

# Public Accounts Committee

## Oral evidence: The Asylum Transformation Programme, HC 1334

Monday 10 July 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 10 July 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Olivia Blake; Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Mrs Flick Drummond; Peter Grant; Ben Lake; Anne Marie Morris; Sarah Olney; Nick Smith.

Home Affairs Committee Member also present: Dame Diana Johnson, Chair.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, Oliver Lodge, Director, National Audit Office, Linda Mills, Director of Parliamentary Relations, National Audit Office, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Questions 1 – 176

### Witnesses

[I](#): Sir Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Simon Ridley, Second Permanent Secretary and SRO of the transformation programme, Home Office; Abi Tierney, Director General, HM Passport Office and UK Visas and Immigration.



Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

The asylum and protection transformation programme (HC 1375)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Matthew Rycroft, Simon Ridley and Abi Tierney.

**Chair:** Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 10 July 2023. Today, we are looking at the asylum transformation programme, which is a Home Office programme to improve the effectiveness of the asylum system. We know that this depends on well-functioning caseworking at the Home Office to support timely and accurate decisions. We also know that there is a big impact when things are not working, particularly on accommodation as well as on the individuals concerned.

In the last financial year, the Home Office spent approximately £3.6 billion on asylum support, which was nearly double its spending in the previous year, and the transformation programme is aiming to improve the speed and quality of decision making, as well as ensuring the supply of the right sort of accommodation for asylum seekers in local authorities. Both of those areas are ones that we want to probe today.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. We have in front of us Sir Matthew Rycroft, who is the Permanent Secretary at the Home Office. He is joined by Simon Ridley, who is the Second Permanent Secretary and senior responsible owner of the transformation programme, particularly pulling together all of the issues around accommodation, as I understand. They are joined by Abi Tierney, who is the director general at His Majesty's Passport Office and UK Visas and Immigration, with a background in customer services. We are going to come to that in a moment.

Before we go into our main session, we wanted to touch on passports, Ms Tierney.

Q1 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Good afternoon, Ms Tierney. This Committee often examines things where Government have got things wrong, so I am now going to invite you to take a bit of credit for where something has gone right, it would appear. I am sure that you are aware of Katie Gatens' article in *The Sunday Times* yesterday. She reports that in 2022, after the covid backlog, about 360,000 passports took more than 10 weeks to be processed, but she is also saying that the system is now flying and that between January and May you processed 4.5 million passports. Tell us how you did it.

**Abi Tierney:** Goodness me. Thank you for the opportunity. It goes without saying that it was not just me but a huge team effort across the Home Office. Tom Greig, my director, was here in December, when I was



having an operation, and you had a really constructive session with him then. The big bit was learning the lessons from last year and putting in place really granular solutions to quite a lot of the things that had caused us challenges—for example, ensuring that the customer service in our call centre was improved through using things like IVR. If people are just wanting an update on a passport, they can phone the call centre, put in their application number and get an update. People just want to know that it is in process and that they do not have to do anything else about it. That was one of the improvements.

We also did some things where more passports can go through the digital application process. As long as all the information is correct and everything clears from a security perspective, you do not need any human interaction. That means that for those passports that are going through in the five days, that is completely digitised. Not having that human interaction means that you do not put any delays into the process for doing that, which really makes a difference.

The other big thing that has been launched more recently is a much more central scanning and validation service. One of the challenges that we had in the peak last year was when people were sending in their supporting documents—for example, their old passport or, if they were changing their name, their marriage certificate and birth certificate, and so on. We were getting a backlog at that front-door bit, whereas we have now created two central offices and central scanning and validation. Rather than going all over the country, they go to these two central hubs in Corby and Hemel Hempstead. They get put on the computer, and then any examiner anywhere in the country can get access to that information, so that has really sped up the front end. Hopefully, those are some examples of the lessons we have learned from last year.

Also, being really honest, the demand has been much less spikey than it was last year, which, of course, has really helped as well in terms of being able to manage that process.

**Q2** **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Tell us a little bit more about this digital process. A lot of Government organisations do not get digital processes streamlined in the way that you are outlining to us today. How did you manage to transform your organisation to doing it in the way that you do now?

**Abi Tierney:** The passport transformation programme began in 2016 and is due to finish in the next couple of years, so it has been a long process. I joined the Passport Office about three and a half years ago, so I came in halfway through that. It has taken really strong programme management. It has been about making sure that the right technical skills are there, but also the culture change.

We have done a huge amount of work with our teams, and that is one of the things that the article recognised. The offices feel different. There is a lot less paper. When you speak to people, they love the new systems. We



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

did a lot of work with our teams and asked, "What works? What do you like? How do you use it?", to make sure that, for those people using the system, it felt streamlined and good.

We also did some really good work with our customers. We do focus groups. One of the things that I get messages about when people are surprised about how good the systems are is the text messaging that says, "We have received your passport. Your passport is now in process. Your passport is now out for delivery." When you look at the best-in-class customer service organisations, keeping a customer at the heart of what you do at every step of the process has also been really important.

Last year was really hard on the team. They now come into work and can see that they are delivering a good service, so staff retention is good. We can recruit people. You end up in a really positive overall environment from that perspective.

**Q3** **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Other than congratulating you, I suspect that some of those aspects will be replayed in the immigration field, but let us see.

**Abi Tierney:** There is a lot of comparison.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** The Atlas system, for example, will come later.

**Chair:** Ms Tierney seems to be responsible for all services across the Home Office at the moment, or at least those that are people facing. I should welcome Dame Diana Johnson, who is guesting today as chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

**Q4** **Dame Diana Johnson:** I have two small questions. First of all, are you able to quantify how much you got back from Teleperformance for its poor call handling last year? Secondly, when will you return to the three-week standard?

**Abi Tierney:** On the first one, that is commercially in confidence, so I am unable to share that situation. Apologies for that.

**Chair:** Can we perhaps have a private briefing?

**Abi Tierney:** Yes, we can absolutely do that. I am very happy to do that.

On the second one, we want to be absolutely confident that we can maintain the three-week service standard. We are yet to have an ordinary year. This year, we saw a really big demand in the first bit of the year, and then it has dropped off in a way that we were not expecting. I want to make sure that we are back to having it very predictable, such that when we do the three weeks, we are confident that we can deliver it. We are modelling it all the time. We have regular conversations with our Ministers. Once we are confident that we can do it operationally, we will look to move to that.

**Q5** **Chair:** Five days were mooted in the paper. We were aware that panic



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

was part of the issue. When people were worried, more people applied and kept chasing, which is fair enough. We were doing the same for our constituents. What is your advice to people who are applying for a passport now? Is five days what they should expect?

**Abi Tierney:** No. They should absolutely expect the 10 weeks. Part of that is us making sure that we are balancing the demand.

Q6 **Chair:** Is five days just lucky?

**Abi Tierney:** No. That is what we are consistently getting for applications. We have had this conversation with the Home Affairs Select Committee. Where people use the digital process, where their photographs are done through the booths, where they get the number, where there is no error or query in the processing, and where it is a straightforward renewal, they are going through in five days at the moment.

Q7 **Chair:** But people should be allowing 10 weeks.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes, they absolutely should.

Q8 **Nick Smith:** Well done on making great progress on this important topic. It is great that some people are turned round in five days, but what is the turnaround average for the Passport Office for anybody who applies?

**Abi Tierney:** Can I come back with the absolute latest figure on that in terms of publishing?

Q9 **Nick Smith:** What was last month's then?

**Abi Tierney:** Last time I saw it, it was about three and a half weeks overall for all applications, including things such as international.

**Chair:** We are going to move into our main session, because we are very concerned to probe what is happening with the asylum transformation programme and how that is going.

Q10 **Sarah Olney:** Sir Matthew, it would be nice to think that, maybe in a year's time, we will be having a conversation about how well you have transformed the asylum backlog in the same way that we have just had one with Ms Tierney in terms of passports. How is it going?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I look forward to that conversation. More seriously, one of the purposes of the reorganisation that we did about two and a half or three years ago now was to put all of the customer services in the Home Office into a single area, headed by Abi Tierney, so that, for instance, the caseworkers are able to move, if there is a lot of demand in one area, from passports to visas or asylum, and so on.

That is easier said than done. There is not total fluidity across the different caseworking yet, but we are moving in that direction and are very keen to learn the lessons from the very successful performance of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Passport Office this year and apply them to the rest of the Home Office's customer services.

As the National Audit Office makes clear, there are some significant challenges ahead, both on accommodation and on caseworking for asylum, which really are the two big parts of the asylum system that we need to focus on if we are to fix it. That is why this programme was set up and why we are seeking to act on the recommendations of the National Audit Office.

**Q11 Sarah Olney:** Specifically, what steps will you be taking to clear the backlog? Particularly, how will you be prioritising different types of claim?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** My colleagues can talk about that in more detail, but, first of all, we have sped up the processing. We have ensured that for some cohorts where there is a very high grant, we do not have to have a very long interview. Secondly, we have increased the number of caseworkers, and we can talk in detail about that. Thirdly, we have increased the productivity of the average caseworker. The average fully trained caseworker is now taking more decisions per week than they previously were. All those are measures designed to fulfil the Prime Minister's commitment to reduce the legacy backlog to zero by the end of this year, and we are on track to do that.

**Q12 Sarah Olney:** Specifically, how have you increased productivity?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Abi, do you want to take that? Abi has overseen this in some detail across the country.

**Abi Tierney:** We have been doing that in lots of different ways. Let me talk you through the key things that we are finding are making the big difference. One of them is that we were having a number of bottlenecks in the process and finding that, first, decisions were not getting to a decision maker at the speed that they needed to, and secondly, once they got there, they were not what we would call clean decisions ready to be made. Looking at every step in the process and at what was causing those bottlenecks, and removing them where needed, has been a big part of it.

The other bit is looking at ways that we have improved. If I give you the example of the streamlined asylum processing, getting information on a questionnaire in and completed before the interview means that the interview can be shorter. That means that the asylum decision makers can do more interviews in a week than they previously could, which again makes them more productive and means that the decision flow improves. You mentioned the Atlas programme; there was double keying, which has now stopped, so that helps in terms of productivity.

We have also looked at what I would say are fairly basic things. We now do a pulse survey every month of our asylum decision makers, which asks, "Which things are and are not working for you?" We go through those in really granular detail and say, "We will sort that and fix it where



we can,” and we put that into the programme.

The other bit is really good operational management and making sure that people at a decision-making unit level have the data to understand what their performance is, what should be expected of individual decision makers and what that stacks up to as a decision-making unit, and then making sure that that stacks up to the overall trajectory. It is a combination of improvement plus what I would call operational delivery grip.

**Q13 Sarah Olney:** Can you talk to me a little more about where you are focusing on the countries that asylum seekers have come from? Have you changed your approach to that in order to speed up decision making?

**Abi Tierney:** We radically have. One of the things that the audit Report had rightly pulled out was that it was taking a long time to get our asylum decision makers productive. That was because we were doing very lengthy training to ensure that they were up to speed with all the different countries, the potential country guidance and what was needed.

One of the things that we are doing is getting decision-making units to focus either on single countries or on countries where the issues are similar. The training for the decision makers has now been shortened as a result, which means that they are more productive and become experts more quickly. Once we are through clearing the backlog, we will top up their training in the other areas. That gives you an example of how we are approaching the different countries. It is much more specialist.

**Q14 Sarah Olney:** Can I ask specifically about Albania, for example? You are saying that some of your caseworkers are doing just Albanian cases. They understand the Albanian issues. They have not needed to be trained on the others.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

**Q15 Sarah Olney:** Does that make Albania a priority cohort? Does that mean that more Albanian cases are being considered than perhaps asylum applications from other countries?

