

David Normington's Blog comments: January – November 2009

Part 1

Grounds for optimism (13 Jan 2009)

Happy New Year to everyone. I feel very optimistic about 2009 (I hope it lasts). We achieved so much in 2008 and I believe we put our previous failings behind us and began to develop a new confidence. But we will only succeed if we keep moving forward, setting our ambition high and investing in our own skills, knowledge and competence. I know lots of bloggers get frustrated by things that don't go right. But I will never give up trying to ensure that the basic tools and systems which support colleagues' work are better and better. We will keep working at better IT systems, better accommodation etc. Keep the ideas coming.

I am grateful that the blog has been particularly good either side of Christmas because there has been a good mix of positive and critical comments and I am also grateful to those who have provided answers on the cycle to work scheme (it is coming!) and the new hotel booking arrangements. On reward and recognition I am quite certain that we have got a lot better at it across the Home Office in 2008, but we still have some way to go to get all managers to use the available recognition tools.

Thanks to Bluebird for the comment on 4/12 about leaks (sorry I didn't acknowledge it earlier). I felt very heartened by it. I have had a lot of support for my global on leaks and I really appreciate the strength of feeling and the kind personal comments (which really matter when you are being misrepresented).

Thanks also to "driver for change" for his/her encouraging comments. But I note this provoked a defence of the current culture in UKBA. I would be interested to see more discussion on this. Does the UKBA culture need to change? If so, from what to what?

So let's get going with a healthy debate for 2009. To those who worry that I get fed up with the blog and will give up on it. Well, yes I do sometimes get frustrated at the negative tone. But I promise to keep the blog going – it is one of the few ways I can have a direct exchange with colleagues across the Department.

David Normington

Silence, success, systems and select committees (19 Jan 2009)

As one of our bloggers points out, the blog is a bit quiet at the moment. I suspect that some UKBA bloggers have indeed gone to the UKBA equivalent - which is fine. I hope, however, they won't disappear altogether (I like to know what is on UKBA's mind), but perhaps some of the gaps could be filled by the rest of the Home Office. Are you out there? If you are, this could be the moment to be heard!

And, while I am addressing Home Office staff outside UKBA, can I draw attention to our drive to celebrate success.

One of ways you can recognise colleagues' successes is through nominating them for an award. UKBA and IPS held award ceremonies in the autumn, which celebrated the great accomplishments they had over the last year, and nominations for the HQ

awards are now open. We all know someone who deserves recognition for going the extra mile, so take some time out to nominate either a team or individual – perhaps even your own team – on the [celebrating success pages](#) on Horizon. The closing date is this Friday (January 23).

Sorry, XXXX and many others, for the problems with CID. We did try to get it back up as fast as we could. And I agree it was not satisfactory. All the more reason for my comment in my first blog of the New Year, that we will never give up on trying to improve basic systems and processes. A replacement caseworking system is long overdue.

Watch out for the Home Secretary and me at the Home Affairs Select Committee on Tuesday – on the Home Office leaks, the crime stats and other topical (and controversial) issues. I guess we might be a bit overshadowed by President Obama's inauguration, don't you?!

David Normington

Questions and answers (27 Jan 2009)

It is good to see the blog entries picking up again. The themes this week seem to be i-expenses, hotel and travel bookings, and cycling. I am not an expert in any of these, but I will ensure we get replies to the points being made. I particularly appreciate the strong value for money theme in all the comments.

My joint appearance with the Home Secretary before the Home Affairs Select Committee went OK, I think. The news reporting was fairly straight forward (except for the Mail's sketchwriter who made some pretty unpleasant comments about me). We spent most of the time taking the Committee patiently through the events surrounding the arrest of our Home Office employee, Christopher Galley, and, later, of Damian Green MP. We repeated for the umpteenth time that we had not known in advance of Mr Green's arrest and that we had neither sought it nor expected it.

I was in Brussels on last Tuesday night over to Wednesday. On Tuesday evening, Suma Chakrabarti, the Permanent Secretary at Ministry of Justice, had a dinner with the key people in the European Commission dealing with justice and home affairs, immigration and CT. This is an important year on our Home Office issues because the EU will later in the year adopt a new 5-year programme for justice and home affairs and there are new proposals on the table on asylum, which are both important and potentially controversial.

