

Scottish Affairs Committee

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From the Chair, Pete Wishart MP

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Home Office
Peel Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Rt Hon Sir Alan Duncan KCMG MP
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
Whitehall
London
SW1A 2AH

25 April 2019

I am writing to raise some issues with the Government's support for the implementation of the new seasonal agricultural workers pilot. These concerns were raised with the Committee by Pro-Force & Concordia, the scheme operators, during their appearance as part of our inquiry into *the future of Scottish agriculture post-Brexit*.

Both operators have taken the decision to focus their recruitment in Moldova & Ukraine and have received a large number of applications for the 2,500 Tier 5 (Temporary Worker) visas. However, while recruitment is going well we heard there were problems both with the support available from the embassies and with the Home Office processing times.

Stephanie Maurel, Chief Executive of Concordia said the operators are experiencing a backlog of visa applications partly due to workers finding it difficult to book appointments at the UK visa offices in Ukraine & Moldova, which are managed by a third party. In the case of Moldova, we were alarmed to hear that until a month ago the office was open only one day a week, providing insufficient time for both pilot operators to process the 2,500 pilot workers. While this has now been increased to two days a week, both operators said it would still be a challenge to process their workers in time, particularly as the Moldovan visa office is now requiring workers to pay an appointment fee of €67 on the first day and €90 on the second, an amount some workers are struggling to pay on top of the £244 cost of the visa itself.

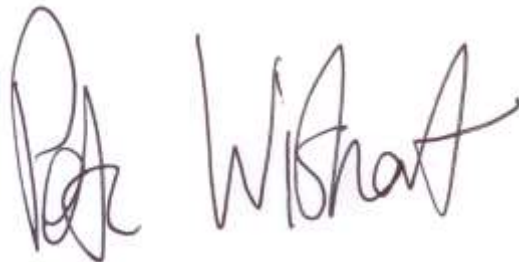
We were told that this has resulted in lengthy delays of visas being processed by the Home Office in Sheffield. While the Home Office has committed to a three-week turnaround, we heard that some visas were taking over 30 days to process. Concordia said this had already resulted in them falling behind orders, with farms not receiving workers on the dates expected. Matthew Jarrett, Director of Pro-Force warned that if these delays were not addressed, some workers would miss the growing season altogether.

Throughout this inquiry, my Committee has heard first-hand about the crucial contribution seasonal workers make to Scottish agriculture and the benefits which a successful pilot could provide. It is therefore important that visas are processed in a timely fashion to ensure workers are in place to support farms during periods of peak production.

Due to the cross-department nature of the visa application process in Moldova and Ukraine, **it would be helpful to the Committee's work if you could outline the support the Government is providing Pro-Force & Concordia, what steps are being taken to speed up the visa applications and whether any additional resources are being allocated to resolve this issue.**

I would be grateful for a response by Wednesday 8 May. Please find enclosed the relevant extracts from the evidence session's **transcript**.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pete Wishart'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pete Wishart MP
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee



Home Office

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Minister of State for Immigration

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Pete Wishart, MP
Scottish Affairs Committee
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14th May 2019

Dear Pete,

Thank you for your letter dated 25 April 2019 regarding the issues Pro-Force and Concordia have experienced with gaining visas as part of their recruitment under the seasonal agricultural workers pilot.

We recognise the importance of seasonal workers which is why we've introduced this new pilot to help alleviate seasonal labour shortages during peak production periods. The UK has one of the most attractive and competitive visa services in the world and we will always welcome those who want to do business and invest in the UK and provide support to those organisations who enable this. I am aware that my officials in UKVI had been engaged with both Pro-Force and Concordia directly to ensure that applications could be submitted early. This included providing increased appointment availability in the Visa Application Centres (VACs) in the relevant locations and also the offer of additional bespoke support through an on demand mobile visa service which both operators decided not to utilise.

I have noted the concerns in your letter, which I have addressed below;

You mentioned the delays experienced with the processing of visas and that some applications were taking over 30 days to complete. Performance figures show that 100% decisions have been made inside our global customer service standard of 15 days. Where a visa may be needed more urgently, customers in both locations have the option of applying for the Priority Visa Service.

