

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Home Office, HC 356

Wednesday 29 November 2023

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; James Daly; Simon Fell; Kim Johnson; Tim Loughton; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 1 - 271

Witnesses

I: Sir Matthew Rycroft KCMG CBE, Permanent Secretary, and Simon Ridley, Interim Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Matthew Rycroft and Simon Ridley.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Welcome to this meeting of the Home Affairs Select Committee. This is our annual meeting with the permanent secretary at the Home Office to scrutinise its work and the annual report and accounts that have been produced. You are very welcome today, Sir Matthew. Mr Ridley, would you like to introduce yourself?

Simon Ridley: I am Simon Ridley, second permanent secretary at the Home Office.

Q2 **Chair:** We have lots of questions for you, as you can imagine, and we will probably run until about half-past 11. I will start with some questions about Rwanda, which is obviously the top subject that Parliament is concerned about at the moment. First, Sir Matthew, in terms of the arrangements for payments, £120 million was paid to the Rwandan Government when the memorandum was originally signed in April 2022, and a further £20 million has been given to them since, so we are at £140 million.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, that is correct, Chair.

Q3 **Chair:** Has anything else been given to the Rwandan Government?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There are additional payments each year. Ministers have decided that the way to keep you and other colleagues in Parliament updated is, once a year, to set out the total additional payments to the Government of Rwanda, and we will do that in the annual report and accounts. The figures that you set out—the £120 million, plus the £20 million—are the payments from the 2022-23 financial year. Any payments in 2023-24, we will announce in the normal way in the next annual report.

Q4 **Chair:** So further payments have been made.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will announce that in the normal way next summer.

Q5 **Chair:** Right. So we have to wait until the summer to find out if further payments have been made. You are not able just to say yes or no.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am able to say that we will ensure transparency by setting out once a year what the total payments have been in the course of the last financial year, rather than giving a running commentary.

Q6 **Chair:** If any payments were made, what would they be for?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: They would be for a mixture of the migration and economic development partnership that the United Kingdom has with Rwanda, and the specific costs for housing the relocated asylum seekers in Rwanda.

Q7 **Chair:** So you are saying that there could be some payments for housing,



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even though nobody has been sent to Rwanda yet.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The way that the agreement between the two Governments is constructed is that there are some fixed costs and there are other costs that depend on the number of people being relocated from the UK to Rwanda.

Q8 **Chair:** So if housing is sitting there available, you are saying that that is a fixed cost and that an ongoing payment would probably have to be made each year for that housing.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There are ongoing payments from the UK to Rwanda in terms of the partnership between the two countries. The other costs will depend on the number of people.

Q9 **Chair:** Could you break down what the costs in the memorandum would be?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think I have broken it down already into the two different types of payments. First, there is the economic development partnership, which is about the United Kingdom supporting the Government of Rwanda in the economic development of Rwanda. The second type of payment is the—

Q10 **Chair:** Sorry, what does that mean?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The £120 million was an example of that; it is payments that the UK makes to Rwanda in order for the Government of Rwanda to build up their capacity and capability as a country.

Q11 **Chair:** Right. There is a lot of talk about a treaty being signed by the UK and Rwandan Governments. Will a figure be attached to that? Will a sum of money be paid for that treaty to be entered into?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The negotiation of that treaty is ongoing; in fact, there is a Home Office and wider team in Kigali as we speak, putting the finishing touches to that negotiation. It would be premature to say anything about the content of that; the Home Secretary will want to announce it to the House in the normal way.

Q12 **Chair:** So you are saying that some payment could be due on the signing of a treaty.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, I am not saying that. I am just saying that, as and when there are any additional payments, they will be announced in the normal way, which, as I say, is annually in our annual report and accounts.

Q13 **Chair:** It is really quite hard, Sir Matthew, to effectively scrutinise the flagship policy of the Home Office and how much is being spent on it, when we get the figures only at the end of the year. Do you see our problem?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Ministers have decided that the way to update Parliament is annually, rather than by giving a running commentary, and that is what—



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Q14 **Chair:** So they could choose to give a running commentary if they wanted to—they could choose to be clear about what was being spent.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think anyone wants to give a running commentary on something like that, particularly when there are commercial sensitivities. As you can see, a lot of other countries are interested in the UK's agreement with Rwanda, and a lot of other countries who receive a large number of asylum seekers are very interested in the sort of arrangement that the UK has with Rwanda. It would be commercially sensitive to give, if you like, unnecessary additional information prematurely.

Q15 **Chair:** Okay, let's try something else: can you tell us the cost of the court cases that have gone all the way up to the Supreme Court? How much is the Home Office paying in legal costs?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't have that number in front of me, but I am happy to write to the Committee with it.

Q16 **Chair:** We would like to see that. If any individual goes to Rwanda, if the scheme is deemed to be up and running, what is the cost that you have allocated per person to remove someone to Rwanda?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is commercially sensitive as well, but broadly speaking, the costs are about the same as they would be if the person were staying in the UK.

Q17 **Chair:** And that is how much?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As I say, I'm not at liberty to pass that on.

Q18 **Chair:** So you can't say how much it costs to keep someone in the UK and process their claim?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I can say that, and I say that it is broadly the same amount included in the agreement between the UK Government and the Government of Rwanda.

Q19 **Chair:** The figure that came out in the economic impact assessment, which came out in June, of £169,000 per individual being removed to Rwanda—is that not a correct figure?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That's not a correct figure. I think I recall saying at an earlier session of this Committee or the Public Accounts Committee that we did not recognise that figure.

Q20 **Chair:** Who produced that figure?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I'm not sure.

Simon Ridley: That's from the impact assessment that went alongside the Bill. I think that is the figure you are referring to.

Q21 **Chair:** Who produces that?

Simon Ridley: We produce that in the Home Office. It is a figure that is derived from a range of different costs, because obviously there are



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different costs per person depending on the circumstances and depending on support. As the permanent secretary says, the agreement with Rwanda itself is commercially sensitive. It is a private agreement between us and the Rwandans, so those figures do not imply anything about the cost we are paying to Rwanda.

Q22 **Chair:** I'm confused now. The Home Office has produced an impact assessment saying it costs £169,000 to send someone to Rwanda.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, it didn't say that. The impact assessment did not say that.

Q23 **Chair:** What did it say?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I can't remember exactly what the £169,000 was, but it wasn't that.

Q24 **Chair:** I'm going to check what the £169,000 was, because it was clear from the impact assessment that the cost to send someone to Rwanda was much higher than to process somebody in the UK. I think we had a previous Minister in front of us who told us he thought it would be about the same cost of about £12,000 per person. Do you recognise that figure?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I'm not going to say any particular figures. All I am saying is that the per-person costs that are part of the agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Rwanda are broadly the same as the costs would be for a person in the UK.

Q25 **Chair:** We'll check what the £169,000 is, because I think we need to get some clarity—if it is a figure from your Department but you do not seem to recognise it—about what it is.

Simon Ridley: It's a combination of costs based on different ranges and different assumptions of the different stages of the process, in terms of bringing people through Manston, detention and removal. It is not the costs of the agreement with Rwanda.

Q26 **Chair:** No, but it's the cost that you have said for someone arriving on a small boat, if the Illegal Migration Act were in force. They come on a small boat, they go through the Manston process, they are detained and then they are removed to Rwanda. The cost of that is £169,000. Is that right?

Simon Ridley: That is a figure based on a set of different assumptions about numbers and different assumptions, therefore, about the deterrent effect and a set of things that we do not know for the purposes of providing the impact assessment. It is not a point figure that is precisely what we will be paying; we can only use a set of assumptions and a set of estimates, and that is what we have produced in the impact assessment.

Q27 **Chair:** I'll try something else with you. In terms of the work that you have gone on to do, on the basis that the Illegal Migration Act would be enacted and the Rwanda policy would work, can you tell us how many staff are involved in setting that up? How many members of the Home Office are engaged?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: A large number. There are some existing members of staff and some new members of staff who we have recruited in recent months in order to be ready, had the Supreme Court decided that the existing agreement was lawful.

Q28 **Chair:** What's the number? How many?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think I have the exact number. Simon might have it.

Simon Ridley: There is not a single number. At this point in time, we have built up staff in the small boats operational command, which is in Border Force, in terms of providing a casework team.

Q29 **Chair:** So what's the total? Do you know how many people are actually putting this policy into operation? That is what I want to know.

Simon Ridley: I don't have a single number, because it is not work that is completely separate from the day-to-day work of the Home Office. We will be using some people in the small boats operational command, which we have increased by about 600 people. We are using them every day. We will use some of them when the IMA comes into force.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: To give another example, Chair, I was in Belfast recently and met the team of caseworkers there. They were just about to start their training to be one of the teams of caseworkers for the Illegal Migration Act. They completed that training and were ready to go. Now that we know that that casework is not going to be needed just at the moment, they have gone back to other duties. So we could count them in that number, or we could count them in a different number. There is lots of other work for them to be doing to clear the asylum backlog.

Q30 **Chair:** I have a figure of over 600 people being used to set up the Rwanda policy. Do you recognise that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We certainly recruited a lot more than that in recent months, many of whom will be ready to do this.

Q31 **Chair:** But is it correct that 600 people are involved in the operational side of the Rwanda policy?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As Simon says, I don't think it is realistic to give a number, because people are doing other things as well.

Q32 **Chair:** Okay. I want to ask about a couple of other things. One is about the Immigration Service Union, which was saying that a number of detention places that would be used for asylum detention had been kept empty on the basis that the Rwanda plan would be in operation. Is it correct that 500 asylum detention places are currently vacant because of the Rwanda work that is going on?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon might want to say more, but the short version is that, yes, that is correct. In order for the Government to be ready to go as soon as the Supreme Court took its decision, we were ensuring that there was space in our detention estate to detain the people



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who would be on the first flights to Rwanda. Of course, there are costs to be paid in terms of other people who are therefore not being detained in that estate, and that is a judgment for our immigration enforcement colleagues to be making day in, day out—how best to use their estate.

Q33 **Chair:** And where are they? Where are the people who would have been in the asylum detention places? Where are they currently?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is not like the prison estate, where people are there for a very long period of time. Typically, you come into the estate only for a small number of days or weeks before your removal from the UK to a safe third country.

Q34 **Chair:** So you have taken 500 out of the estate, and it is not a big estate to start with. Where are those 500 people who would be in the estate? Where are they based at the moment?

Simon Ridley: It is not quite right to say that we were keeping 500 beds empty. That is not what we were doing. We have been running the IRC estate very close to capacity over time, and particularly over the summer, as we took in more foreign national offenders from prison. In the run-up to the Supreme Court judgment, we started to create space for the first arrivals. The first way in which we do that is by running weekly charter flights: as a charter flight goes out, that frees up a number of beds. There are other returns that are happening on a regular basis.

Q35 **Chair:** So what's the number of places that you are keeping empty?

Simon Ridley: We began to create space, the beds—

Q36 **Chair:** Yes, but what is the number? I just want the number—that's all.

Simon Ridley: We have been bringing people back in since the judgment, so we are now building back up to being at capacity.

Q37 **Chair:** Okay, so the Immigration Service Union is not correct in saying that 500 places are empty. That is not correct.

Simon Ridley: I don't think there are 500 empty—I don't know what the number is today.