**Abi Tierney:** Earlier in the year, we focused a large number of decision makers on Albania. Now that we have cleared a significant part of the Albanian cases, we are having a really balanced approach right the way across. We are looking at what it takes to clear the backlog. All of the countries will be cleared in that period, except for a small number of unworkable cases. All of the decisions will be made, so there is no prioritisation from that perspective.

If I take something like the streamlined asylum process, which applies to Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Sudan and Yemen, that is being done by certain teams, but some of the other countries, like Iraq and Iran, are being done by other teams. Everybody is getting the same priority.

**Q16 Sarah Olney:** I am pleased to hear that, because I was hearing that





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Albania was being prioritised. I know from the casework I do for my constituents that they are primarily from other nationalities. My question was going to be about whether your approach inadvertently discriminates, but it does not sound as if it does.

**Abi Tierney:** No. I am really conscious of that, and that everybody in the backlog will get their decision this year, where it is within our gift to do that.

Q17 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I would like to talk about caseworkers. In January 2023, you started off with 1,333. By May, you had 1,280. I just wondered whether you might be able to tell us today how many caseworkers you have.

**Abi Tierney:** I will caveat that this is management information rather than published information. The published information will be out on 21 August. As of today, we have a headcount of 1,594. The FTE is closer to 1,550, because some of them work part time or reduced hours.

Q18 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I had a letter from the Home Secretary just before she appeared before the Home Affairs Select Committee, and she said that the number would go up to 1,800 by the summer.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes. It will be by the end of July. I can confirm that.

Q19 **Dame Diana Johnson:** That is just two or three weeks off.

**Abi Tierney:** I will give you an idea. Last week, we had 165 starting, and we have similar over the next three weeks.

Q20 **Dame Diana Johnson:** By September, you will go up to 2,500.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

Q21 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Are you confident that you can get to 2,500 by the end of September?

**Abi Tierney:** I am. Over 2,000 people have accepted roles. It is the case that we have that process in place. We know exactly what that shape of onboarding is going to be. We know where everybody is in that onboarding process. I am confident. We even have flex within that 2,000, because we know that some will drop out in that process.

Q22 **Dame Diana Johnson:** We know that 25% of your workforce leaves every year. The NAO Report says it is about 8% in the rest of the Home Office. When do you think you will be down to 8%?

**Abi Tierney:** One of the things that is accounted for in there and which has driven some of the numbers that you were talking about is that we have had quite a lot of internal promotion. If you are going to double your workforce, you also need to double your management structure, so we have had to increase the number of technical specialists and team leaders. To begin with, when we were advertising those jobs in order to have the infrastructure and the scaffolding in place for new decision





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

makers, we found that a lot of our decision makers were being successful in those jobs, hence we saw a dip in decision makers to begin with. That is counted in that attrition rate.

What I am pleased to say is that we are continuing to see that attrition rate improve. It is nowhere near where it needs to be, which is at 7% or 8%. I would really hope that we can get there. That is what I have everywhere else in my area.

**Q23 Dame Diana Johnson:** You do not have a date though; you just want to see it improved.

**Abi Tierney:** We are continually monitoring it to see that it improves. It is really difficult to put a date on when it would get to 7% or 8%.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** It was 46% only two years ago so, as you can tell, we are moving in the right direction, for the reasons that Abi has given.

**Q24 Dame Diana Johnson:** Half your workforce was leaving. It is now a quarter leaving.

**Abi Tierney:** No. About 40% of that is internal promotions at the moment. Those are not people leaving, but people moving into jobs within either asylum or other places in the Home Office.

**Q25 Dame Diana Johnson:** That is quite clear in the information that we have. Of the caseworkers you have, you have talked about having specialists for countries, which cuts down the amount of training that people need. In the Report, it was found that in April only 50% of caseworkers were making decisions and that, of those, only 140 were fully trained and making decisions independently. Where are we now in terms of how that is going to work? When you have all these new people coming in, what percentage would you expect will be able to make decisions, and how quickly?

**Abi Tierney:** Based on the current trajectory that I am confident will deliver clearing the backlog, we are assuming that for the last quarter of the year, 1,600 decision makers will be delivering their productivity targets.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** 1,600 out of the 2,500.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes. They will still be making decisions but not at 100% of their productivity.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** It takes a year or so to get to full productivity. In your first year, you are still productive but not fully productive.

**Q26 Dame Diana Johnson:** Of the 2,500 you are aiming for by the end of September, how many will be fully trained and able to make all the decisions that they need to?

**Abi Tierney:** The 1,600 is in the plan for the last quarter of this year.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q27 **Dame Diana Johnson:** We have gone from 140 in April, and now you are saying 1,600 by September.

**Abi Tierney:** No. In the last quarter—so October, November and December—we are assuming that the 1,600 will be being productive.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** As for the people other than the 140, it was not that they were sitting on their hands. They were training, mentoring and supporting the new people. As Abi was saying, if you have a significant surge of recruitment, as we do in this area, you need to train, support and mentor them. We have been doing that in-house, largely speaking, and that has reduced the total number of people who are only doing caseworking, but in a good cause, and we are getting the benefit of that now.

**Abi Tierney:** It also goes back to the cohorting. Making sure that people are being trained on very specific cohorts, with our newer decision makers on some of the less complex cohorts, means that they will be productive and quicker in terms of making decisions.

Q28 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So it is not taking a full year to train.

**Abi Tierney:** No. It took a full year to be productive previously, but by going to this cohorting approach, we are looking to see significant improvement in that.

Q29 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Just so that I am clear, how long does it take to train somebody who is coming in?

**Abi Tierney:** It will now vary, depending on which cohort they are working on and which decision-making unit they are moving into. For example, if they are moving into something like Albania, that will take longer to train than if they are doing one of the high-grant areas.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** On decisions, we know that, thankfully, there has been an increase in the productivity and the decisions being taken.

**Chair:** Before we move on to decisions, Dame Diana, I want to bring in Mr Smith on some of the personnel issues.

Q30 **Nick Smith:** Ms Tierney, of the new starters you have offered jobs to, what percentage take up and start those jobs?

**Abi Tierney:** I will give you an example in our modelling that we are assuming between now and September, based on previous experience.

**Chair:** It is your assumption.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes. We are assuming that of the 2,000, 300 will drop out of that process.

**Nick Smith:** So you will lose 10% to 12%.

**Chair:** That is based on previous figures.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Abi Tierney:** They might get another job. We know that the kind of people we are recruiting will have a number of jobs in their pipeline.

Q31 **Nick Smith:** So you think you have over-recruited to still meet the targets that you are trying to get to.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

Q32 **Nick Smith:** Vetting of new starters has been an issue across a number of Departments, as we have discovered on this Committee in recent times. Is slowness in the administration of vetting undermining your efforts?

**Abi Tierney:** It is not. We have been prioritised as part of the work on the 10-point plan, and prioritising and clearing the backlog. At the moment, we are seeing that the vetting is going through as required and is not causing us major issues.

Q33 **Nick Smith:** What is the average time taken for vetting at the moment?

**Abi Tierney:** It sits at around 20 to 30 days at the moment. I can come back to you on the exact number.

Q34 **Chair:** If somebody applied for a job today, roughly what timeframe would it take for them to be employed?

**Abi Tierney:** The majority of the 165 who applied last week were in a campaign that was kicked off in February or March of this year, so that gives you an idea. Overall, the Home Office is running at about 105 days in terms of what we call street to seat. We have a team that is really managing every single person in that pipeline. Some of the challenges with security vetting are to do with them not filling in the form correctly or us not getting it back. We have a support team who phone them up and say, "Where is your form in this process? Is there any help that you need?" It is about 105 days for the Home Office.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** That 105 days is the result of a very significant amount of reprioritisation elsewhere. Broadly speaking, the rest of the Home Office is having zero recruitment, so that the whole of the recruitment team can get that number of days from street to seat down to 105. That is a very significant achievement, because that is a lot faster than it used to be.

**Chair:** But there is also the potential of other problems arising from this, which we will come to.

Q35 **Nick Smith:** When you say "start of campaign", is that when you put the adverts out or when people responded to the adverts?

**Abi Tierney:** The start of the advert, which went out in February time. It will have been out for a number of weeks at that point, so people have been applying at various points while that advert was out. That is why I said that the majority were from a campaign in February and March.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q36 **Nick Smith:** Is this a rolling advertising campaign that you have on at the moment?

**Abi Tierney:** It is, and we will continue to do that, because of the attrition, so that we make sure to keep at the 2,500.

Q37 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Ms Tierney, sticking with personnel for a minute, you hope to get this turnover down to 25%.

**Abi Tierney:** It was at 25% in the Report. I said that we have continued to see a reduction since then.

Q38 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Does that mean that you are going to still have to pay this retention amount? Or have you increased the pay generally? How have you done this?

**Abi Tierney:** It is through the retention allowance. Doing that has been a really significant factor, and that will continue.

Q39 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Figure 11 says that as we get on into the system—we will come to this in a minute; you will get more appeals and so on—HMCTS is going to need to recruit around 1,000 additional immigration enforcement caseworkers. Are they going to be poaching your best people?

**Abi Tierney:** Immigration enforcement is a very different skillset. When I was talking about people moving within the Home Office from asylum, it tends to be within the caseworking area. I see moves between visas, passports and asylum. You will occasionally have somebody moving into immigration enforcement because they want a change, but that moving across does not tend to be a major cause of losing skills. The same is true with HMCTS.

Q40 **Chair:** Do they have a vetting priority too?

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

**Chair:** So the Home Office is scooping up all the vetting priorities. I bet you are very popular with your colleagues. It is a bit like whack-a-mole.

Q41 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I want to go back to the new caseworkers you will have in place by the end of September. We know from the NAO Report that to clear the remaining backlog and meet the Prime Minister's target—we understand that about 17,000 had been cleared by April, leaving about 77,000 to be cleared by the end of the year—you would need to make, on average, 2,200 decisions per week from May. How are you getting on with that?

**Abi Tierney:** We are seeing a significant increase in the number of decisions.

Q42 **Dame Diana Johnson:** How many do you make a week now?

**Abi Tierney:** Again, this is management information rather than published information from that perspective, so I do want to heavily



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

caveat it. Our trajectory would see us making approximately 2,500 decisions a week by the end of July, and we are on track to achieve that currently.

**Q43 Dame Diana Johnson:** From the beginning of May to July, do you know what your figures were?

**Abi Tierney:** They have gone up each week. In really broad-brush terms, last week we were at about 1,700.

**Q44 Dame Diana Johnson:** These are big numbers that you are going to get through, aren't they?

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

**Q45 Dame Diana Johnson:** Are you satisfied with the quality of the decision making? Just in the last few days I saw that there was a decision made on a man from Sudan. The information that the decision maker used was guidance from the Home Office that was clearly out of date, from before the civil war. Are you confident that these decisions that are being made first time are going to be the correct ones?

**Abi Tierney:** We can write to you on that specific case if you can share it with us. As I mentioned, one of the things that we have done is increase the number of technical specialists and managers to ensure that the support and the quality assurance processes are in place. When we are making this number of decisions, there may sometimes be errors. I do not think we have increased that risk significantly in this process. By the really targeted training, that specialism should, in some ways, help to prevent that, rather than somebody working and making decisions across many countries.

**Q46 Dame Diana Johnson:** So you are confident that you are going to meet the Prime Minister's target by 31 December. What happens if that is not the case? The other backlog is growing, because people are continuing to travel across in the small boats. We had 1,300 over the weekend. What is happening to that backlog?

