

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership, HC 639

Monday 15 April 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 April 2024.

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Paula Barker; Olivia Blake; Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Mr Jonathan Djanogly; Peter Grant; Sarah Olney; Matt Warman.

Home Affairs Committee members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Tim Loughton.

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, National Audit Office, Oliver Lodge, Director, NAO, and David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, were in attendance.

Questions 1-258

Witnesses

I: Sir Matthew Rycroft KCMG CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Simon Ridley, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Dan Hobbs, Director General for Migration and Borders Group, Home Office; and Joanna Rowland, Director General, Customer Services Group, Home Office.

Reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Investigation into the costs of the UK–Rwanda Partnership (HC 577)

Investigation into asylum accommodation (HC 635)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Matthew Rycroft, Simon Ridley, Dan Hobbs, and Joanna Rowland.

Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 15 April 2024. Today, we are looking at two areas of asylum support in the Home Office: first, the costs of the UK-Rwanda partnership and, secondly, the Government's long-term strategy for asylum accommodation.

As we are aware, in 2022 the Government announced a partnership with the Government of Rwanda to relocate to Rwanda some people seeking asylum if they arrive in the UK illegally, which generally speaking is on small boats. Under the partnership, the Home Office has agreed to pay significant sums to Rwanda, which this Committee and our sister Select Committee, the Home Affairs Committee, have been examining. We have had some interesting conversations with the Home Office about why and when we can receive information about that money. Thankfully, the National Audit Office has now dug into those figures and has been able to reveal exactly what the forward costs are for the Rwanda partnership, and we want to talk to the Home Office about them today. By the end of 2024, the Home Office expects to have spent about £28 million on the partnership, regardless of how many asylum seekers have been sent.

On asylum accommodation, as all of us around this table know, many hotels are being used to house the asylum seekers coming over. Obviously, that is not desirable in the long term, and the Home Office solution has been to create large sites. But, again, the National Audit Office has looked into that and highlighted some big concerns for the Public Accounts Committee and our sister Committee about the cost and readiness of those sites, and we want to ask questions about that. In the year to March 2024, the Home Office expects to spend about £4.7 billion on asylum support, including £3.1 billion on hotels for that year. Those are significant sums, and we want to dig into the issues.

I welcome our witnesses, and I will make some introductions for visitors to the Committee. From the Home Office, we have Sir Matthew Rycroft, the permanent secretary; Simon Ridley, the second permanent secretary; Joanna Rowland, director general of the Customer Services Group at the Home Office; and Dan Hobbs, director general of the Migration and Borders Group, who is back with us again. I also warmly welcome Dame Diana Johnson, Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, who is guesting with



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us today, and the deputy Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Tim Loughton MP. They are welcome as they join us.

I have two Members who wish to make declarations of interest.

Olivia Blake: I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on migration, and I am also a principal for the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy group. My details are set out in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Paula Barker: I want to place on record the fact that my son is employed via an agency contract to work on the asylum backlog.

Q1 **Chair:** So we have skin in the game. Before we go into the main session, I wanted to pick up on a couple of issues. We received the accounting officer assessment from you, Sir Matthew, about the sovereign borders programme, which is on this very subject. You sent it to us on 27 March, but it was actually agreed in the Home Office in June last year and went through your finance and investment committee in January last year, so why the delay in getting that accounting officer assessment to Parliament?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First, thank you for this opportunity to discuss all these important issues with you again. That accounting officer assessment, as you say, was completed last summer. It was up to Ministers when to make that public, and they decided to make it public in March.

Q2 **Chair:** But you are the accounting officer; it is your assessment. Are there any reasons from the accounting officer end of things why there should have been, or needed to be, a delay of nine months?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is an assessment that I keep under review. I update it whenever things change, and I think the publication of accounting officer advice, or summaries thereof, has to be agreed by the relevant Ministers, which in this case would be the Home Secretary.

Q3 **Chair:** We have seen only the summary of this. Can we have access to the full accounting officer assessment on the normal terms?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think you can have access on the normal terms, but I think the normal terms include the Home Secretary, in the Home Office's case, being comfortable each time with that release.