It is regrettable though that for a small number of applications, we are aware that the public holidays for Easter in the UK and in Eastern Europe have resulted in a longer timespan before the passports with the visa vignettes endorsed within them were returned to the customer following the decision on the visa. UKVI are taking steps to process applications through this route at an earlier stage to prevent this happening again.

You mentioned the issues workers have had with the availability of appointments in the VACs in Ukraine and Moldova. UKVI outsource the running of these centres to our commercial partner TLS, who operate the VACs in both Kyiv, Ukraine and Chisinau, Moldova.

TLS's role is to capture visa applicants' biometrics and forward their visa application documentation to the Home Office Decision Making Centres (DMCs). They also offer an assisted scanning service for those customers who prefer not to self-upload their own supporting evidence. Once Home Office staff have decided an application, the decision is returned to the customer via TLS. Outsourcing this service is the most cost-effective way of running the network, representing the best value for money for the UK taxpayer.

As you mentioned, in response to the increased demand the VAC in Chisinau increased its opening times to two days a week. Appointments tables for Chisinau show sufficient capacity and unused slots in the last month. 50 appointments are available daily and not all of those slots are being taken. Our commercial partner monitors appointment capacity closely and will offer additional opening days as required.

You also raised a concern about the cost of appointments. It is only right that those who benefit from our immigration system pay towards its costs. This has been a long-standing position of successive Governments. These costs reduce the financial burden on the UK taxpayers and make sure that the border, immigration and citizenship system is funded by those who directly benefit from it.

The majority of VACs, including Kyiv are free to use. However, for some locations where visa demand is low, as in Moldova, or sometimes where there are multiple application centres in one country, UKVI charge an additional fee. This charge enables UKVI to extend the network of application centres to locations where it would otherwise not be viable.

The standard fee for an appointment is £55 which applies to all user pay VAC locations globally. In addition to the standard service our commercial partners offer a range of optional, added value services for an additional fee which provide additional convenience for the customer, for example a prime-time appointment. These can be purchased by customers and are intended to enhance the customer experience.

As referred to above, for the assisted scanning service, for those who choose not to use the self upload system, TLS charge 805 UAH in Kyiv and EUR 22.40 in Chisinau. We understand that Concordia and Pro-Force are scanning the supporting evidence, a single document, on behalf of customers so have not used this service.

Throughout the pilot, 623 applications have been received and all visas have been issued, except for one. One of the key measures of success for this pilot will of course be assessing whether it can be delivered whilst maintaining robust immigration control. It is therefore very much in the sector's best interests that full and thorough checks are made.

I hope this addresses your concerns adequately, and please do let me know if you have further questions.



Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Minister of State for Immigration

Scottish Affairs Committee

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From the Chair, Pete Wishart MP

Stephanie Maurel
Chief Executive
Concordia

21 May 2019

Dear Stephanie,

Thank you for your recent appearance before the Committee on 23 April alongside Managing Director of Pro-Force Matthew Jarrett, to discuss the implementation of the Government's Seasonal Workers Pilot in Scotland.

Following your evidence about the difficulty workers were having in booking visa appointments at the UK visa offices in Ukraine & Moldova, I wrote to the Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes MP to request an update on what support the Home Office had made available to ensure farms received workers on time.

In response, the Home Office have said that 100% of visas related to the pilot have been processed within their 15-day target, with 622 visas issued in total. However, the letter acknowledges that there had been delays for some applicants in the time taken for passports to be returned to workers following the decision to award a visa, and UKVI are taking steps process applications earlier to prevent this happening again.

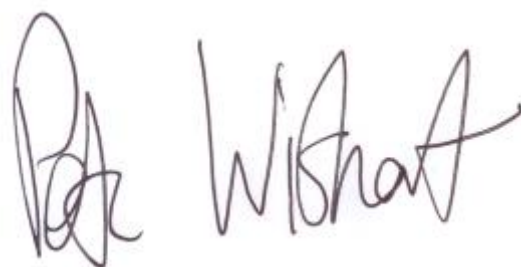
The letter also states that to help you and Pro-Force process applications early, there has been an increase in appointment availability in the Visa Application Centres in Moldova & Ukraine and the offer of additional "bespoke" support through an on demand mobile visa service, which you supposedly declined to use.