The following day I met Home Office/MOJ staff working in the Commission and in UKRep. Then I joined other Permanent Secretaries who had followed similar programmes in their areas. In our joint sessions we had briefings on how the economic and financial crisis was affecting EU countries, the position on the Lisbon treaty, EU priorities across the whole agenda, how to ensure that we continue to attract effective Brits into key jobs in the EU institutions.

It was a crowded programme but I, for one, felt both better informed and able to get across some of our concerns about proposals in the areas covered by the Home Office.

I didn't see (but would have liked to) the giant piece of artwork commissioned by a Czech artist, sometimes described as a Czech Damien Hirst, which has controversial depictions of all 27 EU countries. This has caused a lot of flurry, particularly in Bulgaria, which is depicted as a Turkish toilet (a cover has now had to be put over the offending part of artwork!) The UK is depicted as an empty space, which, in the circumstances, is getting off lightly.

David Normington

Putting our house in order (3 Feb 2009)

I thought I might let the new systems for e-payslips and online expenses claims settle down before joining the debate. On the ending of temporary promotions, I know this is difficult and sensitive and I am not proud of the fact that so-called temporary promotions have in some cases been allowed to go on for so long. But this is another example of us trying to put the Home Office's house in order and we have done our best to make it as fair as possible.

I am conscious that I have been spending a lot of time on police and crime issues recently. This reflects the fact that there is a sudden burst of senior appointments – Met Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, HM Chief Inspector, Chairman of SOCA, Director General of CRCSG – all coming up in a batch. Getting good appointments with all these posts is essential to the future of policing. We made a great start last week with the appointment of Sir Paul Stephenson as Met Commissioner and Stephen Rimmer as the Director General for Crime Reduction and Community Safety in the Home Office. The second of these marks the first appointment to the Home Office Board from within the Home Office for a long time. Bloggers have commented before about the danger of lack of corporate memory on the board, so this is at last beginning to put this right.

I will try to ensure that I do not neglect the rest of our activities in the next few months. I spoke to managers in UKBA's Immigration Group at their conference last week. I was in Dorset last Friday and had a chance to discuss the Olympic Security issues for the sailing in Weymouth. I will be meeting some grade 6 and 7s from across the Department in Marsham Street on Friday. So I will try to keep getting around.

David Normington

Weather permitting (10 Feb 2009)

I am very grateful to everyone for coping with the disruption caused by the snow. I know one blogger is unhappy that those who struggled in got the same treatment as those who did not. But, given the way the snow completely cut off some places (my own railway line was shut down for two days – fortunately I stayed up in London) I can't think of a way of setting down rules for every eventuality. It is everyone's responsibility to get in to the office if we can – in my observation, those who could did so, and many made great efforts to overcome transport difficulties – thank you.

I promise to take up the concerns about hotel bookings and report back. It is clearly unacceptable for people to be out of pocket.

I also promise 'nil desperandum' that I and my colleagues do keep in touch with staff at all levels and will continue to do so. But I don't apologise for the workshops on leadership the Home Office Board is running for grades 6 and 7. They are often the people who directly lead the greatest numbers of staff. If their leadership is effective, the whole organisation will benefit. Last Friday I led one of the grade 6/7 workshops myself. We had a really good two hours on how to improve our knowledge of the front line, building public confidence, working with stakeholders and raising our performance. I enjoyed it and I have lots of good feedback.

Finally I was greatly encouraged by "driver for change" (first post, foot of page, blog entry 3/2/09). I agree.

David Normington

A day in the life (3 Mar 2009)

I am appearing with Lin Homer in front of the public accounts committee on the subject of asylum this week. This has taken a lot of preparation and so I've been behind in making my usual blog entry.

But if you want to see what I've been up to, you can watch my ['a day in the life' video](#).

Demonstrating commitment (9 Mar 2009)

My life until last Wednesday seems to have been dominated by preparation for my, Lin Homer and Matthew Coats' appearance at the Public Accounts Committee. The subject was managing asylum, particularly an early assessment by the National Audit Office of the new asylum model.

The hearing went well for two reasons: first, great briefing and preparation, but secondly, because the report said (and the committee recognised) that we had really improved our performance.

There was also, I think, a real acceptance at the committee that this is one of the toughest and most intractable areas of government.