Q4 **Chair:** Certainly with other Departments, when we ask to see the full accounting officer assessment, we do not usually hit a barrier of a Minister's approval being necessary, because you are accountable to us on the Public Accounts Committee and, through us, to Parliament as an accounting officer. You are saying that, if you ask the Home Secretary and he says yes, we will have the normal access?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely.

Q5 **Chair:** Of course, the National Audit Office has access anyway; it might be worth reminding the Home Secretary of that. We have ways of getting to



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it, but it would be helpful if we could see it. If we could also extend that invitation to senior members of the Home Affairs Committee, that would be helpful.

In terms of what the assessment covers, you talk about it being constantly under review, but it only covers the Nationality and Borders Act, not the other legislation covering this area. Is there any reason for that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Nationality and Borders Act was the legislation in place at that time. There was separate accounting officer advice, as you would expect, for the Illegal Migration Act and, of course, for the safety of Rwanda Bill, which is going through the House now.

Q6 **Chair:** So you are not planning to put that all together, given that they are dealing with broadly the same subject and there is a lot of bleed-over in money and spend?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: You are absolutely right that there is a lot of interrelationship between the different parts of this programme of activity, all of which is designed to stop the boats and to deter illegal migration—people putting their lives, and those of others, at risk. I make sure that there is accounting officer advice both on each individual part of that package of activity and on the totality. I will make sure that you have access to summaries as and when we publish them.

Q7 **Chair:** You sent this to us on 27 March, roughly nine months after it was agreed in the Home Office. Have you produced any other accounting officer assessments since June last year that we have not yet seen?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Not in relation to that piece of legislation; no.

Q8 **Chair:** What about in relation to the Rwanda Bill and the Illegal Migration Act?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, there is accounting officer advice on all the things that we are about to talk about, including on all the large sites, for instance, which I update quarterly. There are small packets of accounting officer advice and then they add up to the totality of looking at a whole programme as well.

Q9 **Chair:** What accounting officer assessments have you written that we have not yet seen? How many, for a start?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I can come back to you with a precise number, but it depends what you count as a separate piece of advice. I update the accounting officer advice for each of these large sites each quarter, and there are four large sites in operation—that would be 12 things since nine months ago, just in relation to the large sites—and then there are other parts of the programme that receive their own accounting officer advice, all of which is private until a summary is made public.

Q10 **Chair:** You say that, but we have been on a bit of a drive as a Public Accounts Committee, because there was a bit of a backlog in some Departments, and we are now expecting to see things when they are



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written, pretty much—within days or a week or so. Why is the Home Office not doing that and providing Parliament with information?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think the Home Office is doing that. The Home Office is—

Q11 **Chair:** You say there are 12 outstanding—that we have not seen.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have a formal obligation to provide you with summaries of that advice. I have committed to updating you more often than that, whenever there is a substantive change to any significant piece of accounting officer advice, and I will recommit to that today, Chair. But often assessments are made behind the scenes where there is, essentially, continuity of judgment.

Q12 **Chair:** As a Public Accounts Committee, we do see things, if necessary, in “Reading Room” terms, to make sure that we are holding you, as accounting officer for taxpayers’ money, to account. Even during covid, I was invited into Departments to see accounting officer assessments in full where we felt there was a necessity to do that. The more we don’t see them, the more we think we need to be seeing them, so can you give us a bit more reassurance that you are going to actually provide information to Parliament through this Committee?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely, Chair. I will absolutely update you whenever there is a summary to be published. In addition, whenever there is a substantive change to any of the assessments—for instance, on the value for money of the Rwanda scheme or on the value for money of any of the large sites we are about to talk about—I will commit to telling you and the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee. Finally, I will absolutely commit to doing what I have already done with the Home Affairs Select Committee, which is, when there is commercially sensitive information, to see whether the Home Secretary agrees that that can be discussed in a private session, as we did with the Home Affairs Select Committee a month or two ago.

