

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral evidence: Equality and the UK asylum process, HC 93

Wednesday 25 January 2023

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Dame Caroline Dinenage; Mark Jenkinson; Kim Johnson; Rachel Maclean; Kate Osborne; and Ms Anum Qaisar.

Questions 242 - 340

### Witnesses

**I:** Robert Jenrick MP, Minister of State (Minister for Immigration), Home Office; Daniel Hobbs, Director of Asylum Protection and Enforcement, Home Office; and Mandy Ivey, Deputy Director Resettlement, Relocation and Reunion Services.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Home Office [[EAP0023](#)]

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robert Jenrick, Daniel Hobbs and Mandy Ivemy.

**Chair:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this afternoon's session of the Women and Equalities Committee on equality and the UK asylum process. You will all be familiar with this: Members of the Committee will ask you questions in turn. I do not think there is anything more for me to say, and we are going to start with Anum Qaisar, please.

**Ms Qaisar:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the panel and to the Minister for joining us today. I want to start by asking about Manston processing centre. I visited Manston in November of last year as part of a cross-party group of MPs and peers from the House of Lords. I found it incredibly harrowing. When I left there, I was pretty much in tears and very emotionally distressed by seeing some of the scenes. What I saw—if you have visited, you will be aware of this—was families living in tents, essentially, and children having to sleep on what, essentially, were gym mats, with toys. It did not look like a particularly pleasant place.

Families spoke to me about their concerns; they just did not know what was happening. They did not know how long they were going to be there. Of course, this is meant to be an area where they are detained for a short time. To be perfectly honest, Minister, it is something I will never forget. From November—that period back then—to now, what improvements have you personally made to ensure that facilities at Manston processing centre are improved so that no one is subjected to them again?

**Robert Jenrick:** Good afternoon, Madam Chair. Thank you to the members of the Committee for inviting me and my officials to join you. If I can begin—my colleagues will come in if they have anything further to add—Manston was created as a short-term reception facility where those individuals whose lives were, in many cases, saved at sea were brought to following their arrival at Western Jet Foil. It was designed to be a place where individuals would have their biometrics taken, where we would do security checks on them. We would treat their immediate needs, and then they would be moved out of that into better quality, long-term accommodation, whether that be hotels, dispersal accommodation or other forms.

It is, unfortunately, a facility that is necessary for the country when we have such large numbers of people crossing the channel. The key thing is that people move out of it as swiftly as possible. When I was appointed in the autumn by the Prime Minister, around the time of your visit, it was the case that a large number of people were being housed at Manston—more than it was designed to accommodate—and as a result of that people were staying longer than was originally envisaged and conditions were worse than they should have been.

We have made a number of changes since then. First, we have addressed the way in which the site is managed. We now have what is known as the



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Small Boats Operational Command, which is a function of Border Force within the Home Office that manages the exercise at sea to save lives, the immediate arrival at Western Jet Foil, and the site at Manston. That is now led by a very experienced former army general, General Capps. Underneath him at Manston, we now have a former prison governor, and respected figure, from the prison estate, Phil Riley, who manages that site and has overall oversight of all those individuals who are working there, ensuring that correct processes are in place, that the people who work there are properly vetted and checked, and that standards are being upheld.

We have also ensured, in terms of the experience of individuals who are there, that there is now more and better quality accommodation, that there is 24/7 healthcare provided by a clinic with a range of different practitioners and access to the NHS in Kent, so that if people have particular conditions they are treated swiftly, and that we keep a very close eye on transmittable diseases like diphtheria, which was an issue at one stage in the autumn.

We have also changed the law so that we have a somewhat longer period in which to do those important security checks and then to move people on to better accommodation. That now gives us up to 96 hours in which to do that. I thought carefully about whether to make that change to the law, and I think it is the right thing to do, because the number of people crossing the channel is, at times, very high and it is very irregular. You can go days or even weeks with no one crossing the channel, and then you can have individual days on which hundreds or even thousands choose to cross. It is challenging for this site to operate in such a way that people can move through it within 24 hours. We now have some extra time in which to do those important checks and for people to be moved on to better accommodation.

The key thing, other than, of course, reducing the number of people crossing the channel in the first place, is that we have that onward accommodation. On that front, we have set out a strategy to reduce the dependence on hotels, because they are economically and socially damaging to the communities in which they are placed, and to move towards a model whereby we have more dispersal accommodation in local authority areas. We also consider larger sites elsewhere in the country where decent but simple accommodation is provided while claims are being processed. There has been some significant progress on that front and, hopefully, in the weeks and months to come, it will become more apparent that we are building the stock of dispersal accommodation and we are starting to launch the larger sites.

**Chair:** Minister, we are going to have to get you to give swifter answers, and I think Anum's got some specific questions.

Q242 **Ms Qaisar:** Thank you for that, Chair, and thank you for that answer, Minister. When I had the opportunity to visit, I spoke to senior medical



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professionals, staff from the Home Office and also their contractors. Just to reiterate, my concern around Manston is not to do with them. They were obviously working to the conditions that they had at a particularly challenging time. One thing that came across through conversations, however, was that different sections at Manston held information, but these different computers or bits of information did not share very well. Does the Home Office have any plans to improve that? They would say to me, for example, that the Home Office would hold information, the NHS would hold information, and other organisations, like Mitie, would come in and hold that information, but they did not share it as well. Any improvements to that?

**Robert Jenrick:** One of the reflections that we had was that, because the site had been set up relatively swiftly, it had not been established with a very clear line of command, and quite a number of different organisations and contractors were working on the site, as you rightly say. We have listened to that advice, which has come, not just from colleagues like yourself but also from the independent inspector. For that reason, we have created an overall governor figure, in Phil Riley, who now has complete oversight over the site and reports to General Capps who is in charge of the broader ecosystem, which includes the work at sea and Western Jet Foil. I think that will give a much stronger leadership and management structure to the site and greater oversight over the individuals who are working there, so that, where there are errors, they can be quickly spotted, and where the culture needs to be improved amongst the staff, it can be restored.

Q243 **Ms Qaisar:** When I spoke to senior medical professionals at that time, there had been small outbreaks of diphtheria and skin infections, and credit to these medical professionals, they had worked in really challenging circumstances. What is the Home Office doing to ensure that medical staff who are working in really challenging situations are supported?

**Robert Jenrick:** As I said in my answer to your earlier question, we now have a 24/7 medical facility. In fact, we probably had that at the time you visited, because it has been there for most of the autumn. It is well staffed; it is well plugged in to the local NHS. We are screening individuals when they arrive, as far as one can. There are some conditions like diphtheria for which there is no lateral flow test-style, simple way of detecting it. Certainly, as soon as anybody has any symptoms, they are taken very seriously and those people are isolated either at Manston or in a specialist hotel elsewhere.

We are also offering, and strongly encouraging, anyone to be vaccinated upon arrival, and uptake is relatively good. We are trying to increase that. Some of the individuals who come to this country come from countries where there are low levels of vaccination, so they are more challenging individuals to encourage to take up the vaccine. None the less, vaccination rates are good and rising.



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Q244 **Ms Qaisar:** I spoke to families that had been housed there—some for 10, 13, or up to 26 days. I spoke to a particular family. The mum said she was going crazy over the situation. Her child had infections, and she just did not feel like she was being supported. As I said quite publicly before, there were children, essentially, sleeping on gym mats. Is this still the case?

**Robert Jenrick:** The key thing is for people to flow through the site as swiftly as possible. We do not view Manston as somewhere where people will live for days or weeks on end.

**Ms Qaisar:** But they were living there.

**Robert Jenrick:** While they are there, conditions are relatively simple. We have had advice that it would not be wise in every case to have beds in some of the accommodation, because that will increase the fire risk in some of the facilities. The task, as I see it, is not to make the facilities at Manston akin to a hotel; it is to get people out of Manston as quickly as possible and to view this as the immediate setting people come to after their lives have been saved at sea.

Q245 **Chair:** Can I interject with a range of questions on that? How many hours does it take to do a security check, on average?

**Robert Jenrick:** Dan, do you have reflections on that?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Again, it depends on flow-through at any one time and how many units and people you have available. As the Minister is alluding to, it is not so much the security check; it is being able to provide the onward accommodation for people that provided the challenge as well.

Q246 **Chair:** If I pitched up at Manston, what is the fastest that I could be processed?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not know, off the top of my head, what the fastest would be. We can probably write to you with that. As I say, generally, checks are done in a matter of 20 to 30 minutes. Individuals have to go through the standard security checks and biometric checking.

Q247 **Chair:** Presumably that gets washed against a database somewhere. If you have a family turn up with a child, how long might that child be expected to be sleeping on a gym mat with an unknown, strange man on the next-door gym mat?

**Daniel Hobbs:** As the Minister said, we have just laid the SI, which says the rules will allow for a maximum of 96 hours for people to be held at Manston. As part of that, further beds are being provided so it will not be gym mats in future. The aim is, as the Minister said, to move people through that site as quickly as possible and on to accommodation, be that hotels as a contingency at the moment, or into the wider dispersed asylum system. That is the challenge. We want to move people out of there as quickly as possible, as the Minister says.



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Q248 **Chair:** What risk assessment has been done with regards to how long it is acceptable to have a child in Manston with an unknown, unrelated, male stranger sleeping next to them?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Generally, families and single women are separated from—

**Chair:** Generally, or always?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Will be. There are separate sleeping and accommodation arrangements between single males and families. Obviously, family units can include males, but family units are accommodated together, and women are accommodated in the family.