**Abi Tierney:** As for how we are going to do it in the process, we will be at our most optimum and productive in terms of number of decision makers and training. Our last big onboarding happens in September. They will continue to be trained and get more productive. The moment that we have cleared the backlog, we will be turning to clearing the flow and will be able to clear that in a much more effective way than we have been able to do in the past, because we will have a highly productive and large number of decision makers.

**Q47 Peter Grant:** Good afternoon. Before I go on with the main topic, Sir Matthew, can I ask you to clarify a number of comments that have been made by the Secretary of State and the Immigration Minister regarding the relative numbers of refugees and asylum seekers being welcomed into different parts of the United Kingdom?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

On 7 March, the Secretary of State said that Scotland currently takes one of the lowest numbers of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. On 13 March, she said, "Compared with the other nations of the United Kingdom, Scotland has taken a disproportionately low number" of asylum seekers. A few weeks later, the Minister, Robert Jenrick, suggested that nowhere in Scotland apart from Glasgow is taking any numbers at all. Those statements are not accurate, are they?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I might ask Mr Ridley to come in, because he oversees the accommodation. This is part of the dispersal of asylum seekers out of the Home Office and into local authorities.

**Chair:** Yes, we know. We are well aware.

**Simon Ridley:** I do not have precise comparisons between Scotland and England in front of me. I am very happy to come back on what those numbers are.

Q48 **Chair:** Just generally, what is your impression?

**Simon Ridley:** In terms of dispersal accommodation, we are definitely seeking a lot more in Scotland. They are different in different regions across the UK. We need to build the accommodation that we have across the piece. We are working with our suppliers and Scottish local authorities to do that in the same way that we are in England.

**Chair:** You are not quite answering Mr Grant's question, though.

**Simon Ridley:** I am happy to come back on precise comparisons. I do not have the Scottish number in front of me.

Q49 **Chair:** If we were to ask you whether there was a nation in the UK that is accepting more or less, or anywhere that you were very worried about not accepting enough asylum seekers through the dispersal programme, would you have answered, "Oh yes, Scotland"? I do not think that you could, could you?

**Simon Ridley:** I would probably have given an answer not dissimilar to the one that I have given. There are far more asylum seekers in the London area and in the north-west than in the other parts of the UK, so we definitely need to seek a greater estate in Scotland in terms of the accommodation that we have there.

Q50 **Peter Grant:** Perhaps I can help, because according to the figures I have from the House of Commons Library—who, unless they made them up themselves, will have got them from Home Office figures—for asylum seekers receiving support, the United Kingdom average is eight per 10,000 population and the Scotland figure is eight per 10,000 population. So they are exactly the same. You mentioned the fact that London, the north-west and the north-east are significantly higher, but the east midlands and the east of England are significantly lower than Scotland, as are the south-east and the south-west.

If we look at refugees settled according to the place of residence, again





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the UK average is seven per 10,000 population, and Scotland is seven per 10,000 population. Those are your own figures. Finally, the figures that the Home Office and DLUHC have jointly published on the Government website are in document number 1158871, which quite correctly includes Ukrainian refugees as well. The total figure of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland is 5.5 per 1,000 population. In England, it is 3.5 per 1,000 population. No English region and no other nation of the United Kingdom is as high as Scotland in those figures. Those are your own figures, aren't they?

**Simon Ridley:** Scotland certainly took a greater proportion of Ukrainian refugees. They set up what was called the super sponsor scheme, where Ukrainians could apply to the Scottish Government as, effectively, their accommodation provider rather than needing a specific match. When you look across all refugees and asylum seekers, I have no reason to dispute your figures. When we look at asylum accommodation particularly, we need more across the whole UK. Exactly as you have said in terms of the numbers, some regions are higher than others.

Q51 **Peter Grant:** Who was it who took the decision to serve notice of eviction on the Afghan refugees living in a hotel in my constituency?

**Simon Ridley:** We have had a large number of Afghan families who came over following Operation Pitting.

Q52 **Peter Grant:** These people are my responsibility at the moment. They are my constituents, even if they are here only for the short term. They have been told that they have no choice. They have to leave their accommodation. Was that decision taken by the Scottish Government, was it taken by Fife Council or was it taken by the Home Office?

**Simon Ridley:** The UK Government have agreed that we need to move Afghans out of bridging accommodation and into permanently settled accommodation that can be sustainable, and we have done that across the country.

Q53 **Peter Grant:** Was it the UK Government who told the hotel that it had to stop looking after these people?

**Simon Ridley:** Yes, and we are working closely with local authorities in Scotland, Wales and England to support people's exit and to help find accommodation. Where housing is devolved, that is the responsibility of the devolved authority.

Q54 **Peter Grant:** Coming back to the asylum transformation programme, Dame Diana has asked questions about the numbers of caseworkers you expect to have. You expected to have 1,600 fully trained and doing frontline casework by the autumn or early winter. How many cases would you expect each of those caseworkers to get through in a typical month?

**Abi Tierney:** It will vary, based on the cohort. That is one of the things that we really changed. By having people focusing on cohorts, each decision maker is given clear expectations of what their productivity is





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

expected to be. For example, if they are looking at a high-grant nationality and making a decision based on paper, that will be a very different number to if somebody is looking at Albania and it is focused on refusals. There will not be a standard average, but, overall, we are on track to triple the productivity as stated.

**Q55 Peter Grant:** From what you are saying, simply quoting a number of cases dealt with, without saying anything about the kind of case, does not tell us anything about the performance, does it?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** It tells you the average, but, as Abi has said, the average masks a very wide range of different cohorts.

**Q56 Peter Grant:** How do you make sure that everybody does not just do the easy cases to get the numbers up?

**Abi Tierney:** One of the other things that we have changed is much more of a push mechanism in terms of workflow. Previously, decision-making units would be able to choose which cases they took, whereas we have now centralised that process, so that we will be allocating the cases out and ensuring that they are in the best possible position to make a decision. I am sure that nobody would do this, but we do then take away the ability for people to focus just on the easy cases.

**Q57 Peter Grant:** One very noticeable thing that has come out of the most recent figures in quarter one of 2023 is that there is a huge jump in a number of applications that have been withdrawn, including a big jump in the number of non-substantiated or implied withdrawal. What is at the back of those figures?

**Abi Tierney:** That was when we were focusing on Albania at that time of year. We were finding that, when we were inviting people to interview, they were not turning up and, therefore, their case was withdrawn. We have now seen that shift significantly to much more substantive decisions in the latest few weeks.

**Q58 Peter Grant:** Is it realistic to expect that that level of withdrawals will continue? Or are you effectively getting the low-hanging fruit and expecting it to go down?

**Abi Tierney:** It is.

**Q59 Peter Grant:** Mr Ridley, you previously expected to find about 500 additional beds per week in residential areas. You then reduced that to 350 per week, but, most recently, it has been 50 or less. Why did you ever think that 500 beds per week was realistic?

**Simon Ridley:** The starting point for 500 came from an aim for the number we hoped to get to by the end of this year. We have revised that down, exactly as you say, because there is a huge amount of pressure, as you will be aware, in the housing market generally and, indeed, for the sort of accommodation that we use for dispersal, which local authorities



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

also use for temporary accommodation. As you say, we revised that down.

The number of 48 in the Report is the average over the year previous to March or April this year. We are up from that number. We are still not close to 350 a week on a regular basis, but we are doing a lot to try to increase that number in how we are working with local authorities and some of the funding that we have put in place, which is the majority of the funding under the asylum transformation programme to support dispersal.

**Q60 Peter Grant:** If your estimates were so badly wrong on that account—and we can now see that they were over-optimistic—what assurance can the Committee take that all of your other estimates are not equally over-optimistic?

**Simon Ridley:** You have heard Abi talk about all the work on the backlog and what we have done to assure ourselves of that. On dispersal, we reassessed on the basis of the market that we are in through our providers to provide that accommodation. We have increased the funding around it. We provide more funding for accommodation that is brought through more quickly to try to see that number come up, and we are in the process of seeing the extent to which that has the impact that we want.

**Q61 Peter Grant:** We will want to come back later on to what some of the knock-on impacts of what you have just described have been, because if you are offering more money—especially if you are offering more money than local authorities can afford—it is going to cause problems that we will come on to later on. What impact has the fact that you have been running at a 10th of the number of additional beds per week than you originally expected had on the achievement of the other targets of the transformation project?

**Simon Ridley:** The impact it has is that for the same number of people we have to use different forms of accommodation than dispersal. As you have just implied, we absolutely need to look at what we are doing on accommodation as part of the overall system that we have in asylum. That is partly work to try to reduce the demand that we put on accommodation, and the backlog is absolutely critical there. The accommodation strands are about increasing the supply that we have. Dispersal is a very big part of that, but we are doing other things alongside. We are increasing the dispersal estate. We are seeking to maximise the use of the hotels that we have before we start to reduce the number of hotels that we use. We are bringing in alternative accommodation on a number of large sites.

**Q62 Peter Grant:** When you are designing a new system to be operational by, say, 2030 or 2032, or something like that, how many asylum seeker applications do you expect to be having to deal with between now and then?



**Simon Ridley:** We are building a system that, first of all, reduces the backlog. We have all the targets that the Prime Minister set out in his 10-point plan. Those are what we are seeking to meet over the course of this year. That will reduce our backlog.

The Government are also pursuing legislation and other approaches to reduce new arrivals through small boats. We are hoping that, by the time we have done all of that and established the accommodation that we are seeking through this programme, we will have a system that can deal with the volume that comes in. It is hard enough to predict what that is over the short run, let alone the long run. What we need is a sustainable system for a number that is always going to fluctuate.

Q63 **Peter Grant:** I appreciate that, but as the Public Accounts Committee we will be hoping to give a view as to whether we think that what you are setting out to do will achieve the policy objectives. It is very difficult for us to do that. If someone was wanting to build an HS2 railway—which might be a bad example just now—and told us what their budget was, but had no idea how long the railway was going to be or where it was going to go, nobody could tell us whether that project had a chance of success. Do you have any figure at all that you have been working on that would give an indication as to how many people the system is going to have to deal with in the future?

**Abi Tierney:** It comes out really clearly in the Report that one of the hardest things about what we are doing is that we are working in what is a very uncertain world in terms of migration patterns and trends. As the Home Office, we monitor those trends really closely. I have mid, high and low-case scenarios that I do my planning against. We update those regularly. Trying to then say what they are going to look like in 10 years' time is really hard. We are building a system that is sustainable, flexible and more agile than the one that we have currently have in order to respond to that changing dynamic.

Q64 **Peter Grant:** The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have both repeatedly claimed, even when challenged, that 100 million asylum seekers are coming here. Are you planning on those kinds of numbers?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** The 100 million are the people on the move at any one time.

Q65 **Peter Grant:** No, the 100 million are the people about whom the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have said, in these precise words, "They are coming here"—not that they are going somewhere, but that they are coming here to the United Kingdom. That number has no basis in fact whatsoever, does it?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** What they meant is that that is the number of people on the move globally. That is the pool from which people seek to come to the UK to claim asylum, but I do not think that anyone is planning on the assumption that all of those people will come to the UK. Clearly, however generous or not we are as a country, we are not going



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

to be playing massively more than our fair share, are we? We do have plans, as Simon and Abi have both said, that are scalable, flexible and agile, and will respond to whatever the numbers are.

For the business case of this programme, we have made an assumption which, broadly speaking, is that the number will stay the same over the coming years. That does not mean that the Home Office thinks that the numbers will stay the same whatever we do. As my colleagues have said, the number of arrivals has a huge number of factors going into it. It is almost impossible to predict it accurately, which is not to say that we should not try, but what matters more than an accurate prediction is the creation or the sustaining of a system of response that will deal with any number.

Q66 **Chair:** Mr Ridley, how many extra beds per week are you going to get by this enormous increase in the number of occupants in each room in a hotel? How much is that contributing to the target?