Q13 **Chair:** I have to say that accounting officers of other Departments just provide that information; it’s not usually a big issue to have it signed off. I don’t know whether the Treasury officer of accounts would like to say something here about what is normally expected by Departments in providing accounting officer assessments to Parliament and about exactly what an accounting officer assessment is. It seems that there is a bit of a fudge here, Sir Matthew, about what you say an accounting officer assessment is and what we would expect.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I can assure you there is no fudge, Chair. I look forward to hearing what the Treasury officer of accounts says.

David Fairbrother: As the Committee knows, for projects in the GMPP—the Government’s major projects programme—there is a requirement to publish accounting officer assessments, including when there is a significant change. I know that, internally in Departments, there can be formal accounting officer assessments and informal accounting officer advice, and it sounds like some of the things Sir Matthew is referring to



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are where he has had advice that has said that nothing significant has changed. In those circumstances, we would not expect a summary to be republished.

Chair: Thank you. We would like some of this, to see for ourselves whether there has been a significant change. I am going to ask Olivia Blake to come in here.

Q14 **Olivia Blake:** I have a couple of questions, going back to the assessment. When was the scheme itself—the programme itself—last approved by your finance and investment committee?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It was approved last year, and then different parts of it get approved subsequently. For instance, when we are approaching a local authority to discuss a new large site, there will be a separate approval by the investment committee at that stage.

Q15 **Olivia Blake:** Do you believe that the programme still meets the four standards set out in “Managing Public Money”?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, with the exception of the value-for-money test in relation to the Rwanda parts of the scheme, which are covered by the ministerial direction.

Q16 **Olivia Blake:** But we do not have an assessment that includes the Rwanda scheme in front of us, do we?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, there is separate accounting officer advice, which the Committee has seen, in relation to the migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda.

Q17 **Olivia Blake:** Does the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act not constitute a substantial change?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It was a very significant piece of legislation, yes, and it has its own accounting officer assessments and so on.

Q18 **Olivia Blake:** Do you think that there is going to be a further reiteration of this assessment, to take all these things into consideration?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As I said to the Chair, I keep this under constant review, and as the Treasury officer of accounts has said, I receive informal advice very frequently to update different parts of the accounting officer advice. I commit to letting this Committee know, first of all, when there is a summary of anything in the major projects portfolio, and when there is any significant change of assessment. I have stuck to that commitment and I have recommitted to that today.

Q19 **Olivia Blake:** So when are we going to see something more relevant to the timings that we have in front of us and the changes since then, that you have shared with us?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Whenever there are changes.

Q20 **Olivia Blake:** But there have been significant changes, so when will we see that updated in the assessment that you provide to us?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: When something changes.

Q21 **Olivia Blake:** But things have changed—sorry.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: And I have updated you. I will carry on updating you.

Q22 **Chair:** I think we will need to take some of this offline and work with our colleagues at the National Audit Office to have a good look through what is coming through in accounting officer advice. But can I say that nine months is a very long delay for something so significant, which had gone through your finance and investment committee? It goes through finance and investment, and six months later it is agreed, but then it is nine months before Parliament sees it. Sir Matthew, you will recall that we had a joint session only a few months ago because we weren't getting information in real time. We seem to be going around the same loop again. It is very unfortunate.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First, I hope that we have resolved the issues that we were discussing previously. I can commit to ensuring that there is a free flow of information. On some issues, it is right and proper that the Home Secretary is the decision maker, rather than myself as the accounting officer. That certainly relates to anything on the ministerial direction on value for money for the Rwanda scheme, but it also relates to other significant parts of the Government's response to the illegal migration challenge.

Q23 **Chair:** We could end up having an interesting and lengthy debate about the constitutional position here, but a ministerial letter of direction does not give carte blanche for the Minister to override the accounting officer's view of what should be reported to Parliament. You have direct accountability to this Committee, and to Parliament through this Committee.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely, and I take that responsibility extremely seriously, but I am just saying that the effect of the ministerial direction, in this instance, is that it is the Home Secretary who is accountable for the value for money, not the accounting officer. That is what a ministerial direction means, in effect.