**Chair:** In all cases?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Yes.

**Chair:** Thank you. Sorry, Anum.

Q249 **Ms Qaisar:** Thank you, Chair. To be honest, I am just more surprised that the Minister said that there are relatively simple living conditions. I do not think children sleeping on gym mats is relatively simple.

**Robert Jenrick:** I would just say, if I may, that it is worth thinking about the context. These are individuals who, in many cases, have crossed continents; have often spent significant time in extremely rudimentary refugee camps in places like northern France; have then crossed the channel in a small boat; have had their lives saved at sea by Border Force or our partners; have then been fed, clothed, watered at Western Jet Foil; and have been brought to Manston, where we provide them with 24/7 medical care. We do some security checks while we are trying to find them transport to onward accommodation, such as a hotel.

Overall, I think the UK is providing a good service to these individuals, which is commensurate with, if not better than, that provided by most of our European neighbours. That is not to say that we are complacent about the quality of the facilities or that we do not take this seriously, and I hope you can see that the changes we have made in recent weeks and months were to do exactly that.

But it is worth considering the context, and how challenging it is for us to do this if you have hundreds, if not thousands, of people arriving illegally, with no notice, in those small boats. This is a very difficult task that the staff at Manston have to fulfil, and I think they do it very well.

Q250 **Chair:** Thank you, Minister. I do not think anyone is saying it is not a difficult task. I am specifically concerned about the safeguarding provisions, notwithstanding that people may have made incredibly dangerous journeys. I am interested in how we are safeguarding children, disabled people, pregnant women and LGBT people once they arrive here, and whether we are saying that, because they have arrived here illegally,



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they deserve a lesser standard of safeguarding than we would expect for British children, pregnant mothers and disabled people.

**Robert Jenrick:** No, I am saying that, in the immediate moments of their arrival, it is difficult for us to provide the standard of care that we would wish on an ongoing basis and that Manston is the place at which we receive individuals from small boats, and then we try to get them into better quality accommodation as soon as possible.

Q251 **Chair:** When you screen them for diseases and conditions on arrival, do you screen them for pregnancy?

**Daniel Hobbs:** No, I do not think we do—not unless the individual offers that information.

**Robert Jenrick:** However, I am certainly aware that we have procedures in place to support pregnant women who come into Western Jet Foil. At the medical facility at Manston, we have developed the right kind of neonatal support, which taps into the neonatal units at Kent hospitals. I have specifically spoken to officials who are involved in the Manston effort about how that operates, and I think they are content that that is providing a decent level of service to those women.

**Chair:** Anum, do you have any more questions?

**Ms Qaisar:** No, just a comment that I think it is disgraceful, Minister, that children and families have travelled—made incredibly difficult journeys—over, and when they arrive at Manston, they are sleeping on gym mats. But we will agree to disagree.

Q252 **Chair:** Can I ask a specific question about people with vulnerabilities? What efforts are made at Manston, prior to people being moved on to dispersed accommodation, to identify any specific vulnerabilities, disabilities and learning difficulties and victims of trafficking or torture?

**Robert Jenrick:** Dan, do you want to speak to that?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Yes. As part of the general screening process, as a first responder, Border Force, immigration enforcement or any of the other authorities can refer people into the national referral mechanism where there are indications of human trafficking or modern slavery. That is a standard part of the organisation as part of being a first responder.

Again, the initial screening will, where possible, identify any of those vulnerabilities. As you know, no unaccompanied children go to Manston. They go from Western Jet Foil directly to the Kent intake unit. As the Minister said, if there are specific medical vulnerabilities, we have a team on-site and a relationship with the NHS in Kent that we can refer people to if other vulnerabilities are identified as part of the interactions with people on the site. Again, the key point is trying to move people through that site as quickly as possible.

Q253 **Chair:** Phil Riley came from the Prison Service. Did he have any



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experience working in female prisons?

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not know, Madam Chair, but I am happy to—

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not know, but he was running a number of the immigration removal centres and our detained estate there prior to this role, which obviously includes—

Q254 **Chair:** Was he ever at Yarl's Wood?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not know if he was specifically at Yarl's Wood.

**Chair:** Thank you. Rachel.

Q255 **Rachel Maclean:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, can you update the Committee on when you are expecting the Rwanda flights to resume?

**Robert Jenrick:** As soon as possible. It obviously remains the Government's policy. We see it as an absolutely critical way of deterring people from making the dangerous crossing and changing the business model of the people smugglers so that they cannot guarantee that those people who come to the UK will have a life here. Instead, the incentives would be for those individuals to remain in other safe countries like France, for example.

We were very pleased with the outcome of the judicial review at the end of last year, where the Government's position was broadly upheld in all material respects. The court said that our policy was lawful, and that Rwanda was a safe country in which individuals could be taken to under the scheme. There is now going to be an appeal, and that will be heard later this year. Obviously, we look forward to defending the Government's position once again as robustly as possible, and we hope and expect that we will have a similar outcome in the Court of Appeal.

Q256 **Rachel Maclean:** So we are waiting for that to conclude before any flights are likely to start again?

**Robert Jenrick:** Yes. It is right that we await the outcome of the British courts. As I say, I hope that we will have a similar outcome from the Court of Appeal as we did from the lower courts, and then, obviously, the Government will decide how to proceed once we have the final judgment.

Q257 **Rachel Maclean:** Can you help the Committee to understand how the Home Office intends to safeguard vulnerable people? We understand from the charity Medical Justice that they identified 17 people, according to their reports, who were issued notices of intent to be removed. They are said to have had a diagnosis or symptoms of PTSD, suicidal thoughts, or evidence of torture or trafficking. What is the Home Office's position on how we safeguard those individuals? Is it the Home Office's intention to remove those people to Rwanda? How will the Home Office deal with these individuals?

**Robert Jenrick:** Dan, would you like to speak to that?



**Daniel Hobbs:** Yes, thank you. The notice of intent is the first stage, on the basis of how someone has arrived and the initial screening. Thereafter, there is a process in which people have a period to bring forward any mitigating factors or circumstances that mean that they would not be safe. It is an individualised decision, and we have said very clearly that, where it is not safe for someone, which may be on a reason of safeguarding, vulnerability or their fitness to fly, they would not be transferred. That is in the process. It is an individualised decision.

People have access to legal aid as part of the process and, as I say, each decision is taken based on the individual circumstances of that person. That would allow for the identification of any vulnerabilities that could not be met under the agreement with Rwanda or where it would not be safe for that individual.

Q258 **Rachel Maclean:** I am not clear, to be fair, whether these were people actually on the flight who were then removed, because there were clearly individuals on the flight who were then removed, weren't there, because there were legal claims launched and so on?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Yes.

**Rachel Maclean:** How are we to have confidence or clarity, when the flights resume again, that we will not be facing that sort of scenario again, where the flight is ready to take off and individuals are then found to have risks attached to them, which means that they need to be removed from the flight and, therefore, we are not able to commence this removal policy at all?

**Daniel Hobbs:** It is difficult to comment on those cases, because I do not know if that was at the notice of intention stage or, as you say, whether they were served with a removal direction which triggers the second—

**Rachel Maclean:** I think notices of intent.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Notices of intent are served, which then triggers the process for people to be able to bring forward any representations as to why they would not be suitable. We have only served removal directions, obviously, for one flight that we attempted last June. That is the process that is baked in—between the notices of intent and the removal direction—for people to be able to bring forward any circumstances that would mean their removal to Rwanda would not be suitable. That is the point at which there is casework before removal directions.

What happened on the last flight is that a number of people, after we had served removal directions, even though they had had an earlier opportunity, raised issues for the first time, such as indications that they may be a victim of modern slavery, which therefore has to be dealt with prior to removal, or made other claims under article 8 or other ECHR instruments, which needed to be fully considered before they could be removed. Obviously, there was a systemic challenge that went to the



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European Court, which meant we were not able to remove some of those individuals.

Q259 **Rachel Maclean:** Can you tell us how many women with disclosed histories of sex or gender-based abuse or torture or trafficking have been issued with notices of intent?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not have those details, but I do know that a very small number of women have been served with notices of intent. I think it is around 3.5% of the total that have been served, and no women have been served with removal directions.

Q260 **Rachel Maclean:** What you are suggesting to the Committee is that notices of intent would then pick up those risk factors for those vulnerable individuals, allow them to get help and to be safely—

**Daniel Hobbs:** That is the beginning of the process that allows people to then bring forward representations. They have seven days if they are in detention, 14 days if they are not, to bring forward any information that is relevant to making the final decision on whether there is an intention to remove them.

Q261 **Rachel Maclean:** With respect to the trafficking issues, clearly, the Home Office is looking to make changes to the Modern Slavery Act to deter some of the abuses of the system that we have seen, specifically with Albanians and with many others, actually. How does the Home Office intend to further legislate in this space to make sure we are safeguarding individuals but also cracking down on abuse?

**Robert Jenrick:** With respect to modern slavery?

**Rachel Maclean:** Yes.

**Robert Jenrick:** As the Prime Minister set out, we intend to bring forward a Bill later this year which will make a number of changes to the asylum and immigration system, specifically targeted at reducing small boats crossings. I am not able to tell you today—I appreciate that is disappointing—the exact contents of that Bill. What I can say is that one of the areas we have looked very closely at is the modern slavery legal framework and whether there are any changes required there which continue to uphold it as a world-class regime to tackle a very serious issue, but make it much more difficult for people to abuse the system.