Q38 **Chair:** You can't tell me the number.

Simon Ridley: I can't tell you what the number is today. It changes every day.

Q39 **Chair:** Perhaps you can write to me about that.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will write with the specific number. The bit they are right about is that this is an example of prioritisation. Stopping the boats is the biggest priority for the Home Office, getting the first flight off to Rwanda is a very important part of stopping the boats, and therefore we have been doing everything necessary to get the first flights off to Rwanda if the Supreme Court judgment had gone the other way.

Q40 **Chair:** Okay, fine. I just want to go back to what happened in April 2022,



when you sought a ministerial direction for the policy because you didn't think it provided value for money, given the lack of evidence of a deterrent effect, which is what this is all about. We have had a number of exchanges about this issue over the months since then, and you told me you were going to evaluate it and come forward with a methodology for determining whether the deterrent effect was going to work. Clearly, the Rwanda flights have not taken off, but have you got to the point now where you know how you are going to evaluate whether the scheme provides value for money?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First of all, Chair, I keep the judgment about value for money, and indeed the other accounting officer tests—feasibility, regularity and propriety—under constant review, as you would expect. I will write to you and the Public Accounts Committee if there are significant changes in those judgments. So far, there are not. Just to repeat, it was not the case in April '22 that we knew for sure that this would not be value for money—

Q41 **Chair:** Did you know it would be?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We didn't have the evidence that it would be because, as you said, the value-for-money judgment depends on the amount of deterrence that the policy does. Clearly, something is deterring people from crossing the channel, because the numbers are over a third down on last year. At the beginning of the year, we were expecting, as our best case, the numbers to be as high as they were last year. Something is deterring people. It is very hard to tell how much of that is the possibility of being relocated to Rwanda, particularly, as you suggest, before the first flights to Rwanda have taken off.

Q42 **Chair:** It is worth pointing out that the blip last year with the Albanians has gone. That is why the numbers are down. You can take the Albanians out of the numbers, but the numbers coming across from all the other nationalities are slightly up. It is worth reflecting on that. I know that the Prime Minister talks a lot about the deals done with Albania, but if you put that to one side, the numbers are still up on small boat crossings from other nationalities.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First of all, the fact that the number of Albanians is down is a very important part of the Home Office's work to stop the boats. It is a successful example of an agreement between the Government of this country and the Government of another country—in this case, Albania. Those sorts of arrangements are obviously possible with other countries as well.

Q43 **Chair:** Yes, but there is only Albania at the moment, isn't there?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The nationality of the people crossing the channel goes up and down in different years.

Q44 **Chair:** Well, it's been going up. That's the key issue.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, some nationalities have gone down.



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- Q45 **Chair:** Afghans are the top nationality at the moment, aren't they?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely. Some nationalities are going up.
Chair: Okay. I am going to come to Lee Anderson, because he is following up on the Rwanda questions.
- Q46 **Lee Anderson:** Yes. Thank you, Chair. We know that once the Rwanda scheme is working—hopefully it will be working—we will accept special cases of refugees in return. Could you please tell me, Mr Rycroft, how many that will be, what the cost is and who pays for it?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is no number agreed with the Government of Rwanda for that. What you are referring to is the fact that, if a Rwandan has come across on a small boat or has made any other illegal entry, they would not be able to go back to Rwanda. It is those sorts of people we are talking about.
- Q47 **Lee Anderson:** No, I'm not referring to that. I am referring to an agreement in place whereby we accept special cases who live in Rwanda that they can't cope with. They may be people with mental health problems or medical problems. What number do we expect, what is the cost and who pays for it?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is part of the partnership with the Government of Rwanda—
Lee Anderson: I know that.
Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think we have a number in mind.
- Q48 **Lee Anderson:** You don't know?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: There isn't a number, just as there isn't a number for the total number of people going to Rwanda.
- Q49 **Lee Anderson:** So it could be one for one.
Sir Matthew Rycroft: It won't be one for one.
- Q50 **Lee Anderson:** So you do have a number.
Sir Matthew Rycroft: We don't have a number.
- Q51 **Lee Anderson:** Okay. Well, that's not very helpful. The accommodation in Rwanda is obviously sat there empty at the moment. At what cost?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a cost that the Government of Rwanda is bearing.
- Q52 **Lee Anderson:** So what is the weekly cost of that accommodation? What are we paying for and not using?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: The way the agreement between the two Governments is structured means that we are not paying the actual cost. We are paying a certain amount, which is based on an assessment of how much it will cost. The actual costs are paid for by the Government of



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Rwanda, and they bear any risk if those costs happen to be higher than what we accounted for.

Q53 Lee Anderson: Okay, let's try a third question, which we will probably not get an answer to. If the Rwanda scheme does not go ahead, what is plan B?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think that the Prime Minister, Home Secretary and other Ministers will be the right people to answer that question. The Home Office is putting a huge amount of effort into continuing to make the Rwanda scheme work. That is our top priority. As I mentioned earlier, we have a team in Rwanda at the moment negotiating a treaty—

Q54 Lee Anderson: Yes, I know that. Are you currently working on a plan B?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Of course, we do all sorts of contingency planning the whole time, so there is lots of planning going on, but I would not want to call it a plan B. That would sound as though there is some very specific thing that Ministers have already decided, but they haven't. When they do decide, they will make the announcements in the normal way.

Q55 Lee Anderson: I don't want to be rude, Mr Rycroft, but I will ask you one more time: are we working on a plan B? Are you working on a plan B for if the Rwanda scheme fails?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are working on lots of ways to stop the boats.

Lee Anderson: All right, that's me done, Chair; I can't ask any more questions.

Q56 James Daly: So what are they? What are these "lots of ways"? You say that you are working on lots of things. Can you tell us about them?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes. As the Home Secretary has said, there are lots of other parts of the strategy. There is the legislation, the Illegal Migration Act, which Parliament has already passed. There are ongoing conversations with other Governments around the world about the possibility of reaching an agreement with them. And, of course, there is a lot of work upstream, as we say, to help with this deterrent effect, to prevent people from seeking to make these illegal and dangerous journeys in the first place.

Q57 James Daly: Okay. You said that other countries are very interested in the relationship we have with Rwanda. Which countries are we talking about?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There are lots of countries. I was in Germany last week and they are interested, just to take one example. I should think that pretty much—

Q58 James Daly: Explain what you mean by "interested". They are looking to implement a Rwanda-style policy—is that what you mean?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It depends on what you mean by "Rwanda-style". There are lots of different ways of—

James Daly: We are interested in the Rwanda policy, so I am assuming that they want to implement—

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There are lots of different ways of structuring an agreement between a country that receives asylum seekers and another country. The UK's agreement with Rwanda is one—

Q59 **James Daly:** Can I put it this way, just to have a straight answer to a straight question: is Germany interested in implementing a Rwanda-style policy—hence the discussions that you have been having with them?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: They are not interested in mirroring exactly the UK's relationship with Rwanda, but they are—as with other EU member states and other asylum-receiving countries such as the United States—interested in how to prevent people making dangerous and illegal journeys.

Q60 **James Daly:** Okay. I am interested in the legal advice. Now, I am a lawyer, so I understand confidentiality, but could you tell me, when you were discussing the Rwanda policy with Ministers, did you seek the advice of independent counsel?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

James Daly: Okay, so independent counsel outside of Government—the Government Legal Service?

Sir Matthew Rycroft *indicated assent.*

Q61 **James Daly:** Okay. As the Chair has already asked, what was the cost of that? Can you give us a figure?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I couldn't give you a figure for that, but I can absolutely assure you that the process of stress-testing that policy—or indeed any other new and controversial policy—should be rigorous, but it should also be behind the scenes; it should be behind closed doors and, on the question that you are talking about, as you know, it should be on the basis of a confidential, privileged relationship.

I can assure you that that did take place before the Government announced the UK's agreement with Rwanda in April 2022, and if I had had any concerns about the lawfulness of the policy, I would have needed a direction on things in addition to value for money.

Q62 **James Daly:** Were you aware, following legal advice, that there would be the very real risk that this matter would be challenged in the courts, and that we could have an outcome as we have seen?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely.

Q63 **James Daly:** Okay, and Ministers were aware of that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely.

Q64 **James Daly:** Okay. On the new treaty, which you have people out in Rwanda discussing, what is going to be different? What is the thing that is



going to make this different from the previous policy, if I can put it that way?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It would be premature to announce that while the negotiation is still going on. Suffice it to say that the purpose of the treaty is to respond to the specifics in the Supreme Court's judgment.

Q65 **James Daly:** One of the specifics in the Supreme Court's judgment was the Court's view of—I won't say the reliability of the Rwandan Government, but I think that we know what we mean in respect of that—the ability of the Rwandan Government not to send people back to their country of origin. What is it that is going on that is going to address that point?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I refer you to my previous answer.

Q66 **James Daly:** Mr Rycroft, you do appreciate that it would be nice to have answers to questions from time to time in respect of these things. We are trying to scrutinise a very, very important policy. Do you not think that we, as a Committee of MPs, are entitled to at least some information about what's going on? Or is that not really our role, do you think?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think your role is to hold to account the Government—in this case, the Home Office. My role as accounting officer is to be held to account personally for the money, and it is the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers who are accountable to Parliament for the policy.

Q67 **Chair:** I'd like to come back, because I've had a look at the £169,000 that I was referring to. Perhaps, Mr Ridley, you might be able to help me with this. The assessment claimed that relocating an individual to this central African country or another third country is estimated to cost £169,000, based on a previous Government scheme. It said: "An estimated unit cost of £169,000 is found for relocating an individual...This cost will only be incurred for people who arrive in the UK illegally." I am just looking at a media comment, which says: "A Home Office source said the figure is based on a 'theoretical exercise on costs under the bill'." Do you recognise that?

Simon Ridley: Yes, I think that's close to what I said earlier.

Q68 **Chair:** So it's £169,000 to relocate someone to Rwanda?

Simon Ridley: Well, it's £169,000 based on a set of estimates of different costs of a theoretical sequence.

Q69 **Chair:** So, as a Committee, we can say that the Home Office's best estimate is that, if this scheme gets under way, it's £169,000 per passenger on a plane—on a flight—to Rwanda. That's right, isn't it?

Simon Ridley: That's what we set out in the impact assessment, with those assumptions.

Q70 **Chair:** Yes, so it's £169,000—very different from the £12,000 I think the Minister said was the cost that he was estimating. He said it was going to



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be an equivalent cost to what it costs to process asylum claims in the UK.

Simon Ridley: I think they are two different things. There is the cost of the processing of the asylum claim in the UK and the cost of the processing of the asylum claim in Rwanda. I don't know the full detail of what the Minister said that you're expressing—

Q71 **Chair:** Okay, but you are the second permanent secretary, so I would expect you to understand—

Simon Ridley: I am just making sure we are comparing the same two things. There is a cost of processing the claims, which is one thing, and then there is the full cost of a removal policy.

Chair: Okay. Tim Loughton.

Q72 **Tim Loughton:** Welcome back, Sir Matthew. Congratulations on the knighthood since you last appeared—in a non-supporting role last time.

I just want to come back on this point, to be clear: 15 minutes ago, you said, Mr Ridley, that you did not recognise the figure of £169,000; you now do recognise it, 15 minutes later.