I won't enter myself into some of the conversation on the blog about uniforms, where I suspect it's just not possible to please everyone. I have asked some of my colleagues to respond directly – you will have seen postings on i-expenses and on assessment centres. We will have a look at what we have blocked, in case we have been over zealous or in the words of one blogger 'daft'.

Thanks for the positive comments on my 'day in the life' video. I particularly agree with Chris' comment (3/3) that it is the simple things (like spending just a few minutes on a Monday morning with new arrivals in 2MS) that can make such a difference. The other day I spent just 30 minutes with a group of external stakeholders who our diversity team had brought together to discuss how we could involve them more in ensuring we met our equality obligations. I thought my participation quite small and was a bit worried that I hadn't been able to spend more time. But the feedback was fantastic. So sometimes just doing something quite simple to demonstrate commitment or say thank you is worth a thousand plans and strategies.

And on the subject of saying thank you (sorry about the clunky link!) we have had a great reaction to the Home Office HQ Celebrating Success Awards with 140 individuals and teams nominated. The judges have whittled them down to shortlist of 41 for the 12 awards. This follows similar, very successful events in UK Border Agency and Identity and Passport Service. Take a look and see who is on [the shortlist](#).

David Normington

Stimulating times (23 Mar 2009)

I have noted the comments about e-learning, billing for expenses and the blocking of websites and have taken this up with those concerned. I am not happy with the present position.

On the brighter side, I have been trying to step up my visibility. We had a great 'Celebrating Success' event in Home Office HQ last Thursday. The overall winners were the excellent children and young people team in crime and policing group (formerly CRCSSG) for their work on youth crime and their great joint working with the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Ministry of Justice. Congratulations to them and all the other winners.

I spent Friday morning in Croydon with visits to the criminal caseworking, case resolution, and special cases directorates. This enabled me to follow up some of the detailed points put to me during my Public Accounts Committee appearance on asylum. I said at the committee that our work on managing asylum deals is one of the toughest and most intractable issues of public policy. During the four hours I spent with the directorates, I saw that for myself. But there is some great work going on – thank you for it. I am back in Croydon today [Monday] for a grade 6/7 workshop.

The Home Secretary and I made a flying (24-hour) visit to Washington on 12/13 March to meet the new Secretary of State for Homeland Security and the US Attorney General and to talk to some of the senior White House officials about security. Exhausting, but very worthwhile.

And then I went to Nottingham (England!) to launch Civil Service East Midlands. This is a new initiative to bring the Civil Service in the English regions closer together, with more sharing of facilities and vacancies.

I could do with more hours in the day, but it has been a stimulating period.

David Normington

Visible evidence (30 Mar 2009)

I am grateful for the rich variety of comments. We will be back to you in due course on long service and internet access. I don't apologise for trying to raise our game on sustainability. Without being fanatical about it, it is everyone's responsibility to look at ways to recycle more, and to cut our carbon footprints by, for example, switching off lights and computers.

Last Tuesday was an important day for the Home Office with the publication of Contest (XXXX, it stands for counter terrorism strategy – get it?). This was promised a year ago when we produced our overall Home Office strategy and is visible evidence of our work to protect the public. It is one of the best examples I know of cross-department and cross-agency working. Well done to everyone involved with it and particularly to OSCT.

Despite her commitments, to launch the strategy the Home Secretary spoke to 400 staff from across the Home Office and answered questions at the QEII Centre in the morning and then returned to do the same for the Senior Civil Service in the afternoon. A video is being produced so that her messages about her priorities can be heard more widely.

Thanks for the comments on the Croydon grades 6 and 7 event (it was a bit disappointing compared with the others) and on Civil Service East Midlands. On the latter, the aim is to ensure that we concentrate regionally on the things which can add value – like sharing vacancies across the Civil Service and making use of each others expertise and facilities. It shouldn't displace normal line management.

David Normington

Praise for success (6 Apr 2009)

I am going on holiday shortly so this will be my last entry for a fortnight. Before I go, I did want to say well done to colleagues in the crime and policing group, office for security and counter-terrorism and UK Border Agency for the part they played in ensuring the G20 conference was safe and successful.