You will have seen that we reached an agreement with Albania at the end of last year that is not dependent upon primary legislation and that enables us to consider cases where individuals claim to be slaves and, where we uphold those decisions, for them to return home to Albania and for the Albanian Government to put in place such measures as are necessary to protect and support them as they rebuild their lives in Albania. We are rolling out that agreement as swiftly as possible this year, which will enable us to return some individuals who might otherwise have remained in the UK.



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Q262 **Chair:** I have a couple of colleagues who want to come in, but I have some questions first. Is it the Home Office's policy to separate families?

**Robert Jenrick:** It is not, but in what respect?

**Chair:** With regard to Rwanda. Would you consider removing somebody to Rwanda if they had family members in the UK?

**Robert Jenrick:** The first flight was, as I think Dan said, exclusively single males.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Yes. If people arrive as a family group, we would not separate them. Again, if there are article 8 reasons why an individual should not be removed, they will be considered in line with our international obligations, but, again, it would depend on the individual circumstances of the case.

Q263 **Chair:** I asked Minister Pursglove a very specific question in the Chamber about whether children would ever be removed to Rwanda. He responded by saying, "No unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will be removed to Rwanda." So, specifically, would you remove children who arrived in a family group?

**Robert Jenrick:** As Minister Pursglove said to you previously, it is not our intention to remove unaccompanied minors.

**Chair:** That is not what I am asking.

**Robert Jenrick:** As we operationalise the Rwanda policy, we will need to consider whether or not we would remove families. There, the balance that we will need to consider is, obviously, the challenge of minors leaving the country for Rwanda against the risk that the UK then became a magnet for people traffickers focusing on families. That is a very real concern if the Rwanda policy was fully operationalised.

I would not want to see a situation where adult males were deterred from coming to the UK as a result of the Rwanda policy but the people smugglers continued their operations, but with a particular focus on families. I think there is a range of risks as a result of that, so we will give further thought to our approach in that respect.

Q264 **Chair:** So that is a yes? You will consider removing families, including children, to Rwanda?

**Robert Jenrick:** We have not come to a firm conclusion there, but I have explained to you the thinking that we are going through. That is a perfectly valid consideration for us, because we would not want to replace a trade in adult males with a trade in families.

Q265 **Chair:** Do you think it runs the risk of single adult males acquiring children to traffic—as in, "I don't have a family. I might find myself one"?



**Robert Jenrick:** That is a very real concern if that was the only route for a single adult male to remain in the UK and to see their asylum claim processed here rather than in a third country.

Q266 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** I just want to follow up from one of one of Rachel's questions. As she said, the charity Medical Justice identified, on this first Rwanda flight that never took off, that there were 17 people who had, among other things, symptoms of PTSD or suicidal thoughts. Say suicidal thoughts is a valid reason for people not being able to be put on that plane—working on the principle that all the legal systems come back and say this is a valid policy—what is to stop everybody deciding they are suddenly feeling suicidal on the basis they do not want to go to Rwanda? You cannot legislate people's thoughts, can you?

**Robert Jenrick:** Dan, do you want to answer this?

**Daniel Hobbs:** This is some of the difficult decision making that has to be made by our operational colleagues when they examine individual cases where evidence is brought forward of that, which might have to be corroborated by medical practitioners, about the state of mind and the fitness of that individual. As I say, it comes down to the individual decision and the evidence that is put forward, and the caseworker will have to make a decision on the basis of the evidence in front of them.

As I say, there are at least two opportunities between the notice of intention and us serving the removal direction, and thereafter, for any further representations to be made. People have legal aid to support them in making those representations to the Home Office as part of the process. As I say, it will come down to the evidence that is put forward and whether that is corroborated by medical evidence or other third-party testimony.

**Robert Jenrick:** Clearly, if the policy is to succeed in establishing a significant deterrent to making this dangerous crossing, then there needs to be a high evidential bar to preclude individuals going to Rwanda. We do not want to put people on flights where it is clearly inappropriate—where they are not fit to fly or where there are any serious concerns about their safety in that third country—but we also have to have a firm line against likely abuse or else the system will ultimately be undermined, as you suggest.

Q267 **Kim Johnson:** Dan, you mentioned that those who had been issued with notices of removal had the opportunity to seek legal aid. I am curious about how that happens and how they access it.

**Daniel Hobbs:** In the case of the first flight, I think the vast majority, if not all, of the people were in a detention centre. Legal surgeries operate in all our detention centres on a daily basis, and people have unlimited access to those surgeries. As I say, that is funded through legal aid. Everyone, as far as I know, who was served with a notice of intention or



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a removal direction for that flight, had a legal representative. They access it through the surgeries that are available in our detention centres.

Q268 **Kim Johnson:** Again, I am just curious about whether you review the capacity of the surgeries in those detention centres and the availability of support for those who have been issued with a notice of intent.

**Daniel Hobbs:** As I say, for the last flight everybody had access to a legal adviser. We work with the legal aid authority and the Ministry of Justice. Obviously, it is slightly separate from the Home Office. It is rightly independent of us in terms of the legal aid provision available to those who are in detention centres.

Q269 **Chair:** Can I ask about the Nationality and Borders Act and what work is being done by the Home Office to monitor any unequal impacts there might be from the new Act and the impact that that could have on people with protected characteristics?

**Robert Jenrick:** We are measuring a range of impacts on equality, and we have done a full equality impact assessment, which is in the public domain. Dan may want to set out some of the further, ongoing work that we will be doing.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Obviously, some elements have only just been implemented, as of 28 June, and further measures are due to come into force. The chief inspector overviews the work, and there is a continual dialogue. We have a team that works with a range of NGOs and partners to gain insight and collect it, as well as a formal monitoring and evaluation of the statistics. As I say, to date, we are still in the very early days of the operation of some of the elements of the NABA that came in at the end of June last year. As I say, that will be undertaken by our monitoring and evaluation and through our standard dialogue with the NGOs and the stakeholder forums, where they are able to bring issues to our attention if we are not picking up on them.

Q270 **Chair:** The EIA indicated that there would be increased access to legal aid for people with vulnerabilities. Has that happened, and has there been any monitoring of people with protected characteristics getting that legal aid?

**Daniel Hobbs:** The increase in legal aid is linked to the priority removal notice, which has not been operationalised yet. That is the new process with the accelerated detained appeals, and those are mainly aimed at people who are either foreign national offenders or long-term overstayers who we are looking to remove, and to establish the one-stop process where they bring all their measures together.

The tribunal procedures committee have just finished their consultation on the judicial elements of that. As I say, that has not been implemented yet, but under the NABA it was proposed that there will be an enhanced legal aid offer if you are being served with a priority removal notice, or the trafficking notice which runs alongside that, to support people to



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bring all their reasons why they may not be suitable for removal—primarily to their own country in these cases, because these are people who have usually been through our systems. They are able to bring all of those, and we are able to deal with them in one go and bring that before the courts if an appeal is needed. But, as I say, that has not operationalised yet.

Q271 **Chair:** When do you expect it to operationalise?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Subject to the TPC, we were hoping later this year, probably in the spring, but, as I say, that is still in discussion with the Ministry of Justice and the tribunal procedures committee.

Q272 **Chair:** How are accelerated detained appeals different from the detained fast track?

**Daniel Hobbs:** It does build on the model of the detained fast track, but what we did in the NABA is ask that the courts—which is what the tribunal procedures committee have been consulting on to bring forward proposals. You will be aware that the Detention Action case found there was inadequate access to justice, and therefore it was found to be unlawful. Therefore, we have been working with the tribunal procedures committee, who have obviously done their consultation to establish the rules and basis for the new system. They are yet to report following their consultation.

**Chair:** Speaking of detention—Kate.

Q273 **Kate Osborne:** Thanks very much, Chair. Minister, I wrote to you following the Committee's visit to Derwentside. It is not in my constituency, but I am in a neighbouring one in the north-east. I have to say that, disappointingly, I thought your response was quite patronising, but, more to the point, it did not answer the questions that I sent out, so I have sent you a further letter, which I hope to get a better and more appropriate response to.

Moving on, first of all, can you tell us why there is no maximum period of immigration detention in the UK?

**Robert Jenrick:** Firstly, I am sorry that you were disappointed by the response you received, and if there are any questions you have for me today, I would be more than happy to answer.

**Kate Osborne:** I have written to you again.

**Robert Jenrick:** Okay. We will respond to that as soon as possible. I was under the impression that the visit of the Committee to Derwentside had been broadly positive, but perhaps that was incorrect.

With respect to detention, we detain people where there is a realistic prospect of them being removed from the country. There is a long history of case law testing that point. There is no mystery behind that, and we do not detain people indefinitely. If there is no realistic prospect of



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someone being removed from the country, we will not be able to continue to detain them.

Q274 **Kate Osborne:** Where there is very little prospect of removing someone who has been refused asylum, what purpose does prolonged detention serve? We spoke to women in Derwentside that could reference 200-plus days that they had been there.

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not know if you want to comment, Dan. It is difficult for us to comment on individual cases without knowing the circumstances behind them.

Q275 **Kate Osborne:** I appreciate that, but the general question is, what purpose does it serve?

**Robert Jenrick:** The principle behind their continued detention will be that we do believe there is a realistic prospect that they can be removed from the country.

**Daniel Hobbs:** The Minister is correct. That is the legal framework. Everyone has access to bail hearings at the tribunal if they are in immigration detention. For Derwentside, about 56% serve less than 28 days. Generally across the immigration estate, the vast majority of people are in detention for less than 28 days. While there is not a predefined period in which you can maintain immigration detention, it is done on the basis of what we call the Hardial Singh principle, a legal principle which says there has to be a realistic prospect of removal within a reasonable timeframe. That is the test applied by both the Home Office, who can directly bail individuals, or by the court when people seek bail through the tribunal.