**Simon Ridley:** In terms of this being management information, so far we are in the high hundreds. We are confident that there is scope for several thousand beds to be maximised.

Q67 **Chair:** High hundreds overall or per week?

**Simon Ridley:** No, that we have secured so far. I do not know what that is per week, but we have been doing this for a number of weeks, so we are probably at between 100 and 200 a week so far.

Q68 **Chair:** In my own constituency we have all had letters about the number of extra people in hotels. We will come on to the impact of that locally in a moment, but it is quite a lot. Replicating that just across 33 London boroughs, let alone what else is happening in other parts of the country and the different nations of the UK—you are saying that only a few hundred are being added overall across the UK.

**Simon Ridley:** No, that we got people into so far. The total number that we are aiming for will be in the thousands. As you say, we have written to local authorities about this, but the providers are working to prepare the hotels. We need to manage operationally moving people into them. In the councils where there is the biggest impact and the biggest increase in numbers that will come about, we are engaging with them and talking through the impact of that before we move people in.

Q69 **Chair:** We are going to come to the wider impacts on councils, but you have just rather alarmed me. What are you doing about safeguarding? These are hotels run by private companies. Some of them will have security guards. You are putting people together. How are you assessing who should be sharing a room and whether it is safe to do that?

**Simon Ridley:** The first thing to say is that room sharing is not new. There is room sharing; we are seeking to do more.

Q70 **Chair:** Do you mean other than families and relatives?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Simon Ridley:** Yes. We are doing more of that in order to maximise the use of hotels.

Q71 **Chair:** How are you making sure that you are matching people who it is safe to have in the same room?

**Simon Ridley:** We are looking at the records that we have, and at the experience of people who we have had in the estate so far. We are looking at nationalities and language. We are having exactly this conversation with councils, but I am happy to come back in more detail.

Q72 **Chair:** Let me just be clear. You look at nationalities, so you are not putting people together who might, because of nationality, have a reason to clash. You are looking at language, so that they can communicate with each other. Are you looking at their mental health?

**Simon Ridley:** Yes, we are looking at health records and at the experience of people we have had in the estate so far.

Q73 **Chair:** And that is on paper.

**Simon Ridley:** What do you mean by "on paper"?

**Chair:** You are looking at records and saying that, say, two people who are from Afghanistan are okay to share a room together.

**Simon Ridley:** Yes.

Q74 **Chair:** Is anybody speaking to them or doing an assessment? If it was a social services placement, there would have to be quite a serious assessment of a young person or of anyone being placed into accommodation.

**Simon Ridley:** We are talking to the people who are in hotels about the sharing, if that is the question that you are asking.

**Chair:** You mean the asylum seekers.

**Simon Ridley:** The asylum seekers.

Q75 **Chair:** When you say that you are talking to them, can you just talk through what that means? Who is talking to them?

**Simon Ridley:** Through our providers, we are explaining what we are doing and how we are doing it, and that people will be sharing. We are doing the assessment in the way that I have said, and then moving people into the shared rooms.

Q76 **Chair:** What if something happens? You suggest that quite a lot of the assessment is paper based. You have providers who are not qualified social workers or health workers.

**Simon Ridley:** We then have the same support around the hotels in terms of managing them and the service management that we have had in place before. We are working very closely with our providers on that.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q77 **Chair:** We understand that, but my specific point is that there is a big difference between sharing a corridor in a hotel and sharing a room with somebody. People have gone through trauma to be in the country. They might have gone through quite a lot, so there might be people with quite serious needs that you have not identified.

**Simon Ridley:** There might be people for whom it is not appropriate that they share. There is room sharing already; we are seeking to do a lot more of it.

Q78 **Chair:** A Minister has written to me and other Members of this House with the number of people who will be in a specific hotel in Old Street, in my constituency. This will be the new number, because this is the number of people who are sharing. They have not all been assessed yet.

**Simon Ridley:** No, but we have a very big pool of people who we are operating in, and that is why we are doing it over a number of months in terms of moving people in. That is why, in the councils where there are large numbers, we are sitting down with them and discussing it.

Q79 **Chair:** You have already made the assessment that there will be a number in that hotel in Old Street—I am just using this as an example from my constituency—once the room sharing is in place. You have made an assumption that those rooms will be shared, yet you said just now that you will make assessments and some people will not be sharing rooms. Is that an upper-level figure that the Minister has written to me with?

**Simon Ridley:** No. We have a pool of people that is much bigger than the number of people who will be staying in a single hotel. We are able to make decisions to maximise the size of that hotel in the way that our service provider thinks that it can be managed.

Q80 **Chair:** Maybe I am just being dense this afternoon. Forgive me for not bringing the letter with me, but a figure has been given for the number of people who will be living in this hotel once room sharing is implemented. What you are saying is that if it is not suitable for someone to share and they need a room of their own, they may still keep a room of their own, and there may not be quite as much room sharing as is predicted. Is the letter that the Minister has written to me a letter of aspiration at the top level? What happens if people do not share and we do not see as many in that hotel, perhaps because they have different needs and cannot share with somebody?

**Simon Ridley:** If there are 200 in a hotel, that is the number that we are aiming to put into that hotel. That is out of a pool of about 50,000 who are currently in the hotel estate. We are confident that we can move enough people into sharing arrangements to maximise the estate in the way that we are describing.

**Abi Tierney:** Can I come in, because I may be able to help? We will be making decisions on these people. As people potentially leave, that gives





us an opportunity to then put two people in there who have been matched based on nationality and mental health. While somebody in one of the rooms now might be assessed as not being able to room share, once we have made a decision on them, that would give the opportunity. It is about saying that, over time—and hence the “over time” period—it will be a dynamic situation.

**Chair:** The Minister’s letter was a very peculiar one then.

**Q81 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** The leader of my county council, Mark Hawthorne, wrote to you on 6 July and said, “We have concerns that there are plans to increase the licence”—I am not going to name the hotel—“so that capacity can be increased from 100 to 200. We strongly object to the proposal, which would change the current single occupancy accommodation from single males into double occupancy throughout. We know that bunk beds are being fitted to the 100 rooms, and this is completely unacceptable, as there is no licence or agreement for accommodating two people in any of the rooms on this site”.

He goes on to say, “The plans to introduce double occupancy in the hotel also raises concerns about health and mental health. Where we identify individuals who need to have their own room for health reasons, we need assurance from the Home Office that they will not be asked to room share. We are also concerned about increased infection and control risks that they pose”. Recent experience from hotels has taught us the importance of being able to support residents to isolate when they are unwell or infectious. Then they finally make the point about pressure on local resources. So this is clearly being really seriously contested by local authorities.

**Simon Ridley:** I was at the Local Government Association conference last week talking about all of these issues. We are working closely with local authorities, both nationally, with the Local Government Association and others, and locally with individual councils. There are a lot of local challenges to this. As you know, last year we spent well over £3 billion on asylum seeking. We are trying to make sure that we make best use of the estate and the money that we spend on it. We are seeking to manage that over time. It is a dynamic situation, but we think that we can use the estate more effectively than we are.

**Chair:** Sorry, but that is not really answering the points that Sir Geoffrey raised.

**Simon Ridley:** We are working through those questions with councils, and nationally with the UK Health Security Agency and others, to manage the potential risks.

**Q82 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** How are you going to work it through with local councils? How are you going to select the two individual males who are going to share a room? That is not just for health reasons; we do not want any breakdown in law and order because people are sharing rooms with people they do not want to be sharing with. This could make the





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

situation a lot worse. It is already fairly fragile in a lot of these hotels.

**Simon Ridley:** As I said, there is room sharing in parts of the accommodation that we have. We need to make judgments about that as we operationalise this.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Can I just underline one point, which is the value-for-money argument that Simon has touched on? This is the Public Accounts Committee, and you would want us to be absolutely sure that we were driving value for money for the taxpayer from all of this work. That is not to say that we would squeeze extra people into any room than the space standard would allow—of course we would not—or that we would take risks with public health or anything else like that.

Q83 **Chair:** We do also look at the effectiveness of policy. Let us be clear.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Absolutely, but we do spend £6.8 million per night on this activity and need to make sure that that we are getting maximum value for money from it in a feasible and effective way.

Q84 **Chair:** A proportion of it is from the overseas development aid budget.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** It is, exactly, which also should be reduced.

Q85 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** May I try this once more? I absolutely understand the value-for-money arguments. I understand the pressures that you are under to find additional dispersal accommodation. I understand all that, but my really important question to Mr Ridley is: if you are going to do this, how do you select the people who are going to share?

**Simon Ridley:** I have set out some of the criteria that we use. I suggest we come back to the Committee and set out the process by which we are doing the operation.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** That would be really helpful. Thank you.

Q86 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Just to follow up on that, I have a letter from Hull City Council to the Home Office. It has been told that the hotel in Hull is going to go from 190 to 373. Clearly, letters are going out all around the country. There does not seem to be any discussion here about, "We are going to put in place these safeguards. We are going to do X, Y and Z." It is basically saying, "This is just going to increase to 373."

**Simon Ridley:** As I say, we are talking that through nationally and individually with councils.

**Chair:** The letter arrived before any conversations had been had.

Q87 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I think they are just being told. It is not a conversation.

**Simon Ridley:** I do not mean to imply that we are having a conversation about whether we are seeking to maximise the use of hotels. We are



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

having conversations about how we will do that and how we manage the risks that members of the Committee have raised.

Q88 **Chair:** But you have already sent the letters out saying how many will be in each hotel, so what purchase do the leaders of Gloucestershire, Hull or Hackney councils have if there is a concern about public health, safety appropriateness or other issues?

**Simon Ridley:** If they think that there is a risk in a particular place, it is about how we can mitigate that, work with them in terms of the support that the providers provide, and support that with local services. As I said, I can come back to the Committee about how we are operationalising this.

**Chair:** You are here to answer the questions now, Mr Ridley.

Q89 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Sir Matthew, when will you stop housing people in hotels?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** As soon as possible.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** When is that?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We have not put a date on it, and the reason for that is that, as I talking about in a different context just now, there are too many variables. There are too many different factors, and any assessment would be out of date, but we are determined to do it as quickly as possible, given that hotels are not the ideal accommodation for people in this situation and nor are they ideal for the taxpayer, given the cost per person per night.

Q90 **Dame Diana Johnson:** But you do not have a date.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We do not have a date. We deliberately do not.

Q91 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Do you not have any stages that you want to go through?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Yes. We have the date by which we think that the total will peak and then start to come down, because it is still going up at the moment. One of the purposes of the work that we have just been discussing is to limit the total number of hotels that we are using by having more in each hotel. That is, of course, one of the drivers of that activity. Even if each hotel had, let us say, twice as many people in it, there would only be half the number of hotels.

Q92 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Sir Matthew, can I just try to get one thing from you? You can clearly hear that around the country there is a lot of concern on this. The concern was that the local authorities were not consulted. Can we have an assurance from you that none of these will be put in place until there is a proper consultation with the relevant people in the local authority to see how it is going to work in the individual hotels? If there are serious concerns, will you abandon that idea in that particular hotel?



**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** As Simon set out, we are in that consultation period at the moment. That is what we are doing. That is what the letter is a part of, and it will continue.

**Chair:** It was just informing us that it is happening.

Q93 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** This letter of serious concern was written by the leader of my county council on 6 July, so it is very recent. From the tone of it, it sounds as though he was not consulted at all.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** He is being consulted about the how, the who, precisely how many in which room and all those sorts of things, but, as Simon has made very clear, the decision to go ahead with this effort to maximise the total number of people safely in each hotel is one that has been taken.