Simon Ridley: Apologies, I don't think I said I didn't recognise it—

Q73 **Tim Loughton:** That's exactly what you said—

Simon Ridley: I said we had put it in the impact assessment, based on estimates.

Q74 **Tim Loughton:** Exactly the phrase that was used was that you did not recognise the figure of £169,000. You now do recognise that figure.

Simon Ridley: Yes, it's in the impact assessment.

Q75 **Tim Loughton:** Right. So 15 minutes later, your answer has changed.

Simon Ridley: I—

Q76 **Tim Loughton:** I think the answer is yes.

Now, Sir Matthew, last time you were here, in your opening comments you said: "There is nothing that the Home Office loves better than a good crisis". How is that going?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I was talking then about the culture of the Home Office and the need, in addition to responding effectively to crises, to work at preventing crises, being agile, being flexible, putting more of our effort upstream, in prevention and deterrence. That is what I meant by that phrase: yes, the Home Office is good in a crisis, but it would be even better if we didn't have so many crises to deal with, by working upstream and preventing those crises.

Q77 **Tim Loughton:** Surely you would only love a good crisis if you were good at handling them.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is a culture in different organisations, as you know, and in terms of the culture in the Home Office, one of the things



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that it celebrates is the ability to rise to a challenge and to deal effectively with a very difficult crisis, so yes.

Q78 Tim Loughton: You think the Home Office has “risen” to those challenges in the 16 months since you were last here?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely.

Q79 Tim Loughton: You do. What’s the top priority of the Home Office at the moment?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The top priority is to support the Home Secretary, and his priorities are to stop the boats, to support the police, to cut crime and to protect the British people.

Q80 Tim Loughton: The top priority as set out in the annual report and accounts in September—to quote you in the foreword—“is to Stop the Boats.”

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Mm-hmm.

Q81 Tim Loughton: It is. Okay. Who is the independent inspector that is most relevant to that top priority?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: David Neal would be—the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration.

Q82 Tim Loughton: When did you last have a formal meeting with David Neal?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, the second permanent secretary, now Simon, has—

Q83 Tim Loughton: No, you.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I can’t remember.

Q84 Tim Loughton: You have never met David Neal.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I have met him, but I can’t remember when the last time was.

Q85 Tim Loughton: You have never had a formal meeting with David Neal, have you, Sir Matthew?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is possible I have never had a formal meeting with him, but I am not the person who—

Q86 Tim Loughton: It is not only possible; it is the case, isn’t it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: If you say so. I have met him, and I know who he is, and I know that the second permanent secretary—now Simon—is responsible for holding that relationship.

Q87 Tim Loughton: You are the top civil servant in charge of the Home Office. You have identified in the annual report, to which you have written a foreword, and in your comments just now that the top priority of your Department is to stop the boats, and the responsibility for overseeing how



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that is being done is with the chief inspector, who you have chosen never to meet. Correct?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I wouldn't put it like that.

Q88 **Tim Loughton:** How would you put it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The structure of the Home Office is such that we have a second permanent secretary, Simon Ridley, whose job is migration and borders. That is the totality of what Simon does, and he does—

Q89 **Tim Loughton:** Your job is also migration and borders, and you are the superior to Mr Ridley.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: My job is migration and borders, plus policing, plus homeland security.

Q90 **Tim Loughton:** You are the top civil servant in the Department, so you might be expected to show an above-average interest in the top priority of that Department, the chief inspector of which you have never met formally. That is the situation, isn't it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I have a very high level of interest in the Home Office's top priority—so much so that I and we have recruited a second permanent secretary whose sole job is migration and borders. We also have a fairly structured system of relationship management, so that important people such as David Neal know who their point of contact is in the Home Office. In his case, it is the second permanent secretary and the Immigration Minister, and he has formal meetings with those people very regularly.

Q91 **Tim Loughton:** So if David Neal had requested to meet you as part of his role, you would have agreed to meet him.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I would be absolutely delighted to meet him.

Q92 **Tim Loughton:** So why haven't you responded to his request to meet you?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Because the second permanent secretary and the Immigration Minister meet him very, very regularly.

Q93 **Tim Loughton:** So you are not delighted to meet him.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I would be delighted to meet him. I meet lots of people. I just think that the clarity of the ownership of the—

Q94 **Tim Loughton:** But you wouldn't be delighted to meet him in your formal role as the top civil servant in the Home Office, because you have not responded to his requests for a meeting in all the time he has been in office, and now his contract is not being renewed.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I believe in clarity of accountability and clarity of relationship management. In this case, we put a very clear mechanism in place after a lot of thought about who was best to hold that relationship. It actually went up from the director general for migration, which is the situation that I inherited, to the second permanent secretary.



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- Q95 **Tim Loughton:** Which Minister would be most relevant to meeting David Neal?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Immigration Minister.
- Q96 **Tim Loughton:** Right. The previous Home Secretary met David Neal, but you did not.
Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.
- Q97 **Tim Loughton:** So it is nothing to do with lines of accountability, really, is it? You have just chosen not to. Who is responsible for making the final decision on whether the inspector's contract should be renewed?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Home Secretary.
- Q98 **Tim Loughton:** Subject to advice from who?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: Home Office officials.
- Q99 **Tim Loughton:** Such as?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: In this case, the team who lead on the relationship with ICIBI in the migration and borders part of the Home Office.
- Q100 **Tim Loughton:** Did you see that advice?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.
- Q101 **Tim Loughton:** Did you have any input into that advice?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: I oversaw it, and I am responsible for it in the way that I am responsible for all advice in the Home Office.
- Q102 **Tim Loughton:** Does that include having input into it?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't recall changing the advice, and if I did, I will write to you.
- Q103 **Tim Loughton:** That was not the question. Did you have any input into the advice, whether the final advice changed or not?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think so.
- Q104 **Tim Loughton:** You had no input into the advice given by officials to the Home Secretary about the renewal of the contract of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration—yes or no?
Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am responsible for all advice from all officials in the Home Office to all Ministers in the Home Office. I oversee that in ways that vary depending on what the issue is. If by "input" you mean, did I change it, I am pretty sure I didn't.
- Q105 **Tim Loughton:** I don't mean change. I am asking about input.
Sir Matthew Rycroft: If by "input" you mean, did I oversee it, then I did oversee it. I am responsible for it, but I did not actively edit it.
- Q106 **Tim Loughton:** So why was the contract of the chief inspector, unusually,



not renewed?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Because that is what the then Home Secretary decided.

Q107 **Tim Loughton:** On what basis?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: You will have to ask her.

Q108 **Tim Loughton:** You have seen the advice. On what basis was the advice to her, which she presumably then agreed with, that the contract should not be renewed? Because you saw that advice, had input into that advice, although had not necessarily changed that advice. What advice was it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Your question makes an assumption about what that advice was. I do not think I am at liberty to say what that advice was. I think that is private between Home Office officials and the Home Secretary. The outcome of that decision making was the Home Secretary's decision, which I referred to.

Q109 **Tim Loughton:** What are the most likely reasons that a chief inspector's contract would not be renewed, given that usually in the past it has been?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think there is any presumption of a particular number of terms for a job like that.

Q110 **Tim Loughton:** Right. On what basis, if the candidate were willing, would it not most likely be renewed? What are the theoretical scenarios?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is up to the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary received advice from Home Office officials, and I oversaw the system of that. It was up to her to take a decision, and she took that decision.

Q111 **Tim Loughton:** Is there a possibility that the advice to the Home Secretary was to renew the contract of David Neal?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is possible. I am not going to say what that was; I don't think I should.

Q112 **Tim Loughton:** Why has it taken so long to publish the reports produced by David Neal taken? How many are still outstanding?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon might be able to answer how many are still outstanding. As to why they take so long, the individual publication of an individual response is a matter for Ministers, so Ministers decide the timing of those responses. Some of them, I accept, are detailed and complicated and deserve very thorough analysis and response. They get that, and sometimes the Home Office is not the speediest Department at responding to things like that. I take responsibility for any delays there. I do think there have also been occasions when Ministers have chosen not to make a publication at a particular time.

Q113 **Tim Loughton:** So it is entirely down to Ministers delaying, not the fact that the officials have not made the necessary checks and reports, in order to publish those reports and then be able to make a response to them.



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think I said the exact opposite to that.

Q114 **Tim Loughton:** So, it is down to your officials.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think I said that sometimes it is down to officials, and sometimes it is down to Ministers.

Q115 **Tim Loughton:** Why is it that this chief inspector's reports seem to be sat on disproportionately for long periods of time? I believe there are currently 10 reports outstanding that have yet to be published. That is "yet to be published", not yet for the Government to respond to the reports. Why is it so frequent in this case? Mr Ridley, do you know?

Simon Ridley: Just to confirm that you are correct that there are 10 reports waiting to be published. They are at different points, as Matthew has said. Some are with business areas, some have been put to Ministers, and we are obviously putting those back to the new Home Secretary. I do not know what the comparison is with past years. It is certainly the case that it is taking too long to publish some of these reports, and we need to get a number of them published much quicker, and I hope that is what we will do.

Q116 **Tim Loughton:** Sir Matthew, when we had both the Home Secretary—with you alongside her, I think—and the Immigration Minister as witnesses, the Committee requested that we respond positively to an invitation by the chief inspector, which was actually instigated by the Committee, to go on joint inspections with him, for the mutual benefit of the inspector, to see how the Committee works, and the Committee, to see how the inspector works, given that he is a key witness in front of us. Neither the Home Secretary nor the Immigration Minister could raise any objections to that being a good idea, yet subsequently it was vetoed. Why?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Ministers decided that, in order to preserve the independence of the inspectorate, it would not be right for this Committee to join an inspection. However, as I hope you know, you all are very welcome to visit any part of the Home Office estate or team, and I am very glad that many of you do so regularly.

Q117 **Tim Loughton:** Why does it compromise the independence of the inspector if he has got some MPs looking at his work at an inspection?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That was the decision that Ministers took.

Q118 **Tim Loughton:** Do you agree with that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think my view is relevant.

Q119 **Tim Loughton:** Your view is entirely relevant. You are the chief civil servant running the Home Office. Ministers expressed to us in front of the Committee that they did not have a problem. Then, magically, they did have a problem. That would suggest that they had taken different advice from officials for whom you are responsible; therefore, your view on this is entirely relevant.



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: A bit like the previous line of questioning, you are assuming that the advice was one particular way.

Q120 **Tim Loughton:** I'm not assuming anything. I would just like to know your opinion on it.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It's a decision for Ministers, and Ministers are quite rightly in our system accountable to Parliament for the decisions they take on policy issues.

Q121 **Tim Loughton:** Why is it that every question this Committee asks where there is a difficulty in providing an answer, it is the responsibility of Ministers rather than something in which you have a role? Even if you think it was ultimately the responsibility of Ministers here, it would be nice to know your view.

You are a very experienced civil servant. In your experience, whether it is with this Committee or other Committees, why would the independence of an inspector be compromised by being accompanied on a day trip to inspect a facility in which the inspector and this Committee has a close direct interest? I just don't understand what the problem is.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I'm a civil servant and my job is to support the Government, support Ministers, give them the best possible advice and be held to account by this Committee and the Public Accounts Committee on the aspects of the running of the Home Office for which I am directly accountable to you. Broadly speaking, that is the money and the way that money is spent. Ministers in our system, as you know, are accountable to Parliament for the policy, strategy and decisions.

