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Dear Luke,

Thank you for your letter of 21 March to the Secretary of State, about the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). I am responding as the Minister responsible for this issue.

I would like to begin by saying that the investigation published by the Times was not representative of the hard-working culture at the DVLA nor is it a true reflection of the more than 6,000 staff who have worked so hard to provide essential services throughout the pandemic. It is important to note that the journalist joined the DVLA for just ten days and spent most of his time in a training area which is naturally quieter than the main operational area where calls are answered. The journalist only entered the main contact centre building for a very short time late on his final day at the DVLA.

I am very familiar with the work the DVLA does. I fully understand the concerns you have expressed and I am aware of the impact that delays can have on people's everyday lives. As you are aware, the DVLA's online services are not subject to delays and remain the quickest and easiest way to apply. However, not all customers can or wish to use online services and the DVLA receives tens of thousands of new paper applications each day. Unfortunately, a backlog of paper applications built up at the DVLA due to a combination of six months of industrial action by the Public and Commercial Services union, which was targeted at the areas that would have the most impact on the motoring public and staffing numbers which were reduced on site to ensure staff safety in line with Welsh Government guidance.

As restrictions have relaxed, the DVLA has eased its restrictions in line with advice from Public Health Wales and environmental health teams. Restrictions in Wales are easing at a different rate to other parts of the UK.

There is still a requirement on employers in Wales to carry out risk assessments and to have mitigating measures in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Prior to 28 March, Wales also had a legal requirement for those with the infection to isolate for five days.

I can assure you that the DVLA is working hard to process paper applications as quickly as possible. The total number of paper applications awaiting processing now stands at just over 850,000 which is a significant reduction from the peak of 1.6 million in September last year. It is important to note that at any one time the DVLA normally has around 400,000 paper applications being processed. I am pleased with this significant progress in a short space of time.

The backlog of vehicles paper applications has already been eliminated. Straightforward vocational driving licence applications and renewals are being processed within five working days with no backlog. The DVLA is on track to return to normal turnaround times on all paper driving licence applications by the end of May. Most straightforward paper driving licence applications are now being processed in around eight weeks. Information on processing times for key DVLA workstreams is published online [here](#).

The more complex driving licence applications where the customer has a medical condition(s) that must be investigated will take longer to recover and the DVLA expects to return to pre-pandemic levels for these applications by September.

To reduce waiting times for customers, the DVLA has recruited additional staff in new customer service centres in Swansea and Birmingham. These staff are mainly working on drivers' medical applications or taking calls from customers who have made such an application. The Government is also introducing a change to the law to widen the pool of medical professionals who can complete DVLA medical questionnaires for driving licence purposes. This change will take effect later this year, subject to Parliamentary approval. Large numbers of staff have and continue to work overtime in the evenings and on weekends to process paper applications.

In relation to the specific questions, you raised I can advise that:

1. The 3,400 staff on paid special leave refers to the very early months of the pandemic in March and April 2020 when we had the first nationwide lockdown. In common with other organisations, the DVLA was not 'COVID-secure' at the very start of the pandemic so, in March 2020, the DVLA sent most staff home to ensure their safety while ensuring services for key workers were maintained. All staff who have been able to work from home have done so and the DVLA expanded this capacity throughout the pandemic.

Operational staff were brought back to the office in a phased way in 2020 as Covid secure measures were put in place. This resulted in the backlog that had built up in the preceding months being eliminated by the winter period.

2. On 7 March, there were just 17 members of DVLA staff on special leave for Covid related reasons.
3. The DVLA has spent more than £6 million making its estate Covid-secure and leasing new buildings. An extensive range of safety measures have been put in place across all of the DVLA's sites since the start of the pandemic.
4. There are combined constraints to processing paper applications at home, rather than a single reason. These include technical, security and data protection as well as the logistical difficulties around distributing paper applications to people's homes. Staff also need to handle sensitive original documentation, for example medical information. Many roles also need access to specialist equipment, for example large-scale printers and scanners. However, all staff whose jobs can be done remotely are doing so, with most non-operational staff working from home, many of whom have done so exclusively since March 2020. The DVLA has also identified additional operational roles that can be done from home. With changes made to IT systems and processes, these roles are now being carried out remotely, which has allowed for more space to increase numbers of staff that need to work on site.
5. The health and wellbeing of the DVLA's call handlers has always been a key focus and an even greater emphasis has been placed on this and their mental health throughout the pandemic. The DVLA has a number of staff network groups, one of which is dedicated to mental health. These groups are widely supported and promoted across the DVLA's contact centre and they provide a raft of different support mechanisms for staff. All calls handlers have a weekly team meeting and monthly meetings with their managers which have been centred around support and their wellbeing. Tips are shared to help people cope with pressures with homelife as well as in work. A drop-in session is available to team leaders to help spot the signs of stress for early intervention. The contact centre also has its own "buddy network" who provide additional one-to-one support and guidance.

I hope this provides you with some reassurance of the work being done to reduce waiting times for DVLA customers.

Yours,  
Charlotte

**BARONESS VERE OF NORBITON**