**Chair:** The "safely" bit is the caveat, is it not?

Q94 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Let us try again. What I want from you is an assurance that there will be meaningful discussions with every local authority where there is concern, and that their concerns will be properly heard, so that we do not get into a situation where safety or public order is put at risk.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** That is absolutely what we are saying.

Q95 **Chair:** There is the licensing issue here that was raised by the leader of Gloucestershire. Two bunkbeds in a room designed for one may not be licensable.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** The space standards will not be breached. That is an important starting point for all of this work. If a room is big enough only for a single bed, there will not be more than one person in it. If the room has two single beds in it, it is big enough for two and there will be two people in it.

**Chair:** What does a bunk bed qualify as?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** If a room has a double bed in it, but there is space within the space standard to have twin beds, twin beds will be put in and two people will go into that room. That does not mean that it will be any two people.

Q96 **Chair:** Does a bunkbed count as a single bed because of its footprint, or does it count as twin beds?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I am afraid that we are beyond my limits of knowledge.

**Chair:** That rather exposes the challenges here, if I put it politely.

Q97 **Dame Diana Johnson:** We could spend all afternoon discussing these rooms in hotels and how many people should be in them.

Can I ask a question about Manston? We know what happened last year



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

when the flow coming out of Manston stopped and there were real problems there. How confident are you that this year you will be able to get people through the Manston process within 24 hours and into hotels or other accommodation?

**Simon Ridley:** We have done a lot since last year at all stages of that process. We are recruiting to the Small Boats Operational Command. As we are doing that recruitment, we are supporting the work with Border Force staff so we have much greater numbers at both Western Jet Foil and Manston. We have redesigned the process through Western Jet Foil and Manston so we can get people from the boats and through much more quickly.

Q98 **Dame Diana Johnson:** That is good, but it is the other end you have the problem with.

**Simon Ridley:** We have also done a number of things to make sure we are properly tracking everyone who comes through and we know where people are.

For the outflow from Manston to accommodation, we have put two things in place. First, we now have a number of beds, which we are calling ringfenced hotels, into which we can move people quickly as an overflow from Manston before they come into the more permanent estate. Secondly, we are making sure we have a buffer of as close to 5,000 beds as we can have so we always have an outflow. We are carrying a large number of empty beds in order to let us move people out.

Q99 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Sorry, can I stop you there? You are keeping 5,000 beds empty, just in case. Are these additional hotel beds in the south-east?

**Simon Ridley:** They are across the country. It is unpredictable. As you say, 1,200 or 1,300 people came in—

Q100 **Chair:** Just to be clear, they are hotel rooms. They are not Nightingale hospitals or barges—they are hotel rooms.

**Simon Ridley:** They are hotel rooms. To keep a buffer of 5,000, we have to grow the overall estate, which is why we are using large sites. We are seeking to increase our dispersal estate so that, over time, we can reduce the use of hotels. All of that is happening. We are managing the immediate outflow of Manston by having a buffer of beds.

Q101 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Just so I am clear, you have 5,000 beds available in case you have a huge number of people coming through Manston.

**Simon Ridley:** Yes. It is less than that at the moment because an awful lot of people arrived over the weekend.

Q102 **Dame Diana Johnson:** They did. You are struggling to get hotels anyway, and now you are telling me you are keeping hotel beds empty



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

just in case the numbers really spike in Manston.

**Simon Ridley:** By definition, we have to have some beds empty to be able to flow people through.

Q103 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, but 5,000 is a lot of beds.

**Simon Ridley:** As I say, 1,300 people came through.

Q104 **Chair:** They are not on 48-hour standby. You are paying for them all the time, just in case.

**Simon Ridley:** We have excess beds that we are paying for, which we can move people into immediately.

Q105 **Dame Diana Johnson:** You have 5,000 beds you are paying for just in case you need them. Is that what you are telling me?

**Simon Ridley:** Yes. It is fewer than that now, but we are keeping a buffer of hotel beds so that if people arrive, we can move people out of Manston and continue to turn people around in 24 hours.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We have to have a buffer somewhere. If we do not, we know what happens: we have people for longer in Manston. I hope the Committee would support the suggestion of having a buffer. We could have an argument about how big the buffer should be.

**Chair:** We had not quite appreciated it was 5,000 beds.

Q106 **Dame Diana Johnson:** What is the total number you are expecting to come across the channel this year?

**Chair:** Ms Tierney has talked about the low, mid and high-level estimates.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** What is the top level you are thinking might come across? *The Times* was quoting 65,000.

**Simon Ridley:** Last year, it was 45,000 or thereabouts. If we have more than that in a worst-case scenario, it could be of that order. In fact, over the first six months of this year we have had slightly fewer than we had in the first six months of last year. We are ahead of where we thought our worst-case scenario might have been back in January.

As you know, the real peak of arrivals is in July, August and September. We are coming into it. The work we are doing with the French to try to increase interception rates is part of how we are mitigating that, but we could be upwards of last year's number by the end of the year. That is definitely a possible scenario.

Q107 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I want to ask about this transformation programme. Part of it is about making the experience of someone going through the asylum system better. We have already quoted Wendy Williams' "face behind the case". Has all of that been shelved because of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the focus on the volume and the Prime Minister's promise to get rid of the legacy backlog? Has that part of the transformation process just been put to one side? If not, what are you doing to gain the experiences of asylum seekers and understand what it feels like to be going through this process?

**Abi Tierney:** To a certain extent, this takes us back to the HMPO conversation. I genuinely believe that quality should cost less. We are not removing the quality or attention we are giving to asylum seekers. We are improving the process—taking away the blockages, streamlining and making the digital process better for our caseworkers. That means they are focusing on the things that add value, which is making a decision and improving the lived experience for asylum seekers so they are coming out of the limbo position they are in in a quicker way.

We are not in any way—and I would not oversee this—taking away from the lessons learned from Windrush. The training still includes all of the training that was identified and built for Windrush. They still do that as part of their induction. We are absolutely still focused on that. I believe the two things go hand in glove. You mentioned the quality of decision making; I am hoping that, by improving a lot of the process and the steps, the quality of the decision making is better and we will get it right first time.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Both sides of the coin are there in the vision for this programme. It does have the vision to be efficient and right first time, but it also has a vision to provide dignity and respect for people coming through that system.

Q108 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, but originally you were going to deal with the backlog over four years, were you not?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Yes.

Q109 **Dame Diana Johnson:** You are now facing having to make some major changes because of the Prime Minister's announcement and changes to the Illegal Migration Bill, if that comes into force. You have a huge number of changes going on at the same time as you are trying to deliver this.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Absolutely, but you can double, treble or quadruple your workforce and still instil those same values in that larger workforce. You can still make sure the respect and dignity we talk about in the vision of this programme are applied by a larger workforce.

**Abi Tierney:** The programme that was at the heart of this was the PACE programme. The last two words at the end of PACE are "customer experience". That is still the fundamental tenet of this. We are removing the failure demand and wastage we had in the previous system.

**Chair:** I am one of the top six customers, if I can use that phrase, of the Home Office on behalf of my constituents. A number of us around this



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

table have high levels of caseload. A man who came to see me today has been in the UK for 24 years and still does not have a decision on his case. We will come to the impact of dealing with the current backlog. That is not unusual in my surgeries.

**Q110 Sarah Olney:** To pick up on casework and the asylum seeker experience, the thing that comes out to me over and over again from the people I meet in my constituency who are waiting for decisions and who are currently living in hotels is the quality of the food. This came up so many times over six months. I am really grateful to your Home Office officials who have engaged with me personally on this. There has now been a change in caterer.

The thing that has been really frustrating is that it has been so difficult to engage with Clearsprings, which is responsible for providing the accommodation, to feed back. That has created health problems. Sir Geoffrey talked about the overcrowding issue, but the food issue is also creating health problems.

What is being done to respond more rapidly to these basic welfare concerns? For me, that is what this is about. It is not about people being fussy; it is about people literally not being able to eat the food. What is being done to address those issues?

**Simon Ridley:** It is interesting. As you describe, in that specific case the accommodation and the food are provided by Clearsprings. We have three main providers across the country. We pick up issues with them as they arise through our contract and commercial management.

Overall, going back to the programme and what is referred to as the place-based approach, that is not just about us and local authorities; it is us, providers and local authorities. We have that dialogue happening all the time, and then we can make sure the service provided through the accommodation the Home Office is paying for meets the required standards.

We are seeking to address the individual issues, as you describe, but overall to get into a position where we have a much closer and ongoing dialogue that includes the providers, us and local areas.

**Q111 Olivia Blake:** I want to follow-up on a few questions. I used to work in a kitchen. If you are doubling the accommodation use in a hotel, you are also doubling the amount of food that has to be made. That is a huge endeavour for any kitchen. How are you making sure that the food quality does not massively disintegrate, especially when it comes to cold storage and other issues?

**Simon Ridley:** That is one of the things we are doing with our providers. In the work we are doing, we are not going beyond the capacity that the hotel could take as a hotel. We are not going outside the capacity of the building and the infrastructure that is there. The crucial part of the discussion is with the provider.





Q112 **Olivia Blake:** Who is taking that decision? Is it the manager of the individual hotel or is it further up the chain?

**Simon Ridley:** We run the accommodation estate through the three strategic providers that we have. We are working with them. They have arrangements with the individual hotel companies and through those discussions we get to a decision.

Q113 **Olivia Blake:** In dispersed accommodation, the payment is per bed.

**Simon Ridley:** Yes.

Q114 **Olivia Blake:** How are you paying for the extra beds in the hotels? Are you paying per room or is it per bed?

**Simon Ridley:** We pay the provider per bed. The funding is at the level of the hotel, and we therefore make a proportionate saving in terms of the estate we are using through maximisation.

Q115 **Olivia Blake:** If you are paying per bed, how is it a saving overall?

**Simon Ridley:** Again, I can come back with more detail, but we have contracted through the hotel. Where we need to fund more, that is what that marginal payment will be.

**Olivia Blake:** It is not a saving.

**Simon Ridley:** It is because you do not pay for the overall cost. It is a marginal cost rather than a full cost.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** There are some costs that are per person and others that are per hotel.

**Simon Ridley:** Yes. Thank you, Matthew.

Q116 **Olivia Blake:** Okay, it might be useful to understand that breakdown a bit further.

Moving on to the transformation, you have had a lot of transformation attempts in the past. Why do you think things will be different under this approach, Sir Matthew?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** That is partly because we are learning the lessons of successful transformation in our own Department and around the civil service, as we talked about in the Passport Office context earlier, and partly because this is being prioritised across Government.

We recognise the benefits of prioritisation on issues like vetting, as Committee members were talking about earlier. That is what prioritisation looks like. When something is a very high priority, it does get more attention, more focus, more of our top-quality resource, our best people and all the rest of it. That is what we are doing, given that this is such a high priority.

Q117 **Olivia Blake:** Just to build on Dame Diana's question about the Windrush



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

lessons learned, how are you ensuring that each of the individual cohorts is maintaining those lessons learned? You have quite a different approach with the different cohorts.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** There are some things that are different and other things that go across the whole of this area and, indeed, across the whole Home Office. The values we talked about, including respect and compassion, are values for the whole Home Office.

Part of the vision for this programme is to create a system of asylum caseworking that gives dignity and respect to the individuals coming into that. That is a really important part of the whole of the programme, whichever cohort you are working on. It is part of the training, support and mentoring that people receive.

**Abi Tierney:** One of the recommendations in the Report was to get much more regular and consistent feedback from colleagues. By implementing this pulse survey, we are seeing feedback on the big questions. What would make your job easier? What are you finding difficult? Do you have the right management support? Is the training working? We are also getting a lot of verbatim comments, which we read and look at, including on culture and values and on how people are working. That would be the other thing. On top of making sure the training still includes those elements, that is the additional element we have put in.