Q122 **Tim Loughton:** And for taking the rap when civil servants do not want to answer the questions.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I respect that division of labour. I do have views on these things, but I do not think it is appropriate for me as an individual to set all those views out.

Q123 **Tim Loughton:** You are not here as an individual; you are here as the chief civil servant in the Home Office. I will end on the asylum legacy target, which the Government now appear to be confident they will achieve. Is that a realistic estimate now by Ministers that that legacy will be completed by 13 December or at some stage in December?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: By the end of December. Actually, we have always been confident of that because we knew that we were on track to recruit the additional caseworkers, which we have now done, with 2,500 by 1 September, and to triple the productivity of caseworkers.

Q124 **Tim Loughton:** So it is entirely down to the extra resource that has been brought in to deal with the backlog now.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is the combination of the extra resource and the increased productivity of the existing resource.

Q125 **Tim Loughton:** Nothing to do with the number of claims that have been



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withdrawn?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It's a combination of those two things. As those caseworkers have gone through the cases, some of them have been withdrawn.

Q126 **Tim Loughton:** You say it's a combination of these two things, but you have now listed three things.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The extra caseworkers and the productivity.

Q127 **Tim Loughton:** So the withdrawal rate plays no part in now being on target to meet the legacy cases.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, I think the withdrawal rate plays an important part. It is a consequence of that—

Q128 **Tim Loughton:** So it is three factors. You said it was two factors, but it is, in fact, three factors, isn't it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The number of caseworkers times the average number of decisions per week gets you the number of decisions per week in total. So, in that sense, it's about two factors. Within that, there are certain policy changes and some operational changes, including the one that you referred to, which lead to improvements in the rate.

Q129 **Tim Loughton:** Okay. Is it correct that 17,316 claims were withdrawn between September 2022 and September 2023?

Simon Ridley: If you say so; I do not have the exact number. It is absolutely the case as we go through much higher numbers of decisions that you would expect a number of withdrawals. We have clear thresholds for when we withdraw, which is when people do not engage with the process. If individuals do not show for an interview twice or if individuals do not respond to requests for questionnaires twice, their claim is withdrawn.

However, there are outcomes. Over the course of the year, we have addressed far more claims and made far more decisions. Some have been granted, some have been refused and some have been withdrawn.

Q130 **Tim Loughton:** I understand that, Mr Ridley. Is it just fortuitous that in that period, there has been a 307% increase in the number of withdrawals?

Simon Ridley: I don't think it is fortuitous. What we have done this year is set out to address all the claims in the legacy backlog by the end of the year, as the Government set out. We have followed our policy and process in all those cases. In dealing with a lot of older cases there have been some people who will have absconded before we get to this point. Withdrawals come about, as I say, when people do not show for interviews or have not returned questionnaires. Because we are dealing with a lot of very old cases, that is one plausible reason why it has gone up. I do not think that is fortuitous. We have gone through each case in the backlog—



Q131 Tim Loughton: But the reason for those withdrawals has changed, hasn't it? Some 5% of those withdrawals were classed as "non-substantiated", which is a specific term, but 95% were classed as "other", against 54% being classed as "other" the year before. There has been a huge rise in the withdrawals classed as "other", which can apply to a whole series of reasons instigated by the Home Office. Is it not strange that, conveniently, when faced with a very stiff target, there has been a threefold increase for undetermined reasons in people magically not going forward with their claims? And where are those people?

Simon Ridley: In most cases, I do not know where those people are. As I say—

Q132 Tim Loughton: So we have no record of that 307% increase or the 17,316 claims withdrawn in the last year. You have not got a clue where those people now are.

Simon Ridley: These are people who have made a claim and who we have sought to invite to interviews and sent out questionnaires to who have not responded. At the point at which they are not engaging with the system, that leads to a decision, and we have withdrawn their claim.

Q133 Tim Loughton: So you tick them off the list, but they have not gone home.

Simon Ridley: I don't know.

Q134 Tim Loughton: You don't know. So you have no idea where those 17,316 people are.

Simon Ridley: I don't think we know where all those people are, no.

Tim Loughton: You have no idea.

Q135 Chair: Why do you not have the figures for withdrawals? Why are you not able to confirm what Tim Loughton just said?

Simon Ridley: I just don't have the precise number in front of me.

Tim Loughton: It is quite an important figure to have had, isn't it?

Q136 Chair: Yes. I find this amazing. We were going to talk to you, obviously, about the backlog, because it is a key priority of the Prime Minister. He has said that by the end of December we will have cleared the legacy backlog. I would have thought that you would know chapter and verse on all the figures in relation to the backlog and what happened to all the claims and withdrawals—ones that had been accepted and ones that had been turned down. Do you not have any of that information?

Simon Ridley: We have all that information. Indeed, we are managing all that information and our teams are managing it daily.

Q137 Chair: So you do have the figures, then.



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Simon Ridley: We've got the figures, obviously, because we are managing our way through the backlog. We published a load of the numbers and the latest position at the end of September last week.

Q138 **Chair:** But we are asking you questions today about the figures, and you say that you do not know what the figures are.

Simon Ridley: I just don't have them on the table right in front of me at this moment.

Chair: Why don't you? It is actually really disrespectful to this Committee that you do not come prepared for questions. You have officials sitting behind you, so I assume that they might be able to pass you a note to confirm the figures. Can they? I am assuming so. That is what happens in the House of Commons; if a Minister is in difficulty, the officials in the Box send a note to the Minister. I can see that we are not getting very far today, are we?

Q139 **Simon Fell:** Thank you for joining us, gentlemen. Carrying on with the asylum backlog and hotel use, the Immigration Minister was clear at the Dispatch Box that he intends to end the use of hotels. The latest quarterly immigration stats to September this year show that despite small boat crossings falling, there is still a record high number of asylum seekers in hotels; I think it is 56,000 people. Can you talk us through your plans to end hotel use?

Simon Ridley: Yes, certainly. As you say, there are just over 56,000 people in hotels at the moment. What we have done, as Ministers set out, is to commit to closing the first 50 hotels by the end of January. We are working very closely with our providers and with local authorities in those areas to close those hotels. We are doing that by essentially consolidating the accommodation estate. As we make decisions on the asylum backlog and grant asylum, people are leaving. We are then essentially moving people around the estate. So, we are doing a number of things, the first of which is growing dispersed accommodation—housing, essentially—in communities. The second is maximising the number of beds that we can utilise across the estate, both in dispersed accommodation and hotel accommodation.

As people leave, that creates space; we have to consolidate people into a smaller number of hotels and, once we get to the point that we have an empty hotel, having announced 50 ahead of time, we are then able to end the contract and therefore to close that hotel. The 50 that were announced were the first 50; as the Minister said, it is our intention to close hotels and to end the use of hotels over time. We are working to develop what the next tranche of hotels will be; when that is prepared, we will move on to the next set of hotels.

Q140 **Simon Fell:** That is helpful, thank you. My understanding is that nearly 14,000 people have arrived in the UK since the Illegal Migration Act got Royal Assent. There have been zero inadmissible decisions since that time. How does that marry up with what you have just said? How will we decline the use of hotels when we actually have more people arriving and are not



sending them anywhere else?

Simon Ridley: We are able to reduce the number of hotels for two reasons. The first is that a combination of arrivals going down and decisions going up means that we are reducing the demand on our accommodation estate—at the moment, overall, we are seeing fewer people arriving on the estate than are leaving—and the second is that we are increasing both the number of beds that are available in our estate outside hotels and consolidating beds within hotels, so that we can use fewer hotels. Over time, that will enable us to close more hotels. Clearly, over the medium term, the forecasts of arrivals get less certain, depending on a number of things that we have talked about already this morning. We will therefore need to grow the number of beds that are available outside hotels as well, because there will still be some level of demand on our estate.

Q141 **Simon Fell:** You said over the medium term. What are your projections? When can we expect to see no more hotels being used?

Simon Ridley: We are still working through our projections for the coming year and beyond, because there are large numbers of uncertainties in those, as we already touched on. Small boat arrivals are down a third this year. That is for a number of reasons, and it is difficult to attach causality with certainty; there is the work that we have done with Albania and the work that we are continuing to do with the French and how much more we can get from that. There are also the current uncertainties around Rwanda and the deterrent that comes from that.

It is difficult to make projections for next year. We will have a range. Once we have got that, we will match our—

Q142 **Simon Fell:** Can you share what that range will be?

Simon Ridley: In this year just gone, we had a central, best and worst case. We do not have a range for next year that is complete. We are working through those projections at the moment.

Q143 **Simon Fell:** Can you share that with the Committee when it is done?

Simon Ridley: I think we articulated our central case last year.

Simon Fell: So when the new work is done you can share that with the Committee.

Simon Ridley: Yes.

Q144 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. Let's move on to the move-on period. "The Big Issue" did a freedom of information request recently and found that, due to the refugee move-on period, the number of refugees becoming homeless tripled to 1,500 between August and October. That is up 450 from the same period last year. What are your plans to deal with that?

Simon Ridley: Sorry, can you just—?

Simon Fell: The move-on period, which is set currently at 56 days—



Simon Ridley: 28 days.

Simon Fell: Sorry, it's set at 28 days. That is driving homelessness among the refugee population. What are your plans to address that?

Simon Ridley: As you say, once we grant asylum to an individual, they have a 28-day period, which we notify them of. We do a number of things to support people through that period through some of our partners, such as Migrant Help, to help point people towards how they can access the labour market and get support from the Department for Work and Pensions and for housing. We are increasing the data that we can share with local authorities to give them better information on people who will be leaving the estate. We have some Home Office liaison teams who work with people as they leave hotels to try to point them towards support.

Equally, we work very closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which is responsible for housing in the round and funds a huge amount of support for councils to help address homelessness. Through those partnerships, we are trying to help manage the transition.

Q145 **Simon Fell:** Why is there a discrepancy between how we treat families in the UK? We give them 56 days to help them through the risk of homelessness, but keep it to only 28 where there are people with far less stable lives and less ability to lean on family and friends and set themselves up. Why is that discrepancy there?

Simon Ridley: All I can say is that the regulations governing the support that we give to asylum seekers require us to give people 28 days' notice. We do a lot in that period to try to support people and make sure that they have information about the sorts of support they can access when they leave hotels. As the Committee knows, it is already both very expensive and challenging to provide the level of accommodation that we do for asylum seekers. At some point they have to transition from the Home Office estate to other support that they might need from the local authority or, ideally, to access the labour market. That is the work that we are doing. Once they leave our estate, they can access other UK benefits if they have been granted asylum and can become part of our communities.

Q146 **Simon Fell:** But we are layering challenges on some of these people. Starting the move-on period when they are granted their status, rather than when they receive their biometric documentation, makes it harder for them to find accommodation and work. This is a barrier that we are putting in their way, which could be changed. Why are we not looking at changing it?