Chair: Well, yes, but as the programme changes—I think we may need to take this offline to have further discussions.

Q24 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I want to be clear about the safety of Rwanda Bill. There is advice that has been given, but it has not been made available. When is that likely to be made available?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I will have to get back to you. I think it is as the Bill receives Royal Assent, but I will get back to you.

Q25 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Is that the same with the Illegal Migration Act?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That has received Royal Assent already.

Q26 **Dame Diana Johnson:** But the advice has not been published or made



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available to the Public Accounts Committee.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I thought a summary of it had, but if I am wrong, then I will get back to you or one of my colleagues will update us. *[Interruption.]* We published the impact assessment, and we will get back to you on the timing of publishing the summary of the full accounting officer advice.

Q27 **Chair:** When that was sent to us, we were already in recess—I think it was sent on 27 March, when we had already broken up. That is really sub-optimal. I will say again that your parliamentary team—maybe they are at the back listening—need to be a bit sharper on understanding parliamentary deadlines, because all of this meant that we have only been able to raise the issue now. That puts Parliament and the taxpayer on the back foot, which I am sure is not what you intend, so can we make sure we sharpen up on that, please?

I want to move on to the issue of where the money is coming from for some of our asylum support. I will hand over to the deputy Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Q28 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Good afternoon, Sir Matthew. You will be aware that, four days ago, the BBC reported that £4.3 billion of the foreign aid budget went on supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. A lot of the British public would be surprised to find that what they thought they were spending on important work in developing countries was instead being spent in this country on dealing with refugees and asylum seekers. Is that sustainable?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is absolutely not sustainable, which is why the Government are taking such novel, decisive and robust action to stop the boats and, more broadly, to deter illegal migration. As you know, Sir Geoffrey, it is a statutory obligation for the Government to provide support, including accommodation, for asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute. The rules of overseas development assistance mean that, in any donor country, in the first year those costs count as official development assistance. So it is not a choice of the British Government to score that money as official development assistance; it is just part of the rules of what counts as ODA.

Q29 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** It may well be part of the rules, and it may well qualify for ODA spending. Of course, part of the answer is to try to reduce that cost, which has gone up 16% since 2022, but it is a quarter of all our aid spending, so it is a very big part of that spending. Just because it is allowable under the rules, is that a correct way of allocating these costs? Should it not come under the Home Office budget?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: What I meant by my previous answer, Sir Geoffrey, just to elucidate, is that there is no choice. It is not a Government policy decision whether or not to count this spending as ODA. It is ODA. It has to count as ODA, because the rules describe what sorts of activity count as official development assistance, then a donor like the UK abides by those rules and sets out annually all its spending that meets



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those rules. This spending, for the first year of asylum seekers, does meet those rules. That is why there is no choice about it but to score it as ODA.

Of course, there is also a very significant amount of activity to reduce those costs, which are much too high. That is why, as I sure we will talk about, we are seeking to reduce our reliance on hotels, which are a very large proportion of those costs: to bear down on that money, not least so that the official development assistance part of taxpayers' money can be spent elsewhere.

Q30 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We shall be examining a lot of where that money is spent. Can I move on to a different subject? You will be aware that *The Times* today has reported that you are actively in talks with four countries other than Rwanda for third country removal of asylum seekers: Armenia, Ivory Coast, Costa Rica and Botswana. It also reports that 16 other countries have been approached. Can you tell us what stage your discussions have got to with those four countries that seem to be in the frontline?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The first thing to say is that of course the Government do not comment on leaks. Secondly, that is an out-of-date document. I do not think that the Committee should assume that there are active negotiations with those four countries or that everything else in that document is currently accurate.

Q31 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: If it is an out-of-date document, can you update us, please?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think it is important that the substance of any negotiations with any countries other than Rwanda is kept private. However, I am happy to pursue the possibility of briefing a number of you behind the scenes, if that would be helpful.