Q118 **Olivia Blake:** I am sorry, Chair: I forgot to declare some interests. I am the chair of the APPG on migration and the chair of the APPG on SEND, and I also receive money from RAMP for my research in this area. I just wanted to get those on the record. Apologies for that.

Moving on to vulnerable groups, I have a particular interest in people with disabilities. Particular issues have been raised around capacity issues and how those assessments go on. How are you making sure that there is an equality impact assessment not only for disabled people coming through the system but also LGBT people and those with other protected characteristics?

**Abi Tierney:** Do you mean in the decision-making process, in the support process, or both?

**Olivia Blake:** Yes, within both elements of the transformation.

**Abi Tierney:** With the changes we have implemented—we had that conversation earlier—for the cohorts, we have done an equalities impact assessment. As part of training, induction and ongoing management, people also undertake training in those areas.

We are constantly learning. We work with everybody. ASAG is a group that has a number of NGOs around the table. We meet with them regularly to get feedback on what is and is not working. Interestingly, one of the most useful things was the recent work we did with UNHCR on improving the questionnaire, by looking at how accessible it was and



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

whether it was usable for different cohorts. They have been really heavily involved in designing it as we have used it more broadly.

Those are a couple of examples of where we try to bring it to life and ensure we are listening and learning. In Simon's area, we provide support to people in hotels, but we have also used, for example, Migrant Help to ensure that different needs are met as best we can.

**Q119 Olivia Blake:** As you mentioned questionnaires, could I ask why you are extending their use when the quality of the questionnaires returned is quite low?

**Abi Tierney:** I am really pleased to say that that has improved significantly since the audit was done. We now have a very high number of returns and a very high quality on those returns. That has been one of the big drivers for us being able to improve the number of decisions.

**Q120 Olivia Blake:** How have you managed to do that improvement? How much further is there to go?

**Abi Tierney:** There were lots of lessons learned in this. One of the big bits was engagement with the sector. We did not do as much engagement with legal representatives as we could have. They did not understand quite what we were trying to achieve from the process. We have really improved that engagement.

As I said, we have then also worked with UNHCR. It is a much shorter questionnaire. We have also made—this will be launched soon—a digital version of the questionnaire. It is much tighter. Again, this is learning from other areas of the Home Office.

**Chair:** We have evidence from UNHCR, which is highlighting some of the stuff it has done with you.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes, there are improvements there. We are not asking people to do lots of really long-form answers. We are really making sure they are focused. There are drop-down boxes and things like that. That is proving to improve the quality.

**Q121 Chair:** The Home Office has been dealing with immigration issues for a while. Is it not a bit humiliating that UNHCR is having to support the British Home Office quite so much on getting this right?

**Abi Tierney:** It is a really good partnership.

**Chair:** It is good that it is happening, but is it not a sign that there was such a failure before?

**Abi Tierney:** I would not see it as a sign of failure. This comes back to the Windrush bit. In the past we have been criticised for being quite insular, not listening, not engaging and not necessarily learning. This is an example of where we are learning and engaging.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** The Home Office is humbly welcoming the support of UNHCR.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

Q122 **Olivia Blake:** I have a couple more on questionnaires. How many decisions have been taken on the basis of questionnaires alone?

**Abi Tierney:** That will come out as part of the stats. We are mid-flight in terms of the decisions. We can include that in the published stats come 24 August.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Everyone has an initial interview before the questionnaire.

**Abi Tierney:** Yes.

**Olivia Blake:** You know what I am getting at.

Q123 **Chair:** What date will it be in August?

**Abi Tierney:** The statistics get published on 24 August.

Q124 **Olivia Blake:** This is the key question here: is this new process saving time? How effective is it at saving time?

**Abi Tierney:** As I say, we are mid-flight, but once we got to much higher quality in the returns, we are seeing a significant saving in terms of productivity and time in that process.

Q125 **Olivia Blake:** You are measuring the quality of the returns now, which is positive. How are you measuring the quality of the assessment of those returns?

**Abi Tierney:** There are a number of ways. I described the infrastructure we have in place. We have technical specialists and we also have managers, who are making sure the decisions that are taken are good. We are not just putting really new recruits into this area. It is a real mixture of both new and really experienced decision makers.

We are regularly looking at their feedback on the data they are getting. Where they are saying, "The information we had on this area was not enough for us to be able to make a decision," we are improving it. It is that real-time feedback. We are also working closely with legal reps.

Q126 **Olivia Blake:** That is really helpful. We have spoken a lot about stuff, but I just wanted to ask how you are looking to improve working conditions for staff.

**Abi Tierney:** I have explained one of the things, which is the pulse survey. Listening to that has made a difference. We have improved other things, such as not having to double key. I know that sounds like quite a small thing, but it is quite demoralising when you are having to put exactly the same information in twice. We are really pleased that we have been able to stop doing that.



The RRA allowance is helping in what is a challenging cost of living environment. We are investing in new facilities. I know Matthew was there a couple of weeks ago. We have opened up a new hub up in Stoke. Those are new jobs for that area, but it is also a fantastic facility in terms of the environment in which colleagues work. It is really impressive. When you walk in, it feels like we are investing in our colleagues and really caring about them having a place where they want to go to work.

**Q127 Peter Grant:** Sir Matthew, the business case you prepared for the programme did not include all of the expected costs even for the asylum and protection team. It did not include other costs that you expected would fall either on other parts of the Home Office or on other parts of the public sector. Why not?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We believe in being agile and iterating. We no longer do a single business case that is then set in stone for the duration of the programme. We do a first version, then we learn from that and we expand the assessment of the benefits and, indeed, the costs across the whole system.

As it happens, the National Audit Office reviewed this particular programme quite early in the programme cycle on the basis of a fairly initial business case. Some of the projects were very much in the start-up phase rather than later on, which has already helped to shape the way we do the rest of the programme.

I am not criticising the NAO for coming in too early—I am not saying that at all. I am saying that, as it happens, this was assessed quite early in its lifecycle as a programme, and therefore we are already learning, adapting and taking account of that lesson as well as others in the next version.

**Q128 Peter Grant:** What happens if the next iteration of the business case shows that the numbers do not add up and it is not a good idea?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I am pretty sure it will not, because the costs of having people in hotels for longer are higher than they would be if we had quicker decision making. I am very confident that investing in this area in general is going to have a positive net present value in programme terms. I am very confident about that.

The numbers will change. You are absolutely right to highlight that one of the things we did not do early on was look broadly enough at where the costs and, indeed, the benefits would fall outside this particular area. There is an impact on immigration enforcement. Outside the Home Office, there is an impact on the Courts and Tribunals Service and on our colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, for instance.

The next version of the business case in the early part of next year will seek to assess the programme in a much wider or system-wide way.

**Q129 Peter Grant:** Unless something happens that markedly changes the



make-up of future groups of asylum seekers from what they have been in the last few years, a substantial majority of the cases you process more quickly will lead to a grant of full protection more quickly than has happened previously. One of the benefits of that, certainly for the asylum seeker, is that once they are given asylum and accepted as an asylum seeker, they are entitled to work and contribute to the economy. Have you included the wider economic benefits of asylum seekers being allowed to work more quickly? Have the benefits from that been built into your business case?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** You are getting into a very political question, which is probably better answered by Ministers, but rest assured that, in terms of the benefits of the programme, we are making—

Q130 **Chair:** There is an important point here, though, in terms of impact assessments. You have just now touched on the DWP. Of course, if somebody is placed in a local authority and needs help with housing benefit or needs other benefits, there is a cost to the taxpayer. What Mr Grant is pushing at is whether you are looking at those balances.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We absolutely are. The next iteration of the business case, early next year, will take account of those sorts of things, including the positive benefit to the economy of someone who has come through the system and is able to work. I felt there might be a political aspect to the question as well, which is why I hesitated to answer it.

**Chair:** I appreciate you are not a Minister.

Q131 **Peter Grant:** I have no doubt there could be political interpretations of your answers, but that is what politicians do. This is what I am trying to get at, Permanent Secretary. Have you been asked to look at the 25,000, 30,000 or 40,000 people who have been granted asylum over the last two and a half years and what they are doing now? How many of them are claiming benefit? That is what some people would say they are all doing. How many of them are working and actively contributing to the economy?

It may be that a politician would think that knowing what people do after they have been granted asylum is quite an important piece of information to have before we decide on a policy as to whether we should allow them to keep coming here. Have you been asked to do any analysis to find out the actual economic impact of this number of asylum grants?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I do not know whether we have been asked, but we are doing that analysis.

**Chair:** Ms Tierney is nodding.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We are interested in that ourselves. We will make sure that analysis helps to inform the next version of the business case.

Q132 **Chair:** Ms Tierney, can you walk us briefly through what you are doing and how you follow people, then?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Abi Tierney:** Yes. The economic benefit and potential cost—the other side of this is the potential cost to DWP if people are not working—is absolutely being analysed and built into the next iteration of the business case. That includes the impact on the Courts and Tribunals Service and DFE. There is a whole raft of areas that we absolutely need to build into the business case going forward.

We have support that is looking at the evaluation and how we evaluate that overall benefit and cost, and ensuring that we are improving that. That was one of the key recommendations of the Report. We are working on that.

Q133 **Peter Grant:** Is it your intention that that will be published once it has been completed?

**Abi Tierney:** I do not know, sorry.

**Peter Grant:** You cannot see the Permanent Secretary's face.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** The Permanent Secretary's face is saying is that that would be a decision for Ministers.

**Chair:** It depends on how it is commissioned, I suspect. We can talk to our sister Committee.

Q134 **Peter Grant:** There is one more area I wanted to look at. I know that some others want to look in more detail at the possibility that by clearing up what you see as a difficulty with backlogs in the system, you might be creating bigger problems elsewhere.

There is one specific thing I wanted to ask you about. There was a very worrying report on the BBC on 23 June, which was probably carried elsewhere, suggesting that a number of London boroughs in particular are finding it impossible to find emergency accommodation for homeless people because they are being priced out of the market because your contactor Clearsprings is offering landlords more than the councils are allowed to offer to house their own homeless people.

First of all, is it correct as a matter of fact that at times your contactor will offer landlords a higher rent than local councils are allowed to offer for homeless accommodation?

**Simon Ridley:** It is certainly possible in parts of the country for a provider to offer more than a council's policy is to pay, yes. It is also true, as I said earlier—and it differs in different parts of the country, as you are well aware—that there are areas of the country, not least London, with very tight housing markets.

We are working very closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. There are also very high levels of homelessness. There is a lot of pressure that councils are facing to try to find temporary accommodation. We are in similar parts of the market to them in a lot of places.





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

That is why we are building towards the place-based approach set out here and having regional conversations with councils, our suppliers and strategic migration partnerships. What they cannot do is to increase supply very quickly, but they can help us by sharing data and information on the pressures that there are in different places.

Q135 **Peter Grant:** Do you have any concerns as to what it does for the relationship between asylum seekers and the communities they are living within when people realise that the reason why their family is still living in a hotel is that someone else has been allowed to pay more for the accommodation they might have been in? I have to say, when I read that report, I was terrified of where it could lead.

Instead of the unacceptable position where a lot of asylum seekers were living in very poor-quality accommodation, we are moving to a position where some of those asylum seekers are living in probably not particularly good private rented accommodation and homeless people from local communities are living in very poor-quality hotel accommodation. We are not changing the number of people living in unacceptably bad accommodation. All we are doing is making that apply less to one group of people and more to another. Have you stopped to consider the tensions that creates between different groups of people?