Simon Ridley: We are doing some things to try to improve the point of transition in terms of making sure people get that information as soon as the decision is made. We are also increasing the amount of information that we have available in hotels for people who are not yet at the end of the process, and we are moving some of that more upstream. Some of our partners, such as Migrant Help, are seeking to support those people we have in our accommodation as early and as much as possible.



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Q147 **Simon Fell:** Is there a plan to review that policy at some point?

Simon Ridley: Not the policy around 28 days.

Simon Fell: I have questions on another topic, but I know Lee wanted to come in.

Q148 **Lee Anderson:** I have one question. If we put foreign offenders and Albanians aside—forget about those numbers—how many people travelling on small boats who have been refused asylum have been sent to a third country or back to their own country over the past three years?

Simon Ridley: I don't think we have—

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will write to the Committee with those numbers.

Q149 **Lee Anderson:** That is staggering. What about in the last year?

Simon Ridley: I don't have a number for non-Albanian, non-FNOs.

Chair: Your officials are behind you. Perhaps they might be able to help you.

Lee Anderson: What about last week, then?

Q150 **Chair:** Do we have any figures about anything?

Simon Ridley: Yes.

Q151 **Lee Anderson:** How many have there been in the last six months?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As Simon said, there are charter flights and other ways of doing returns the whole time, and we can give you whatever time period you would like.

Q152 **Lee Anderson:** If we put foreign offenders and Albanians aside and just look at people coming here who are being refused asylum—I am sure there are a few—how many were sent back last month?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will write to you with those numbers, Mr Anderson.

Q153 **Lee Anderson:** I'm sorry, Chair, but I find it absolutely staggering that the big boss hasn't got a clue, not just on this question but on nearly every other question we have asked today. Why is that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Mr Ridley is looking for the numbers, and we will send them to you.

Lee Anderson: Okay. That's me done.

Q154 **Simon Fell:** Moving on to Home Office expenditure, could you provide an update on the emergency services network project?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes. This is the very important project to replace the Airwave contract, which will become technically obsolete at some point in the 2030s. It is a long-standing programme that this Committee has



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rightly taken a very close interest in, given the amounts of money involved. The long-term savings to the taxpayer will be significant—in the order of £200 million per year—so the £450 million annual cost will reduce to £250 million once we turn off Airwave.

The date by which we can turn off Airwave has been delayed again, as you know, as a result of the Competition and Markets Authority declaring supernormal profits that Motorola was making. Motorola is now appealing against that decision, but on the assumption that Motorola loses that appeal, the programme will have saved the taxpayer £1.1 billion as a result of that CMA investigation.

Simon Fell: Good news all round, then.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is good news in terms of money. It is bad news in terms of there being a bit longer to wait before the police and the other emergency services get the new kit, but I think 95% of the masts for the new system—the emergency services mobile communications programme—have already been built. We are cracking on with delivery of the parts of the programme that do not require Motorola, because obviously there are lots of different aspects of this programme. I write to the Public Accounts Committee quarterly specifically on this programme, given the amounts of money involved and the close interest that you and they take, and I will continue to do that.

Q155 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. You wrote to us last year and said it would take about 12 months to find a new supplier. How is that going?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Very well.

Simon Fell: Excellent. Could you give us a little bit more than that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I cannot announce yet who the new supplier will be, but in the normal way, we will ensure that the Committee knows about that announcement.

Q156 **Simon Fell:** Could you give us an estimate of when we might hear something on that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are on track with that stage of the re-procurement, and I will update you as soon as I can.

Q157 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. There was a write-off of £135 million as a consequence of Motorola leaving the programme. Can we expect more write-offs to come?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am not anticipating more write-offs at this stage. We have been working hard with Motorola and other commercial partners to ensure that the vast majority of the investments that Motorola has made will be used in the future emergency services network. I cannot give an absolute guarantee, but I can assure you that the Home Office team running this programme are working very hard to make maximum use of the existing investments.



Q158 **Simon Fell:** The baseline cost of the programme is now £11.3 billion. Is that a figure you recognise?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That includes all the running costs until 2035, if I remember correctly. That is why it is such a big number, but as I say, the purpose of the programme is to replace a technology that will go obsolete and, at the same time, to save the taxpayer money. We are still on track to save £200 million per year.

Simon Fell: I appreciate that, but the business case signed off by the Cabinet Office in 2015 put it at £5.2 billion, so it has more than doubled in projected costs.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think that might be because of the running costs. We are also extending it for longer. In other words, the difference is not a waste of money; we are measuring a different thing. We are measuring a service that is going longer into the future than we had previously accounted for.

Q159 **Simon Fell:** I am a very simple man; I look at one figure with a projected cost and then at the figure for where we are now, and it is more than double. But let's put that to one side. If we are looking at that increase, what is the knock-on effect for other teams in the Department? You have to find that money from somewhere.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely. We manage our portfolio of programmes, of which this is one—this is one of the largest. We have funding from the Treasury specifically earmarked for this programme, and indeed for all the others, and we make sure that when there is a saving to the taxpayer, as there will be if the CMA appeal goes the way that we hope and expect, the Home Office does not keep that money and the Exchequer will benefit. Similarly, if we have overruns that require additional funding, we make that case to the Treasury. We are able to continue the essential work of the other programmes in the Home Office's portfolio.

Q160 **Simon Fell:** This is the last question from me, on lessons learned. The NAO came out with a helpful report that in essence said that through the Motorola part of this programme, you are not using any of the critical systems or software that it produced, and that you will not use any of its work when the ESN goes live. What does a lessons learned report look like from this?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is a very good question, and one that I am obviously very attuned to and spend a lot of time on in the Home Office, working closely with this programme. I think that the lesson that we have learned already is that we have to have the users inside the programme. The SRO for this programme is a former chief constable, from policing. That is lesson one.

Lesson two is that we need absolute clarity between the Home Office and policing on who does what. The national capabilities that are required for policing across the whole country need to be done once and only once.



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That does not necessarily mean that the Home Office is the right place to do all of them, but it does mean that if we have a confederation of 43 police forces—as we do across England and Wales—we need some mechanism of prioritising and making sure that those national capabilities are met.

The third lesson, for me personally, is that the cutting edge of technology is not always the best place to be, if you are a Government—not always, although sometimes it should be. On this sort of issue, there are some benefits in going quickly but not being at the absolute cutting edge of technology, because if you are at that edge you end up being buffeted by all the winds of where that technology goes.

With the benefit of hindsight, it might have been better at the very beginning of this programme, several years ago, to wait a bit and use the existing Airwave programme for a bit longer, which as it happened is what we ended up doing anyway because of the delays. As the technology improves, you can then get the benefit of that technology. That is not a lesson that will always apply, I don't think, but it does in this case.

Q161 Simon Fell: You are going through this reset now. We are waiting with bated breath on the announcement of who the next supplier will be. Are you applying the lesson of getting users into the tent to help design that out?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely. As I hope I made clear earlier, we are not just twiddling our thumbs and waiting for the CMA issue to be resolved and then for the re-procurement to go ahead; we are doing a lot of delivery on the other parts of the programme. The building of the masts is one example. Another is the testing of the kit so that it works in the Underground, up in the air and on rural roads where, at the moment, the current system does not work. All those sorts of issues continue to be in delivery mode. There is an inevitability about this programme. We will get there in the end; it will just be later than originally anticipated. That has obviously added to the timeline, but it has reduced the total cost.

Q162 Chair: Can I just confirm: what was the date by which this new system was supposed to be in place?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: At the very beginning of the programme, it was about now—2024—from memory. The different changes that I was just talking about have progressively delayed that date. The absolutely crucial date is when the current system becomes obsolete. At one point, we thought that that would be in the late 2020s, and we now know that it will not be until the 2030s. So we do have longer, which is not a reason for delay but does mean that we will ensure that the new emergency services network is up and running for the police and other emergency services well before the current system has to be turned off.

Q163 Chair: Do you have a date?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, it will depend on this re-procurement. I will keep you updated when there is any change, once that re-procurement has concluded.

Q164 **Alison Thewliss:** May I follow up on a couple of questions from colleagues? Does the Home Office conduct all asylum interviews in this country in-house?

Simon Ridley: Yes.

Q165 **Alison Thewliss:** Can you explain, then, why my constituent was dispatched to a private contractor in Glasgow who knew nothing about this, so it is marked in his case file that he did not turn up for his interview?

Simon Ridley: I will have to look. I am very happy to look at a specific case, but I cannot comment on a specific case.

Q166 **Alison Thewliss:** That sounds very much like you are trying to add to the people who end up on Tim Loughton's list of people who don't show or who have their cases withdrawn.

Simon Ridley: We are certainly not trying to add to the list of withdrawn cases. As we said, we have increased the number of caseworkers, we have changed our IT systems and practices to make them more productive, we have managed caseworker performance to increase productivity, and we are seeking to process everyone in the initial backlog by the end of the year. We are confident that we will do that. I am very happy to look at a specific case if there is one, but I cannot comment on it today.

Q167 **Alison Thewliss:** For context, I should say that I have the highest immigration caseload in Scotland, so I see a lot of things through my office and would question any level of competence that you have as a Department to manage things well. I have a lot of people who wait for a very long time, have mistakes made in their cases and have BRPs that turn up with the wrong details. It is a significant problem.

I want to raise a slightly different backlog with you: the allowed appeals backlog. These are people who have gone to court and the case has been found in their favour, or the Home Office has withdrawn its objections to it. They are then left waiting, sometimes for a significant amount of time, to receive their paperwork.

I had to put down an FOI request to get to some of these figures, because I could not get a response out of your Department about this, and this was the response that I had. This is for allowed appeals in the category of marriage and family, including partner, child, adult dependant, and relative and associated dependant routes—not family private life, non-fee-paid family reunion application routes. It is a specific bunch of people.

As of 31 March this year, there were 364 entry claims allowed appeals awaiting implementation. The oldest application in March 2023 had been waiting since 12 November 2021. What is going so wrong in your Department that once a decision has been made by the courts, it is taking you so long to implement these things and let people get on with their



lives?

Simon Ridley: It is the case that, as a result of a number of challenges—particularly covid in some cases—we built up a number of backlogs around asylum, as people know. The work we are doing now is to increase our resources and improve our processes so that we get through the backlogs of cases, as well as the people who have been waiting a very long time for decisions and for the paperwork that enables them to move on. We are doing that across all our categories of work. At the moment, we still have some significant backlogs, but we are continuing to work through them.

Q168 **Alison Thewliss:** Can you describe these other backlogs? The one around asylum has been very well documented and reported on. Describe these other backlogs and how long people are having to wait for different things.

Simon Ridley: In a sense, I am saying—and I think your question relates to this—that there is an end-to-end system of the processes that individual people go through with their claims. We need to make the initial decision, and where that initial decision is granted, we need to provide the necessary paperwork and work through the issues around accommodation and exits. That is one pathway where people are refused, go into the appeal system, and then there is a second set of decisions that they need to wait for, which we work on in partnership with the courts and the Ministry of Justice. In all these areas, there is quite a complicated end-to-end process, as you know, where people go through different stages. We are pulling the work and the teams together so that we can manage end-to-end through those different processes and claims in as efficient and effective a way as possible. That work is under way, and getting through the initial decision backlog, which we are aiming to do by the end of this year, is a very important first part of that.

Q169 **Alison Thewliss:** Is the political focus on this asylum legacy backlog resulting in increasing backlogs in other parts of your work?