Q276 **Chair:** Can I pick up on that percentage? Has it gone down?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Broadly, it has gone down in recent years. The vast majority are less than 28 days.

Q277 **Chair:** It always used to be over 60% were less than 28 days, and 90-plus per cent. were out within three months. Is there a differential between men and women?

**Daniel Hobbs:** The statistic on Derwentside appears to be, but as I say, the general majority are less than 28 days.

**Chair:** Thank you. Kate.

Q278 **Kate Osborne:** Is Derwentside higher?

**Daniel Hobbs:** As I say, it is around 56% of women served fewer than 28 days in detention in Derwentside, from the statistics we were given ahead of this meeting, but we would need to look further. It has not been operational for very long, and these are small numbers. I think there are only 19 individuals at Derwentside. That, again, may mean the statistics are slightly skewed, compared to the general population.



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**Kate Osborne:** The amount of women there may be lower, but 56% is quite high, is not it?

**Daniel Hobbs:** Fifty-six per cent. serve fewer than 28 days.

Q279 **Kate Osborne:** It means that 44% do more.

There is currently, as you say, a tiny number of women asylum seekers in detention. Would it not be more cost-effective and humane to deal with women asylum cases in the community?

**Robert Jenrick:** It depends on the circumstances of the individual case. As Dan said, individuals have access to legal advice, and there are bail hearings at which these matters are considered, taking into account all the factors. There will be a small number of female offenders for whom it is right that they are detained prior to their removal from the country.

Q280 **Chair:** When you say offenders, do you mean immigration offenders or foreign national offenders?

**Robert Jenrick:** There will be a small number of migrants who are also foreign national offenders, for whom there is a rationale that they are detained prior to their removal. But these decisions are not made arbitrarily; these are subject to a rigorous process of bail hearings, at which all the circumstances are taken into account.

Q281 **Kate Osborne:** Are women who do not have a history of criminality a risk to the community?

**Robert Jenrick:** It is difficult to generalise. The point is these decisions have to be taken on an individual basis. That is why we have the processes that we have in place, whereby their circumstances are heard at a bail hearing. It is only after that that somebody would continue to remain in detention. Dan, is there anything you want to add to that?

**Daniel Hobbs:** It is fair to say detention is usually used very sparingly and as a last resort, to be able to effect and enforce removal from the country of someone who no longer has a right to stay, whether that is a foreign national offender or someone who has overstayed or has no right to remain following completion of their immigration case. The reason it is relatively short is because of the case law, but also it is usually just in advance of someone being served with their removal directions and ahead of their removal from the country, because their case has been concluded. They will have been offered voluntary return generally, which does not require detention.

**Robert Jenrick:** It is worth saying our detention estate is relatively small. The Government is not detaining people in particularly large numbers. We detain people relatively sparingly and because there is a good reason, either because of their past offending record or because their removal from the country is believed to be imminent.

Q282 **Kate Osborne:** We heard from Home Office officials that there are plans



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to increase capacity for detention of women at Colnbrook, Dungavel and Yarl's Wood. Personally, I do not want to see women detained in this way at all, but is it necessary to do that, given your investment in Derwentside and its current under-occupancy?

**Robert Jenrick:** I will ask Dan to comment on the specific capacity issues, but across the system we do believe that we need more detained accommodation. The detained estate is, as I said, relatively small, and if we want to be removing more people from the country, then we will need to have a larger detained estate so that our immigration enforcement officers and others can bring individuals to it for the immediate period prior to their removal from the country.

If we were to operationalise the Rwanda policy, once again that will require a greater detained estate so that people can be brought into that as the immediate precursor to being removed from the country. We do now need to invest in expansion of our detained estate, and it is for that reason that we are taking forward, or considering taking forward, the sites that you have just laid out.

Q283 **Kate Osborne:** How much are you looking to increase the numbers by? Is there a target—a percentage increase?

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not have that number in front of me. I do not know if you do, Dan.

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not have it in front of me.

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be happy to provide you with a guide to the extra capacity that we expect to get as a result of those investments.

Q284 **Kate Osborne:** We heard that the mobile reception at Derwentside is poor, and, actually, this is something that the Committee experienced—certainly I experienced it when we went there. Internet access is intermittent, and it is difficult to access face-to-face legal visits at Derwentside IRC as well. Are all detainees made aware of their right to request face-to-face legal visits?

**Robert Jenrick:** I believe they are. I saw your comments in that regard. My officials have told me there are twice-weekly legal advice surgeries at Derwentside, as well as access to legal advice via Skype. They are working to improve the level of internet access so that there is greater connectivity. It is a product of its rural location, as you will have seen.

Q285 **Kate Osborne:** As you rightly say, it is quite rural. It is a hard place to access, particularly if you are relying on public transport. What further steps are you taking around all these barriers? It is all very well saying they can access face-to-face, but from what I have heard, from the women in the centre and from others, it is extremely difficult.

**Robert Jenrick:** All I can give you is reassurance today that there are twice-weekly face-to-face surgeries available at Derwentside, in addition to any other meetings that somebody at Derwentside had set up



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themselves separate to that, and that we have the capacity to do Skype meetings as well. The officials at Derwentside are making a serious effort to improve the level of connectivity. It is not out of a lack of will; it is a relatively rural location, which makes getting a mobile phone signal more difficult than at some other locations.

**Q286 Kate Osborne:** Is access to legal advice offered in different languages as well, or do people have to go through interpreters? I am just wondering how easy it is. Are women regularly reminded that legal advice is available to them?

**Robert Jenrick:** In a range of different languages?

**Kate Osborne:** Yes.

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not know if you want to comment on that, Dan. I believe it would be, although it may well be through an interpreter.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Generally in our detention centres, there is a range of information that is available in a range of languages—predominantly those that feature in the nationalities that we detain in terms of the numbers in our immigration system. Access to interpreter services is available through a phone connection as well. As the Minister said, at Derwentside they do daily testing on the mobile signal, but also all the women in the centre have access to landline phones on request, as well as to the internet, fax and video-calling facilities to liaise with family and/or their legal advisers.

**Q287 Kate Osborne:** Thank you. I, along with others, have highlighted concerns with male detention centre staff being used to carry out the constant supervision of women detained in the immigration removal centre. Along with that, the management team could not tell us how many times that had happened, and also the diversity and gender make-up of the staff. I know that that is something—certainly the diversity—that we have raised in a letter to Frances Hardy.

Can you tell me how many times male constant supervision has happened and what steps are being taken to ensure it does not happen again? Also, do you collect data on the diversity, gender and ethnic mix of the staff in the centres?

**Robert Jenrick:** Dan, do you have those figures?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not have those figures, and I do not know whether we directly will have the gender and ethnic mix, because often these are run by contractors. That will be information that the contractors that run the immigration centres—rather than the Home Office caseworkers who support individuals in those centres—would hold on their staff.

**Q288 Kate Osborne:** If they were really lacking in diversity, you would not know that?



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**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not know. We would have to write to you, because I am not aware of what information we hold on the diversity of detention centre staff run by our contractors.

Q289 **Kate Osborne:** Minister, do you think it is important to have gender and ethnic diversity within these centres?

**Robert Jenrick:** You are absolutely right that it is. I am happy to make inquiries as to the mix of staff and the efforts that our contractors, or indeed Home Office itself, are making to recruit a broader, more diverse workforce.

Q290 **Kate Osborne:** Can I go back to the constant supervision of women being carried out by men and the fact that that is still happening?

**Robert Jenrick:** We will have to come back to you on that, because I do not have information and I do not want to mislead you. Perhaps we can come back to you with what our policy is in that regard and how often that practice is happening, if it is.

Can I just say that one of my officials behind me has confirmed that, whilst we are increasing the size of the estate, there are no plans for the female estate to expand? The extra facilities that we discussed will lead to expansion of the male estate but not of female placements.

Q291 **Chair:** Can I pick up on that specific point? You spoke about the need to invest in the expansion of the estate because of the operationalisation of the Rwanda policy. You indicated earlier today there is not necessarily a bar to families being removed to Rwanda, which presumably will involve children. Does that mean you will be expanding the specialist facility that there currently is at Gatwick—I apologise, I cannot remember the name of it—that enables the removal of families?

**Robert Jenrick:** The facility that you are referring to is for voluntary removals, I believe.

**Chair:** Not in every case, unless that has changed.

**Robert Jenrick:** Please correct me if I am wrong.

**Daniel Hobbs:** We very rarely enforce removal on families.

**Robert Jenrick:** There may be some exceptions, so apologies if I am mistaken, but as I understand, it is a voluntary removal centre, where families would be placed immediately prior to taking the flight. As we have not made a decision on whether to enforce family removals to Rwanda, I do not think that is something I am able to comment on today, but you are correct that, were we to see significant numbers of families leaving the UK to Rwanda, we would need to have some further support, in the way that we have today for the very small number of voluntary removals that take place.

Q292 **Chair:** It is not exclusively voluntary removals that use that facility, but I



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just want to clarify that, although you are potentially planning to remove families, you have no plans to increase the very specialist facilities that are required in order to remove families. What is your percentage increase in ambition for the size of the detention estate?

**Robert Jenrick:** At the moment we are investing in the three additional facilities that we set out earlier. We do not have further plans beyond that.

Q293 **Chair:** What percentage increase will that give you?

