



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Home Secretary, HC 201

Wednesday 14 June 2023

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; Paula Barker; Simon Fell; Carolyn Harris; Tim Loughton; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 536-686

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Suella Braverman MP, Home Secretary; Rachel Watson, Policing Director, Home Office; Daniel Hobbs, Director of Asylum, Protection and Enforcement, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Suella Braverman MP, Rachel Watson and Daniel Hobbs.

Q536 **Chair:** Good morning everybody and welcome to the Home Affairs Committee. We are delighted to have the Home Secretary with us for one of our regular sessions to ask questions about the Home Office.

Before I start, I want to mark that today is the seventh anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy. I am sure that our thoughts are with the families of all those affected, and with the families and friends of all those who died or were injured in the attack in Nottingham yesterday.

Home Secretary, I see that you have brought some Home Office officials with you. For the record, it might be helpful if they gave their name and role.

Rachel Watson: Good morning. I am Rachel Watson, the policing director in the Home Office.

Daniel Hobbs: Good morning. I am Dan Hobbs, the director for asylum protection and enforcement in the Home Office.

Q537 **Chair:** Thank you. I ought to mention that the air conditioning is not working in this room. We are expecting some fans to be brought in to keep us all cool.

As you would expect, Home Secretary, we have lots of questions for you this morning. I would like to start where we as a Committee left off last week. We are in the middle of an inquiry into human trafficking. Last week we took evidence from a commercial website called Vivastreet, which hosts prostitution adverts on which victims of sex trafficking have been advertised. I think the Committee was fairly shocked by what we heard. The public might also be shocked that these pimping websites are currently legal and that organised prostitution operations such as Vivastreet, which allows single individuals to pay to advertise multiple women for prostitution, are operating freely and openly. Why have we not outlawed these types of pimping websites?

Suella Braverman: Thank you, Dame Diana. Before I answer, may I take a moment to reiterate the sympathies that you have expressed for those directly and more broadly affected by the Grenfell Tower tragedy? I also echo the comments that I made yesterday about the tragic incident in Nottingham. It would not be appropriate for me to go into operational details, but I made a statement yesterday. It is deeply shocking for the community in Nottingham and the surrounding area. My thoughts are with the families and friends of those affected.

I have to say, that is the first time that I have heard of Vivastreet. You say that it is a website that advertises prostitution services. I will turn to Rachel to see if officials have anything to say, but this is a heinous practice. We need to ensure that the vulnerability of those involved is put first and foremost by the people on the frontline. Prostitution is very closely related to human trafficking, modern slavery and people



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smuggling. We passed the landmark Modern Slavery Act in 2015, which put into place a broad framework designed specifically to protect the vulnerable people to whom you refer.

Q538 Chair: I hear what you say. I am aware that Vivastreet has met your officials in the Home Office 15 times in the last five years so, clearly, your officials know about it. I would point out that many countries in the world, including France, Israel and the US, have outlawed these websites. Hearing that, is your view that we are quite soft in allowing these websites to continue, compared with other countries in the world?

Suella Braverman: When it comes to adult services websites, law enforcement agencies recognise that they are an enabler of sexual exploitation. As I said, they are linked to trafficking. We are working closely with the online companies to ensure that awareness is raised so that criminal activity does not occur. To be honest, this is the first time that I am coming across this particular subject. Unless officials can add anything, I would rather reserve my position and write to you with more detail.

Q539 Chair: That would be helpful. I just wanted to tell you that I had a look on the website for Hampshire, which is the county in which your constituency is based. There were 297 prostitution adverts live on Vivastreet yesterday. I had a look at about 150 of those, and at least half of them had adverts for different women but were using the same phone number or the same text. That is a red flag that they could have been trafficked. There were lots of adverts suggesting a woman was new in town or only here for a short period, which, again, fits with what we have heard about women being moved around the country by traffickers.

I have now referred those adverts to Hampshire and Isle of Wight constabulary for them to have a look at this, because it seems to me that there are some obvious red flags there. I hear what you say about this being the first time that you have become aware of this. I just wonder, though, about your reflection on hearing about that in your own local area. Do you think the Government need to do something about these websites?

Suella Braverman: It is totally unacceptable, of course. What I am encouraged by is that we have new mechanisms in legislation to deal with the trafficking of vulnerable people, which includes exploitation and can include prostitution of the type that you are talking about. There is a whole array of measures to support vulnerable victims as they go through a criminal investigation, such as special measures and witness anonymity. Obviously, if it is support through the modern slavery framework that is required, that will be provided upon an assessment of individual circumstances. In terms of that element, there is a large framework. It requires an effective police investigation.

Q540 Chair: Okay. I just want to move on to the Illegal Migration Bill, particularly dealing with the example I have been setting out around women who have been trafficked into sexual exploitation. I had a look at the equalities impact assessment for the Bill, which concludes that the



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provisions that are going to be introduced will have a disproportionate impact on women. I just want to drill down into this a little bit. If a woman who had been brought into the United Kingdom by an illegal route for sex trafficking came to the attention of the authorities, would she be subject to arrest and detention under the Illegal Migration Bill?

Suella Braverman: For context, the vast majority of people coming on small boats are men—about 80%—so we are talking about a minority of people who are female. I would say we are also talking about an even smaller minority of women who are being trafficked on the boats. I am not denying that it occurs, but it is a small fraction compared with the totality of the issue that our Bill is designed to deal with.

Q541 **Chair:** But they are caught up in it, so would they be subject to arrest and detention?

Suella Braverman: What I would say is that we take very seriously our commitments and our protections under the Modern Slavery Act. We want to ensure that the balance is struck. What we have seen—I talked about it last time and in a follow-up letter—is that the modern slavery rules have been exploited and abused by people coming here illegally to gain time to stay in the UK. Our measures in the Bill make it harder for people to game the modern slavery system. At the same time, I believe our measures in the Bill strike the right balance and still enable us to protect the genuine victims of trafficking, such as the type that you mention, who have been trafficked—

Q542 **Chair:** So will they be subject to arrest and detention?

Suella Braverman: Well, it would depend on the circumstances. I am not going to give you a definitive answer without knowing the particular facts.

Q543 **Chair:** So a woman who has arrived irregularly or illegally in the United Kingdom, who comes to the attention of the authorities and who has been brought in and trafficked for sexual exploitation—under the Illegal Migration Bill, you are saying that you are not sure whether she would be arrested and detained.

Suella Braverman: There is an exception. We have provisions in the IMB that deal with the situation I have just set out. We have got to—

Q544 **Chair:** So all women who are in those circumstances would not be subject to this provision of arrest and detention.

Suella Braverman: If I can finish the answer, because it is a complicated issue, so I do need to get through the explanation. We have set out very targeted and deliberately drafted measures in the Illegal Migration Bill. What we have done is we have allowed for the scenario where someone is claiming to be a victim of trafficking or modern slavery. If they are part of a police investigation, for example—

Q545 **Chair:** But say they are not. Say that it has just come to the attention of the authorities that this woman has arrived irregularly or illegally in the United Kingdom and is being used for sex trafficking. Just leaving aside



the police investigation, what happens to this woman?

Suella Braverman: That is a fundamental aspect of the issue you have just raised. This is an illegality we are talking about, if someone has been trafficked for prostitution. We believe that our measures strike the right balance of protecting those genuine victims. If they go to the police or if they are required by the police to be here and be part of a live investigation relating to the investigation of trafficking or modern slavery, then they could claim an exemption to the removal powers in the Bill. We have to also make sure that we are not allowing the continuation of the gaming of our rules, which is people claiming to be victims of modern slavery when they patently are not, as a way to thwart removal, as a way to thwart detention and as a way to buy time in the United Kingdom.

Q546 **Chair:** I think the problem for the Committee is that we have asked for evidence of that gaming of the system and we have not received any of it. In fact, we have had in front of us the former anti-slavery commissioner, who again says that she has seen no evidence of that either.

On this particular point—

Suella Braverman: That is not right. You raised this point the last time I came before the Committee. I made the point then, I still maintain it and I wrote to you with detailed examples subsequently.

Q547 **Chair:** Well, I think two.

Suella Braverman: No, not two, actually.

Q548 **Chair:** It was four, my Clerk reliably informs me.

Suella Braverman: It was several examples, and I can mention more now. They were several examples of how modern slavery rules are being abused by people who are not genuine victims of modern slavery. We need to bring an end to that and that is what the Bill does.

Q549 **Chair:** We have not seen that evidence. We have seen a couple, or four, I think, as my Clerk reliably informs me, which you put in your letter.

I just want to be clear, though. What you are saying to me is that this person, this woman, would be subject to arrest and detention, but she may be able to stop being removed from the country if she then participates in giving evidence and being part of a police investigation. I think that is what you are saying to me. So she would be arrested and detained in the first place.

Suella Braverman: We are saying that we take our commitments to modern slavery very seriously. We are not including blanket exclusions in our legislation.

Q550 **Chair:** Okay, so she would be arrested.

Suella Braverman: We have struck the right balance, whereby genuine victims of modern slavery can still put in a claim and if they are able to meet the thresholds we have set in the Bill, combined with thresholds that



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we are implementing at the moment, in terms of objective and compelling evidence for their reasonable grounds claim and if they are part of a police investigation, we believe that will filter out the vexatious claims of modern slavery.

Q551 **Chair:** Okay, so she would be subject to arrest and detention. She might be able to claim the exemption if she is helping the police. Will she be allowed to access the support via the national referral mechanism?

Suella Braverman: Potentially, yes. Absolutely, if she is eligible. If she meets the criteria that we have set. So she meets the thresholds we have set in our reasonable grounds guidance: objective and compelling evidence of being a victim of modern slavery; if there is a requirement by the police that she or he stay here to participate in and enable investigation; and if she satisfies the criteria in modern slavery. Then, yes, she may well be entitled to the NRM and support under the modern slavery regime.

Q552 **Chair:** Right. It is quite clear that we know that particularly victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation find it very difficult to come forward and explain what has happened to them. It takes them quite a long time to get confidence to do that.

Suella Braverman: The problem I would also have to add here is that, at the moment, because of the dramatic and exponential increase in the number of claims that are being put into our modern slavery system, the delay has become unacceptable. What used to take 40 or 50 days to consider a reasonable grounds or conclusive grounds decision is now taking 500 days. That is because the system has been overwhelmed by a large number of meritless claims. These measures will actually free up our resources to better help those genuine victims of modern slavery more quickly.

Q553 **Chair:** Again, the anti-slavery commissioner does not agree with that. She says that the fact that more people are coming forward is because of better training and better spotting of people who might well have been trafficked. That is why she says the numbers have gone up and I think, actually, the former Prime Minister Theresa May also takes that view.

While we are on about this issue of the Illegal Migration Bill, it is 100 days since that Bill was introduced to the Commons. It has gone through all its Commons stages and is now in the Lords, as you know. I think it is the final day for the Committee stage in the Lords. Why do we still not have an economic impact assessment?