UK Border Agency colleagues, in particular, had a huge logistical task in achieving the smooth arrival of a large number of delegates, often with dozens (and, in some cases, hundreds) of people to welcome and clear through immigration. They did it with great skill and won lots of praise for their success. UK Border Agency became a full executive agency on 1 April so this was a great way to start.

David Normington

Modern, efficient services (28 Apr 2009)

I had a great holiday (very sunny in both Northumberland and Scotland!). But with all the things that were going on over the Easter period in the Home Office, it wasn't completely uninterrupted.

I came back to find the blog full of comments about the introduction of the final phase of the Adelphi upgrade. This is not surprising since this final phase affects all of us with the introduction of online self-service processes for expenses, absence management, overtime management, etc. It requires much more rigour about these processes and will require staff and their managers to follow procedures more consistently than in the past. Once they do, however, the processes on the whole will be quicker and there will be good management information.

I am generally very pleased about how this has been prepared and introduced. It will bring us into the 21st century at last and I am confident that it will, in due course, be a great improvement. But, of course, even with the extensive testing, it will not be trouble free.

I don't mind people grumbling about shared services on the blog. But, if you do it anonymously, we can't follow up the issue. Indeed if you need a problem solved, it is much better if you use either one of the local implementation managers or the [customer contact centre](#) in the shared service centre at Newport. (See the Adelphi section on Horizon for more details).

I would like to think that in the new Home Office we not only grumble a bit, but we also are ready to take responsibility for making things work and to support other colleagues who are working their socks off to create the modern, efficient services. Please don't throw rocks from the sidelines. Help us sort it out.

David Normington

Frank and constructive (11 May 2009)

Sorry for my silence. There has been a lot going on!

I will try to get colleagues to respond to many of the detailed points raised about IT and other service issues. But at the risk of provoking a new round of comments on our new sickness absence policy, I think this is a case of needing to get real.

Ratios of sickness absence in parts of UK Border Agency, Identity and Passport Service and the Criminal Records Bureau are higher than many comparable employees across the public sector. We intend to tackle that by getting much tougher with those we believe are taking sick leave for no good reason. If people are genuinely ill, they have nothing to fear. Indeed, it is in the interests of those who are genuinely sick, that we take action against those who are playing the system. Please, can we have some support for a concerted effort to get a grip on this problem.

On a more positive note, I spent a day with Devon and Cornwall police. I met the neighbourhood team in Exeter and was impressed with how they were implementing the police pledge and really trying to be responsive to public concerns. I visited a family intervention project and went to meet a previously 'problem' family in their home. I discussed with the finance and HR people their ideas for improving efficiency and cutting costs. A really good day.

Finally, since my last entry I attended the Home Office Disability Support Network's AGM. There was some tough talking on both sides about how far we had come in improving employment of disabled people and how much we still had to do. I appreciated the frank, but constructive exchange.

David Normington

The kind of Home Office we all want (19 May 2009)

I guess I knew my intervention on sickness absence last week would stir things up. I didn't intend my 'get real' message to be disrespectful. Surely by now (after three years of blogging), colleagues know that I sometimes like to take on arguments directly and robustly. I think that's the kind of Home Office we all want.

Why did I use the 'get real' phrase? Only because I want these arguments to be based on the facts. And two weigh heavily with me.

First, the Home Office's performance on sickness absence is poor compared with many similar Civil Service organisations. So the question we all have to face up to is why? Why do we do worse than other big departments and agencies? At a time when there is rigorous scrutiny – rightly – of whether taxpayers' money is being spent wisely, this is a big reputational issue for us. We have to do better.

Secondly, the policy that has been introduced – and specifically the warnings policy – is not as tough as many such policies in other parts of the Civil Service and the wider public sector, including local government. For me, there continues to be an unreality among some colleagues about what the world of employment is really like.

As for the specific issue of the 12-day warning, the first thing to say is that 12 days is a lot. Most people never have 12 days off sick in a year – whether in one go or in odd days here or there. So this policy will only bite on a relatively small number.

Most of the examples people give, like all the references to cancer, will be covered by the exception for serious underlying medical conditions. Of course, we are not going to harass people who have a serious illness. There is also the option for the individual's director to apply discretion in particular cases. We do not expect that to happen often. But it will provide flexibility to ensure the policy is sensitive to individual need.