Simon Ridley: No, I do not believe that it is. Indeed, we are addressing this backlog, as we have said, through additional resources and productivity. We are creating a more productive system that will then be sustainable and so we will then be able to move through subsequent decisions more quickly.

Q170 **Alison Thewliss:** For the first time, despite having a constituency that has lots of international students coming, I am seeing delays in student visas, graduate visas, visitor visas, family reunion visas and spousal visas. Are you taking a longer time to process these because you are focusing on something else, and can you provide evidence to that effect?

Simon Ridley: We are inside all our service level agreements on visa decisions. We have just—in the last few weeks—moved in our service level agreement on passports from 10 weeks to three weeks. I do not think we are doing this at the expense of other services.

Q171 **Alison Thewliss:** What I am getting in replies is that some of these visas do not have standard service levels any more. You have removed the service standard from visas so you do not have to meet any targets.



Simon Ridley: We have addressed the surges in student visas this autumn inside our timelines, but again I am very happy to look at the specifics that you are referring to. We are increasing our workforce and the productivity of our systems, and seeking to both address the backlogs we have in the asylum seeker service and maintain our service levels in other areas.

Q172 **Alison Thewliss:** Can you provide evidence on that to the Committee?

Simon Ridley: We can certainly set out the times in which we have serviced all the visas, if that is the question you are asking.

Q173 **Alison Thewliss:** Thank you.

Let me move on to a different issue: the Brook House inquiry. That highlighted—and I quote from Kate Eves’s report—that “The failure to act on previous recommendations is a dark thread that runs through this report.” Why has it taken this further report highlighting further failures in management—of contracts and facilities—by the Home Office? Why has that gone so badly wrong?

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that the behaviours and actions that led to the Brook House inquiry are completely unacceptable, and it is our duty and our intention to work with our suppliers and to manage our immigration centres to the highest standards possible, and at the standards that the public would expect. We have read the Brook House inquiry’s recommendations, and we will be responding to them. In the time since the events at Brook House, we have done a lot in terms of how we work with our providers and suppliers in our immigration removal centres, and the way we manage and address any issues that arise.

Q174 **Alison Thewliss:** How many of the same staff who were in place at the time of these incidents are still in place now?

Simon Ridley: There’s been an awful lot of change. Indeed, there is a new director general of Immigration Enforcement, who we recruited this summer and who has started in the last few weeks. His senior team has a mix of newer people and those who are more experienced. I’m afraid I do not know exactly how many of any tier of management were there at the time of Brook House, but there has been substantial change in the leadership team since then.

Q175 **Alison Thewliss:** Recommendation 24 was mandatory training for immigration removal centre staff. Can you give me an assurance that everybody working in the immigration removal centres—particularly in Brook House, but in all of them—have received mandatory training on mental health, race and diversity, trauma-informed resilience, drug awareness, the purpose of immigration removal centres and their own obligations under human rights law?

Simon Ridley: As I say, we are checking our performance and where we are against the recommendations in the Brook House inquiry, and we are taking all that seriously. We certainly do mandatory training for all our



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staff who work in our immigration removal centres, and with our suppliers, on that.

Q176 Alison Thewliss: Is that training for new starts, or is that training for everybody on an ongoing basis?

Simon Ridley: There is ongoing training for colleagues in Immigration Enforcement, as well as for new staff.

Q177 Alison Thewliss: You will be aware that, at Brook House, there was a death reported last week and a suicide attempt. Other reports, published in evidence by Medical Justice in September, show that the same safeguards, the same problems and the same difficulties are still happening. Why is that?

Simon Ridley: There are, sadly, tragic events that take place in our immigration removal centres. People there are dealing with difficult and traumatic circumstances, and with mental health or other issues. We do everything we can, working with our suppliers, to provide support and advice inside centres. As I say, tragically, there are still occasional incidents of that sort, and we need to ensure that we have done everything we can to try to prevent them and to address any issues that arise.

Q178 Alison Thewliss: It's not really working, though, is it? The report has highlighted issues around culture. That comes from the top, and it reflects a service that is understaffed, poorly trained and mismanaged. Staff were desensitised to the situation they were facing. There was racism, there was a power dynamic, and there was a worrying lack of reflection from staff who were there at the time, who may still be in the service now, about why the situation arose.

Simon Ridley: There is no question but that the events at Brook House and the findings of the inquiry were unacceptable. We have put a lot in place since then, in terms of leadership and ensuring that we challenge our culture. Indeed, there is work under way in immigration enforcement and across other parts of the service to do that. We have leadership change and we have improved the training. Of course, there are still risks with individuals or particular cultures that we need to challenge and address. I am sure there are lots of ways in which we can continue to improve. As we respond to the findings of the Brook House inquiry, that is exactly what we will do, but I think we have done a lot to respond to that event in recent years, and we will absolutely continue to do so.

Q179 Alison Thewliss: I am quite new to this Committee, and I have not had the opportunity to visit Brook House yet. I visited Dungavel, because it is the only one in Scotland. Have you visited Brook House?

Simon Ridley: I have been to Brook House, Tinsley House and a number of other immigration removal centres.

Q180 Alison Thewliss: One of the things reflected in the report was that the prison-like environment was not appropriate for people in this situation. They are not prisoners; they have not committed a crime. They should not



be in a prison-like environment.

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that our immigration removal centres are quite different from each other. It is quite a heterogenous set of institutions. You are absolutely right that people are there under immigration law, and as we have said, in most cases people are there for a short time between brought in in order to be removed. However—

Q181 **Alison Thewliss:** They can be held there indefinitely, though?

Simon Ridley: Well, some people are held there for longer periods, but removal is the central, simple expectation. On the other hand, in a number of our immigration removal centres we have seen behaviours that have been challenging and dangerous to staff. There have been escape attempts and, from time to time, successful escapes where people have broken through the security. People also have access to things that they do not have access to in prisons. It is a different sort of environment. We are trying to manage a balance between the fact that we need people to be detained and we need to manage risks of bad and dangerous behaviours and escape attempts, alongside the fact that, as you say, people have not committed a crime in the same way as those in prison have. But we have a large number of foreign national offenders in our immigration removal centres, and we need to have enough security and regime to provide protection to other prisoners and to our staff and our contractors.

Q182 **Alison Thewliss:** After a period when the detention estate was declining, given it is now Government policy to increase the detention estate, how can you ensure that with this variation in facilities, the very serious issues at Brook House will not be repeated when you expand the estate?

Simon Ridley: I come back to a number of things I have said. We need to design and build additions to the estate appropriately, and ensure that we have the necessary security and the right balance of secure and more open spaces where, for example, people can exercise. We then need to ensure we have the right contract and that we are managing those contracts with our suppliers, in terms of training and health and safety. We need to ensure our teams and staff are trained, and then we need to bring new facilities online in an appropriate way so that the leadership and management of those centres can ensure that a new facility is working as we would expect it to be, as we bring it up to capacity.

Q183 **Alison Thewliss:** Why is the Department not implementing the “alternatives to detention” pilot, which has proven to be quite successful and cheaper than expanding the detention estate?

Simon Ridley: First, as has been commented on, our detention estate is relatively small compared with the number of people we need to return, so we need to increase it to make sure that we have the capacity we need. Equally, to be ready for the Illegal Migration Act, we will need more detention space, because of the need to detain arrivals. So there is a need to increase the estate. There are also several challenges to alternatives in



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terms of being able to maintain contact with enough people and address risks of absconsion.

Q184 **Alison Thewliss:** Well, it was found to be more successful and to have less risk. That was your own pilot.

Simon Ridley: Pilots around—

Alison Thewliss: I am asking why you are ignoring your own evidence.

Simon Ridley: We're not ignoring our own evidence. We have done various pilots, as you say, and we have actually not found them always to be more effective. It can be cheaper than detention, but the risks of absconsion are still high in some places. Perhaps you could let me know exactly which bit of evidence you are referring to, but the pilots that we have run have not demonstrated that consistently.

Q185 **Alison Thewliss:** Was not implementing your own recommendations a ministerial choice?

Simon Ridley: No, we have people in detention and people outside detention. We run our system with both.

Q186 **Alison Thewliss:** When can Kate Eves expect to receive a reply to her inquiry? It has now been more than two months.

Simon Ridley: As I say, I don't have a precise date, but we are preparing our response and will respond fully to the inquiry.

Q187 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. Simon, you mentioned the plans to reduce the reliance on hotel accommodation to house asylum seekers, and you spoke about providers and local authorities. I want to ask you a question about the amount of profit that private providers make by housing asylum seekers. Serco made £148 million in 2023, Clearsprings £62 million, and Stay Belvedere £50 million. Do you think it is an appropriate use of public sector funding that these companies are making so much profit? When they make so much profit, how much should they be sending back to the Home Office?

Simon Ridley: We have a duty to accommodate and provide support to those asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute, and we have private commercial agreements in place with suppliers to help us to do that. As the Government have stated, it is unacceptable that we have so many people in hotels. That is hugely expensive for the taxpayer, exactly as you say, and we are seeking to reduce hotels. We need to manage our commercial agreements so they are as effective as possible, and that is why we are, for example, maximising the number of beds that we have in any given hotel. But there is not an arrangement for us to require commercial providers to give us money back, unless they have in some way breached their contract.

Q188 **Kim Johnson:** I have mentioned the figures for the amount of profit those three companies have made—that public sector funding could be used far more effectively. Again, my question is, how much are they allowed to



make in profit before you, as the Home Office, claw back any money from them?

Simon Ridley: They are running businesses, which depend differentially on contracts with the Home Office. Serco has a wide range of other business. We do not have the ability to claim profits back off them. Our objective is to reduce the number of hotels that we are using and ensure that we are not using unreasonable amounts of taxpayers' money to provide hotel accommodation.

Q189 **Kim Johnson:** I think that is exactly what is happening with the profit being made by those companies, but, as with other questions, we are not going to get that response from you.

You talked about working with local authorities, and my local authority in Liverpool—city of sanctuary—has done an awful lot in support. However, there is lot of criticism about the Home Office not communicating and corresponding effectively with local authorities, such as informing them at very late notice about hotels that will be stood up. What are you doing to improve those relations? Local authorities like mine and those in the north-east and north-west do not have the capacity to house because of the reduction in their funding and the impact of that on housing over the last 13 years. Could you say something about some of those issues and the relationships with the local authorities?

Simon Ridley: We are doing a lot of work with councils at the moment, but there is unquestionably more that we can and need to do in the future. We do a lot of work at a regional level, including through strategic migration partnerships and with local authorities in a regional area to share data about the number of asylum seekers and, indeed, other refugees in the area. We do a lot of that work jointly with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—we are trying to share a lot more data.

As I said, we have regular regional discussions led by our accommodation and support teams. There is definitely scope to deepen those and improve the data that we are sharing, but I think that we are doing a lot more now than we were six, nine, 12 months ago. We are informing councils individually where we have made significant changes to individual hotels in terms of numbers, or indeed for those 50 hotels that we have committed to close. I acknowledge that sometimes some of those things have happened quite quickly, but we have sought to give councils as much notice as we can, and I hope that we will be able to improve that as we go. Then we have a number of national-level discussions with the Local Government Association and other chief executives with senior colleagues in the Home Office to talk about more general policy issues and the like. The Immigration Minister certainly meets political counterparts in the Local Government Association and, I am sure, council leaders and others.