Suella Braverman: We obviously have produced lots of documents surrounding the need for the Bill. Again, I need to set out the context. We have got a very urgent problem here, relating to illegal migration; it is one of the Prime Minister's priorities and mine as well, with 45,000 people travelling across the channel illegally last year. We are spending £6 million a day on hotel accommodation—£3 billion a year. Doing nothing is not an option.

Q554 **Chair:** I would like you just to answer the question, because I know that



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other Members want to come in. Why have we not got the economic impact assessment, which is a requirement really for Members to know how much this Bill is going to cost?

Suella Braverman: We will be publishing it in due course.

Q555 **Chair:** When does that mean? I mean, the Bill will have finished all its stages and been given Royal Assent by the time we get this, won't it?

Suella Braverman: The issue is that there are many unknown factors, relating to—

Q556 **Chair:** So you do not know the factors—?

Suella Braverman: If I could finish a sentence, then we might be able to get somewhere.

Q557 **Chair:** Sorry. I am just intrigued by what you are saying: "There are many unknown factors" of a Bill that is three quarters of its way through the House of Lords.

Suella Braverman: There are many unknown factors upon which the Bill's success is contingent; I am very happy to admit that. For example, one is the delivery of our Rwanda agreement. We are currently in litigation and those timelines are out of our control. We need to conclude our litigation relating to our Rwanda agreement. Once we have a clear view of the operability of Rwanda confirmed by the courts, then we will be able to take a very firm view about the economic impact of this Bill.

However, I would also say that to my mind it is pretty obvious what the economic impact of the Bill will be. We will stop spending £3 billion a year on our asylum cost. It is a Bill that will lead to the cessation of 45,000 people in hotels and £6 million a day. To my mind, those are savings that we cannot ignore.

Q558 **Chair:** Okay. Are you able just to help us with what the financial assessment is of detaining all those who will need to be detained under the Bill? What is the cost in that, because you are going to detain people for at least up to 28 days? So what is the cost of that going to be?

Suella Braverman: Again, we are keeping that under review. Again, that is an unknown. I cannot predict the number of people who are going to be arriving on any one day illegally. We have past experience, but we know that these numbers really vary. When the Bill comes into force—

Q559 **Chair:** What is your best estimate?

Suella Braverman: When the Bill comes into force, we will be able to take a view as to how and how quickly we are able to operationalise our detention powers and our relocation powers, and that will then inform the costs.

Q560 **Chair:** All right, thank you. I will just move on very quickly to the backlog. As of the end of November last year, the asylum initial decision backlog was 131,292; that is what was published. On 28 May, it was



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137,583. I just want to be clear: has the asylum backlog increased or decreased under your watch?

Suella Braverman: The backlog of initial decisions which predate 28 June 2022—the so-called legacy backlog—has decreased. As of December, when the Prime Minister stood up and set out our plan, that stood at just over 92,000. That has fallen by about 17,000 at most recent count. So, the backlog to which the Prime Minister and I have consistently been referring has fallen.

We also have inflowing cases, which post-date 28 June 2022 and run up to today. It is absolutely impossible to ever get that number down to zero, because there are constantly cases coming into the system. But I accept, of course, that the numbers keep rising because the boats keep coming, and that is the flow of casework, and that is what we are also working on to reduce.

Q561 **Chair:** I think 1,200 came over in small boats between Saturday and Monday alone, so that obviously needs to be added in to your backlog.

Suella Braverman: Exactly.

Q562 **Chair:** Just so I am clear on the backlogs, you have got your legacy backlog, which you say has gone down by 17,000; then you have got your flow backlog, which is just going up and up; and then, as of today, you have got more coming in. So you have got three lots of backlogs that you are dealing with.

Suella Braverman: You can cut the cake in many different ways. I mean, it is very typical and proper to define a legacy backlog; that is when the NABA came into force. And it is right that the old rules applied up until then.

There are some very long-standing cases in that backlog, and it is right that we deal with that 92,000-strong case load. On flow, you could go up until 7 March 2023, which is when we will backdate the implementation of our new measures in the Illegal Migration Bill. You could do a post-7 March case load too. There are different ways of looking at it, but the Prime Minister and I have been consistent and clear all along that the pre-28 June '22 backlog—the so-called legacy initial decisions—has fallen because of interventions that we have put in place.

Q563 **Chair:** Right; it just seems to me that you have a backlog of backlogs now. You are just building backlog upon backlog. That is the position you are in.

Suella Braverman: No, I wouldn't say that. I would say that we have a case load of cases, and you have to define them in different ways. There are different rules that apply to different cases—

Chair: Well, we will just disagree on that.

Suella Braverman: There are initial decisions. There are decisions that are being appealed. There is work in progress. There is business as usual.



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There are all types of decisions in the asylum case load. It is not fair to count it all in the very simplistic form you are suggesting.

Q564 **Chair:** I think we are going to disagree on that, because I think you have a backlog of backlogs now.

Can I finally deal with caseworkers? You very kindly wrote to me last night, and you set out in your letter the Prime Minister's promise that you would have 2,500 caseworkers to deal with these backlogs. In that letter, you say that, as of 1 March, there were 1,281 caseworkers. You say also that the caseworker number will go up to 1,800 by the summer, and by September this year it will be 2,500. I just want to ask you how that is going. We are now in June, so what is the latest figure, in terms of caseworkers?

Suella Braverman: I will turn to Dan, but we have increased the decision makers, and my most recent figure is 1,281 full-time equivalent asylum decision makers—

Chair: You had that in March.

Suella Braverman: That is 48% more than July 2022, and we are aiming to get to 2,500 by September.

Q565 **Chair:** Sorry, on 1 March you were at 1,281, so you have not increased that since March.

Daniel Hobbs: That is the figure that we have, which is as of the March figure. Obviously, the recruitment is ongoing, and we have a number of mass campaigns that are running through the operations. We don't have the figure as at today.

Q566 **Chair:** You don't know today how many caseworkers you have? Clearing the backlog is one of the Prime Minister's top priorities.

Suella Braverman: We produce these figures on a regular basis. I am very confident that those are the most recent figures. I have very regular, intensive work programmes on the issue of caseworker recruitment, and we are actually doing very well. I am confident that we are going to meet our target of 2,500 by September.

Q567 **Chair:** Sorry, what is the definition of "summer" for getting to 1,800? In your letter, you said that by the summer you would be at 1,800, and it is 14 June today—it is summer.

Suella Braverman: I can write to you—

Chair: Well, you wrote to me last night.

Suella Braverman: —if I can access that data with the absolutely up-to-date figure as of today. I am not sure whether we can identify that figure. As I say, I look at this piece of work very, very closely—

Chair: But you don't know what today's figure is.



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Suella Braverman: We have a very intensive work programme in the Home Office. As I said, there has been a very proactive effort to recruit and onboard caseworkers—

Chair: Yes, I hear that.

Suella Braverman: We will improve their productivity and train them up. As I said, I am confident that we are going to meet our target.

Q568 **Chair:** Okay, so you are going to get to 1,800 by the summer and 2,500 by September.

Suella Braverman: Yes, I believe so.

Q569 **Chair:** Really? Goodness me. Are the figures that you put in your letter gross or net figures?

Suella Braverman: They will be full-time equivalent.

Q570 **Chair:** So they are full-time equivalent, and are they gross or net? When we had evidence in 2021, the attrition rate within this group of staff was at 47%. What is the attrition rate?

Suella Braverman: We will be talking about our total cohort. It is not just about people coming in. It is only effective if we have bums on seats, so to speak, at the end of the day.

Chair: Okay, so these are net figures.

Suella Braverman: This is not just about a one-way recruitment drive; it is about what our total cohort comprises.

Q571 **Chair:** That is interesting, because in your letter you say you don't keep records of people leaving, retiring, moving on or getting promotions, so how do you know those figures are correct?

Suella Braverman: We know what our total workforce is.

Q572 **Chair:** Oh, do you? Because you say, "We do not keep a central record of the number of asylum caseworkers who have left their role due to retirement, resignation, promotion or other causes." You are saying to me that the figures that you put in your letter are net figures, but you don't actually have a central record to work out how many people have left.

Suella Braverman: I will turn to Dan.

Daniel Hobbs: We do know that our attrition rate, which you mentioned, has dropped significantly—it is down to around 28%. As the Home Secretary said, the aim is to have 2,500 caseworkers in post in September, and that is what we are working towards and what the plans are delivering against.

Suella Braverman: As I said, I think we have a good track record. As of our most recent figure, we have already increased the number by about 48% compared to July 2022, so we are moving in the right direction.



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Chair: But you had missed your target in July 2022. You were supposed to get to 1,000, and you missed that target, so it took you longer to get to over 1,000. I agree that it is good to see progress being made, but you have a long way to go if you are going to get to 2,500 by September and you have an attrition rate of 28%. We will be interested to see the next figures produced from the Home Office on this issue.

Q573 **Simon Fell:** Thank you for joining us, Home Secretary. I am going to ask you some exciting questions about fraud. Last time you were in front of us, you trailed the fact that the fraud strategy was about to be launched. I am very glad to see it now out, and I think it is a good document. It brings together Government and Government focus, which I welcome, as something of an aficionado of these reports over the years.

But the thing that strikes me is that, despite the fact that 40% of crime in England and Wales is fraud—it is the single most common crime type around—the plan only proposes to reduce it by 10%. Could you share your thinking on that?

Suella Braverman: Thank you for bringing your expertise to this issue. It has been an underexplored issue for some time, and that is why I am very proud that, as a Government, we were able to publish this long-awaited strategy. It is now a prevalent feature of modern-day crime and law enforcement, and we need a step change in how our agencies respond to this very significant crime, which can be devastating.

The fraud strategy includes over 50 actions—I think that is quite ambitious—that we are working on. You say that it does not go far enough. If we look at the scale of the problem, it consists of over 40% of crime these days, and it is rising quickly. We have committed to cutting it. That is a big step forward, and we are building on progress that has been made so far.

We have already blocked over 600 million scam texts from reaching the public. This strategy will enable us to go further, by banning cold calls on financial products, banning SIM farms, preventing criminals using mass texts even more and taking down fraudulent websites. I point you to the very good operation on iSpoofer that the Met and other policing partners recently led, which led to a very wide-ranging takedown of one such website. There is some work, but we have to build on it.

The £100 million investment in law enforcement is a significant contribution to the strategy, and we need to go further, building on the measures in the Online Safety Bill, to ensure that people are better protected. Of notable significance is the fact that our national fraud squad sets a high level of ambition of 400 new specialists who are going to be working in this field, deploying those from the UK intelligence community to relentlessly pursue criminals who are operating in this way.

I would love to eradicate fraud and get it down to zero, but this is the beginning of the fightback against fraud, and we have to be ambitious and stretch ourselves but also have an element of realism in terms of what we can technologically and operationally achieve.



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Q574 **Simon Fell:** I do not think anyone doubts the scale of the challenge here, which is huge—that 40% is, there or thereabouts, 3.5 million crimes a year. Within that, there is probably significant under-reporting, and it does not include public sector fraud against the DWP and in other areas.