But, finally, once we have taken these exceptions into account, is it really draconian to warn everyone else who reaches 12 days that this is, on the face of it, an excessive amount? There are some colleagues, I am afraid, who play the system to the detriment of the rest of us. Not many, fortunately, but enough to make our performance some of Whitehall's worst.

I promise not to use 'get real' again (at least for a while). But I will continue to challenge views which seem to me to ignore the realities.

David Normington

New ideas (1 Jun 2009)

There have been some good postings on absence management. I like the variety and frankness of views on both sides. Naturally, I think the changes we have made are the right thing to do. But if that is wrong, we will think again. Two final thoughts on the subject (for the moment):

First, this is all about good management. Effective managers manage their teams fairly and effectively and achieve high performance; and they will have no problem, I believe, managing sickness absence.

Secondly, I am sorry if XXXX (whose comments I thought otherwise excellent) thinks I or any other senior colleague shows a lack of respect on the blog (or anywhere else). I respect the right of everyone in the Home Office to express their views. But my way of showing respect is to take those views seriously and to argue back when I don't agree. I am actually very pleased that my two postings have prompted such a vigorous debate. I think it's the blog at its best.

But maybe we should change the subject for a bit. New ideas, new subjects, please.

David Normington

Changes (8 Jun 2009)

Thanks for all the entries this week. I did not mean in my previous entry to choke off comments on absence management and, in any case, I am sure we will return to the issue when we see how the new arrangements are working out.

My mind has been very much on changes to the ministerial team, particularly the departure of Jacqui Smith and the arrival of Alan Johnson. Sad as I was to lose Jacqui Smith, it is great news for the Home Office that Alan Johnson is our new Home Secretary. He is someone I have worked with before when I was Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and Skills and he was minister for higher education.

He arrived here at the Home Office at 7pm on Friday night and has spent some of the weekend reading the first day briefing we prepared for him. He addressed colleagues in 2MS this (Monday) morning and I know he is keen to get out and learn about what we do. More anon.

David Normington

Step by step... (15 Jun 2009)

Thanks to Ben Grinnell for his entries about the IT service. I sympathise with all the users who had difficulties. When I came to the Home Office at the beginning of 2006 I said that a major part of our improvement programme needed to be major changes to our basic systems and processes. We have made a lot of progress, but the toughest nut to crack is the question of a modern caseworking system for UK Border Agency. The system should really have been replaced 10 years ago, but a previous attempt failed and we have suffered ever since. However, as Ben explains, the ICW programme is replacing CID over a number of years. I recently reviewed progress and was excited by the possibilities. I am afraid it will take time because we have learned that step by step is better than big bang when complex new systems are concerned. The UKBA Board, with my support, are determined to see it through.

On the subject of promises not yet fulfilled, we are not far off an announcement about a long service award. Evidence that we do get there in the end, even if it sometimes takes time. In this case I was not convinced – but I have now been persuaded.

I am visiting Dover and Calais later in the week. This is a long promised visit. I seem to have managed 3½ years in the Home Office without visiting two of our major operations.

David Normington

Out and about (23 Jun 2009)

I was in Calais and Dover on Friday, visiting front end immigration controls at Calais and then the customs operation at Dover. I saw for myself how much our juxtaposed controls at Calais had really tightened up our border controls. This means that more and more people – Afghans, Somalis, Eritreans, Vietnamese – are trapped at Calais, making increasingly desperate attempts to find a way across the Channel. At Dover later in the day I was given a real insight into the ingenious ways that people seek to smuggle tobacco and drugs through customs. I guess when there is huge money to be made through trafficking people and goods, some will take extraordinary risks. Thanks to everyone who gave me a fascinating, and extremely full, day.

Earlier in the week I spent some time in the Public Order Unit at 2MS. This is a relatively small team which deals with a wide range of public order issues from violence at football matches, to the policing of G20 to the recent Tamil protests in Parliament Square. Even after 3½ years in the Home Office I am still regularly amazed at how much we do and how much expertise we have.

If ever I am feeling a bit stale sitting at my desk, getting out and about always restores my faith in the importance of our work.

David Normington

Reinforcing our emphasis (8 Jul 2009)

Sorry to have been silent. But a lot has been happening since I last made an entry.