Q32 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Maybe we can discuss this in Committee Room terms in private. It is important that we on this Committee, perhaps jointly with the Home Affairs Committee, are as updated on these matters as we possibly can be, because presumably there may well be good reasons why you would not want to send them all to Rwanda. You may want to split the load, for example.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is Government policy to explore with other countries the possibility of partnerships like the one with Rwanda. It is the job of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to scope out which countries might be available for that sort of partnership and then hand over to the Home Office at a due point to have the negotiation, as we successfully did in relation to Rwanda. But I think Committee Room terms would be the way to take forward any further discussion about the specifics of any countries.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That is a really helpful answer. I appreciate the commercial confidentiality of these discussions, but it is important that our two Committees are updated as soon as possible.

Q33 Matt Warman: To push a bit further on that, when you are thinking



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about which countries you might explore, which as you say is very much Government policy, what criteria are you using to work out who to approach first?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As I said, the Home Office quite rightly leaves the initial triage of countries to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. It looks at a range of things, including the human rights situation in the country, the UK's relationship with the country, the size and capacity of the country and so on.

Q34 **Matt Warman:** Can you give us a sense of how many countries have been assessed and how many have got through to a further round, for instance?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: On the basis of what you will have read, I think that the Committee will be disappointed by the numbers that have got through the triaging process. The numbers in the Report would suggest that there are—

Chair: I am not sure that you can ascribe feelings to the Committee. We are not here to discuss our views on the policy.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: My apologies. What I meant was that there are a lot that have been assessed, and a tiny number are into the next stages of work.

Q35 **Matt Warman:** Could you give us a sense of how many, as *The Times* reports, have rejected our overtures?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, I do not think that I can do that in public.

Q36 **Chair:** It is a number we are talking about; we are not asking for names. Apparently the list is too long for *The Times* to print.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think it would be right for a discussion on Committee Room terms, but broadly I would say that when the Foreign Office approaches different countries, some of them reject the suggestion outright; others are interested and the conversation continues.

Q37 **Matt Warman:** We can take it from that that some countries have rejected it.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q38 **Dame Diana Johnson:** It has now been two years since the Rwanda scheme was first announced, and obviously nobody has yet been sent to Rwanda. In terms of plan B, and the Home Office looking actively at other countries, I assume we would be looking at a similar lead-in time to set something up for another country, wouldn't we?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First, the Home Office and the Government as a whole are busy pursuing plan A, which is the Safety of Rwanda Bill going through Parliament, the treaty between the UK and Rwanda, and operationalising that.

Q39 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I understand that. What about plan B?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: At the same time, we plan for all sorts of different scenarios, which is why the work is ongoing in relation to other countries as well. And there are other parts of the strategy to reduce illegal, irregular and dangerous crossings, including all of the work that we do upstream.

Q40 **Dame Diana Johnson:** In terms of plan B and other countries, we know the numbers that we are looking at for removals to Rwanda are fairly small at the moment. I know it is uncapped in the long term, but in the short term it is very limited—a few hundred, perhaps. So if you are looking at sharing the load, as it has been described, and looking at other countries for plan B, we would still be looking at probably a year or two years.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: You are right to say that there is a long lead time in terms of negotiation and preparation, but there are also benefits in having a system up and running in terms of deterrence. The Government's agreement with Albania, for instance, has demonstrated, in terms of Albanian nationals, some benefit—

Q41 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Sir Matthew, you know as well as I do that Albania is a very different kettle of fish from the Rwanda scheme and the deterrence that Rwanda is being put forward to meet, so it is not correct to say that.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The reason I mentioned it in that context is that the Albania agreement demonstrates the power of the deterrent effect. The reason that the Rwanda scheme is plan A, if you like, is that that is applicable to nationals from a range of countries, not just Albanians. That is why so much effort has gone into the Safety of Rwanda Bill, the treaty between the UK and Rwanda and the preparations to operationalise the partnership, with flights as soon as possible after Royal Assent and ratification of the treaty.

Q42 **Chair:** Thank you for that, as far as it goes. That brings us very neatly to the Rwanda partnership. You have just said exactly what I was going to ask about: there is legislation going through the House this week. If it does pass, what are your plans to get people relocated to Rwanda, and how many?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have robust plans to operationalise the partnership. We are not going to go into detail today.