To take you back to that 10%, if 40% of crime was burglaries, muggings or anything else, then there would be headlines and they would be very, very different, with everybody shouting about it, yet for some reason we seem to be able to bear fraud. I am interested as to why you think a 10% reduction is sufficient as part of this strategy, especially given the fact that we know that the people committing these frauds often have very deep links with organised crime and are driving far worse stuff and using this to fuel that activity.

Suella Braverman: It is a fair challenge. I believe that 10% will still numerically in absolute terms mean hundreds of thousands fewer victims of fraud and fewer offences. That must be welcomed.

We have ultimately a very complex challenge that is shared by many jurisdictions around the world. When I speak to my Five Eyes partners, online crime, cyber-crime and fraudulent activities are often an area of common concern.

The way these criminals operate is so multifaceted, and that affects what the protections and mitigations should be. We need greater powers to pursue the fraudsters to ensure that criminals are behind bars. That means better technological capability for our police, for our NCA and for our other services so that they can detect crime and take action. We need to block it in the first place. I think that requires a degree of greater personal responsibility on the part of citizens to be more aware about the threats we all face.

The thing about fraud is that there is no one type of victim. It can be an elderly lady—I am sure we have all met a constituent who has had her life savings robbed from her over the phone by a swindler—to a professional who works in the City who has been a victim of credit card fraud or identity fraud. And I haven't even got to the broader, white-collar serious organised crime that we see, which can damage economies. It is so varied and requires a huge level of personal responsibility.

We need to get the technology companies to play their part, which is why the Online Safety Bill is integral to this, and we need law enforcement and our policing community to be better equipped. It is an incredibly challenging issue, and I think this is a very important first step.

Q575 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. You touched on tech companies. So 80% of fraud is cyber-enabled, and let us be honest: the vast majority of that sits on Meta's platform. Some 70% of the fraud that banks have to deal with comes direct from Facebook, Instagram and other channels.

Why are we not pursuing a more stringent, polluter-pays principle, where those who are actually driving this are held responsible for it, whether financially or reputationally? Let's be honest, that is what is going to drive



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these companies to change their behaviour and clamp down on fraud on their platforms.

Suella Braverman: The Online Safety Bill contains specific measures, in that there will be greater penalties and more incentives. It will require the social media and search engine giants to introduce measures to prevent fraud. We are also bringing forward the online advertising programme, which will tackle fraudulent ads across the UK-facing internet. We have published charters with the banking, accountancy and telecoms sectors, which are already seeing results. We hope to follow up with an online fraud charter very soon, which will address some of the detail to which you refer.

Incentivisation is key. We have an excellent new anti-fraud champion, Anthony Browne MP, who will be working with industry to ensure that companies are adequately incentivised to tackle fraud. We have engagement with the big tech companies, and ultimately we need to ensure that the balance is struck between law enforcement and access and their need for end-to-end encryption. I believe the technology exists to enable both privacy and security concerns to be addressed. We need to incentivise tech companies to embrace it.

Q576 **Simon Fell:** Moving on to the PSR and the contingent reimbursement model, the announcement of last week or the week before was that the vast majority of people, if they fell victim to fraud through the banking system, would get their money back—through a slightly convoluted process, but a process none the less. Many people see that as a win.

Are you not concerned that we are now in the position where we are coddling people to the point where they will not learn from their mistakes or change their behaviour as a result of this? This is a tried and tested analogy, but if you leave your front door open and you are burgled, your insurance company won't pay out. There is a reason for that. We are walking into an environment, are we not, where in an online space people are not going to be concerned about the risks they are facing?

Suella Braverman: That is a really important point, and I am passionate about increasing awareness—in a way, much like practice changed when it came to wearing a seat belt, or, as you say, putting CCTV on your property.

We need a step change when it comes to online activity. We are far more vulnerable than we appreciate, and people's lives are lived so prolifically online that they forget that there are fraudsters operating in that online world. There needs to be a culture change, and greater awareness among individuals about how they can secure themselves properly online while buying their theatre tickets or booking their holidays. I don't think we yet have a sufficient level of personal responsibility.

You talk about the payment system. One of the challenges we have here in the UK is that we have a very effective payment system. The mechanism is very swift, and there are instant transactions. That can enable fraudsters, so injecting some check and balance into the system is



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something the industry is open to, and something that might, again, strike the right balance between enabling transactions electronically to happen, effectively to enable the wheels of commerce to roll, and giving people a chance to think twice and to check whether that money should be leaving their account, or whether they want to check the identity of the destination. There are lots of complex things.

As I said, Government can't do this alone. We need the tech companies, we need the financial sector and we need society as a whole to have a cultural step change in their attitude towards fraud.

Q577 Simon Fell: I am concerned that we are sleepwalking into an environment where we are creating perverse incentive after perverse incentive, and where the tech companies that are driving a lot of the fraud that is hitting our constituents, hitting businesses and hitting Government are almost entirely off the hook. They are signing up to a voluntary charter.

As this Committee well knows, we have had social media companies in front of us, talking about racism on their platforms, but they do not adhere to their own terms and conditions, or monitor what goes on there. When we hold them to account, they don't act on it and are not being driven to change.

It is not often you will hear someone defending the banks, but they are putting huge investment into their fraud systems. They are having then to pay out to customers whose frauds were enabled on those services. Consumers are not learning from their mistakes. Meanwhile, none of us is feeling the heat from this to anywhere near the degree we should be because people aren't angry at us; they get their money back. I don't see how this system improves when this is the situation.

If I am coming to a question at the end of this, I suppose it is: can you convince me that I am wrong and that, actually, the system is going to improve with the model being as it is?

Suella Braverman: I do not think it's all on the individual, nor do I think it's all on banks to compensate people who have been defrauded. There needs to be greater protection and securing yourself online, greater law enforcement tools that can be effectively deployed, and the right skills. There is a real need for upskilling in our law enforcement when it comes to online fraudulent activity. There needs to be a level of security that is provided by those large corporations, but not to a degree where that infantilises individuals, and people are robbed of the incentive and the need to be vigilant online. That would be the worst-case scenario, I agree.

Q578 Simon Fell: Thank you. Last question, Chair. We went to visit the NCA a little while ago, and they are doing good work in this space. I think you were absolutely right around the skilling piece. This is a real challenge; we need to make sure that we have the right people in the right jobs who understand this environment and can work in it. That does not necessarily mean bobbies on the beat; it means people behind computer screens. One of the challenges they have is that they are a civil service



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agency, as opposed to a policing agency. We have heard anecdotally, and directly from them, that they lose staff to the Met—they lose staff all over the place—and they struggle to recruit into positions, because the pay structures are different. Given that this is such a priority and given that it is 40% of the crime in England and Wales, do you have any appetite to look at changing the pay structure for the NCA?

Suella Braverman: Well, I am definitely looking at how the NCA can better be equipped to deal with the online threat. I should say they have had some really good results: 290 arrests in the recent Operation Henhouse and over £6.2 million of assets seized by the NCA in a fraud intensification period earlier this year, and Operation Cookie Monster, which was an NCA-FBI operation where 24 UK cyber-criminals and fraudsters selling stolen credentials on the dark web were arrested.

I mentioned iSpooof. There was an international investigation targeting the iSpooof website—one of the biggest operations we have seen—and of course Operation Elaborate, where the Met has taken down a website that used to make 10 million spoof calls between June '21 and June '22. They have arrested 138 suspects, and hundreds of lines of inquiry are being pursued under that operation, so there is a huge amount of work going on.

I have come into the Department. What I have noticed is that we need to emphasise fraud, but also the serious organised crime element underlying not just fraud and cyber-crime, but many other crime types. I am working with the NCA to ensure that there is a greater focus on those crime types. That means enabling them to have the tools, the right powers and the appropriate focus.

Q579 **Simon Fell:** Will you be looking at those pay scales?

Suella Braverman: I am not going to confirm that at the moment.

Simon Fell: Worth a try. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Next is Carolyn Harris.

Q580 **Carolyn Harris:** Thank you, Chair. Can I first go back to two questions that the Chair asked? The first one was around decision backlogs. You said on 5 June in the Chamber that the backlog was 17,000.

Suella Braverman: No, I did not say it was 17,000. I said it has fallen by 17,000.

Q581 **Carolyn Harris:** It was down by 17,000. Was that correct?

Suella Braverman: As I have said, at all times the Prime Minister and myself have been consistent about the backlog of the legacy of initial decisions, which predates 28 June 2022. Those are some of the longer-standing claims. They predate the Nationality and Borders Act reforms, and that is the backlog to which the Prime Minister referred in December. That is the backlog that we have been focusing on. I should say we are also working on reducing our overall case load, but that backlog, which



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stood at 92,000 when the PM stood up and set out our plan, has fallen by 17,000.

Q582 Carolyn Harris: But those are different elements of the backlog, not the total backlog. Am I right in thinking that the ministerial code would require you to go back into the House of Commons and correct a non-factual statement?

Suella Braverman: I have not made any incorrect statement. As I said—I am repeating myself, but I do not mind doing so—at all times—

Carolyn Harris: I do not mind listening to you.

Suella Braverman: Wonderful. Likewise. At all times, the Prime Minister and I have been consistent in our references to the backlog of the initial decisions—the so-called legacy backlog—that originally stood at 92,000. As of my announcement a few weeks ago, that has fallen by 17,000. In addition, the overall case load includes incoming cases, which postdate 28 June and run up until today. I will never be able to get that number down to zero, because there are constantly cases coming into that case load. We are also, none the less, diverting resource and interventions to ensure that that number falls as well.

Q583 Carolyn Harris: Okay. Thanks very much. That is despite the fact that the Home Office is very specific about describing the asylum initial decision backlog and total backlog as two separate entities.

My next question again goes back to something that Chair said. Trafficking for sex is a very lucrative business for those who decide to traffic people for sex, but it would not be so lucrative if we did not have such demand. What is your Department doing to curb demand so that we can, in turn, curb the practice of trafficking for sex?

Suella Braverman: That is a great question. I share your sentiment that it is a horrendous practice that we need to bring to an end. I am very proud of our modern slavery regime, which brings in new offences designed to protect victims of trafficking and exploitation. The Palermo protocol makes it clear that exploitation includes sexual exploitation and prostitution, but it can be incredibly varied. We are seeing prosecutions brought for those offences, whether facilitation or putting people into servitude or slavery or forced behaviour. It is also linked to people smuggling, which is slightly different from trafficking. Again, the Modern Slavery Act includes new offences relating to that.

Q584 Carolyn Harris: I was specifically talking about people being trafficked for sex. The only thing I can find that the Department has done proactively is that between 2013 and 2020, three individuals were summoned and fined for the act of purchasing sex from a trafficked victim. That will hardly deter people who traffic people for sex, which is highly lucrative. Three fines of around £100 in seven years will not be much of a deterrent, will it, Home Secretary?