**Robert Jenrick:** We will have to come back to you with the exact figures, but they are in the public domain.

Q294 **Chair:** Do you feel in any way uncomfortable that in 2018 the then Home Secretary spoke in response to the second Shaw report boasting of having reduced the detention estate by 25%?

**Robert Jenrick:** Of course, I was not in the Home Office at that time and I do not know the exact reasons why the detention estate was scaled back. The numbers of individuals crossing the channel illegally now are significant and rising, so it is right that, if we want to have a more expeditious route for people leaving the country and we want to operationalise new policies like Rwanda, we will need to invest in some more capacity. That may well be a product simply of the increased numbers that are crossing the channel and the new policy of Rwanda.

Q295 **Chair:** Is Stephen Shaw's work—twice—now irrelevant?

**Daniel Hobbs:** All the safeguards, the detention gatekeeper and all the vulnerability and safeguarding assessments that run alongside detention remain, and the adults at risk policy remains. This is an increase, although we did also lose some sites, so some of these are replacing sites that were lost. The net increase may not be as high as what it might seem in terms of adding new sites on, because we did lose some of the other sites—we handed one site back to the Ministry of Justice. As the Minister said, we will write to you on the exact percentage increase, but all the policies and safeguards remain in place in terms of the detention gatekeepers, the ongoing case working review and the adults at risk policy.

Q296 **Chair:** Has the detention in the community pilot that was done in Newcastle been deemed to be a failure?

**Daniel Hobbs:** It is not continuing.

**Chair:** Thank you. Mark.

Q297 **Mark Jenkinson:** Thanks, Chair. The Committee heard from women in Derwentside who wished to go home. There are voluntary schemes. Notwithstanding the fact that they could have been telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, would there be any reason why those women were not part of some voluntary scheme?



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**Robert Jenrick:** It would depend on where they were being returned to.

**Mark Jenkinson:** They were FNOs, and they would be east European countries.

**Robert Jenrick:** If there is a returns agreement in place, then we strongly encourage people to take part in voluntary return schemes. I would hope the women you met at Derwentside, as indeed anyone else in an immigration removal centre, were fully aware of those and had access to them if they chose to take part in one. It will depend on their country of origin, because we do not routinely return people to a range of different countries, because we do not have an agreement in place or that agreement is no longer operational because that country is not a safe country to return them to. It rather depends on the individual circumstances.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Generally, it is always open for people to return voluntarily and co-operate with the process. It may be the distinction between assisted voluntary return, where there is a scheme for people who are generally not foreign national offenders but will be provided with some financial incentive to support them to return to their home country. That may be the confusion, between the voluntary return and the assisted voluntary return.

**Mark Jenkinson:** It is widely advertised. It should be widely known.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Voluntary return will always be discussed with individuals, because it is always the preference that people will go voluntarily rather than through an enforced route.

Q298 **Mark Jenkinson:** Are there ever cases where legal advice would change their mind, for example?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not think we can speak to what legal advice individuals are provided with or the decisions they make, because that is between them and their legal representative. People do sometimes agree to go voluntarily and then latterly change their mind, but I cannot pinpoint what has caused that decision change.

Q299 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** If they agree to go voluntarily, is there a funding stream for them for access to be able to make that happen, or is it only if they are part of the assisted voluntary scheme?

**Daniel Hobbs:** We will always pay for people's flights home. The assisted voluntary is also to assist them with reintegrating back. That is not generally something that is available to foreign national offenders.

Q300 **Chair:** How long does that take on average?

**Daniel Hobbs:** The assisted voluntary return package?

**Chair:** Yes, or voluntary returns. If somebody you are taking enforcement action against, either in detention or in the community,



indicates they want to go home, what is the time lapse between them making a first approach to the Home Office and being assisted to find a flight?

**Daniel Hobbs:** We would have to write you with the exact average time. As I say, the number of voluntary returns, as you will see in the statistics, has generally gone down over the period, so people willing to go has generally dropped in recent years. Arguably, it is open to anyone to come and seek assisted voluntary returns, and wherever possible we will make that happen as quickly as possible. It will depend on whether they have their documentation and if there is an embassy willing to redocument them, or if we have a UK returns letter agreement with that country on how we return those people.

Q301 **Ms Qaisar:** May I gently remind the panel to be mindful of inadvertently misleading the Committee, because many of us have visited Derwentside, as we have spoken about, and I have also been to Manston. At both, one of the things I was most struck by was a lack of legal advice. Whilst people are offered face-to-face interviews, there was very little information around both sites. I did not find many posters around legal advice, and if I did, they were pretty much in English. This of course is a wider issue around legal advice, and it is a justice issue as well.

Can you please explain to me and the Committee what minimum levels of engagement are expected when people are at Manston or at Derwentside in regard to gaining legal advice? I hear you that, when people come, they are told, but let us be honest: if I am detained at Manston or Derwentside, I am going to be quite emotional and I might not take that information in.

**Robert Jenrick:** They are two quite different settings. At Manston, people are reminded of their right to legal advice, but it is designed to be a site where people spend a very short period of time. If it is operating well, with the recent change in the law, that may be even as short as 24 hours or less; 96 hours is the legal maximum, but we hope not to reach that in every case. There will be increased access to legal support where individuals are staying for up to 96 hours. If you are there for a very short period of time, it is unlikely that you would need it, but if you were staying for a longer period, we are now putting in place at Manston increased access to legal support in light of the fact that we are expecting people to stay for up to 96 hours.

Derwentside is clearly a very different setting, because an individual might be there for a more sustained period of time. As I said in answer to the earlier question, I am told there is good access to legal advice through the twice-weekly surgeries and appointments that can be made via Skype. But I will take the comments from the Committee that you did not find there was sufficient advertising of that in multiple languages. If there is anything further we need to do, then we should obviously make changes.



**Q302 Ms Qaisar:** One of the big issues I felt was that most of the information was in English. For example, when we visited Derwentside, we went to one of the bits where people are living, and they showed us one of the welcome packs they receive. This welcome pack gave loads of information about where they could receive lessons on arts and crafts, English and maths. That is all fair and well, but the bit about legal advice was essentially two sentences, Minister, that said, "If you are looking for legal advice, come to us and we will give you that information." Why is that information not just advertised? Why are they not given the contact numbers or the email addresses if they have access to phones and the internet?

**Robert Jenrick:** If I may, I will take that away and get advice as to what the procedures are at Derwentside and whether they need to be enhanced. Having visited Western Jet Foil and Manston, I can say there is a range of material available in different languages. There are signs advertising different services and explaining the situation, and there is quite ready access to interpreters—for example, at the key moments, like your immediate processing at Western Jet Foil and when you are being processed subsequently at Manston. There should not be an issue there, but I would be pleased to look into that for you.

**Ms Qaisar:** If you can write to the Committee, we would appreciate that. Thank you.

**Q303 Elliot Colburn:** I would like to move on to discussing the decision-making process for sexual orientation-based asylum claims. Despite the policy instruction that the Home Office issued back in 2016, we have received a significant amount of evidence that gay and bisexual claimants continue to be asked inappropriate and irrelevant questions about their sexual behaviour. Why does this persist years on from that policy direction?

**Robert Jenrick:** I am disappointed to hear that. That is not our intention. I am told we now have detailed guidance and extensive training for any decision maker onboarded by the Home Office so they can ensure that exactly the standards you are asking for are upheld. There is sexual orientation case-working training. The country guidance team, which is particularly critical to this, regularly reassess the way in which LGBTQ individuals are treated in each of those countries to ensure the guidance is up to date with life in those countries, so that decisions are made in a sensible and updated manner. That country guidance is considered, I am told, to be amongst the best that is available in similar developed countries, but I do not dismiss your concerns and the evidence that that you have heard.

**Q304 Elliot Colburn:** What does that training consist of? What does it look like? And who is delivering that to the Home Office caseworkers?

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not know if, Dan, you are able to—



**Daniel Hobbs:** There would be a range of training as part of an asylum decision maker's training—classroom-based training and online training. We have worked with a range of organisations on the guidance. They will be looking at the guidance in terms of the individual specific country but also the interviewing on grounds of sexual orientation, to ensure that that guidance will work with new caseworkers. As I say, there is an intensive period of training at the beginning and then ongoing monitoring and review of new caseworkers as they move through, so it will take a range of forms.

Q305 **Elliot Colburn:** In searching for evidence, if you want to call it that, of someone's sexuality—which just sounds like an awful phrase but let us call it that for the time being—do you take into account the fact that the countries that a lot of these claimants will be coming from will be so discriminatory against LGBT+ people that evidence is obviously going to be lacking, because if they were out they probably would not be presenting here? Does that guidance take into account the fact that they are unlikely to be able to provide such evidence to the Home Office?

**Daniel Hobbs:** The guidance does take account of the fact that these may be sensitive and difficult issues for people to talk about; that, culturally, people may not be used to talking, particularly to authorities, about them; or that they may have had to flee a country where, as you say, these things are not acceptable, and indeed are unlawful, in many circumstances. The guidance does talk about that and does look at how you can sensitively deal with those complex claims as part of the process. We do not ask people about sexual activity; that is really clear in the guidance that is provided to caseworkers. But, as you say, it is a complex and sensitive area, and it does reflect those points that you just made.

Q306 **Elliot Colburn:** That is part of the question. The evidence we have received is that people still are being questioned about their sexual behaviour even six years on from the policy direction. That is what we are hoping to get to the bottom of.

Notwithstanding that, what sort of support is in place, or is there specific support in place, particularly for LGBT+ claimants? Do you link them up with legal advice that has expertise in this area? Do they have access to charities with a specific focus on LGBT+ issues? As you say, they will not be used to talking about these issues to authorities, so do they have access to LGBT-specific support?