**Simon Ridley:** Yes, we have. You are absolutely right: we need to continue to increase what we are doing to see the overall impact in different places and on the system as a whole. Together, the Home Office and local authorities are facing an enormous challenge in terms of the supply of accommodation and the demand for it from both asylum seekers and homeless people. Those are the conversations we are seeking to build.

Q136 **Chair:** Mr Ridley, you are new as Second Permanent Secretary, but I have lost count of the number of times we have sat in this Committee Room and asked Home Office officials whether they have consulted with local authorities about housing people in their areas. One time I had more letters than I have ever had on this Committee from Members across the House, of all parties and in all areas of the country, saying that there had been no consultation. It is quite a common thing.

You are talking now about what you are going to be doing going forward, but in the meantime we have councils that cannot outbid you for housing for their own families. You should have seen this coming. Why did you not see it coming?

**Simon Ridley:** We have seen it coming, which is why a core part of the business case and this project is about how we build the right sort of consultation, conversations, data sharing and some of the things that underpin that with councils. It is certainly not perfect, but we are doing a lot more than we were nine months ago. We are doing a lot more than we were previous to that in terms of the communications with councils about the accommodation we have and what we can do to continue to expand dispersal into more areas.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Councils have produced at a regional level for dispersal their dispersal plans in terms of where accommodation would ideally be. We are working with our providers to try to match that. There is a long way to go, for sure, but there is a lot of conversation and a lot of data sharing. We are having monthly conversations with every region. Those are still maturing. There is a lot more we need to do with local government, but that is what we are seeking to improve.

**Q137 Peter Grant:** The Home Office response to the BBC story referred to the statutory responsibility you have to support asylum seekers, which I hope nobody would disagree with. Councils have a statutory responsibility towards homeless people in their areas. A lot of London boroughs are finding it impossible to meet that statutory responsibility because you are pricing them out of the market. Most London councils have agreed that they will not outbid each other for accommodation. Why has the Home Office not become part of that agreement so that you do not have public bodies fighting among themselves?

**Simon Ridley:** We are having conversations through London Councils, with chief executives of London boroughs and in the various other national-level fora we have, precisely in order to start to discuss those issues and where we can best seek accommodation, as the Home Office, to meet our statutory responsibilities.

London is one of the regions that are planning across their own region. Part of the answer is about how we increase the accommodation we have outside of London, where in some areas there is less pressure on the housing market. The number of local authorities with dispersal accommodation has increased over the last six months, but there is still scope to spread where we have accommodation more broadly across the country. That work is in progress and that is what we are trying to achieve.

**Q138 Olivia Blake:** How are you ensuring that the programme is not simply shunting the backlog element of this to another Department within Government?

**Simon Ridley:** There are different aspects to this. You have particular Departments. Again, there is a lot of dialogue with local authorities. Asylum seekers who are granted asylum will move out of the Home Office estate and into local communities, whether they have been in hotels or whether they go to where their wider diaspora is.

Equally, we are working closely with councils and, as Abi mentioned, DWP and others, particularly as the outflow increases. Where we make an initial decision and people are not granted, they will often appeal. Clearly, there are demands on the Ministry of Justice and the Courts and Tribunals Service. Again, we are working that through with them. Those are the discussions we are having as we make our way through the programme.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

None the less, we are aiming to meet the commitment and therefore we are working through the impacts with different councils.

Q139 **Olivia Blake:** How are you able to respond to the concerns that are being raised with you by the Courts and Tribunals Service, for example?

**Abi Tierney:** I can come in on that. One of the big bits that Simon and I, with the team, have been really working on is the end-to-end quality of the system and the data so we can give and share detailed forecasting, whether that is with the Courts and Tribunals Service or with local authorities. There is still more work to be done, but it is much better than what it was. We have started to share that on a regular basis.

There is a governance system set up with the Courts and Tribunals Service. We meet with them regularly and share that information. You will see that initially we have agreed to invest money to increase their capacity in the first quarter of 2024, based on when we think we are going to have a spike in appeals and will need some extra capacity.

The point of getting into a more sustainable system, where we have much more of an ongoing drumbeat, is that we will be able to plan much better going forward. The work we are doing on data, sharing it regularly, having conversations, understanding the risks and then saying, "How are we going to deal with these together and work with you on them?" is how we are doing that.

Q140 **Olivia Blake:** Are you confident that every possible unintended consequence has been forecast?

**Abi Tierney:** No, it would be remiss of me if I were to say that. All of us have talked about just what an uncertain world we are working in. We do this by responding in an iterative and agile way, ensuring we are constantly looking at our assumptions and risks, assessing those and working with the other Departments and other partners to assess them. There will be unknowns. It is how we make sure we are constantly looking for those as best as we can. How we manage risk in this is really important.

Q141 **Chair:** In the past, the Home Office would not agree all cases in, say, Hull, Hackney or Sheffield all at once but would have a trickle approach. Are you doing that?

**Abi Tierney:** Yes, we absolutely are. My team and Simon's team are working hand in glove on that to minimise the impact on local authorities.

Q142 **Chair:** So you do not have everybody being agreed in one area over a weekend.

**Abi Tierney:** No, we are really avoiding that.

Q143 **Sarah Olney:** When you are liaising with local authorities and thinking about the impact on local services, are you including in that assessment the impact on local health services? My local authority has raised a



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

serious concern about access to GP services, which are already quite constrained. They are finding that for asylum seekers it takes about 50 minutes to do a consultation, for example. That can be really difficult to accommodate. What conversations are you having about access to health services?

**Simon Ridley:** It is worth saying very quickly that we are engaging with local government in a number of ways. We run a number of national groups, along with the LGA, which have a number of local authority chief executives and other representative groups on them. We also have the regional meetings, which I have talked about a couple of times, and then we talk to individual councils about issues.

Through those various routes, we are talking about all the big issues that arise, whether that is housing capacity, health, safeguarding and so on. In given areas, we then seek to work with the council and the health providers in the best way possible to try to mitigate those. We do not have all the levers to do that, but if there are things we can do, whether that is about future accommodation or decisions on how we are managing the estate, we seek to accommodate that. We are talking directly to health providers and we are talking about health issues with councils.

Q144 **Sarah Olney:** What happens where you cannot mitigate and you do not have the levers?

**Simon Ridley:** We talk to the councils. Through the integrated care board and others, they also look at the provision they can seek to put in place. In lots of these areas, there clearly are constraints. We are trying to get into a much deeper and richer set of conversations with local areas so that we understand where those risks are and we can try to manage them.

There is pressure on these public service systems, as you know, in part where there are high numbers of asylum seekers, but there are also other issues that Departments and the local areas are seeking to tackle. We are trying to work with them on those.

Q145 **Dame Diana Johnson:** It sounds very good that you are having all these conversations with local councils and improving co-ordination. I am just really concerned that the Home Office itself is not able to co-ordinate between the different parts of the Home Office.

The example I want to raise with you is about my own local authority. Hull, the city of sanctuary, has always stepped up, taken asylum seekers and welcomed them. On 7 June this year, the council had a letter from the full dispersal resettlement asylum support deputy director. That letter basically accepted that there were unsustainable pressures and impacts on Hull, due to the current numbers of asylum seekers being placed in the city, and said that the concerns about increasing these numbers had been clearly understood by the Home Office, resulting in a decision to halt further acquisition of dispersal accommodation within Hull.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

There was that acknowledgement from the Home Office, which we welcomed, but about 10 days later the Home Office wrote to the council and said, "We are now going to double the number of people in hotels in the city." On top of that, we were then told that Mears was going to obtain another 70 places in the city for dispersal accommodation.

How is it that the Home Office, which is supposed to be having all these consultations with local authorities, cannot engage across the different bits of the Home Office to get its line straight about how it treats a local authority? I do not know who would like to answer that.

**Simon Ridley:** I cannot comment on the specific case, but after today I will certainly have a look at it and come back to you.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** How did it happen? That is what I am asking.

**Simon Ridley:** I cannot comment on the specific case. What I can say is that we do a lot internally to co-ordinate what we are doing. We recently established an asylum support and accommodation delivery board so that we have consistent data across this. We have published data around where the estate is, the numbers of people in each local authority and how we then deliver on the conversations and the work that we are doing with councils. In this specific instance, I do not know what happened, to be honest.

Q146 **Chair:** Does it surprise you?

**Simon Ridley:** It does surprise me, yes.

Q147 **Chair:** What should have stopped this happening? What systems do you have in place to make sure that one bit knows what the other is doing?

**Simon Ridley:** We are aiming to get to what is set out in the business case, which is a place-based approach where we have a plan that is organised at regional level, and then flows through to local authority level, for the estate we are going to have. Then we have a way of managing—

Q148 **Chair:** These infamous letters about doubling hotel spaces seem to have been rather outside your system. Is that a fair assessment, Mr Ridley?

**Simon Ridley:** No. We are doing project maximise as part of the work that we are doing on the accommodation.

**Chair:** It is the letters that have cut across—

**Simon Ridley:** There seem to be two dispersal letters, in your question. I will take the individual piece away.

Q149 **Dame Diana Johnson:** There seems to have been an acknowledgment that there will be no more people and then a letter saying, "Yes, we are sending you people—and here, have some more as well."

**Simon Ridley:** As I say, I cannot comment on the individual case. I will have a look at it. What we are doing is bringing our data together in one



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

place. We are organised at a regional level to understand that through the dispersal plans we have, and we are seeking to manage that. At the margins of that, things change and there are dynamic issues that we need to manage, but I will have a look at the specific case after today.

Q150 **Ben Lake:** Mr Ridley, you mentioned a couple of national structures through which you undertake your engagement with local authorities; which local authorities from Wales are represented on some of these groups?

**Simon Ridley:** The Welsh Local Government Association is represented. I have also had conversations with Cardiff and other councils. I can send you the membership of the different groups, but they cover the devolved Administrations as well as England.

Q151 **Ben Lake:** From that, I assume that Welsh NHS boards, police forces and what have you have some input into the discussions as well.

**Simon Ridley:** Where we are talking about the position in Wales, yes.

Q152 **Ben Lake:** One of the concerns, which you may be aware of, is about the particular case of a council in Wales, where not only the local authority itself but also the chief executive of the health board, the chief constable of the local police force and other community leaders have expressed concern about the position of one of its hotels being inappropriate for use as dispersal, citing particular challenges to local services. I am just interested to know, when the Home Office came to decide on that location, whether the views of those authorities were taken into account at all.

**Simon Ridley:** Again, I cannot comment on the individual case. Where we are bringing forward a hotel in any area, we let the council know. In some of those cases, the council or local area responds by saying they do not think it is appropriate for whatever reason, perhaps because of pressure on services. Sometimes we can respond to that, but not all the time. We need to have a sufficient estate. I do not know about the individual case.

Q153 **Ben Lake:** If the local authority in question offers alternative locations that it thinks would be more appropriate, is that something the Home Office would entertain and explore?

**Simon Ridley:** It is absolutely something we would listen to. We would have a conversation with the council, but, clearly, we would need to make the decision with our providers on a range of factors.

Q154 **Ben Lake:** That is all well and interesting, but in this particular case in west Wales—there are not many—I understand that sadly that was not the case. I understand that the local authorities did offer a range of other locations, but they were not explored. To the contrary, the decision was very much presented as a fait accompli and they were told to like it or lump it.





**Simon Ridley:** As I say, I cannot comment on the individual case. I do not know about the other locations in terms of size, cost and so on. There are conversations we have had with a number of local areas where they have asked us not to open a particular hotel for given reasons and we have done something else. In this case I do not know. I am happy to look at it. We cannot always go with the local preference.