Suella Braverman: When it comes to dealing with reducing sexual exploitation and tackling demand, I have set out the modern slavery



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regime. Acts of buying and selling sex are not illegal in England and Wales. However, there is a range of offences, from paying for the services of a sex worker or a prostitute subject to force, to causing, inciting or controlling prostitution for gain, under the Sexual Offences Act and the Modern Slavery Act.

We know that criminals can use prostitution and sex work to target and exploit vulnerable people for their own commercial gain. We are working very closely with law enforcement partners to tackle those drivers, and we are developing a cross-agency adult services website action plan to tackle sexual exploitation online and its root cause, which is adult services and the websites associated with them. We are investing extra resource to support the police to build more intelligence on those ASWs, to identify risk and vulnerability. Listing the priority offences in the Online Safety Bill will place a duty on companies to take proactive measures to ensure that illegal content that amounts to an offence of human trafficking does not appear on their services, and to remove it once they are swiftly alerted to it.

Q585 Carolyn Harris: What you have read in the script did not anticipate the question, because none of that answered why only three fines have been issued for buying sex from trafficked sex workers in the last seven years, but thank you for that answer.

Suella Braverman: I would also note that there has been a specific operation led by the NCA, Operation Aidant, which has been intensifying the targeting of offenders involved in the exploitation to which you refer.

Q586 Carolyn Harris: Three offences will not dent the sex traffickers, I can assure you.

Will you make spiking an individual criminal offence?

Suella Braverman: Spiking is an abhorrent crime already. It is illegal under existing legislation such as the Offences Against the Person Act and the Sexual Offences Act. The perpetrators of that kind of behaviour need to be brought to justice. Proper investigations need to be led and prosecutions need to be successfully brought.

We are very keen to explore and work more proactively with the National Police Chiefs' Council. I have raised it with Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, who is the NPCC lead for tackling violence against women and girls. There has been a reclassification of the drugs that have been historically linked with drink spiking. There has been extra funding through the Safety of Women at Night and the Safer Streets funds, to support initiatives that prevent people from becoming victims of spiking.

I recently visited Nottinghamshire police and met the night-time economy team. They have got a really good unit that goes out to city centres on Friday and Saturday nights outside clubs and bars. They are ready and waiting to support people who might complain of being victims of spiking. What we find is a real challenge operationally. By the time someone realises that they might have been spiked, and by the time they get to the



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police, it is very hard operationally to prove that the substances are in their system or to find the perpetrator. Those are where we need to target efforts, in my view.

Carolyn Harris: Okay. Thanks ever so much. Thank you, Chair.

Q587 **Chair:** Can I just check whether the Home Office has published its report on the prevalence of spiking, and the actions it proposes to take? Have you produced that yet? We produced a report and that was one of the things you said you were going to do.

Suella Braverman: The Minister for Safeguarding wrote to you on 3 April saying that publication would be delayed, due to the pre-election period, as it was then. We are looking to finalise and publish it very soon.

Q588 **Chair:** Very soon. Okay. Thank you.

Finally, do you support the Nordic model for tackling demand?

Suella Braverman: Demand in what context?

Chair: Sorry—for sex. The Nordic model that has been introduced in Northern Ireland, Ireland and Sweden. Do you support that?

Suella Braverman: I am not familiar with it. If you explain it, I will answer.

Chair: Okay. Perhaps you could write to me about that.

Q589 **Lee Anderson:** Thank you for coming, Home Secretary. Now then, we can talk about backlogs all day long, but in my mind the best way to stop the backlogs is to stop people coming here illegally. That poses a couple of problems for me. Once we do stop people coming here illegally, we will have lots of staff in the Home Office who will no longer be required, because our job will be done in stopping the illegal entries. The way we stop it in my mind is through the Rwanda flights. Either that or a returns policy to France or wherever, and that's not going to happen. Will you give the Committee an update of where we are with the Rwanda flights, please?

Suella Braverman: Yes. We are currently waiting for the Court of Appeal to opine on the appeal hearing. I will not reiterate the scenes that we saw approximately this time last year, when the former Home Secretary attempted to put people on a flight and get it off to Rwanda. It was thwarted at the last minute pretty much by the Strasbourg Court.

Ever since then we have been in litigation. In December, we won the first round of that litigation on the substance of the Rwanda policy, on whether it is lawful. In a very strong judgment, the High Court endorsed the lawfulness of the policy. That has been challenged by the claimants. A hearing took place at the end of April—

Daniel Hobbs: *indicated assent.*



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Suella Braverman: And we are awaiting a judgment from the Court of Appeal. So, that is out of my hands. Once we finish and complete the litigation, and assuming we are successful, we will be in a position for flights to take off.

Q590 **Lee Anderson:** Thank you. I will move away from backlogs and asylum, and talk about something completely different. A few weeks back, we had Commissioner Rowley in front of the Committee. There was some confusion as to whether the police can stop protesters blocking the road and move people on, ensuring that the public can go about their daily business unhindered. Would you please confirm, Home Secretary, whether the police now have the powers to stop people stopping the citizens of this country going about their daily business?

Suella Braverman: I believe they do, particularly after last night—and I am grateful to their lordships—when our new statutory instrument clarified the definition of serious disruptions, bringing it in line with the Public Order Act 1986 and enabling the police to take more robust and swifter action when it comes to slow walkers or those bringing misery and chaos to the law-abiding majority. Yes, they do have the full armoury of legal tools at their disposal.

Q591 **Lee Anderson:** So you will be coming down heavy on any chief constables or commissioners that do not see this through?

Suella Braverman: The police are operationally independent, and I respect that. That is a foundation of our arrangement and our constitution. Any decision that they make about arresting a particular person or intervening in a matter is for them alone, and I have to respect that. Of course, I am incredibly frustrated when I see scenes of militant activists and selfish protesters disrupting people from getting to work, school and hospital appointments. We cannot see that.

I have to say that my view is quite mixed. I think that we want to see a more robust and swifter response from the police, and I personally think there is room for improvement, going forward. I also think the police have done a very difficult job well. If you look at the coronation, for example, the policing of an event of that scale and significance was a success for the police. It went off unimpeded, and people were able to enjoy that historic event. That is thanks to the incredible hard work and initiative deployed by the police.

If you look at recent protests relating to Just Stop Oil, the police have invested huge amounts of time and money in responding to these protests. In the last six weeks alone there have been 156 events or protest incidents, or thereabouts. Thirteen thousand police officer shifts have been used on policing those protests. There have been hundreds of arrests and it has cost millions of pounds. The police are trying. They are trying hard. I believe that they have come to us and asked for greater clarity in the law so that they understand where the threshold sits. I believe we have provided that clarity, and that they are now empowered to respond robustly.



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Q592 **Lee Anderson:** Do you think that will help, for example, when we see protesters at HS2 sites, where they are developing the tunnels and tracks. There we see protesters tunnelling and being nuisances, adding hundreds of millions of pounds to the cost of HS2. Are those powers going to help with that as well?

Suella Braverman: The new offences, contained in the Public Order Act, deal with specifically that issue. We have included the new offences of tunnelling and locking on, because previously it was felt that there was a gap in the law. People might not have been meeting the obstruction of the highway criteria or the criminal damage criteria; we created new offences to deal with those scenarios

Q593 **Lee Anderson:** Finally, you have been Home Secretary, in your second stint, for about six or seven months. What are your main achievements?

Suella Braverman: There are three ways that I think about the work of the Home Secretary. You have law and order, first of all, migration and then security.

When it comes to law and order, my focus is on more police, less crime, safer streets and common-sense policing. What have we achieved on my watch? We have delivered record police numbers. The Home Office delivered our manifesto pledge on time and on budget. We have a record number—the highest number ever in the history of policing. I have to pay credit to Rachel, who was the SRO who oversaw the delivery of that. We do also have less crime. The chief inspector remarked in his state of policing report last week that, actually, England and Wales are arguably safer now than they ever have been before because there has been an overall fall in crime. We have extended the powers for the police to take better action on militant protesters.

Ultimately, I want the police to be liberated from needless bureaucracy, hence the Home Office counting rules reforms that I have brought in, which the NPCC estimate will save 400,000 police hours. There have been changes to mental health, so that we are not getting police officers waiting for nine hours in A&E and chaperoning someone who really should be being met with a health response. We have changed the threshold on non-crime hate incidents to protect freedom of speech, as well as enabling people to come in who do not have a degree. I want common-sense policing and for the police to focus on the basics—the people's priorities, such as antisocial behaviour and knife crime—and to use their stop-and-search powers, and I want them to restore confidence in themselves among the British public.

On the boats and on migration, the challenge is to stop the boats. We are not there yet, but we have achieved a lot in introducing a landmark piece of legislation in the Illegal Migration Bill. This goes further than ever before, and I believe that it will be an important element in our mission to stop the boats. We are seeing some progress already. We have returned over 1,800 people to Albania who do not have the right to be here. We are intensifying our immigration enforcement raids and interventions. There is



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work, as I say, on the backlog. We are rolling out alternative sites so that we can stop using hotels.

Lastly, on security, we just talked about the fraud strategy, but there is also Prevent. I have begun the biggest programme of reform, which is much needed for our Prevent programme.

Q594 **Chair:** You referred to returning 1,800 Albanians. I just want to check with you: out of the over 12,000 that came across in small boats last year—we published a report earlier this week on Albania—how many of them have been returned? I think it was 12,300 that came across; how many have you been able to return? We have asked for a breakdown of who these 1,800 are but we have not been able to get that information.

Suella Braverman: Yes, that 1,800 are not all small boat arrivals—I have to be clear about that. That 1,800 is made up of foreign national offenders, people who are returning voluntarily and some people who came here illegally on small boats—I am very straight about that. Have you got the breakdown, Daniel?

Daniel Hobbs: No, we don't.

Suella Braverman: We don't have the specific answer to your question.

Q595 **Chair:** You don't know how many of the Albanians from last year you have been able to return.

Daniel Hobbs: We don't have that figure in front of us.

Q596 **Chair:** Is that because you are not processing them? They are in the backlog, so none of them would have been dealt with. Is that how it is working?

Suella Braverman: There are, as you say, about 12,000 nationals from Albania who arrived last year. We are increasing the level of returns of Albanians: 795 Albanian nationals were returned in Q1 of this year—January to March 2023—which is 16% of all returns. I think that is an increase on previous years.

Q597 **Chair:** Have they come out of the 12,000 from last year?

Suella Braverman: It is very difficult to necessarily pinpoint that they arrived last year. They might have been here in the system longer, so I would not feel confident identifying the origins of those people.

Q598 **Chair:** Are you able to write to us to explain?

Suella Braverman: We can look into it.

Chair: Okay, thank you.

Suella Braverman: Can I just correct myself? I have been told that the number is not 1,800; it is 1,750, as of 1 June, Albanian nationals returned.

Q599 **Chair:** In the first quarter of this year.



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Suella Braverman: No, since the joint communiqué was signed. I am correcting the 1,800 figure that I gave you.

Chair: Right, so it's fewer.

Suella Braverman: Sorry about that.

Q600 **Alison Thewliss:** Home Secretary, you and I both have two children. What would you do if one of them went missing?