I know in your evidence last month you addressed the issues surrounding the extra cost workers had to pay to access these new appointment slots, but I was hoping you could provide the Committee with some information on your decision not to utilise the mobile visa service provided by the Home Office and if there are any additional measures the Government could introduce to help you process your workers in a timely fashion?

I will be sending an identical letter to Pro-Force as well.

I would be grateful for a response by Wednesday 29 May. Please find enclosed the letter we received from the Minister of State for Immigration Caroline Nokes MP.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized first name followed by the surname 'Wishart'.

Pete Wishart MP
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee

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From the Chair, Pete Wishart MP

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Home Office
Peel Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW14 4DF

21 May 2019

Dear Caroline,

Thank you for the detailed & constructive response to my letter concerning the visa issues Pro-Force & Concordia raised with my Committee last month as part of their recruitment for the **Government's seasonal agricultural workers pilot**. However, I want to follow up on a couple of matters.

In your letter you refer to the fact that 100% of visas related to the pilot have been processed **within the Home Office's 15-day target**, while I am pleased that this process is working in a timely fashion, our understanding is that the issue is not with the processing of visas in Sheffield, but with workers having difficulty booking appointments at the Visa Application Centres (VAC) in Kiev and Chisinau. This appears to be an unresolved issue, with Concordia recently informing us that there is still a 4-week waiting period for a visa appointment in Kiev. Can you update us on what measures are being taken to ensure that there are more appointments available in future?

Secondly, you mention that since the VAC in Chisinau has increased its opening times to two days a week, appointment tables show a number of unused slots last month. When Pro-Force & Concordia gave evidence to my committee, they said this was because the VAC was charging €23 more to book an appointment on this second day than the standard €67 fee. Stephanie Maurel, Chief Executive of Concordia told us that because of this increase, they were telling workers not to apply for the second day:

"We are asking people who are students, who are trying to pay their termly fees and who are coming over here to earn a minimum wage, to pay out quite a lot of money to come over. Our

recommendation is: don't pay the extra money; we will just have to try to work with growers and see whether we can move workers from somewhere else.”¹

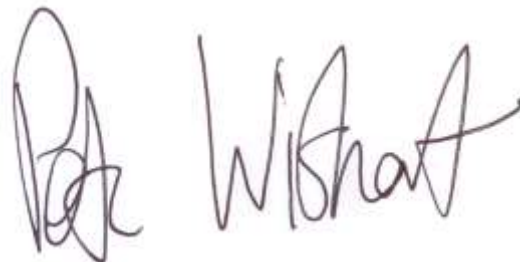
Can you inform us the rationale behind charging extra for this second day, and if the Government would consider reducing this following the remarks made by the pilot operators?

Ensuring that farms in the UK can attract the best workers will be key to the success of this Pilot. While I understand the Government's position that those entering the UK to work should pay a fee, the pilot must be able to compete with similar schemes across the EU such as Germany, who take 60,000 agricultural workers from Ukraine a year and don't charge any application fees.

If the Government is to consider creating a permanent scheme in future, it must look at what measures can be taken to ensure the UK remains an attractive destination for seasonal workers.

I would be grateful for a response to these points by Monday 3 June.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pete Wishart'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pete Wishart MP
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee

¹ Scottish Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence transcript 23rd April](#), 2019

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30th May 2019

Dear Pete Wishart MP

Many thanks for the interest in the new Seasonal Worker Pilot that Concordia is an operator of and for the opportunity to present to the Scottish Affairs Committee on 23rd April 2019.

Concordia is recruiting 1250 seasonal agricultural workers this year via partners in Russia, Moldova and the Ukraine. As was discussed at the Committee there had been no issues getting visa appointments in Russia however there were unexpected costs as well as delays in getting a visa interview in both Moldova and Ukraine.

The first area of concern was the time taken to get a visa appointment in Ukraine and Moldova. Whilst I have subsequently been made aware of an on-demand mobile visa service, there appears to have been an oversight and Concordia was not offered this additional bespoke support until after the Scottish Affairs Committee. Since your letter to the Home Office, Concordia has been contacted by TLS Kiev, and our Ukrainian partners have taken up the service. This has made it easier and quicker to get group appointments especially as the office has offered to come directly to students. As a small example, within 24 hours of this service being offered to me a group of 40 students had a bespoke Saturday appointment where they applied for their visa.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that there is a charge for this service of UAH 17,000 to cover the trip and security costs and then UAH 1,5000 per applicant in the group. The service is excellent; the associated costs will prove prohibitive for many students.