So, we are trying to develop both a regular national conversation and a deeper regional one. But, as I said, there is definitely more that we need to do in that space.

Q190 Kim Johnson: Thanks for saying that there is more to do.

You mentioned effective use of taxpayers' money. Will you say a little about the £2.9 million that was lost on the failed Linton-on-Ouse accommodation centre? How many people are accommodated in large-scale asylum projects?

Simon Ridley: We did do work to prepare to use Linton-on-Ouse as a larger-scale site, which was then not taken forward. In terms of large sites, we have got people residing at the ex-MOD site in Wethersfield and on the barge at Portland. People have been joining those sites regularly, and indeed in Portland I think new people are arriving almost daily. Between the two at the moment, it is a bit over 700.

Q191 Kim Johnson: Are there any further plans to have more barges around the country? There was a suggestion of coming to the north-west, on the Mersey.

Simon Ridley: At the moment, we are focused on getting the sites we have up to capacity. We are continuing to look at a number of other potential sites, to create the best non-hotel accommodation portfolio that we can. At the moment, that does not include a vessel in the north-west.

Q192 Kim Johnson: Are you able to share details of those potential sites with the Committee?

Simon Ridley: With most of the sites we have, we start by needing to have commercial discussions and discussions with service providers. There is not a list that I would share with the Committee at the moment but, as I say, our focus is on getting the sites we have up to capacity.

Q193 Chair: Could I just ask about the Bibby Stockholm? How many people are on the barge now?

Simon Ridley: About 200.

Q194 Chair: What is the cost per person of housing someone on the Bibby Stockholm barge?

Simon Ridley: I don't have a precise figure.

Q195 Chair: What have you spent so far on it? What have you spent to get the barge and to set it up? Have you got that figure?

Simon Ridley: I can write to the Committee with the details of the funding to date on the Bibby Stockholm, but we did the assessments needed before we bought it on, to ensure that it meets our tests on value for money.

Q196 Chair: That is good to know, but it would be nice to have some information about the costs and how much you have already spent on it. The capacity is 500, is it?

Simon Ridley: Yes.

Q197 Chair: You said there are 200 on there at the moment.



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Simon Ridley: Yes, we are bringing people on on a rolling basis.

Q198 **Chair:** We are looking forward to visiting in January and seeing for ourselves.

Simon Ridley: Good.

Q199 **Chair:** Can I ask you one other question before I come back to Tim Loughton? At the Public Accounts Committee hearing on the transformation plan in the Home Office, I asked you a specific question about the use of hotel spaces that were kept empty, in case there was a surge of small boat crossings. Could you update the Committee on how many empty beds you are keeping available at the moment?

Simon Ridley: We are holding 3,500 beds, which we use to ensure we can manage the outflow from Manston and the inflow into the permanent estate. They are more or less full, depending on arrivals. Because there have been few arrivals in the past couple of weeks, they are largely available. We will reduce that number as we go through the coming months. Those beds have enabled us throughout the summer, even when there have been particularly busy periods of arrivals, to keep the outflow from Manston running, so that we do not get an overflow at Manston. We move the vast majority of people through in 24 hours. Those beds provide that transition, to get people into the permanent estate.

Q200 **Chair:** That is 3,500 beds. Do you have a contract for those beds, or are you spot-purchasing as you go along?

Simon Ridley: No, it's seven hotels we have a contract for. We will end those contracts as we continue to close hotels. They are contracted, not spot-booked.

Q201 **Chair:** Right. So, they are contracted, but they are basically a resource in case you need them. At some stage, they are just empty, waiting to see if more people cross the channel.

Simon Ridley: Yes, they enable us, when large numbers of people come across the channel. Last autumn, we had the challenge of the outflow, so they are there to manage that outflow.

Q202 **Chair:** I understand. They will probably be the last hotels to be closed, because you need them there as a resource, in case the numbers start to increase.

Simon Ridley: We are assessing the number we need, based on our experience this year, where we managed to maintain the flow. Obviously, we do not want to have hotel beds that are unnecessary.

Q203 **Chair:** No. At the Public Accounts Committee, you seemed to say there were quite a lot of beds that were just empty, just waiting. You are now saying that you are filling these beds fairly regularly.

Simon Ridley: There are specific hotels that we use to manage the outflow. All the work that we are doing in the hotel estate more generally is to consolidate it and make sure we use the beds that we have got.



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Chair: Alison, do you want to come back on that?

Q204 **Alison Thewliss:** Just briefly, Chair. How many young people are still missing from Home Office hotels?

Simon Ridley: The number that was published in the summer was 154.

Q205 **Alison Thewliss:** Have you found any of them?

Simon Ridley: We work very closely with the police and local authorities to try and find all missing children.

Q206 **Alison Thewliss:** Have you found any of those?

Simon Ridley: I think the latest number of missing children is slightly down in terms of our internal information, but a lot of those people are not yet identified.

Q207 **Alison Thewliss:** How many have you found?

Simon Ridley: I don't know how many exactly of the 154. We are working to find all missing children.

Q208 **Alison Thewliss:** If one of my children had gone missing, I would want to know where they were. These children are your responsibility. Why don't you know how many are still missing?

Simon Ridley: We take the safety and security of everybody in our estate incredibly seriously.

Alison Thewliss: That's not indicated by your answer.

Q209 **Chair:** Have you got any numbers?

Simon Ridley: We can't detain them. We do monitor and record people leaving. When people go missing for a period of time, we work with the local authority, children's services and the police to find as many people as quickly as possible, but it has not been possible to keep track of everybody.

Chair: We're not talking about everybody; we are talking about children.

Q210 **Alison Thewliss:** One hundred and fifty-four were reported as of June. When I asked a follow-up question to that, the Immigration Minister said that there are internal figures on this that they wouldn't give me. How many are still missing? How many have you found?

Simon Ridley: There are internal figures on that.

Q211 **Alison Thewliss:** Why is it a secret?

Simon Ridley: The latest published data is the 154.

Q212 **Alison Thewliss:** So you can't tell us or you won't tell us how many are still missing?



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Simon Ridley: The latest public data is the data from the summer. We are continuing to work closely with other authorities to identify as many people as we possibly can.

Q213 **Alison Thewliss:** So you can't tell us.

Simon Ridley: I can't tell you today, no.

Alison Thewliss: That's completely unacceptable.

Q214 **Tim Loughton:** Just to come back on the Bibby Stockholm, the theoretical capacity is 500. The current occupation is about 200, or 40%. Realistically, what is the top capacity that you think you could use?

Simon Ridley: The top capacity that we think we could use is 500.

Q215 **Tim Loughton:** So you think it can be manageably 100% full.

Simon Ridley: It can be manageably full. It is built to be full. The reason that we are bringing people on in a steady stream is to manage it as it gets closer to capacity.

Q216 **Tim Loughton:** It wasn't built to be used as a detention centre. It was built for short-term accommodation for workers on oil rigs and things like that. That is what the thing was built for. It has not been custom-built for this purpose.

Simon Ridley: We have contracted for this purpose, and our commercial partners have developed the Bibby Stockholm to be used for this purpose.

Q217 **Tim Loughton:** Can I come back to the figures on the withdrawals? It was quite worrying how we left that. I quoted the percentage of figures that were designated as "other". The Home Office defines two types of withdrawals: non-substantiated withdrawals and other withdrawals. The figures that I quoted were for the last quarter, when 95% of figures were designated as "other".

Under the Home Office's definitions, "other" withdrawals are defined as follows: "An asylum claim can be withdrawn explicitly (i.e. if the applicant signs a form to withdraw an application), or withdrawn if the applicant leaves the UK prior to a decision." You said that you had no idea of where the 17,316—if that is annualised—actually are. On the basis that you defined 95% of them as "other" in the last quarter, which equates to 4,050 people, those 4,050 must have either signed a form to withdraw an application or left the UK. Hopefully you will have known if they had left the UK, if they did so legitimately, or you will have 4,050 forms signed by somebody. What do those forms actually ask, and how do they keep tabs on where the people have gone? Or do they not keep any tabs on where they have gone?

Simon Ridley: We do have the ability to get in contact with people. Indeed, that is how we get in contact with them about their claims. I confess that I do not know exactly what is on the form, but I'm very happy to come back to you and set all of that out. We do have a means of contacting, but people are obviously free to move.



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Q218 Tim Loughton: Well, they are not free to move if they are in the country illegally.

Simon Ridley: We are not detaining everybody, is all I mean.

Q219 Tim Loughton: But if they are in the country having not regularised their status, they are not entitled to be in the country, but you apparently do not have any means of keeping tabs on them. You said you have the means to keep in contact with people about their claims, but they no longer have a claim, because they have withdrawn.

Simon Ridley: The way in which we follow up people who are not in the country legally and have not regularised their status is through immigration enforcement and our removals. We do that through enforcement visits and enforcement action to bring people in and remove them.

Tim Loughton: You do have a means of finding out what has happened to those 17,316 if they have signed a form. These are not people who have just disappeared. In order for you to define the reasons for withdrawal of their claim as "other", they have to sign a form or leave the country. If they sign a form, surely that is the first part of keeping tabs on them. You have said that you have no idea where those people are. I would hope that some of them have then been investigated by enforcement, and some of them may have been removed, but you said earlier that you have no idea where those 17,316 are.

Simon Ridley: Sorry—I spoke too quickly. All I meant was that we do not have all of those people in detention. We have information on them and we need to use our removal services to remove the people who are not here legally.

Q220 Tim Loughton: I would have thought that those people would be quite a priority. They are people on your radar. They have signed a piece of paper to say, "We are no longer making a claim to be in the UK." Does that mean that they have a month to leave the country? Is it three months, six months? If you haven't got a piece of evidence to show that they have left the country, is there not an automatic facility whereby they will get a visit if they are still residing at the address at which they signed that form, for example? What is the process?

Simon Ridley: We pursue a large number of groups of people. I suggest I come back to you in detail on this group subsequent to this hearing.

Q221 Tim Loughton: I think that would be helpful. I would quite like to know what is actually in those forms and what information you require, rather than somebody just being able to sign "Mickey Mouse" on a form and then disappearing into the ether.

Simon Ridley: Let me write to you subsequent to this hearing on the detail of that group.

Q222 Tim Loughton: Okay. Sir Matthew, I will come back to you. Do you think the Home Office is well led?



Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q223 **Tim Loughton:** What is the evidence for that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think you can look at objective criteria such as recruitment and retention. You can look imminently at our People Survey scores to see what the nearly 50,000 civil servants in the Home Office think and feel about working in the Home Office. You can look at the delivery of some high priorities for Government, all of which are done in a complex arena and quite often in ways that are politically controversial in our society.

Q224 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, so let's take one of those pieces of evidence. What does the staff survey say about leadership at the Home Office?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is an annual survey and we are about to get the results, so everything is eleven and a half months out of date, but it is about to be updated. The last time we asked everyone, there were only two Departments in the whole of Government whose scores stayed level. Everyone else's went down. The Home Office was one of the two, along with the Ministry of Justice, that stayed level for overall engagement, which included leadership.