Suella Braverman: I would call the police immediately.

Q601 **Alison Thewliss:** According to the answer to the written question that I had this week, 154 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who were in a Home Office hotel are still missing. What are you doing to find those children?

Suella Braverman: In terms of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels, we are using hotels to accommodate them because of an unprecedented increase. I am going to use the term "UASC"; of course, with due respect to the children. Our first choice and by far the best measure is to accommodate UASCs through the local authority in foster care. It has been incredibly difficult to identify sufficient places for those children. However, we were able to get that number down to—let me ensure that I have the right—

Q602 **Alison Thewliss:** According to the parliamentary answer I had, 154 remain missing.

Suella Braverman: You asked me about this, I think, at the last session. This is obviously an incredibly serious issue. We have worked intensively, and we now have that number down to zero. There are no UASCs accommodated in hotels, following an intensive focus led by the Home Office to ensure that all those children found appropriate foster care in local authorities. I am very grateful to the local authorities that stepped forward.

Q603 **Alison Thewliss:** With respect, Home Secretary, that is not what I asked. I am glad that there are no unaccompanied children being kept in hotels because none of them should be there in the first place. It is entirely inappropriate that they should be housed in such a way. I asked about what you are doing to find the 154 children still unaccounted for.

Suella Braverman: Any child going missing is extremely serious. That is why we work very closely, if that case arises, with local authorities and the police to operate a very robust system of missing persons protocols to ensure that the appropriate efforts are put in place to identify where they might be.

Q604 **Alison Thewliss:** Are you aware of the names and dates of birth of these children that are still missing?

Suella Braverman: These would be operational matters for the police. It is not for me to intervene in specific details of cases to do with missing persons.



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Q605 **Alison Thewliss:** As Home Secretary, your Department put these children in hotels, from where they went missing. I am asking you, if it were your child who had gone missing, just as if it were mine or a child I had never met in my neighbourhood, the entire neighbourhood would be out looking for them. Who is looking for these 154 missing children?

Suella Braverman: We have no power to detain unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in these hotels.

Q606 **Alison Thewliss:** But you are supposed to be looking after them.

Suella Braverman: Are you suggesting that we detain them in more secure accommodation?

Q607 **Alison Thewliss:** I am suggesting that you care if 154 of them go missing and have not yet been found.

Suella Braverman: With respect, it is incredibly difficult, generally when it comes to missing persons if you speak to the police, to trace them. It is incredibly challenging to find someone who does not want to be found.

Q608 **Alison Thewliss:** How do you know they don't want to be found?

Suella Braverman: However, we take this issue very seriously. When there is a notification that children in the UASC category have gone missing, we work with the police. Sometimes they are located and they are traced. However, there is an intensive and quite extensive package of social work support, local authority support and support workers who are specially trained to look after UASCs, who provide the activities and wellbeing support that is necessary to safeguard this particularly vulnerable cohort of people.

Q609 **Alison Thewliss:** You said in your answer that someone may not want to be found. Is that because they are afraid of being sent to Rwanda or because they are in the hands of traffickers?

Suella Braverman: You are asking a hypothetical question that I simply do not have the answer to.

Q610 **Alison Thewliss:** You do not know who these children are, you do not know why they have gone missing and you do not know where they are.

Suella Braverman: We also have to be really honest about the profile of the children we are dealing with. The vast majority of children are 16 or 17 years old. If they have come here unaccompanied—we also get the situation where many adults claim to be children, and illegitimately so. Fifty per cent of age-assessment cases are resolved in the Home Office's favour—in other words, they are actually adults.

Let me give you the profile. We are dealing here with largely 16 to 17-year-old children. They are children—we owe them legal duties. As of today, the ones in our care are housed in foster care. That is by far the best form of accommodation to safeguard their needs and their vulnerabilities and to support them. For those children who have gone missing because they were previously in hotels, there is, of course, a



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multi-agency missing persons protocol that is mobilised with the police and local authorities to do everything possible to establish their whereabouts.

Q611 **Alison Thewliss:** How long will you keep looking for them?

Suella Braverman: You would have to ask the police. That is a missing persons protocol that the police apply, and they have to take a judgment based on the intelligence and the facts of a particular case.

Q612 **Alison Thewliss:** It is going to be very difficult to know, if they are in the hands of traffickers or running scared of being sent to Rwanda, when you will actually find them, isn't it?

Suella Braverman: The Home Office's position is that if you are a UASC and you are in the care of the Home Office, you are encouraged to remain within the accommodation that is being provided and not to run away. You are provided with all the resources and services to which you are entitled—schooling, mental health, health and other wellbeing support. There is, as I say, an extensive package of which I am very proud, because we have worked hard to build that package to ensure that UASCs are properly supported. Running away is something that I would not encourage or condone.

Q613 **Alison Thewliss:** People in the sector have said that your Rwanda plan has caused such fear in children in those circumstances that that is why they are disappearing.

Suella Braverman: The point of Rwanda is a deterrent. We want to stop people coming here on boats in the first place.

Q614 **Alison Thewliss:** These children are already here. You have a duty of care to them.

Suella Braverman: We want to stop people making this illegal journey in the first place. We want to stop the people-smuggling gangs exploiting vulnerable people. We want to stop them putting children on their unseaworthy vessels, travelling late at night without a lifejacket in the vain hope of getting to a life in the United Kingdom. That is why I have every confidence in our Rwanda plan and that once we are able to operationalise it, we will be able to implement that deterrent, and we will see a fall in the number of people coming here illegally.

Q615 **Alison Thewliss:** That remains to be seen. Would you agree that the system we have in Scotland with the Scottish Guardianship Service, where young people are supported by Aberlour and the Scottish Refugee Council, which are experts in this area, would be a much better way of protecting young people and preventing them from disappearing in the way that they have under your care?

Suella Braverman: Well, Scotland has a slightly different regime to us. Ultimately, we have system here whereby—as I say, I am very proud of the service and the quality of care we offer unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They are housed, as of today and, thanks to intensive



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effort, not in hotels but in foster care. We worked very hard to find local authorities that are able to provide foster care homes. I am very grateful to those families who have come forward and those local authorities that have assisted. Those children should be well settled and well supported now as they go through our process.

Q616 **Alison Thewliss:** Okay; I wonder how you are able to be proud of 154 children still missing, but we will leave that there.

Let us move on to the issue of Afghans. I have a number of Afghans in my constituency who are still trying to get their families out of Afghanistan and Pakistan. One constituent applied through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and put in an expression of interest, and he has yet to receive anything back from that process. How many people are still outstanding who have put in an expression of interest?

Suella Braverman: Are you talking about ARAP?

Alison Thewliss: Yes—ARAP 3.

Suella Braverman: Sorry?

Alison Thewliss: The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme pathway 3.

Suella Braverman: Let me just get my notes. First of all, let me say that I am very proud of what we have done so far on ARAP and ACRS. In total, they provide up to 20,000 places for people affected by events in Afghanistan. There are three pathways under ARAP that offer relocation to eligible Afghan citizens who worked for or with the UK Government locally in Afghanistan. That scheme recognises the service of eligible Afghan citizens and the risks arising to them and their dependent family members as well as a result of their work. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office are working very hard to ensure that we resettle up to 1,500 people in the first stage of pathway 3. That is a Foreign Office lead and that is something that they are working on.

Q617 **Alison Thewliss:** My constituent's sister has sent me footage of the Taliban entering her home and assaulting her. How long will she have to wait before she can get to safety in the UK under the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme pathway 3?

Suella Braverman: I am not going to comment on an individual case. I am very happy for you to write to the relevant Minister and we can look into it, but in general terms—

Q618 **Alison Thewliss:** I have written to the Minister and they have told me that they cannot give me a timescale for that. That is why I am asking you.

Suella Braverman: In terms of the ACRS, we have granted more than 9,000 people settled status under that scheme. We are continuing to welcome individuals under all the pathways. Ultimately, if someone meets the criteria set out in our Afghan-specific schemes, they will be supported to get here and they will be resettled.



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Approximately 11,400 people have arrived in the UK through the ARAP scheme, and a further 3,700 are expected to come. There is a huge amount of investment that I am putting into the scheme: £258 million of funding from the Home Office is going into supporting the individuals coming under this scheme. I cannot comment on the specific facts of your constituent or the lady you are referring to, but I am happy to look into it. Is there something you want to add, Daniel?

Daniel Hobbs: Just to say that, as the Home Secretary said, the FCDO, which operates pathway 3, is working through the 1,500 applications under that scheme as quickly as possible.

Q619 **Alison Thewliss:** Thank you. A number of Afghans are still stranded in Pakistan. *The Independent* reported in April that there were at least 1,000 people, including 500 children, stuck in Pakistan who would be eligible to come here but have not yet had the paperwork processed. One of my constituents contacted me just a few minutes ago: he is still waiting for the Home Office to process the visas for his family who are in Pakistan, in a very bad condition, waiting to come here to safety. When will people such as my constituent see his family?

Suella Braverman: As I said, under ARAP we have already—

Alison Thewliss: This isn't under ARAP; this is under family reunion, which is your responsibility.

Suella Braverman: Okay. If it is under family reunion there are different rules. The criteria pertaining to ARAP or ACRS do not apply. Family reunion relates to whether you have someone who is a family member of someone who has refugee status. It generally applies to the spouse or children, but there is also a discretion in the circumstances of compelling cases. That will all be determined on its merit. All applications for family reunion—we have granted 46,000 applications for family reunion—

Q620 **Alison Thewliss:** I have a number of cases of people who are waiting for the VAC in Islamabad to process their documents. Why is that taking so long?

Suella Braverman: We are actually progressing quite well with our visa applications and there has been improvement due to extra resource and caseworker deployment. But there is always a wait in the system. If you write to us, we can look into it.

Q621 **Alison Thewliss:** Further to that, I have constituents who have family members in Sudan. I was told by the FCDO during a call that we had that the Home Office was looking at a workaround for documents that we held because people had submitted their passports to the VAC in Sudan prior to the situation as it is kicking off, and then they were obviously not able to access those documents because the consular support and all the services there were withdrawn. The Home Office has more recently written to me to say that the documents are in secure storage in the VAC, with no idea of how people are supposed to progress those applications. One constituent applied for a spousal visa in February 2022



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and is still waiting for a decision. Would you accept that the Home Office delays in processing those applications is actually putting lives at risk now?

Suella Braverman: When it comes to the general issuance of visas, we are processing visa applications within our published service standards. We are expecting a summer surge of student applications. We generally encourage people to apply as early as possible—up to three months before they travel.

Alison Thewliss: That is not relevant to people in Sudan.

Suella Braverman: Sudan? Sorry, I missed that at the beginning. In terms of Sudan, we have already welcomed people from Sudan. Let me try to get my—

Q622 **Alison Thewliss:** People who have applications in the process for whom you hold the paperwork, what are they supposed to do?