**Daniel Hobbs:** We will always signpost people who are making claims based on sexual orientation to a range of NGOs, including the Rainbow Migration group and LGBTI+ support networks. That is done as standard in those types of cases, and people will be signposted to them for support.

Q307 **Kate Osborne:** Minister, in 2020 the Home Office confirmed that a review was carried out into the way asylum claims based on religious grounds and made by LGBTQ+ people were assessed. Can you tell us



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why the Home Office review and action plan has not been published? Have there been any changes in the process during the last three years?

**Robert Jenrick:** Dan, are you familiar with the work that has been done after that review?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I am not immediately familiar, but guidance is published and regularly updated on how we interview and deal with claims on the basis of sexual orientation, as is guidance on religious grounds, so that will be the work. We now publish data on outcomes of cases in terms of sexual orientation. I recall that, some time ago, that was one of the asks, particularly from a House of Lords Committee, and that is now published.

**Kate Osborne:** I am not talking about guidance. I am talking about a review and action plan that was done in 2019-20.

**Daniel Hobbs:** I am not immediately aware of which action plan that is referring to.

**Kate Osborne:** It was a Home Office review. Rainbow Migration reported that the Home Office carried out a review into the way asylum claims based on religious grounds and LGBT grounds were assessed in 2019-20. The Home Office confirmed that the review was complete and an action plan formulated, but neither have ever been published.

**Robert Jenrick:** We will have to come back to you on that and set out the work that has been done subsequently and which of the measures we have just discussed were informed by that.

**Kate Osborne:** I have to say, it is extremely disappointing that you are not aware that a review was done, let alone what the action plan would be. Thank you, Chair.

Q308 **Chair:** Can I ask a question on caseworkers? They receive initial training on LGBTQI issues and then ongoing training. How many caseworkers have done ongoing training, and at what point in their caseworker journey would that be refreshed? How many months would they need to have served?

**Daniel Hobbs:** This will differ. There is a range of mandatory training for all civil servants on a range of issues, including equality and diversity, that has to be done annually or periodically, so they will be expected to do those. Our guidance, as you will be aware, is updated relatively frequently, so that will be communicated out. I do not know specifically in terms of between the initial training and then the monitoring and shadowing, but obviously we have other things like "second pair of eyes" checks and assurance checks that are ongoing, but we would have to write to you specifically on the training.

Q309 **Chair:** Could you let us know when that training takes place? Could you also let us know at the same time, unless you can tell us now, what the average length of tenure is for a caseworker working on asylum claims?



Is it still about 18 months?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be happy to come back to you on that. There has been an issue, as you allude to, of high turnover of decision makers. I hope we are in the process of resolving that both by hiring significantly more, streamlining procedures generally and improving the productivity and support that decision makers get.

**Chair:** Thank you. Caroline Dinénage.

Q310 **Dame Caroline Dinénage:** Thank you very much, Chair. I would like to talk to you a little about the way the system supports women, particularly survivors of gender-based violence and other very distressing backgrounds. We have heard strong evidence that there is heavy reliance on this substantive interview, which can particularly disadvantage women. Among some of the evidence that we have heard, women report that they felt they were not being listened to, that they were disbelieved. Many described their interactions with interviewers as being stressful and confrontational. Others described them as frightening. Particularly for those who have experienced some kind of traumatic sexual or gender-based violence, I can imagine these quite intense interviews can be quite harrowing and would not necessarily reflect the true situation women have found themselves in.

Has any thought been given, or have any pilots been considered, in terms of having a different type of process—a more reformed process—where women have a bit more time and space to give their own account? Is there any way they could be better supported by an independent or expert advocate?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be pleased to read the evidence you have received. Clearly, this is an area of concern. We do believe we have a gender-sensitive policy, particularly with regard to women who have suffered gender-based violence. There are a number of areas in which we have tried to ensure that the process is as sensitive as possible. One is that, rather like for sexual orientation, decision makers are specifically trained in gender issues, and there is ongoing training and mentoring in place to ensure that.

A second area is the way that interviews are conducted. As you say, they do need to be conducted with a high degree of sensitivity. We try to minimise interviews if it is possible, so that we do not unnecessarily traumatise individuals. The decision makers are trained in how to conduct these interviews, in which they seek to establish trust and to approach topics in a sensitive manner. People can have a follow-up interview, which enables individuals who do not want to have unnecessarily long and traumatic interviews to be questioned for several hours. They can also request to bring somebody appropriate with them to the interview. Clearly, that would need to be the right person, not someone where there is a conflict of interest or another asylum seeker. But that could enable them to bring a family member, a trusted friend or a professional to



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support them during the interview. I hope those measures provide a degree of reassurance. I do not know if Dan has anything further.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Only to say that they can also request a female interviewer and a female interpreter, or male, depending on the gender-based preference of the individual.

Q311 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** Do they know? Is it well publicised and advertised to people that they have those particular options—the ability to bring someone, the ability to have a female interviewer and so on?

**Daniel Hobbs:** It is in our guidance, and people will generally be told, as part of their invitation to the substantive interview, that they can bring people. They will also be offered breaks as part of the interview, particularly where the individual is feeling distressed. The interviewing case worker would set that out for the individual, both at the interview and in their invitation.

Q312 **Dame Caroline Dinenage:** The reason I ask is that, according to your guidance—there is some great guidance—women can request a female interviewer and childcare can be provided during their interview at some of the sites. That is really important, because some of the evidence these women are giving, particularly about sexual violence, is horrific and you really do not want to be giving it in front of your children. But we have heard that there are circumstances in which women do not know that these options are available to them, and if they do request them, their requests are actually frequently not met. How can you go further to ensure that women are aware of these options and that their requests are granted?

**Robert Jenrick:** We take this very seriously—both myself as a Minister and the officials I work with. Let me look again at the procedures that we have in place and set those out to you. If there is anything further that we need to do in light of the evidence that you have heard, you have my assurance that we will take those steps.

Q313 **Chair:** Dan, you said that people will generally be told these things in their invitation to attend the interview. Is it just a standard paragraph?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I will need to go back and absolutely verify that, in the letter that is sent when they are invited, which will normally also go to their representatives, it is absolutely clear that those facilities and options are available.

Q314 **Chair:** It would be very helpful for us to see whatever standard paragraph is inserted. Do you know what number of requests are made by—let's use women as our example—female asylum applicants for a female interviewer?

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not have that detail, sorry.

**Chair:** Could you find out whether the Home Office knows what number of requests are made and, of those, what proportion are granted? That



would be a useful detail to have. Kim.

**Q315 Kim Johnson:** Minister, what safeguarding assessments are conducted before women, children and vulnerable people are accommodated in bridging hotels? There are 4,600 children seeking asylum who are currently accommodated in hotels, and of those 440 have gone missing. In Kent, a whistleblower reported witnessing children being trafficked from a hotel, run by the Home Office, estimating that 10% of its young people disappeared each week. Can you say how this has been investigated and what action is likely to be taken?

**Robert Jenrick:** Yes, and we take this very seriously, as you would expect. There are two issues that I think you are referring to: one is bridging hotels, which could have anyone in them, and the other is the hotels that have been put in place for unaccompanied minors.

To take the second issue first, which I think is the focus of your question, we do not want to have any hotels of this nature; we want to exit the use of these hotels as quickly as possible. The hotels solely exist because it is challenging to find local authorities who are willing to take these unaccompanied minors as swiftly as we need to upon their arrival in the UK. As you will recall, these young people used to be cared for by Kent County Council. As the numbers grew, it was no longer possible for them to take their responsibilities up, so the Home Office had to step in and create some very short-term bridging accommodation.

The number of unaccompanied minors has increased substantially in recent years—it has increased by over a third, since 2019. As a result of that, we do have to have some temporary accommodation. The main focus of our work has to be getting more local authorities to come forward and make places available, either in supported accommodation or foster care, so that individuals can be moved into better, permanent settings as quickly as possible.

For as long as we need to use the hotels, we have to put in place all the safeguarding support that we can. Each of the hotels has a range of support around them; if you visited one today, you would find a number of security guards around the perimeter, making sure that there are not individuals coming into the hotel who should not be, and that suspicious activity is reported immediately to the police. There will be 24/7 support workers there who are managing the facility and looking after the minors, and there will be nurses as well.

**Q316 Kim Johnson:** I imagine that you are getting this information from the management agents, whether it be Serco or G4S—whoever is delivering this service for you. From what I gather, the information you are getting and what actually happens in reality are two very different things, as we have heard from some of my colleagues this afternoon. It will be very interesting to see how you actually find out if these services are being provided in reality.



**Robert Jenrick:** The hotels we are talking about are actually provided by the Home Office; these hotels for unaccompanied minors are not outsourced to providers in the same way that hotels for adults and families might be. It is a Home Office responsibility to manage these hotels directly. As the Minister, when there were concerns recently regarding one hotel in Hove, I met senior officials at Brighton and Hove Council. My senior officials have spoken with Mitie, who provide the security there, to look into reports that issues were not raised, internally or with the Home Office, and I am going to visit that that hotel as soon as possible. So we do have procedures in place to understand what is actually happening on the ground.