Q225 **Tim Loughton:** It didn't improve; it stayed level.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Last year it stayed level. As I say, all but one of the other Departments went down.

Q226 **Tim Loughton:** Do you expect your leadership of the Home Office to have improved when that survey is published?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I do everything I can to give them the best possible leadership, working in concert with Simon as the second permanent secretary and the whole of the executive committee, while forging a strong partnership with Ministers.

Q227 **Tim Loughton:** Do you think you are good at recruiting?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes. We have recruited 16,000 people who have come into the Department in this calendar year. Some of those are new jobs and some are replacements. There is a very large number of people to be recruited at a time when parts of the labour market are very constrained. We have a strong track record of recent recruitment and a strong track record of retention. The churn rate is relatively low.

Q228 **Tim Loughton:** What is the average time it takes to hire somebody for the Home Office, pre-security clearance?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Ninety-nine days post-security clearance. It changes each month, but last month it was—

Q229 **Tim Loughton:** Pre-security clearance.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think it is about 70 days.

Q230 **Tim Loughton:** The National Audit Office says it is 120 days before



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security clearance. That is the second worst record of any Government Department.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It has improved since then. We have put a huge amount of effort into improving it because of the need to get these extra people in, including in order to operationalise the Illegal Migration Act.

Q231 **Tim Loughton:** When was that 120 days figure?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't recall exactly when the National Audit Office did that assessment, but it has improved in the last six months because we have put a particular emphasis on it. It is one of the numbers that we track very carefully in order to make sure that we have the workforce in place to deliver the Government's priorities.

Q232 **Tim Loughton:** You say there is not a large amount of churn.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That's right. Different parts of the Department have different levels of churn, as you would expect. We have a good track record on average of promoting people from within the Department. They are given opportunities if they are seeking to build their careers, including in our regional hubs. Simon and I and the executive committee were in Liverpool just yesterday. We have a workforce that is well spread out around the country, including a new office in Stoke as part of the Places for Growth programme.

Q233 **Tim Loughton:** How many of your senior management personnel are set up in your structure chart in your annual report? How many of those people have changed?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In what time? I have been here nearly four years. In that time, all but one of the most senior people have moved. That is normal. Normally people do three or four years in a job like that.

Q234 **Tim Loughton:** This chart, which was only published in September, should be fairly up to date. I will read out a few names. Is head of customer services Abi Tierney still there?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q235 **Tim Loughton:** And immigration enforcement's Tony Eastaugh?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: He has just been replaced by Bas Javid, who started a couple of weeks ago.

Q236 **Tim Loughton:** He's gone. Okay, head of legal Gilad Segal and Sarah Goom?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Sarah has just been promoted.

Q237 **Tim Loughton:** To where?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: To the Government Legal Department.

Q238 **Tim Loughton:** In the Home Office?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No.



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Tim Loughton: She's gone. And Gilad Segal?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I should say that, in respect of Sarah Goom, the most senior legal position in the Home Office is at director level. She has now been promoted to director general. There is no slot for a director general legal person in the Home Office. That is why she is in the Government Legal Department.

Q239 **Tim Loughton:** And Gilad Segal?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: He has moved to another role.

Q240 **Tim Loughton:** He has moved. Phil Douglas of Border Force?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: He is the head of Border Force, yes.

Tim Loughton: He is still there?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q241 **Tim Loughton:** Corporate and delivery's David Kuenssberg?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, he's still there.

Q242 **Tim Loughton:** Head of HR, Julie Blomley?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, she's still there. If you want, I can—

Q243 **Tim Loughton:** Head of communications, Robert Hall?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q244 **Tim Loughton:** And transformation's Alex Hurst?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, she has moved to a different role.

Q245 **Tim Loughton:** She's gone—okay. Homeland Security's Chloe Squires?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q246 **Tim Loughton:** Public safety's Jae Samant?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q247 **Tim Loughton:** And migration and borders' Emma Churchill?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: She has moved to a different role.

Q248 **Tim Loughton:** Science and technology's Jennifer Rubin?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q249 **Tim Loughton:** And strategy director, Emily Weighill?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q250 **Tim Loughton:** Tricia Hayes?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: She's been replaced by Simon.

Tim Loughton: So she's gone.

Q251 **Chair:** Can I just ask about that? Mr Ridley is the second permanent secretary, but interim?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon is the second permanent secretary who took over from Tricia.

Chair: Interim.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, theoretically.

Chair: He is interim. Just so we are all clear. You seem a bit confused as to whether he is interim or not.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am not at all confused, Chair. He is interim, but he is the second permanent secretary.

Chair: Interim.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Formally, he is still, currently, interim.

Q252 **Chair:** What does that mean?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Can I go back to Mr Loughton's point?

Tim Loughton: I want to come back to my point.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Were you trying to show that there was a high level of churn or a low level of churn?

Q253 **Tim Loughton:** You just said that, in your time there, you have only lost one senior person. I have just quoted from the chart of senior management in your annual report, produced in September of this year—barely two months ago—and out of 15 names, six people have gone.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Sorry, Mr Loughton, to be clear, I said that in the nearly four years that I have been here, all but one of the senior people have moved on, and that is what you would expect, given that if, on average, everyone does four years, all of them will have moved on in four years.

Q254 **Tim Loughton:** I am just talking about what has happened since September. Six people have moved on.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is the annual report for the 2022-23 financial year. It was accurate as at April. In the eight or nine months since then, there have been those additional changes.

Q255 **Tim Loughton:** Why are you publishing a report in September 2023 that is inaccurate?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is the annual report and accounts for the financial year 2022-23.

Q256 **Tim Loughton:** Shouldn't there be an asterisk against all these names who you are claiming are your senior management but who were no longer there when you published the report?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is an improvement that we can look at for next year, absolutely.

Q257 **Tim Loughton:** It is misleading.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is the annual report.

Q258 **Tim Loughton:** You are claiming that these are the senior people who are leading in the Home Office. You have just claimed that you have very little churn and that only one person has left. I have just revealed six people who have left since the report was published in September.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I really need to correct that point, Mr Loughton—which I have just done, but I repeat: I did not say that only one person had left; I said that all but one person had left in the nearly four years that I have been in this job, and that is normal, because everyone does, on average, three or four years.

Q259 **Tim Loughton:** We are talking about two months.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Within the eight months since the annual report year ended, there have been the additional changes that you have identified as a result of that line of questioning. I submit that that continues to be what you would expect if you have a group of a dozen or 15 people, all of whom are doing, let's say, three years. You would expect five of them to change every year, and that is exactly what happened. We just named the five who changed this year.

Q260 **Chair:** I note that, of the 12 senior leaders in the Home Office, seven have changed in the last two years. You are saying that that is perfectly normal.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q261 **Chair:** That kind of churn is what you would expect.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is roughly what I would expect. These things tend to come and go in lumps, often in the summer and also at Christmas and the new year. We just identified the ones who left.

Q262 **Chair:** I want to ask a couple of things. Your departmental board, which is supposed to provide collective leadership of the Home Office, only met three times in 2022-23, with the chair—the former Home Secretary—on record as attending only two of the meetings. What do you say about that? How are you able to make decisions with ministerial leadership if you only meet very infrequently?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The norm is a quarterly meeting. They are supposed to meet four times year. I accept that we met only three times rather than four times last year, and for one of those three meetings, as you say, the Home Secretary was not there, so another Minister deputised for her.

The departmental board is, if you like, the tip of the iceberg in terms of the governance of a Department like the Home Office. There are lots of other ways that Ministers provide leadership of the Department, including,



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with the Home Secretary, a weekly meeting of the whole of the executive committee and the whole of the ministerial team.

Q263 **Chair:** So you are not too worried about that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: My job is to ensure the effective governance of the Home Office, working very closely with the Home Secretary. Sometimes, Home Secretaries want to do that through a structure such a departmental board; at other times, they want to do it in other ways. There is a whole range of ways of providing that sort of leadership, and the right number of departmental board meetings per year is four.

Q264 **Chair:** Right. I want to ask you a couple of other things very quickly. Where is the statutory report on spiking that was due in April this year? Why haven't we got it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think I will have to write to you on that. Sorry, Chair.

Q265 **Chair:** Yes, write to me. And are you currently looking at any other gaps or possible gaps in the laws on protest? Is the Home Office carrying out a piece of work on that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes. I think the Home Secretary has said—as his predecessor did—that the Government would offer the police whatever support they need, in terms of additional powers, in order to police the protests effectively. It is absolutely essential that the Government support the police to keep the public of this country safe. I think we have bigger and more frequent protests—particularly in London—than any other city in the world at the moment, as a result of the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel. We will continue to look at all options, both to allow the police to, if you like, police within the existing legislation and, if needed, to introduce additional legislation to Parliament, if that were deemed to be necessary.

Q266 **Chair:** Finally from me, we have just been discussing Mr Ridley being an interim second permanent secretary. Is it difficult to recruit to that post?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, it wasn't last time, which is why we have got a great second permanent secretary.

Q267 **Chair:** On an interim basis, though?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: For now, and for a short period of time, on an interim basis, yes.

Q268 **Chair:** So it's difficult to recruit, then? I am not quite sure why we haven't got a permanent second permanent secretary, and why we've got an interim one.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will have a permanent second permanent secretary very soon.

Q269 **Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much for coming along today. I think you are probably going to be back in January, when we see the new Home Secretary. Could I just give you a word of advice? When you come back in



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January, it would be very helpful if you had all the information—facts, figures and data—that you could reasonably expect the Committee to want to ask you questions on, so that we don't end up with the conversation we have had today, where you have not been able to provide us with fairly basic information.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will absolutely do our best, Chair. I apologise for any inability to do that. I think there have been a range of questions where—for whatever reason—Ministers have decided not to release additional information until an appropriate time; so we have been constrained by that. In other areas, there has been information that you have quite rightly requested which we will write to you on.

The work of the Home Office is very broad, and you quite rightly hold us to account on all of it. If there are any particular things you want to focus on, the Clerks' steers are always very welcome.

Q270 **Chair:** We will write to you as well, because we have not been able to really get into the detail of the accounts. We are very concerned about the issue of the asylum line, why you are struggling to put a figure on what the cost will be to asylum each year, and why you are relying on the supplementary estimates. We will write to you and ask for further information about that, because we are concerned you have lost control of the asylum budget.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The short answer to that question, Chair, is that we have not lost control. We had an agreement with the Treasury at the last spending round not to budget for that line item in the spending round, but to do so separately. Going through the supplementary estimates exercise each year is exactly what we anticipated doing, as well as calling on the reserve, which is what we will be doing.

Q271 **Chair:** We would question why you are calling on the reserve when you know, year on year—especially around the small boat crossings—those numbers were going up. You don't have to deal with reserves on that basis. Reserves are there for exceptional things that you don't know are going to happen, and you need to use your reserves that year. They are not for the ongoing problem you have got with the small boat crossings.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: All I am saying is that at the last spending review the Treasury asked us to come to a separate agreement on that budget line, and to deal with it through the supplementary estimates process. That is exactly what we have been doing this year—we are coming to that stage—and we did that last year. That is the one in the annual report and accounts we have been looking at today.

Chair: I think we will write to you about that.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I look forward to hearing your views.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Thank you very much, Chair.