformance to ensure that it is prepared for any surge in applications in 2023. In support of this, HMPO is continuing to permit Teleperformance to engage sub-contractors and is looking for a second supplier to take on 25% of customer calls to the advice line. HMPO has also appointed EY, an external consultant, to support improvement in the performance of the services provided to HMPO by Teleperformance.[17]

4.5 Once a customer gets their query through to HMPO, they may pass through a range of different teams. To address this, HMPO is changing how it directs and deals with calls and is establishing a 'Resolution Hub' in Southport. A key aim of the Resolution Hub is to reduce the number of contacts a customer query passes through before being resolved, thereby improving the customer experience. HMPO is implementing the Hub in phases and plans to introduce the first phase by March 2023.

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17 EY was previously known as Ernst & Young.

Building capacity to manage demand

4.6 HMPO recognises that recruitment and staffing challenges affected its ability to process applications during 2022. It has identified it needs a more flexible workforce, so that staff can move more easily between processing digital and paper-based applications. It also needs to be able to increase staffing levels quickly at times of high demand. At the time of our work, HMPO had not finalised its staffing plans for 2023. However, in June 2022 it launched a recruitment campaign to hire 300 staff by 21 October. By 12 September 2022, 199 candidates were going through pre-employment checks and 10 candidates had passed these.

4.7 HMPO is also working with its suppliers to ensure they have sufficient capacity for expected demand in 2023. In November 2022, HMPO launched 'Scanning Validation and Storage' with Sopra Steria. This is a new service which HMPO expects to more efficiently digitise supporting paper evidence for passport applications.

Completing the digital transformation programme

4.8 Many of the challenges that HMPO faced in 2022 were linked to the capacity and functionality of the digital application system, delivered through its transformation programme. The scope of the programme has increased significantly since it began in 2016, and in 2021 it was added to the Government Major Projects Portfolio. In February 2021, HMPO appointed a new senior responsible owner for the programme until 31 March 2022, the date by which the programme was expected to complete. However, HMPO extended the tenure of this position as the programme faced delays to the timetable. In September 2022, HMPO appointed another new senior responsible owner.

4.9 HMPO adapted the transformation programme in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has ultimately delayed the programme. It now expects to complete the programme in the 2024-25 financial year, although it acknowledges that full delivery may not be achieved until 2025-26. HMPO's contract for its paper-based system is due to expire in March 2024.

4.10 The Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) rated the programme as red in its review in August 2022 and recommended that the programme should not proceed to the next phase until HMPO has managed risks to an acceptable level. The IPA's guidance states that, following a risk rating of red, an 'Assurance of Action Plan' review must take place within three months of the original review. By mid-October, HMPO was still putting in place an action plan and a review date had not yet been fixed. As part of this, HMPO is working to respond to the IPA's seven recommendations, one of which was rated as critical and four of which were rated as essential.

Appendix One

Our investigative approach

Scope

1   We investigated three specific areas. These were:

●   how HM Passport Office (HMPO) planned to manage the high level of demand it expected in 2022;

●   its performance in managing applications between January and September 2022; and

●   its plans to learn lessons from the experience to manage a similar level of demand in 2023 and the future.

2   We conducted our fieldwork in September and October 2022. We have focused our investigation on HMPO's planning for the 2022 surge and management of demand for passports between January and September 2022. We have not looked in detail at its ongoing programme of digital transformation, other than where interactions between the transformation programme and routine operations have affected HMPO's ability to process applications.

Methods

3   In examining these issues, we drew on a variety of evidence sources.

Interviews

4   We carried out 19 online interviews with HMPO. We undertook these interviews to understand:

●   how HMPO forecasts its likely demand for applications, the drivers of that demand, and the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has altered forecasts;

●   how HMPO planned to manage the demand in 2022, focusing on how it prepared staff, systems, suppliers and customers;

- HMPO's views of its own and suppliers' performance throughout the year;

- its activities to capture lessons for the future from its experience in 2022; and

- the transformation programme and its impact on managing demand in 2022.

5 To identify and select interviewees within HMPO, we followed our contacts' advice on who had the most relevant knowledge. We did not interview customers or passport examiners. We used the interviews to identify relevant information and plan other fieldwork activities.

Document review

6 We reviewed around 170 documents. The main types of documents we reviewed were:

- introductory material, to help us understand the organisation of HMPO and the context in which it works;

- planning papers from HMPO and its suppliers to understand actions and decisions taken in preparation, and where relevant, ministerial submissions to support those actions;

- transcripts and minutes of HMPO senior management meetings, including its surge capacity group and management board, to understand how it reported, reflected on and responded to risks, including the tactical solutions it deployed to manage the surge;

- management reporting packs, to understand how HMPO managed its performance and identified risks during the surge;

- customer insight reports, to understand HMPO's actions to influence customer behaviour, and the impact of those actions; and

- Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) reports, for an assessment of HMPO's transformation programme.

7 We systematically analysed these documents against our key scope areas and triangulated the documentation against our interviews and our data analysis and requested further information where required.

Quantitative analysis

8 We undertook analysis based on HMPO data to understand its performance during the surge. This included:

- analysing management information including forecasting, resourcing, volumes of applications received and processed, processing times and performance of HMPO and suppliers against key performance indicators. Where relevant, we also examined historical data to demonstrate the scale of the difference in 2022 to previous years;

- analysing live data on passport application status, to assess the full extent of HMPO's work in the system at any given time in the summer;

- analysing data on processing times to understand average completion times of applications and the number of applications completed within service level agreements. To do this we have also looked at historical data to provide a comparison against previous years.

9 Throughout the report we have not sought to examine performance during COVID-19 restrictions, but we have used prior performance in 2019 as a benchmark. However, where we have used charts to represent performance we have included the intervening years so readers can identify patterns.

10 Most of the data we present are drawn from HMPO's internal management information, meaning it is not subject to the same quality checks as official statistics or audited accounts. We have not audited the underlying systems producing these data.

CORRECTION SLIP

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Correction One:

We need to make the correction in paragraph 12 on page 7 of the Summary, we have a reference to paras 4.2-4.11. There is no paragraph 4.11, Part Four stops at 4.10.

The text currently reads:

12   By the end of September 2022, the average processing time for passports was 12 days for straightforward applications from within the UK and 29 days for non-straightforward applications. HMPO is identifying lessons and addressing known issues to prepare for a similar level of demand in 2023. This includes helping to prepare its suppliers, providing better options for customers that need support and continuing to develop its digital system so it can handle a wider range of applications (paragraphs 4.2 to 4.11 and Figure 8).

The text should read:

13   By the end of September 2022, the average processing time for passports was 12 days for straightforward applications from within the UK and 29 days for non-straightforward applications. HMPO is identifying lessons and addressing known issues to prepare for a similar level of demand in 2023. This includes helping to prepare its suppliers, providing better options for customers that need support and continuing to develop its digital system so it can handle a wider range of applications (paragraphs 4.2 to 4.10 and Figure 8).

Correction Two:

We need to make the correction in paragraph 4.3 on page 28 of Part Four, we refer to November 2023 in the last sentence, this is incorrect, it should be 2022.

The text currently reads:

4.3   HMPO intends to use the lessons identified through its workshops to support readiness planning for 2023, and has developed a programme of work. It estimates that it could receive 9.8 million passport applications in 2023. It received formal sign-off of the forecast in November 2023, three months later than the equivalent sign-off last year.

The text should read:

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