There are also quite well worked-through procedures for signing in and out of the hotels. Remember, these are not detained facilities, and I do not think anybody is actually suggesting that we would want to put minors in detained facilities. It will always be a fact of life that young people— particularly the 16 and 17-year-olds that are predominantly in these facilities—will want to go out to get a breather from the hotel. They do have sign-in and sign-out facilities, and where an individual does not return within the agreed time, which for the hotel in Hove is four hours, a missing person procedure is immediately implemented. That would mean reporting it to the police and taking all the steps that would be taken for any other missing person, whether that was a migrant in a hotel or my child, and that is absolutely right.

Q317 **Kim Johnson:** May I ask that you write to the Committee about what actions are actually being taken to try to find these missing children?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be more than happy to do so, but just as a point of correction, there are actually only 200 young people who have gone missing from the hotels, not 400-plus. Those were occurrences, which is where a young person does not return within the agreed time but is later found and returned. That is not to diminish that number. It is also worth noting that there is a particular challenge with young Albanian males, because 88% of the missing children are Albanians, and they are predominantly 16 and 17-year-old males. That is an issue we are obviously thinking carefully about.

Q318 **Kim Johnson:** On the point you made earlier about local authorities being unwilling to take on unaccompanied minors, I would like to ask about dispersal in general. From my point of view, a lot of dispersal is taking place in the most disadvantaged wards. I know for a fact that, in my city of Liverpool, we have housed over 1,000 and that the Prime Minister and other Ministers have not accepted any. Can you explain whether you have done any mapping about what local authorities are accepting dispersal migrants from Manston and other detention centres?

**Robert Jenrick:** We have, and you are absolutely right to say that if numbers continue to be as high as they are, it is very important that there is fairness and equity as to how people are placed across the



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country. Otherwise, particular places—Liverpool would be one of them—will bear a heavy burden in looking after those people.

We have taken this in two halves; one, with respect to the unaccompanied minors, is the national transfer scheme, where we have made it mandatory that local authorities should be stepping up and taking young people so that they can exit the hotels as swiftly as possible. That is having an effect, and we have taken further steps to turbocharge that in recent weeks, such that the numbers in the hotels have fallen from around 450 at the end of November to around 150 today. I could give you the exact numbers, if you would like.

For dispersal accommodation more broadly, we are also trying to take a fairer approach to try to ensure that more people are taken by beyond just a small number of large cities, where the focus was for most of last year and in the recent past. That has meant that more facilities have opened in second-tier cities, smaller towns and even, in some cases, in rural areas, as you will have seen from the press coverage. There are challenges in some of those settings, because, generally speaking, it is easier to operate these facilities in larger communities, where individuals have more access to services. But we have tried to ensure a fairer split across the country.

The other area is that there has not been a fair distribution amongst the nations of the UK, and England has borne a disproportionate burden, so we are making a concerted effort, working with the devolved Administrations to ensure that more people are placed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

**Q319 Kim Johnson:** Could you explain why local authorities do not get additional funding for contingency hotels? I know, again from my city, that we have voluntary community organisations and public health providing support, but without additional funding, even though we have had a reduction in our central grant funding.

**Robert Jenrick:** That is a fair point. The Home Office has provided funding for dispersal accommodation, so if an individual is placed in more permanent accommodation, the relevant local authority will receive financial support for meeting their needs on an ongoing basis. Local authorities do not get commensurate financial support for hosting hotels, on the grounds that the hotels were never designed to be a long-term solution. They were designed to be something that was meeting the immediate, extreme pressures that were created as a result of small boat crossings. It is a fair point that, where hotels continue for sustained periods of time, we should think about what extra support we might be able to give to local authorities.

**Q320 Kim Johnson:** On the topic of small boat crossings, do you think they would reduce if we had more, safer and legal routes? Instead of spending an inordinate amount of money on the Rwanda scheme, should that money be used to fix our broken asylum system?



**Robert Jenrick:** I do not agree with you on that point, with respect. It is important that the UK does have safe and legal routes, such as the resettlement schemes that we have created for Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria and Hong Kong. We should be proud of those; in fact, last year, more individuals entered this country on humanitarian grounds than in any year since the end of the second world war.

But I do not think it is correct to assume that if you create a safe and legal route to the UK, that will prevent people from coming in small boats. We live in an age of mass migration, in which tens of millions of people are on the move, many of whom see the UK as a preferred destination, for understandable reasons. There is no safe and legal route that we could create that would prevent people from making that dangerous crossing, and I think the international evidence bears that out. Other countries—for example, the United States—that have opened schemes that give citizens of other countries the opportunity to come via safe and legal routes have not seen a commensurate fall in the number of people making illegal crossings, because demand is so high from people to leave those countries and to come to highly developed countries like our own.

**Kim Johnson:** I will end by saying that we have a broken asylum system, and that is why we unfortunately have hundreds of thousands of people still languishing in hotels, Minister.

Q321 **Chair:** Kim asked you an important point about the safeguarding of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. What are you doing to safeguard those children from those who are posing as children but who are not?

**Robert Jenrick:** That is an extremely important point, Madam Chair. We want to ensure that we have robust procedures in place to assess the age of people coming into the country; we are doing a disservice to vulnerable people and other children if we are placing adults in the hotels we have just been discussing or, indeed, in any other setting. We took powers in the Nationality and Borders Act to establish further procedures in this regard. We have published a detailed piece of work around scientific age assessment, and we are considering carefully the outcome of that work and how we can take it forward. We want to establish a scientific method for age assessment, as many other, comparable, countries already have. We will then seek to implement that as quickly as we can.

Q322 **Chair:** Thank you. I asked you a very specific question earlier about how long it took to do security checks to establish someone's identity and whether they were a security risk to this country and, potentially, to other asylum seekers whilst they were at Manston. There has been a very high-profile case recently, where we clearly failed as a nation, back in 2019, to identify that somebody was a security risk. Are you confident that an individual that was wanted for murder in Serbia and had a failed asylum claim in Norway would not get through Manston now?



**Robert Jenrick:** That was a particularly disturbing case, and that individual had lied and misled a number of countries as he passed through other safe countries to come to the UK. We need to learn lessons from that, and we are conducting an internal review to understand exactly what happened and every opportunity that there might have been to establish that individual's past. If necessary, we will make changes to ensure that does not happen again.

The fundamental challenge is that a very large number of people are arriving—for example, at Western Jet Foil—and saying that they are minors when they might not be. We need to put in place more robust procedures than we currently have, so that we can test the veracity of their claims. That leads us to establishing a scientific method of age assessment. As I said earlier, we now have an evidential basis to make that decision. We are going to carefully consider that and come forward with a proposal in due course. I would like to think we could implement that as quickly as possible, but it is a complex and sensitive area, so we will need to give it careful thought.

Q323 **Chair:** Could it have been a surprise to anybody that people lie? You said he had lied to various countries. I might go so far as to suggest that it is probably pretty usual practice for people fetching up at Manston to not tell the whole truth.

**Robert Jenrick:** Absolutely, and I think you are making the case for a more scientific method of age assessment. At the moment, we rely on a system which has a high degree of trust, and that is not appropriate if we are going to safeguard other young people and catch those people who are trying to game the system. I have met the individuals who do the difficult job of conducting interviews at Western Jet Foil. They speak to people who are, in many cases, lying, and they would be better served if there was a more scientific method at their disposal, so that we can make more robust decisions.

Q324 **Chair:** Presumably it was not just age he was lying about; he had a failed claim in Norway, and he had killed people in Serbia. Have we lost access to additional databases since 2019 that might help us identify these individuals?

**Robert Jenrick:** Perhaps Dan can answer with more detail.

**Daniel Hobbs:** We no longer have access to the EURODAC database, which provides evidence on people who have claimed in other European countries. As part of our leaving the EU, we do not have access to that system anymore.

Q325 **Chair:** How can we be confident, when we are saying people have travelled through safe third countries, that they have or not, if we do not have access to the databases that would tell us that?



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**Daniel Hobbs:** Generally, because people have got into boats in France to come to the UK. They will also often tell you about their journey to the UK as part of their screening interview.

Q326 **Chair:** We would not necessarily know if they had made a claim elsewhere, anymore?

**Daniel Hobbs:** No, but the point is that they could have done because they had been resident in those countries.

Q327 **Chair:** As with this individual, we would not know that they had a failed claim somewhere else.

**Daniel Hobbs:** Not necessarily, unless they had told us they were there and we sought information from that country on a bilateral basis.

Q328 **Chair:** On the Ukrainian visa scheme, we know that it is predominantly women and children who have been seeking access to sanctuary in the UK. Are we confident that those applications are being processed swiftly?

**Robert Jenrick:** Yes, I believe so. You are right to say that it is predominantly, or majority, female; in the latest statistics that I have seen, approximately 49% of those who are coming are adult working-age women. A significant proportion on top of that are obviously girls as part of family parties. If your question is whether there is any suggestion that female applications would be treated any differently from male application, then absolutely not. The Home Office is meeting its current service standards in processing the claims—I am joined by Mandy to my right, who has oversight.

Q329 **Chair:** Mandy, you have had no questions so far, so I will direct this one to you, because the Minister has not guessed where I am going with this. There are women who have fled Ukraine with their children, who are potentially at risk, living in camps in Poland, and who have made applications to come here. Is it acceptable that I have a constituent seeking to sponsor a woman and child—a nine-year-old girl—who have been living in a camp in Poland, and whose outstanding application to us is now 78 days old?

**Mandy Ivey:** At the outset, I should be clear that I am not responsible for the Ukrainian scheme. I know that my colleagues who are working on those cases are taking their role really seriously and prioritising and processing applications as quickly as they can. We will need to come back to you with the detail that you have asked for. I do not have that information.

Q330 **Chair:** Thank you. I have raised this with the Home Office numerous times since November, but I have still had no answers. Perhaps the Minister can give me some advice. Should they make a fresh application?