Q43 **Chair:** "Operationalise the partnership" does not tell us very much at all. What do you mean by that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Operationalising the partnership means getting flights to Rwanda. Government policy is to get flights to Rwanda as soon as possible after Royal Assent and ratification of the treaty. The Home Secretary and the Prime Minister will set out what that means in detail after Royal Assent and ratification.

Q44 **Chair:** If the Bill goes through, you expect Royal Assent pretty quickly. Under Her Majesty it was always very rapid. Do you expect it to be this



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week or next week?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: For Royal Assent, yes.

Q45 **Chair:** We will go through some other questions about that in a moment, but I just want to pin down costs. The National Audit Office's fieldwork finished in February; the figures are up to date to January. What are the costs to date of the Rwanda partnership?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As the National Audit Office has set out—indeed, as I have set out to this Committee—the first-year costs in the 2022-23 financial year were £120 million in total, with £20 million in the bank from which Rwanda could draw down. In the second year, 2023-24, it was £100 million. In 2024-25, the financial year that is just starting, the UK Government are due to pay the Government of Rwanda £50 million.

Q46 **Chair:** "Due to"—so it has not gone out yet this month, but it will go out imminently?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That's right. It will go out as soon as we have Royal Assent and ratification of the treaty.

Q47 **Chair:** Okay, so that is dependent on Royal Assent. If Royal Assent is not given, that money does not go to Rwanda.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are due to pay that money and we are planning to do so—

Q48 **Chair:** That is what I thought: so you are due to pay that money regardless of whether the Bill becomes an Act.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As we have discussed previously, there are break clauses in the memorandum of understanding. I would not want to preclude, even hypothetically, any future action, but the plan absolutely is to spend the money that is planned for this year imminently.

Q49 **Chair:** Let's be clear. I do not like dealing in hypotheticals, so let's be clear about the money. We already know, thanks to the National Audit Office, that this money is earmarked to go out this financial year. Previous ones have gone out at about this time, but you have not actually sent it yet because you are waiting for the Act to get Royal Assent?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That's right, but I don't think we are talking about a very long delay.

Q50 **Chair:** So you are slightly hedging just in case, or as I imagine you might put it—well, I would not want to imagine what you are imagining, but there we go.

Q51 **Olivia Blake:** I want to ask about numbers again. How many people will be impacted by the duty to remove under the Illegal Migration Act? What is the latest estimate on that number?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Who shall I turn to for that?

Chair: Mr Hobbs?



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Dan Hobbs: The duty to remove applies to anyone who arrives from a safe third country illegally in the UK. On the impact assessment, as published, broadly it is anyone who is arriving by small boat or otherwise from a safe third country. I do not have the precise modelling number in front of me, but since 7 March the number is around 30,000 so far that fall under the purview of the Illegal Migration Act, although that has not yet been commenced, as the Committee will be aware.

Q52 **Olivia Blake:** Is there an estimate of an annual number at all?

Dan Hobbs: In the economic impact assessment, we set out the modelling for the Illegal Migration Act. I do not have the number immediately to hand, but it applies to anyone who is arriving irregularly or illegally into the UK from a safe third country.

Q53 **Olivia Blake:** Can we get that number? Is that possible?

Dan Hobbs: Yes.

Chair: Yes, we would like to see the figures, please. Thank you.

Q54 **Tim Loughton:** This is quite an important number, isn't it? It is a growing number, and it can only really be growing. Since the terms of the Illegal Migration Act came in, where anybody has arrived in a boat or from another safe third country, the Government have a duty to remove them without assessing asylum claims—with a few exceptions, as I think you have demonstrated before, Mr Hobbs. Is that right?

Dan Hobbs: Correct, although the duty has not been commenced, so the duty does not apply. It is set out in the legislation, but that piece of the legislation has yet to be commenced.

Q55 **Tim Loughton:** So you do not have a duty to remove anybody still arriving on a boat now?