There has been further progress since my appearance at the Committee from the TLS office in Kiev. The office contacted me yesterday to commit to offering free standard appointments within 5 working days of the appointment request. As this had been running at 4-5 weeks previously, this is excellent news. We will be monitoring this closely, however, we have received much good will from the TLS Kiev office in the past few weeks.

At present there has been no contact or update from the TLS Moldova visa office. The waiting time for appointments is running at c.2 weeks, however the real worry is the fee



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charged for each appointment – including standard ones. Every appointment costs a minimum of 50EUR with additional costs for extra services such as group bookings, bookings on the potential second open day a week and different times of day. There is currently no possibility for a free appointment to make a visa request in Moldova.

Concordia has already moved over 150 requests for seasonal workers from Moldova to the Ukraine and Russia because of the delay and especially because of the associated costs. Every worker accepts that they need to pay the £244 visa application cost, however the other surrounding fees are pricing many workers out of the market. We want to ensure we get the best and most motivated workers coming to the UK, not those who can afford to pay visa processing costs. Any support on lowering or removing the fees in the Moldovan TLS office would be greatly of assistance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "S. Maurel", written over a horizontal line.

Stephanie Maurel

Chief Executive





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Pete Wishart, MP
Scottish Affairs Committee
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10 June 2019

Dear Pete,

Thank you for your recent letter dated 21 May 2019 requesting further information in relation to the issues Pro-Force and Concordia have raised with your Committee.

Firstly, I would like to clarify a statement in the previous letter I sent to you on dated 14 May. Within my previous response, I mentioned that we had offered additional bespoke support through an on demand mobile visa service to both Pro Force and Concordia, which they had decided not to utilise. It has now become clear that at the time of sending the letter, TLS hadn't yet offered the bespoke support to one of the operators, Concordia on our behalf. TLS have since contacted Concordia to offer this additional support which they have gladly accepted, and I'm pleased to say that the day after accepting our offer we processed 30 workers by group appointment on a Saturday. We will continue to provide this and other support as required.

In your most recent letter, you asked for information on the measures we are taking to ensure that the Visa Application Centres (VACs) in Kyiv and Chisinau increase their appointment availability to meet the customer demand. As part of our commercial agreement with TLS, they must offer a free standard appointment in their VACs within five working days of their appointment request.

We have reviewed the appointment tables in Kyiv which are showing that since the Seasonal Workers pilot commenced, standard appointments are taking place within four days. We continue to work with our commercial partner to monitor appointment capacity closely and will offer additional appointment slots or opening days as required.

You mention that Concordia are experiencing a four-week waiting period for visa appointments in Kyiv. Our system shows that TLS are offering appointments within their service level agreement of 5 days so to address this I've asked officials to contact Stephanie Maurel, Chief Executive of Concordia directly to establish why Concordia are experiencing a delay and determine an appropriate solution.

You mention a concern that that the unused appointment slots in Chisinau were due to the VAC charging €23 more for customers to book an appointment on an additional day, meaning workers are deterred from applying. You asked for the rationale behind this and whether we would consider reducing this additional fee.

As mentioned in my previous response, the standard fee for an appointment is €67.00 which applies to all user pay VAC locations globally. This fee does not change and applies to all customers submitting an application at the Chisinau VAC. Customers now have the option to digitise their supporting documentation through a user friendly self-upload app prior to attending the VAC to enroll their biometrics. There is no additional charge if this option is selected.

However, there is an additional €23 charge to customers who prefer TLS to scan documents on their behalf when attending their appointment. During the application process the TLS website presents customers with one of two appointment calendars; 'self service' for those self uploading and 'assisted service' for those that want their documents scanned for them. Customers choosing the self-service will have no additional charged however if an 'assisted service' is chosen, the additional €23 fee will automatically be charged to the customer when they complete the application process. We monitor these added services very closely to ensure integrity and value.

I'd like to reiterate our commitment to making the seasonal workers pilot a success and providing support to organisations who contribute to the scheme.

I hope this addresses your concerns adequately.

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Minister of State for Immigration