The new Home Secretary announced his proposals for pressing ahead with ID cards (they are not to be 'scrapped' as some newspapers implied). Then at the Battersea Arts Centre, he made an important speech on crime, reinforcing our emphasis on crimes that really matter to the public and focussing, particularly, on the need to step up our act in countering antisocial behaviour.

Yesterday I was at Civil Service Live at Olympia, an event (see Horizon News) that is showcasing the Civil Service. I spoke in one of the plenary sessions on how we are raising capability in the Home Office. There was a good audience (over 200) with a good sprinkling of UK Border Agency, IPS and Home Office HQ staff present. It was

a good opportunity to present the Home Office in a positive light – look out for the Horizon News story about it.

Finally, some quick comments about some of the blog entries. On cycling to work, I agree it's all been too slow. I am promised some action soon and will report back. On PDRs, if you haven't received feedback on the outcome of the moderation process, please ask your line manager and if that doesn't work, contact HR.

On 'hot desking', there is a really serious purpose here – which is to get the usage of our buildings up, thus saving money on space we do not need. The situation varies from building to building. But in 2MS we are piloting the approach so that we can see how best to meet the needs of teams, as well as to improve efficient use of expensive space. But the absolute priority – now and in the future – is to look for ways of saving money which don't hit frontline services. If it were a choice between cutting back on office space or cutting back on essential staff, I guess we would all make the same choice, so please help us to be super-efficient.

David Normington

Encouraging and inspiring (21 Jul 2009)

As part of my efforts to get out more to the front line this summer, I spent Friday in West Yorkshire, updating myself on the progress in Bradford on implementing the 'Prevent' agenda and then, in Wakefield, seeing the excellent work of the police in making justice more visible to the public. It was all very encouraging.

Part of the morning was spent at a mosque in Bradford, which has won an award as a 'model mosque', for the way it reaches out to the community, for its work to promote understanding of Islam and for its governance structures. I met a group of young people there (three women and one man) who talked to me about the leadership programme in which they had participated. It was quite inspiring.

The mosque is about a quarter of a mile from where my grandparents used to live and my father was brought up. And it is next to a house where friends of ours lived and where I was a frequent visitor in my childhood. So it was a trip down memory lane for me, although, of course, there was no mosque 45 years ago.

There are many different subjects on the blog at the moment to which I will reply later this week.

David Normington

Hot topics (28 Jul 2009)

I promised to pick up some of the hot topics on the blog.

I am interested in the debate which has opened up about the new asylum model. Just to reassure you, these issues are very well understood by the UK Border Agency Board and they are regularly at the top of the agenda at my monthly performance review (known as 'operating reviews') with the agency. Our asylum performance has been under great pressure this year from increased applications, particularly from people from Zimbabwe. We are all clear that we must both meet the targets we have set for concluding cases AND continue to work at cases which are not concluded in six months. That is a tall order. But performance has begun to improve again and UK Border Agency senior management believe it can be done.

There have been lots of comments on the blog about the use of consultants. I share the general wish to reduce their numbers, where they are doing jobs which could easily be done by civil servants. But consultants come in all shapes and sizes and they often bring skills and expertise that we do not have inside the organisation.

On bonuses and the moderation process, it is important to stress that there is a 35 per cent limit on the number of bonuses which can be awarded. So inevitably there are judgments to be made about who are the best performers even within the top performers. That is one of the purposes of moderation.

On Senior Civil Service (SCS) pay, this has been much debated on the blog before. The system is set by the government on the recommendation of an independent pay review body. The rules are not set by me or the Home Office, and they apply all across the SCS. It has been government policy over a number of years to hold down consolidated pay for the SCS and to increase the number and size of SCS performance bonuses (which are non consolidated and not pensionable). The Home Office has never paid bonuses to 75 per cent of its senior staff. In 2006 neither the Home Office board, nor the (then) IND Board took any bonuses in recognition of the Home Office's poor performance in that year. Along with all Permanent Secretaries, I have forgone my own bonus again this year in recognition of the serious economic situation.

I am grateful to Denise McDonagh for coming in on some of the IT issues. I hope other colleagues will help me out by joining in on other issues, like temporary cover allowance (TCA).

Finally, Lin Homer and I have just announced the introduction of a long service award, a big demand of bloggers some months ago. Proof that, in the end, bloggers do get their voices heard – and in this case, you changed my mind. I'm expecting hundreds of approving comments on the blog!

David Normington