Suella Braverman: Well, the visa application centre in Khartoum is closed because of the circumstances in Sudan. That is publicly available information; people have been informed of that. It is not safe for customers and staff to attend the Khartoum VAC. They will not be able to collect their documents from the Khartoum VAC or have them sent back to them in Sudan until the VAC is safe to access. These are very difficult circumstances. We need to balance the safety of people who are related to the VAC and the safety of the circumstances and the conditions in the country. But UKVI is proactively contacting everybody who is affected, particularly if we have their passports or if they have been applying to provide them with the options as to how they can work around this.

Q623 **Alison Thewliss:** Are they able to get digital copies of the documents you hold, and will that be sufficient for them to travel?

Suella Braverman: It depends. If the Khartoum VAC has or had the passport of the individual, what the customers are being offered is a letter. They are being offered a letter that confirms their passport is being securely stored at our visa application centre in Khartoum and the digital copy of their passport. They can use that in support of travelling out of Sudan, so yes.

Q624 **Alison Thewliss:** For people like my constituent whose pregnant wife is in Khartoum, is there any way of further supporting somebody who is pregnant in Khartoum, has family in the UK and cannot get that documentation, because it is very difficult for people in that circumstance to travel and take the risk of moving across the country?

Suella Braverman: Again, I cannot get into individual circumstances, but, as I said, if you write to the Home Office, we will look into it.

Chair: Alison, are you happy to raise these things in writing and then we can get the Home Secretary to respond?

Alison Thewliss *indicated assent.*



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Q625 **Paula Barker:** Good morning, Home Secretary, Ms Watson and Mr Hobbs. Can you tell us how many asylum hotels are in use at the moment, how many new hotels you have opened in the last six months and how many more you are planning to open?

Chair: I am not sure what that noise is—*[Interruption.]* Who is answering the question? I am just conscious of time, so we do need to keep going.

Suella Braverman: I don't have the specific number of hotels—you might, Dan—

Paula Barker: So you do not know how many hotels are in use.

Suella Braverman: I have the number of people. It is about 45,000 people.

Q626 **Paula Barker:** I know—I have people myself—but I am interested in the amount of hotels that are in use.

Suella Braverman: We do have that number because I have looked at the spreadsheet with all the hotels. I think it is in the hundreds, but I do not have the specific number.

Q627 **Paula Barker:** Please could you write to the Committee with those numbers, and with how many have opened in the last six months and how many more you are planning to open?

Suella Braverman: We can do that.

Q628 **Paula Barker:** There was a press release from the Home Office on 5 June regarding two additional barges, saying this "could reduce the need to source an additional 90 hotels." Were you actually planning an additional 90 hotels?

Suella Braverman: Because we are meeting increasing demand, we are constantly trying to source accommodation for incoming arrivals. That inevitably means the use of hotels, so we are still using hotels as of today, yes.

Q629 **Paula Barker:** So you were planning an additional 90 hotels?

Suella Braverman: We are doing everything according to the need, and we are demand led. As I say, we have 45,000 or thereabouts in hotels at the moment. That is an unacceptable situation not just for cost, but it is actually inappropriate and unfair on the asylum seeker to be living in a hotel. What we are aiming to deliver, and are moving towards, is a system of more appropriate, bespoke and cost-effective accommodation for asylum seekers. The barge that we announced is one such example, as is repurposing sites such as RAF Scampton and RAF Wethersfield.

Q630 **Paula Barker:** On 5 June, the press release said that an additional two barges had been sourced, and that could reduce the need to source an additional 90 hotels. On 10 June, it was confirmed that the barge that was due to go on Merseyside had been scrapped. The need for 90 hotels was put in your press release on 5 June. Is the Liverpool barge being



scrapped going to increase the use of hotels significantly?

Suella Braverman: Any time a site that we are aiming to procure for asylum accommodation fails to go ahead, we are inevitably going to have to use hotels. There is a challenge for us as MPs. I have lost count of the number of MPs who have spoken to me about not wanting a barge in their constituency, or not wanting student accommodation or hotels to be used. I very much understand those concerns. The alternative is hotels. We all have a choice, and it is really about whether we want to move away from the use of hotels or keep using hotels. This Government want to move away and reduce dependency on hotels. That means we need to increase alternative sources of accommodation. Those include barges, new sites and local authority-dispersed accommodation. The more we can maximise those sources of accommodation, the more we can close hotels.

Q631 **Paula Barker:** Let's just go with the assumption for a second that the press release on 5 June from the Home Office was indeed accurate, and you were saying that the barges would reduce the need for an additional 90 hotels. There are approximately 108,000 people in asylum accommodation, and 47,000 in hotels. If you need an additional 90 hotels, how many more people are you looking to house in hotels on top of the 47,000 who are already there?

Suella Braverman: There were over 1,000 arrivals this weekend; they will all have to go to a hotel. We are demand led.

Q632 **Paula Barker:** But I am assuming that you have a strategy and a plan?

Suella Braverman: It is not binary, and with respect, you are oversimplifying the situation. We have a community of people in hotels, and we have people incoming. That is why we have been working intensively, at pace, energetically, to find alternative sources of accommodation and reduce our dependency on hotels. That takes time. We have been able to announce the first batch of sites. Those will be delivered very soon, and we will be seeing asylum seekers relocated to those sites in the next few months. Once we are able to ramp that up, keep going with it and do more sites—and we are working on many other options around the country—and once we are able to implement our Bill and Rwanda flights and stop the inflow of people, then I believe we will ultimately be in a position where we can reduce our dependency on hotels. That is the goal, but it takes time to get there. It is not “put a barge on, stop hotels”. We have got people coming in as well.

Q633 **Paula Barker:** Let's turn our attention to the Bill. Is it correct that clause 9 of the Illegal Migration Bill means that you will still need to provide taxpayer-funded asylum accommodation for people who have arrived in the UK and have not yet been returned anywhere?

Suella Braverman: What in particular are you referring to in clause 9? There are many subsections.

Paula Barker: Clause 9 of the Illegal Migration Bill.



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Suella Braverman: Are you talking about clause 8, which is about inadmissible asylum claims?

Paula Barker: No, clause 9.

Suella Braverman: Aspects of clause 9 work with clause 2 to place a duty on the Secretary of State to make arrangements for the removal from the UK, as soon as reasonably practicable, of those who are here illegally as of 7 March and have not come directly from a safe country. The duty to make arrangements for the removal applies irrespective of the claim that someone will have put in. There is a duty. That is the way we are going to stop the boats. This element in the framework set up by the Illegal Migration Bill is absolutely essential if we are to inject an element of deterrence into our system and greater robustness into our immigration laws, and ensure that people stop making the journey in the first place.

Q634 **Paula Barker:** Given that you still need to provide taxpayer-funded asylum accommodation and that people have not yet been returned, how many places are you planning for, for this year and next, as a result of the Bill?

Suella Braverman: As I said, we are working incredibly hard. I don't know how many different ways I can say it; it's the same thing that I have already repeated. We are working to procure as many alternative sources of accommodation as possible. There's no limit on the number of alternatives to hotels that we are working on.

Q635 **Paula Barker:** I understand that, Home Secretary. What I don't accept is that you don't have any forward planning strategy that would give you any sort of indication of how many places you are planning for.

Suella Braverman: Well, of course, we can see—we have got reasonable worst-case scenarios of what we expect the number to be this year.

Q636 **Paula Barker:** So what's the number in your worst-case scenario?

Suella Braverman: I think that number was published at the end of last year. I think it was about 60,000—65,000—people, as a reasonable worst-case scenario in terms of number of arrivals for this year.

Q637 **Paula Barker:** And next year?

Suella Braverman: That estimate has not been made for '24.

Q638 **Paula Barker:** How many will we have in taxpayer-funded accommodation because you haven't returned them this year in your worst-case scenario? What about next year?

Suella Braverman: The solution to the problem—we both agree on the problem.

Paula Barker: I know what you believe the solution is, Home Secretary. That's not my question.



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Suella Braverman: Well, your question is slightly tautologous, with respect. I am telling you our plan to solve the very problem that you are talking about, which is unprecedented numbers of people coming into the country illegally, costing the taxpayer £6 million a day and forcing 45,000 people to be housed in hotels. We are both frustrated—well, I am, at least—with that situation. I’m not sure if you are, actually.

Q639 **Paula Barker:** Well, I was frustrated when you tried to put them in a disused hotel in my constituency.

Suella Braverman: What we want to do is stop the use of hotels. That is why we are working very hard to identify and deliver alternative sites. Ultimately, I am very confident. By combining our deterrence in the Illegal Migration Bill, flights to Rwanda and extra accommodation which is not hotels, we will be able to bear down on the number of people currently accommodated in hotels, which is at an unacceptable level.

Q640 **Paula Barker:** Okay, let’s try this question. The Bill says that everyone who arrived after March 2023 will not be eligible for an asylum decision, and you have said that everyone will be detained and deported, so that’s already over 5,000 people and it has increased by over 1,000 already, in this week alone. Assuming that the Bill actually goes through by the summer recess, do you have an estimate about how many people will be immediately covered by the Bill provisions, and where will those people then go?

Suella Braverman: We are currently working very hard to ensure that we are in a position to operationalise the Bill. We are working to deliver more detention places. We need to ensure that the new sites are brought forward. This includes developing a new immigration removal centre in Oxfordshire, on the former site of Campsfield House, and a new immigration removal centre at Gosport, Hampshire, on the former site at Haslar. We need to ensure that there is sufficient detention capacity to support the measures in the Bill.

Q641 **Paula Barker:** My final question is this. What is the contingency plan if you can’t deport these individuals? Will they stay permanently in asylum accommodation? How many additional places, in that respect, are you planning for?

Suella Braverman: Again, it’s not the case that we need to provide, suddenly, 60,000 new detention places. No one is proposing that. No one is working to that objective. We believe that deterrence is an important factor in this new framework and once we are able to relocate people from the United Kingdom to Rwanda or another safe country, we will see a drop-off in the number of people coming and a reduction in the pressure being put on our accommodation estate and our detention capacity.

That is, in many respects, how the Australian model bore out. Once they were able to put on flights to another territory, in a pretty short space of time the number of people coming on boats to Australia fell pretty dramatically. No one is suggesting—I am certainly not—that we are in the



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process of building 60,000 new detention beds, but we are increasing our detention capacity, as I just set out.

Q642 Tim Loughton: Welcome back, Home Secretary. Can I return to the issue of the numbers and the backlog and get it absolutely clear? My understanding is that the Prime Minister said he would clear the 92,000-ish legacy backlog—as I understand it to be—by the end of this year. So far, up to last month, I think, 17,000 of those have been cleared, which leaves approximately 75,000—very roughly. Is that the case?

Suella Braverman: Yes. It is down 17,000.

Q643 Tim Loughton: Last month, 2,440 legacy backlog case decisions were made, and that was down 1,000 on the previous month. On my very rough calculations, in order to succeed with that undertaking of clearing the backlog by the end of the year, 10,630 decisions will have to be made every month for the rest of the year. That is more than four times what took place last month. Even with your increase in caseworkers, which is not a fourfold increase, and an increase in productivity, which is unlikely to be a twofold or threefold increase, you are not going to make that target, are you?