**Robert Jenrick:** It should not have to be this way, but if you give me the details of their application, I would be happy to look into exactly what has happened. In general, we have succeeded in processing claims within



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the service standard. The scheme is operating well today, and a substantial amount of Home Office resource has been put against it—in fact, to the detriment of some of our other visa and immigration services. We are now approaching the first-year anniversary of the route, and it has been a huge success, which we should all be proud of.

**Chair:** We should indeed be able to celebrate it; my constituent, Harriet, is not celebrating it, because she has seen a family return to Ukraine having waited in Poland for 78 days for the Home Office to process their application. Elliot.

Q331 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you very much, Chair. I have some questions around access to services. Asylum support was recently increased to £45 a week, which was described by the High Court as the minimum lawful action necessary. What steps are the Home Office taking to be confident that they are fulfilling their duty to ensure that this meets essential living needs?

**Robert Jenrick:** We have complied with the interim order, so the level of support the Court requested will now be paid to individuals. We are considering our position and whether we want to challenge that, but even were we to do so, we would obviously continue to meet our obligation to the Court in the interim.

There is a balance to be struck here. A cost of living crisis is affecting all members of society. Of course, we want to provide asylum seekers with sufficient funding to live decently while their claims are being heard, but it would also be inappropriate for us to privilege them versus any other member of society. The balance has to be to find a level which enables them to manage their affairs decently while they are awaiting the outcome of their cases, but not go to further than that, because we do not want to create any additional pull factors to the UK that makes life here more generous than in any of our European neighbours.

It is worth saying that, in most cases, individuals are provided with accommodation that is furnished and has utilities included. The cost of living crisis we are living through is driven by a number of things, but one of the major factors is the rise in energy prices; that should not be impacting upon the household budgets of asylum seekers. We also have different rates for a range of more vulnerable groups, such as a maternity grant and support for pregnant women and mothers.

Q332 **Elliot Colburn:** You have answered my second question around whether it could create perverse incentive, so thank you for that.

Could you talk to us a little more about the Home Office's assessment of that level of support; it is not linked to the uprating of inflation or mainstream benefits, that much is clear, so what is the rationale and process for deciding the level of support and whether it meets those needs without creating any additional pull factors?



**Daniel Hobbs:** The process is done on an annual review basis, and the Home Office is reviewing that position in light of the judgment. That is done on a mix of a basket of goods, the inflation rate and work by the Office for National Statistics, in terms of the availability. That is then looked at in terms of a comparative group in terms of spend. The methodology had been successfully defended as a rational basis on which to set the level to meet the minimum basic needs of individuals in our asylum support system. Obviously, that has been subject to litigation, and we are currently reviewing our position in light of the interim order and the judgment of the High Court. But, as I say, the methodology had been successfully defended over a period as being a rational basis on which to set the level.

Q333 **Elliot Colburn:** Notwithstanding the increase to £45, and the fact that the Home Office is currently considering its position, the previous £40 weekly rate included just 69p to go towards toiletries. That included access to feminine products, such as tampons and other period products. Again, evidence that we have received indicated that some women were deciding between other essentials, like food, and period products. Is that acceptable? Has the Home Office looked into potentially providing guaranteed access to free period products, for example?

**Daniel Hobbs:** As you say, there is a breakdown of allowances for each element of the £40 rate—now £45—as was calculated under the scheme. I am not aware that we have explored the issue around free and guaranteed access to sanitary products—I will need to check with the team on that. But as the Minister said, there are top-ups that people can ask for if they are facing specific destitution, and my understanding is that, invariably, those are looked at favourably. If people find themselves in particularly difficult circumstances, they can, through the asylum support services seek further top-ups where they require them.

Q334 **Elliot Colburn:** On the subject of pregnant women, Maternity Action has reported to us that pregnant women are still being dispersed at short notice, without advice from a women's clinician. Why is that still happening?

**Robert Jenrick:** I am not sure what you mean by dispersed. If a pregnant woman arrives at Manston, great care would be taken to support her. It would not be our intention for that person to be put on a bus and taken to an unknown destination, but, clearly, we would not want them to remain at Manston for a prolonged period, although they would have access to medical support there.

I would hope that a sensitive decision is made about where to take them. In finding hotels or other forms of accommodation, we have always sought to prioritise vulnerable people, and pregnant women would of course be high on that list. There is no alternative but to get people out of somewhere like Manston and into better accommodation as swiftly as possible. There will be instances where people have been moved on, but it is always moving on in their best interest, in the sense of moving them



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to something better and more permanent than the very temporary bridge that somewhere like Manston provides.

**Q335 Elliot Colburn:** There is no published data around women being moved on, to use your phrase, whilst pregnant or post-natally. Will you commit to reviewing the decision not to publish that data?

**Robert Jenrick:** I am happy to give that thought, although I am not sure what the data would refer to. Crudely, we have three settings: one is the immediate reception at Manston, then we have hotels and then we have dispersal accommodation, which might be a home, a flat—something more permanent. I can see whether we have data on pregnant women within those settings. But it is important for, and probably in the best interests of, pregnant women to move on that journey, because a pregnant woman would not want to remain at Manston for a long time. They might prefer to stay in a hotel, rather than to move on to the dispersal accommodation, but it might equally be in their best interests to move them to the dispersal accommodation, because that would be a home, or more akin to a home than a hotel. The key thing is that each of those steps is taken sensitively and not at moments when it would be against medical advice or likely to cause the pregnant woman distress.

**Q336 Elliot Colburn:** From the report that we received, that is the concern from Maternity Action. Of course, we do not want to keep pregnant women in Manston, in particular, but despite assurances around access to medical support, there is still evidence that pregnant women are not getting access to clinicians before being moved on to either a hotel or dispersal accommodation. Will the Home Office commit to reviewing the current guidance and compliance with the guidance when it comes to the dispersal of pregnant women?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be very happy to look into the way we are managing that process and to ensure that it is as sensitive as possible.

**Chair:** We do know that once people are—I am going to use the term loosely—“settled” in dispersed accommodation, they can sometimes be moved on again, at relatively short notice, to various parts of the country. It is not unusual to find yourself going from Wales to Southampton, for example. It would be really useful to have data on what notice people are given before they are moved, and specifically with reference to pregnant women—we all know that continuity of care when you are pregnant is important—and families with children. I hear too many stories in my constituency surgeries of families in dispersed accommodation in Southampton being moved suddenly, with children missing out on school places—they have been settled in a school and are then moved. I spoke to a gentleman today in Westminster Hall. He and his father were separated—he is not a child—but one of them is now in Carlisle, and I think they started off in Brighton. These are huge distances, and if that happens to parents with children who are settled in a school, that is a serious challenge in terms of us meeting our obligations under the Children Act.



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Anum, did you have a final question on toiletries?

Q337 **Ms Qaisar:** I did, thank you, Chair. Bear with me, panel. The weekly rate is around £40 to £45. As I understand it, that includes £6 to £9 per week to cover toiletries, including women's period products. If my maths is right—and it might not be—that should be around £2.76 every four weeks. I am a little confused, because a pack of 18 Tampax costs around £2.50; supermarket-own-branded sanitary towels cost around 80p per packet. Of course, if you have differing levels of period flow, it could be heavier or lighter. I really want to gain an understanding of how policies are created and how you advocate for women within the process. Are policies made within the prism of gender sensitivity?

**Robert Jenrick:** I do not know exactly how that apportionment was arrived at.

**Daniel Hobbs:** I do not know the precise details, but as I said earlier, it is done on a basket of goods and an allowance, and it is looked at against a comparative population group in terms of income. Again, we can probably write to the Committee on this in terms of the methodology and statistics, because it has been subject to litigation. There is a methodology that is used with the statistics to set that policy as it is set by the Government.

Q338 **Ms Qaisar:** Minister, are policies considered through the prism of gender sensitivity?

**Robert Jenrick:** Yes, they are. You can see that evidenced by the fact that we have this specific allocation—albeit that I appreciate your view that it is too low—and that we have a range of grants available for women who are pregnant and for mums. These have been put in place to specifically support women during particular periods of their life when they need additional support.

Overall, as I said in my answer earlier, we have to balance this against the general population. There are many people who are finding life difficult at the moment, and it would not be right for us to increase the support for asylum seekers more than we are providing to, say, recipients of universal credit. We have a responsibility to the broader taxpayer at the same time.

Q339 **Ms Qaisar:** That is really interesting, Minister, because the Scottish Government take a different approach, where these products are free. Do you not think that it would be better to have a wider conversation about free access to period products across the country? I do not think that people in the asylum process would consider free period products to be a pull factor.

**Robert Jenrick:** I am not sure how practical it would be to provide free period products to this cohort—I appreciate that is the Scottish Government's approach more generally. Here, we have a very large range of settings, from Manston to hundreds of hotels and thousands of



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dispersal accommodation venues. From a practical perspective, it would be quite difficult to make that available, but I am always open to suggestions.

I have seen for myself that at Western Jet Foil and Manston that there is a wide range of free products available for women and parents, from sanitary products to baby milk and powder. These are offered freely to anyone who is passing through those settings in that particularly challenging moment when they first arrive in the UK.

Q340 **Chair:** During covid-19, we were all told to wash our hands more regularly. Was there any uplift for hand sanitisers or handwash?

***Daniel Hobbs:*** There was an interim uplift during the covid period.

**Chair:** Unless any other Members have further questions, that brings this afternoon's Committee meeting to an end. I thank all of you for attending.