**Chair:** There are a few things to take offline, which we will follow up on.

Q155 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Ms Tierney, clearly, from the very welcome information you gave us earlier in the hearing, you are going to speed up the applications. Of the ones that are rejected, a good proportion will go to appeal. Are you having discussions with HMCTS to make sure that you do not create yet another backlog?

The basis of this question comes from figure 11 on page 34 of the Report. Just to run through figure 11 very quickly, it says there could be a "Possible quadrupling of appeals in progress to around 75,000". That is a bit worrying when we know that between October and December last year the first-tier tribunal took 54 weeks to conclude each case.

Figure 11 says you will "Increase capacity for immigration and asylum hearings from 11,000 sitting days to 16,100". You have agreed to pay £5.2 million for the first six months of this coming year. What happens after that I am not entirely sure. It says, "HMCTS may need additional space to hear appeals". Finally, it says, "HMCTS expects recruiting judges to be the most significant capacity challenge."

Could you tell us something about those discussions to ensure we are not going to create another backlog in tribunals due to appeal cases?

**Abi Tierney:** This goes back to previous questions. We are having very regular discussions with them. There is a real acknowledgment that the initial investment we are offering for the first part of next year is the start of a conversation. More may need to be done, but we are working to build that business case to ensure we know exactly what is required, how quickly they think they can do the recruitment and what that looks like in the exact capacity model. Those are the questions we are exploring with them, and we are working together with them to ensure that, where possible, we will avoid the pressures.

Q156 **Chair:** The tribunal cases have been delayed massively for a very long time. I have so many constituents who are stuck in that system. If you cannot get the judges, throwing money at this is not going to solve the problem, is it? Nothing has been solved for a long time in the past.

**Abi Tierney:** It is a real challenge. For me, that should not stop us from making these decisions. We then have to support our colleagues as best we can to improve the capacity and address some of those challenges. That is what we are doing, working hand in glove.

Q157 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** The other bit of the table in figure 11 deals with immigration enforcement. It says, "Failed asylum seekers awaiting



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

removal could increase to 76,000 people by March 2025". It also says, "Recruit around 1,000 additional Immigration Enforcement caseworkers", which we have discussed. You estimate this to cost approximately £67.5 million. It says, "Immigration Enforcement is establishing two new immigration removal centres". They need to be up and running. Finally, immigration enforcement will need to facilitate returns. It says, "The Home Office estimates that only 0.4% of people referred to Immigration Enforcement are immediately suitable for enforced returns". It sounds like you have quite a lot of work to do on the actual enforcement action.

**Abi Tierney:** I agree. There is a lot of work to do there. We will expect to see some people returning voluntarily. We support them and we have a programme to do that.

Q158 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** In reality most of them will not do that, will they?

**Abi Tierney:** We do see that every week. We have also seen an increase in our returns this year as a result of investment in that area. We have been working really carefully with them.

I have described the end-to-end process for decision making. We have expanded that. We are looking at the process end to end, including the immigration enforcement decision bit. We could address quite a lot of that 0.4% earlier on in the process. That would ensure that, when it lands with them, the case is as robust as possible and they have the information they need. We have implemented things such as a new track and trace programme that enables us to secure and find people, and so on. We are looking at the process end to end. It is okay for me to look at my bit, but that people bit means looking at it end to end and working really closely with immigration enforcement colleagues to do that.

Q159 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** You said your work "could"; hopefully it will look at the end bit—the 0.4%. I am just picking up on your answer and being a little picky. You said "could"; I am hoping it is going to be "will".

**Abi Tierney:** This was the Report as then; we will certainly come back to you on what we have seen this year as a result of the improvements we put in that process and what the increase on that percentage is.

Q160 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I was picking up on one word. I am being a bit picky, I am afraid.

Can I move on to the dreaded Rwanda policy? I do not mind who answers this. It may be Ms Tierney; it may be Mr Ridley. I am not sure. The article in the *Independent* on 27 June makes a number of points about this. It says that deporting each asylum seeker will cost just under £170,000. I do not know whether that is accurate or whether that is sloppy reporting, but it does then say that that compares to £106,000 to process them in the UK. It says that at least 37% of small boat arrivals would have to be deterred for there to be no additional cost to the taxpayer.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

I know that nobody knows yet—unless you are going to be able to tell us today that you do—what the level of deterrence is likely to be. Can you just take us around the cost against the potential level of deterrence and how this is all going to work?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Shall I come in first? I am sure that my colleagues might want to add to this. The numbers you quoted, Sir Geoffrey, come from the Home Office's economic impact assessment on the Illegal Migration Bill in the House at the moment. We recognise the numbers, but they are proxy numbers. They were estimates based on how much it had cost in the past to process someone's claim in the UK, which was then applied to Rwanda.

The most important judgment is the one you have quoted, which is that it requires 37% of journeys across the channel to be deterred for the scheme to pay for itself. It is not possible to know whether 30% of journeys will be deterred or not, which is precisely why, you may recall, just over a year ago I required a ministerial direction from the then Home Secretary on value-for-money grounds. We did not have the evidence one way or the other about whether it would be value for money.

In the future, when we look back on this time, we will be able to judge whether there has been a reduction as a result of the preventive effect of that policy. If it is greater than 30%—

Q161 **Chair:** Will you be able to judge whether that is a direct effect of the policy?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** As always, there will be multiple factors at play, just as we have a multidimensional approach to this very complex problem. I agree: it will be difficult to factor out the bit of the deterrent that came from that as opposed to some of the other things the Government are doing, but we will make our best estimate of that.

**Chair:** You were very clear about that in your letter to the Home Secretary.

Q162 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I am told, Sir Matthew, that these costs are proxies based on a comparator. You know the actual costs, but you are not disclosing them. Is that correct?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** No, it is not. There is a bit that we are not disclosing, which is commercially sensitive between the UK Government and the Government of Rwanda, but we are disclosing every year, through our annual report and accounts, which I look forward to signing imminently for the year that has just ended—

Q163 **Chair:** How commercially sensitive is it? Are a lot of countries bidding for this business?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** They probably are, actually, yes. It is not a lot, but there are other countries.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q164 **Chair:** The Home Office has had discussions with other countries about third-party returns.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Indeed, yes.

Q165 **Chair:** Are you able to name any of them?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** No.

Q166 **Chair:** How many are there, ballpark—single figures?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I am not able to say that, but there are other countries that are interested. There are other countries that the UK Government will, at some point, between now and the future, be engaging in those conversations with. This is a matter of principle.

Q167 **Chair:** Rwanda has been ruled out by the Court of Appeal as not a safe place to go. Are there discussions currently under way with any other country?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** First of all, the Court of Appeal, by two members to one, decided that one aspect of the situation in Rwanda was not safe, which is nothing to do with the circumstances in Rwanda. It was about the risk of the Rwandan authorities passing on the people who come to Rwanda to another country.

Q168 **Chair:** The system was not safe. We can paraphrase it in as many ways as we want. Is the Home Office currently in discussions with one of the other countries that might be interested in this?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I will just say that the Government are appealing that. We will await it going through the Supreme Court.

Q169 **Chair:** You are not talking to anyone while you are waiting for the appeal. Are you hedging your bets? You have 5,000 beds in case you need them. Do you have anything in case you need it if Rwanda does not work out?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** The Government will be prioritising efforts in the Supreme Court. In parallel with that, there will be other activity.

Q170 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** This is for either Sir Matthew or Mr Ridley; I do not mind which. I want to probe you a little bit on the questions Peter Grant was asking about the business case. You would not expect this Committee not to probe the business case, and I gather you are making a new business case as we speak. The NAO Report says that you expect that to complete in the summer of 2023.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** It is in fact early 2024. That was an error.

Q171 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** It is early 2024. That means you will be able to consider what I am about to say even more carefully. I want to probe you particularly about the advantages of the £15 billion over 10 years, which seems a very big figure. Even that, apparently, according to note 2, includes an adjustment for optimism bias. We have no optimism



bias in that, but it is going to be achieved, apparently.

What is going to be included in that? Can I go through one or two things? It excludes the costs of employing caseworkers; predicting the number of asylum seekers is difficult, so that must be a difficult thing to work out. It excludes the number of caseworkers and decisions per week; we have discussed quite a lot of that, but that could have a significant effect.

We have just talked about third-country asylum processing; we do not know whether that is going to take place and what the cost of it is going to be. Dispersal accommodation has very uncertain costs that are not considered, apparently, in the business case. Finally, there is the question I was asking Ms Tierney about delays in HMCTS and your own enforcement.

There is a lot in there that is either uncertain or not included. Can we expect some tightening up on that in the new business case? It is surprising that we are excluding the costs of employing caseworkers. Can we expect some of that to be included in the new business case?

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Yes, absolutely. As I said earlier, the initial business case that was around at the time the National Audit Office did its review was a very early one. It looked at all of the factors that you have described and many more, but it did not seek to quantify some important ones.

The benefits accrue over 10 years. As we were discussing earlier this afternoon, it is very unpredictable what will happen later this year, never mind in 10 years' time. As we do the new version of the business case, yes, we will expect a significant tightening up of all of those assessments.

Q172 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** The Treasury will be looking at this business case with increased scrutiny. We will see whether they think it is realistic or not.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Indeed, yes, but as I said earlier, I would expect that there will still be a significant benefit to the taxpayer from doing this programme because, at its heart, it is about two things. One is about getting better, faster and more streamlined at decision making, and the other is about providing effective but cheaper accommodation. Both of those things should be—

Q173 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I do not doubt that at all, Sir Matthew, but one does not want it to lead to a situation where a cost looks like it is fairly exaggerated from what it is likely to be. On this Committee, we like to see proper estimates and true costs.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** Absolutely, yes. I can give you my assurance, Sir Geoffrey, that the next version of the business case will iterate from the previous version. It will be sharper on all of those things.

Q174 **Dame Diana Johnson:** You have a memorandum of understanding with Rwanda. The British Government and the Rwandan Government have a



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

memorandum of understanding. As I understand it, that is not a commercial contract; it is an arrangement between two Governments. I do not quite get why this is a commercial contract, as you have just described, Sir Matthew, and why you cannot give us figures and details.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** We have given a lot of figures and details, and we continue to do so. As I say, every time we publish our annual report and accounts, which is annually, we will set out all of the figures and detail from the previous financial year. That is a moment that is about to come up in relation to the 2022-23 financial year.

What I said, though, was that, despite the public nature of the agreement between the two Governments, it is underpinned by some commercially sensitive information, including the cost.

Q175 **Chair:** This Committee often looks at papers from Government in a capacity where we do not reveal that information. Could we come and look at that information in a reading room in the Home Office, if that is what works for you? We could do it another way.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I can certainly take away the request.

Q176 **Chair:** We have looked at previous Home Office matters. We are a responsible Committee, not a reckless one. We have never yet leaked anything; we would not start all of a sudden. It would be helpful to look at the numbers underpinning this, if we could do that.

**Sir Matthew Rycroft:** I will take the request away. The decision about whether to accede to it or not will be for Ministers, but I will put that to the Minister.

**Chair:** Other Permanent Secretaries have acceded to that request, including in the Home Office, without noticeably going to Ministers. There has certainly been no pushback. Sir Geoffrey and I can come in and talk to you, if you would like to do that. We can push the point. We would like to see this. It would be helpful just to see the numbers. It is helpful for you, Sir Matthew, if Parliament, in the form of the Public Accounts Committee, has access to information and can verify figures. Perhaps we can take that away.

Thank you very much indeed for your time on a hot afternoon. There is lots still to chew over. Our sister Committee—thank you to Dame Diana Johnson for guesting with us today—will continue to pursue this issue, as we will. The transcript of this session will be available on the website uncorrected in the next couple of days. Many thanks to our colleagues at Hansard for that. We will be publishing our report in the autumn. Thank you very much indeed.