Suella Braverman: I am not as pessimistic as you are. I believe that, yes, if we maintained the current pace, we would not meet the target. However, that is to overlook the fact that we will have our full cohort of decision makers later this year. They will be fully trained up and more proficient, and the other measures we have put into place to speed up the process will be fully bedded in. In a way, we expect the rate of decision making and productivity to increase toward the end of our mission. If you will, it is a slower start aiming at accelerating. Some of those measures are very tangible. We have talked about the actual number of decision makers, and we are still yet to increase that number, but the benefits of the streamlined asylum processing and the increases and improvements to the productivity through the changes to the interview process will all bed in a lot more.

Q644 Tim Loughton: I understand all that, but you have just made it even more of a challenge. You have just said, on the 10,630 that I said you will have to reach per month, which I do not think you are disagreeing with, that you are not going to get anywhere like that in the next few months. That means that for the final months of the year, when you have these new people in place, the monthly figure will have to be substantially more than 10,630. We are not talking about quadrupling the number of people in place. We are not talking about quadrupling the productivity of the existing people in place, which would be another way of doing it. We are talking about substantially more than that in order to achieve the target. That is not realistic, is it?

Suella Braverman: There will need to be a substantial increase in productivity and outputs. I agree with that. I believe we have put in place the measures and processes now. All of that takes time—to actually put in place the streamlined asylum process.



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Q645 **Tim Loughton:** Yes, but you have a time limit. You have set the target for the end of this year. I am not saying it cannot be achieved ultimately by increasing productivity and staff. Hopefully at some stage it can, because there is a finite number, but those figures I have given you will need substantially more than a quadrupling of productivity or bums on seats, as you put it, and that is not going to happen, is it?

Suella Braverman: I am not as pessimistic as you.

Tim Loughton: I'm not being pessimistic. I am just looking at the figures and any reasonable prediction of how those figures will pan out. I think most people, however gloomster or optimistic they may be, will question that that target will be achieved by the end of the year.

Suella Braverman: As I said, those numbers—retrospectively—are, in a way, not benefiting so much from the changes to the processing. I think that when you combine the extra people—which will be a doubling, at least, of decision makers—the impacts of the streamline assessment asylum process and the changes to the way initial decisions are made, there will be a substantial uptick in the rate and the progress.

Tim Loughton: Not sufficiently.

Suella Braverman: You will call me back, I am sure.

Q646 **Tim Loughton:** To come back to another thing you said—I should declare an interest, because I chair the safeguarding board of a fostering group—you said that there are currently 45,000 asylum seekers in hotels, roughly. You said that there is not a single unaccompanied child asylum seeker in any of those hotels. Are you sure?

Suella Braverman: This came up at the last Select Committee.

Tim Loughton: It came up about 30 minutes ago. You have just said that—

Suella Braverman: No, but it first came up when we talked about it at length at the last Select Committee meeting. After that, we have taken extensive measures to identify. There were about 100 or so children—in that region—at the time who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels, and we wanted to work to ensure that they were no longer in hotels. I have not looked at it in the last few days, but as of last week, that number was zero, because I provided a concerted effort to ensure that foster care was provided. We worked very intensively and went out to local authorities. We wanted them to come forward.

Q647 **Tim Loughton:** No, that's fine. If you are sure about that figure, that figure is encouraging.

Suella Braverman: That was my assurance. That is what officials have given me as of last week. Can I just confirm with the officials?

Daniel Hobbs: To confirm, the Home Secretary is right: the figure that we had as of last week was that there were no unaccompanied children in



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hotels. Obviously, as the Home Secretary already spoke about, there have been arrivals in the last few days, so that position may have changed. Just to be clear to the Committee, as of last week there were no children in Home Office hotels.

Q648 **Tim Loughton:** So children can still be put in hotels.

Daniel Hobbs: In extremis, when there is no availability in local authorities, in order to safeguard those children and provide them accommodation, there is no other option for the Home Office but to put them in the best accommodation we can find for them, which may well be a bespoke UASC hotel, with the necessary support work and recording of their entry and exit that goes with that. But if there is no local authority that is able to take a child, we have no other option but to provide for—

Q649 **Tim Loughton:** Well, you have the option of commissioning a children's home—residential care—for example.

Daniel Hobbs: Currently, our only option is to use the hotels. You will be aware that in the Illegal Migration Bill the plan is to take new powers for the Government to accommodate unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, but at the moment, when local authorities are unable to accommodate children, we are only able to provide bespoke hotels with safeguarding care and support.

Q650 **Tim Loughton:** So if foster care is not available, you have no ability to directly commission an independent residential children's home to accommodate unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Daniel Hobbs: On the ability to accommodate asylum-seeking children, there are further powers being taken in the Illegal Migration Bill.

Q651 **Tim Loughton:** I am talking about now.

Daniel Hobbs: Currently, the Children Act places the obligation on local authorities to accommodate children in their area who are otherwise unaccompanied.

Q652 **Tim Loughton:** That brings me to the next question. In the new powers in the Illegal Migration Bill, you will have to amend the Children Act 1989.

Daniel Hobbs *indicated dissent.*

Suella Braverman: No, I do not think that that is provided for in the Bill.

Q653 **Tim Loughton:** That doesn't make sense. Mr Hobbs has just said that under the current provisions under the Children Act, which is what you have to deal with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, they are the responsibility of local authorities—hence you are relying on local authorities to provide those foster places. That is what the Children Act 1989 says—I think we can all agree on that.

You are now saying that under the new Bill you will have the ability for the Government directly to take responsibility for those children in unaccompanied asylum-seeking accommodation and in secure



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accommodation, which is contrary to the provisions of the Children Act. Therefore, either the Illegal Migration Bill is breaking the provisions of the Children Act, or you are going to have to amend the Children Act. Which is it going to be?

Daniel Hobbs: If I may clarify, the power is to be able to accommodate. The statutory powers of corporate parenting remain, as per the Children Act, with local authorities. So it is the power to accommodate; the Home Office is not a body for corporate parental responsibility.

Tim Loughton: That doesn't answer my question.

Daniel Hobbs: The corporate parenting responsibility remains with the local authority, per the Children Act. Our power is to provide accommodation.

Q654 **Tim Loughton:** So will local authorities be putting them in secure accommodation?

Daniel Hobbs: I don't know whether they will be putting them in secure accommodation.

Q655 **Tim Loughton:** If, under the terms of the Bill, they are going to be in secure accommodation, which is the case as it stands— notwithstanding the undertaking given by the Immigration Minister—they can be in secure accommodation for up to 27 days.

Daniel Hobbs: That is a separate regime. That is detention, which is used in very rare and limited circumstances. The power in the Bill is to provide accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Q656 **Tim Loughton:** But in the Bill, the Government will have the power to put unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in detention in secure accommodation, as it stands on the face of the Bill, for the same length of time as adults, which is 28 days. But given that the Immigration Minister gave an undertaking that it would be less than that, at the outset it could be up to 27 days.

Daniel Hobbs: That is for the purpose of removal.

Suella Braverman: If I may say, we already have the powers in law to detain children at the border and for the purpose of removal. That is already a settled position. It is really important that we do not create incentives for the people-smuggling gangs to target unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or family groups. That is an important factor in this discussion. There will not be a requirement to make arrangements to remove an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child from the UK until they turn 18, but there is a power to do so, so there will be a discretion in addition to an accompanying power to detain.

Q657 **Tim Loughton:** I am not talking about deporting them. I am talking about how they are accommodated. One of the problems—



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Suella Braverman: The powers of detention of unaccompanied children will be very limited and will be set out in regulations, such as for the purposes of family reunion or removal to a safe country.

Q658 **Tim Loughton:** We know that, but we don't know the details of how that is going to work. What we also know is that you have a problem with age verification. Part of this is because, at the moment, it is taking six weeks to conduct a not 100% foolproof age verification on somebody claiming to be under 18 who is not. Have you made any progress in reducing that? If not, six weeks is longer than 28 days.

Suella Braverman: We are bringing into—

Tim Loughton: It was quite a big issue raised during the passage of the Bill, so hopefully there has been quite an initiative. You gave the phrase just now, Home Secretary, that you are working very hard to operationalise the Bill. I would not expect anything else. This is an area where you are going to have to work particularly hard to operationalise how you deal with children without detaining them, contrary to existing welfare legislation for children, for the same amount of time as adults. Why do we not know if you have made any progress on age verification?

Suella Braverman: We are reforming how we resolve age disputes through the introduction of the National Age Assessment Board, which started on 31 March of this year. That consists of expert social workers. Their primary task is to conduct age assessments upon referral from a local authority or the Home Office. It is initially focused on targeted areas where there are particular pressures. This is a very serious issue, because, ultimately, if there is a child who is in the presence of an over-18 individual who is being treated a child, that is a safeguarding risk. We have the Age Estimation Science Advisory Committee, which was set up in December 2021 to provide independent advice to us on the scientific methods.

Q659 **Tim Loughton:** So they have had lots of time to get it to below six weeks.

Suella Braverman: They provided a report earlier this year. We are considering the recommendations in that report, but we are making progress in how we are considering age assessments. There are a lot of challenges with this. The statistics that I have—

Q660 **Tim Loughton:** We know there are lots of challenges. That came out in the Bill. It is a really, really urgent issue. I understand absolutely why the Government may need to retain some powers to detain children who may abscond—and there are circumstances—but absolutely key to that is having an age verification system that actually works and does not take six weeks.

Suella Braverman: I agree.

Q661 **Tim Loughton:** It does not take six weeks in other countries to do it. Everything you have said so far is everything that the Minister was able to say during the passage of the Bill; nothing seems to have changed.



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Can I touch on a couple of other, separate issues?

Suella Braverman: Basically the upshot is we are bringing in the reforms of the NABA on age assessment. That takes time; we have got to resource that—that is not going to happen overnight—and then we are also taking further steps.

Q662 **Tim Loughton:** You want this Bill to come in and take effect before the summer recess. That is weeks away, and you do not know how you are going to improve age verification.

Suella Braverman: I have not said that. I have not said that I want this Bill to take effect before the summer recess.

Q663 **Tim Loughton:** That is the Government's intention and ambition—to have it in force before the summer recess—is it not?

Suella Braverman: Commencement happens after the Bill secures Royal Assent, so effectively applying—

Q664 **Tim Loughton:** You want it to commence as soon as possible, for all the reasons we have already discussed, in order to deter people—in order to clear the backlog without adding to it.

Suella Braverman: We are bringing in the reforms in the NABA to age assessment. That does take time. We are also including provisions in the Illegal Migration Bill on age assessment, precisely to avoid the lengthy disputes to which you refer. That can protract the experience. It can prevent removal of those who are assessed to be adults, and we need to ensure that there is a speedier turnaround and much more robust age assessment in the system.

Q665 **Tim Loughton:** We agree with that, but we do not know how.

On another issue, the French police have been intercepting more migrants before they get into the water. They still will not intercept them once they are in the water beyond thigh depth, I think we ascertained when we went there. They have now intercepted, I think, something like 54% of the attempts, which is progress, helped by the £500 million subsidy of the French police force that the British taxpayer is giving. How many of those have actually been detained, rather than allowed to go free?

Suella Braverman: In France?

Tim Loughton: In France, by the French police. Has there been any concomitant increase in the number of attempted boat crossings who are then actually detained, rather than just allowed to go free and return to the same beach the following night?

Suella Braverman: Last year, the French prevented crossings which were carrying over 33,000 illegal migrants. That is an increase of 40% on the previous year, so they are preventing departures. They have also carried out arrests and prosecutions of their own. I do not think I have got that specific figure of the French prosecutions—



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Tim Loughton: It is not many, is it?

Suella Braverman: I do not know if you do?

Q666 **Tim Loughton:** So we are paying £500 million to the French police in order to do more interceptions, which is delaying people coming across, but we do not know if it is actually leading to them being arrested and their status in France analysed and then dealt with appropriately. The point is that they are just trying again and trying again, and they only have to get lucky once. Have we not put some conditions on that £500 million that they have actually got to prevent people from keeping trying? You only do that by detaining them and analysing what their status is in France itself, and whether they should be in France, let alone able to come to the UK.

Suella Braverman: In the first two months of this year, over 3,700 crossings were prevented. The interception rate is one that we monitor closely. It sits at around 50%.

Q667 **Tim Loughton:** It is even better—54%.

Suella Braverman: There we go. We need that to increase, and we all agree on that. That is why we have put in more resource; that is why we are working more closely with the French.

Q668 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but you do agree that the 54% could be fewer people.

Suella Braverman: In terms of outcomes, the French have destroyed over 1,000 small boats last year. Our intelligence cell—we have got a UK-France joint intelligence cell.

Q669 **Tim Loughton:** I know all that, and all that is good, but what I am saying is you do agree that 54% of interceptions could mean fewer, different people intercepted.

Suella Braverman: There have been 400 arrests of people smugglers, and there have been 76 organised crime groups dismantled since the set-up of the joint intelligence cell.

Q670 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but you do agree that the 54% figure could actually mean fewer different people have been intercepted, because it is the same people trying again, isn't it?

Suella Braverman: Yes; it is measured by the proportion of people who do not make it across compared to the total number who make it across in any one session.

Q671 **Tim Loughton:** Okay. This is my final question. The chief inspector of borders and immigration has invited us to accompany him on an inspection of one of the facilities for which he is responsible. Would you have any problem with this Committee going with him?

Suella Braverman: It would depend on which facility. I would have to—

Q672 **Tim Loughton:** In principle, would you have any problem with us



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accompanying him to see how he does his work?

Suella Braverman: Instinctively, no. I do not know whether there is any propriety or procedural issue that I am not aware of, but I cannot see any issue. Let me review that and get back to you.

Q673 **Tim Loughton:** So you would be perfectly happy if we were to go with the inspector to see how he does his work.

Suella Braverman: Well, you visited Manston, didn't you? Did you visit with the inspector?

Tim Loughton: No.

Suella Braverman: Have you ever visited with the inspector?

Q674 **Tim Loughton:** No. We have not been able to visit with the inspector. We would quite like to, so that we are looking at the same things and seeing how he comes to his conclusions. It would be very helpful to this Committee, but we need permission from the Home Office to do that, and we cannot see why the Home Office would not want us to be able to do that.

Suella Braverman: I have not considered this issue before. I want to look into it in detail. If it is appropriate, I am happy to permit it, if I have the power to permit it.

Q675 **Tim Loughton:** Apparently it is being considered by the Home Office, but it is taking rather a long time, so could you perhaps expedite it? If you cannot come up with any obvious problems with it today, clearly we need to get on with it, because there is lots for us to do.

Suella Braverman: I have not come across this issue, so I will look into it and get back to you.

Tim Loughton: Do we have time for one final question?

Chair: Yes, but I am sure the Home Secretary needs to prepare for the statement.

Q676 **Tim Loughton:** I am worried that Ms Watson has not had an opportunity to contribute.

Suella Braverman: This is what happened last time—nothing on policing.

Q677 **Tim Loughton:** She is the director for policing. Why are there six police forces in the Engage process—the most extreme form of monitoring?

Suella Braverman: I will start off, and Rachel, you might want to come in.

Tim Loughton: This is an opportunity to hear from one of your colleagues, rather than you having to do all the work, Home Secretary—I am giving you a breather.



Suella Braverman: I would like to start, because I am the responsible Minister; it is my responsibility. The chief inspector is someone whose work I value greatly. We have a good relationship, and his report last week puts down some real challenges for policing as a whole. I note that he says overall crime is falling and there has never been a safer time to live, arguably, in England and Wales. I take comfort from his observations in that regard, but you are right: there are several forces that are in the Engage process. The inspectorate escalates a force into Engage when there have been significant or enduring concerns over their ability to address serious underperformance.

Q678 **Tim Loughton:** We know the process. Why?

Suella Braverman: Well, at the end of the day, chief constables and PCCs—ultimately, PCCs—are responsible for on-the-ground performance of those forces: how they deploy, how they respond and whether public confidence is high. Once those forces are in Engage, we need to ensure that they are presented with an improvement plan, and there is a considerable level of oversight, accountability and challenge that is injected into them.

I am encouraged that the system does work. We have seen forces go into Engage and then come out of it. Greater Manchester police is a great example of one such force that was put into special measures. A new chief was appointed, and there was a real and quite dramatic turnaround. I believe we can see that, and from my updates from the chief inspector, he has some grounds for optimism about some of these forces coming out of Engage in the not-too-distant future. Rachel, do you want to say anything?

Chair: I am very conscious of time, so could you be brief?

Rachel Watson: I will be very brief. I absolutely reiterate the points made by the Home Secretary. The inspectorate now does more continual monitoring of forces' performance. Although the inspectorate reports come out on a periodic basis, it does periodic monitoring of forces' performance. We have much better insight and oversight than ever before into how forces are doing, which means that when a force starts to fall short to a degree that is of real concern to the inspectorate, it is put into Engage very, very swiftly.

As the Home Secretary said, the Engage process is designed not to be punitive but to improve performance, and we have seen that. We have seen Greater Manchester come out. We have seen improvements in Cleveland's performance as it has been in the Engage process. It allows the Home Office, along with the inspectorate and other parts of the policing system, to support that force and keep it under closer observation while it improves.

Suella Braverman: I would add South Yorkshire and Humberside as forces that have shown marked improvement.

Q679 **Chair:** I am very conscious of your time, Home Secretary. I have a few quick questions to put to you. When are we going to see the police



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regulations to get rid of bad cops that have been requested by the commissioner of the Met?

Suella Braverman: Are you talking about dismissal reviews?

Chair: To get rid of bad cops, yes.

Suella Braverman: I launched the review because Sir Mark Rowley and other chiefs have raised concerns with me. We have completed the consultation on the review. We are now considering options.

Chair: So when?

Suella Braverman: Very soon.

Chair: Before the summer recess?

Suella Braverman: That would be my aim, but I will only say very soon at the moment.

Rachel Watson: I think we will be in a position to make an announcement of what exactly the measures will look like, but then the regulations would have to follow. As you know, there is a process for agreeing and clearing regulations.

Chair: I am trying to work out when you are going to make an announcement to Parliament about what you are going to do about this. So, it is not going to be before the summer?

Suella Braverman: It will be very soon. I cannot give any more detail than that, I'm afraid.

Q680 **Chair:** When will you be bringing in the provisions within the Public Order Act in relation to journalists and buffer zones?

Rachel Watson: I believe the provision relating to journalists is going to be on 2 July. Buffer zones will take a little longer. I do not have a precise date to hand for that, but we will certainly let you know.

Q681 **Chair:** Could you write to me about that and explain why it is taking longer?

Rachel Watson: Absolutely.

Q682 **Chair:** When will the Committee receive an apology for the behaviour of Lord Murray, who appeared before us to discuss Windrush? He was late, rude and obstructive, and I have never had an apology about his behaviour.

Suella Braverman: That is the first I have heard of it.

Chair: I wrote to you about it and made it very clear that his behaviour was unacceptable. I have not had a response to my concerns.

Suella Braverman: When did you write? What was the date of your letter?



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Chair: I can send you the letter again, but I wrote and specifically raised his behaviour with the Committee.

Suella Braverman: Yes please. I will look into it.

Q683 **Chair:** Finally, I have just checked the phrase that you used in the Commons, which Carolyn Harris referred to, about the backlog and it being reduced. You said, “the asylum initial decision backlog is down by 17,000”. So the Home Office’s definition of asylum initial decision backlog is total backlog, including legacy and flow. We just need to reflect on what you said to the House of Commons.

Suella Braverman: You are also kind of picking and choosing. If you complete the whole of that sentence of my statement, I referred to the legacy within it. I am making it clear, if there is any doubt, that at all times I have been referring to, as has the Prime Minister, the pre-28 June 2022 initial decision backlog of legacy cases—also known as the legacy backlog. That is what I have been referring to—the 92,000 in December, down by 17,000. I think we have probably ad nauseam gone over that issue. It is precisely what I meant and what I said. I want to clarify, in case anyone is wilfully or otherwise misinterpreting what I have said, that at all times I have been consistent about the reference to the backlog.

Q684 **Chair:** I do not think anybody is wanting to do that. All I am asking you to do is reflect on what is in *Hansard* and what it says, because it seems to be different to what the Home Office’s definition is. We know there has been a lot of concern about the use of numbers and statistics coming from the Home Office. We all want to get this right. We all want to ensure that the facts we give are correct. Can you reflect on that?

Suella Braverman: With respect, you have asked me this question for possibly approaching double figures—10 times or something like that. We have not been able to talk about the large amount of work on policing and crime, yet again, like in the last session, which you have just acknowledged yourself, yet you have repeated the same question several times. With respect, I have repeated the answer and made my point. There is not much more I can say.

Q685 **Chair:** With the greatest of respect, Home Secretary, it is down to this Committee to choose the questions we wish to ask you. We are very grateful for your time today. You have spent more than the two hours you had allocated here, so we are very grateful for that. You are absolutely right that we have not been able to cover many of the issues we would like to explore with you. This is an open invitation. If you would like to come back, we would very happily have a session with you on policing alone. Since you came in November, we have had the Dame Louise Casey report, the David Carrick case, which was shocking—

Suella Braverman: Unfortunately you haven’t asked me many questions on those very serious issues.

Q686 **Chair:** No, but we would very much like to ask you. If you would like to come back, we can make arrangements to sit specially and have a



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session for you.

Suella Braverman: I will look at my diary before I make any commitments. What I would say is that asking the same questions repetitively again and again and again is not the best use of your time. I humbly suggest that to you.

Chair: I would respectfully say to you that we decide what we wish to ask you and how many times we need to ask you to get an answer. Thank you very much for your time today. We look forward to seeing you again, hopefully shortly so we can discuss with you policing issues and many others. Thank you for your time, and thank you to the officials as well.