Dan Hobbs: They are inadmissible under the Nationality and Borders Act. The duty to remove measure under the Illegal Migration Act has not yet been commenced.

Q56 **Tim Loughton:** So that figure of 30,000 or whatever, and the now approximately 6,200 who have come across the Channel in 2024, including over 500 over the weekend: we do not have a duty to remove them as it stands, and they could apply for asylum?

Dan Hobbs: The duty to remove is not in place, but they are inadmissible under the terms of the Nationality and Borders Act. They are already inadmissible to the UK asylum system and are therefore pending relocation. Their asylum claim is not admitted unless they fall under one of the exemptions. The duty on the Secretary of State to remove them has yet to commence.

Q57 **Tim Loughton:** And that figure is likely to be in excess of roughly 30,000, we think, but you do not have the exact number?

Dan Hobbs: Broadly, since 7 March.



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Q58 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Ridley, do you have the exact number?

Simon Ridley: The number that was last published is just over 33,000, and we will publish the next statistics in May.

Q59 **Tim Loughton:** How old is that 33,000?

Simon Ridley: We published it on 31 December.

Tim Loughton: So it was 33,000—

Simon Ridley: Up to 28 December.

Q60 **Tim Loughton:** At the end of '23, to which we can add at least 6,200 who we know have come across in boats. In total, we are talking about a figure that is probably now in excess of 40,000.

Simon Ridley: We will publish it in our next statistics in May.

Q61 **Chair:** Just to be clear, are they quarterly figures published just after the quarter?

Simon Ridley: Yes, we publish them in our Home Office stats every quarter.

Q62 **Tim Loughton:** But it is not beyond the bounds of rationality that we are looking at a figure of 40,000-plus. As it stands, they cannot apply for asylum and the Home Secretary is not yet obliged to remove them, so they are entirely in limbo.

Dan Hobbs: Correct. They are pending relocation at this time.

Q63 **Tim Loughton:** Which is effectively limbo, is it not?

Dan Hobbs: They are inadmissible under the Nationality and Borders Act.

Q64 **Tim Loughton:** They have no status in the UK and the Home Secretary is not yet obliged to remove them, so they are in limbo—I think that is how most people would describe them.

What is going to happen to them? If we now have 40,000 people who we are looking to remove—of whom a great number may be removed to countries that do not accept them, otherwise they might have been removed under other criteria already—that is a lot of additional seats on the planes to Rwanda when they start, isn't it? Or is something else going to affect their status?

Dan Hobbs: Under the terms of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, it goes to the arrivals after 7 March last year. The inadmissibility, once commenced, and the duty will apply to them, so they will fall under the current terms of the Act to be relocated to Rwanda.

Q65 **Chair:** All of them?

Dan Hobbs: Under the current legislation, that is the proposal: Rwanda, or another safe third country, as provided for in the legislation.

Q66 **Tim Loughton:** I think the more concise answer to my question is yes.



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We have 40,000 people in limbo. What will happen to them when the duty of the Home Secretary is effective? How will we remove them if they are going to countries that will not receive them, which we know a large number will be? We have had discussions about those countries before. Or are you anticipating that the 40,000 and growing will be on flights to Rwanda at some stage?

Dan Hobbs: Under the terms of the Act and the existing legislation, they are inadmissible to our system, so they will fall for relocation to a safe third country, including Rwanda, which is our—

Q67 **Tim Loughton:** With respect, Mr Hobbs, you have said that several times. What is going to happen to them?

Dan Hobbs: They will be treated under the legislation once it's commenced.

Q68 **Tim Loughton:** And what is going to happen to them, practically? Where, practically, are the 40,000 people going to go?

Dan Hobbs: While they are in the UK, if they were otherwise destitute they are provided with accommodation and support. Once commenced, they will then be part of the workflow to go through the provisions set out in the Illegal Migration Act 2023 that allow them to bring claims, whether it would be on the basis of imminent, serious and irreversible harm if they were transferred to Rwanda, and then they go through that process.

Q69 **Tim Loughton:** With respect, we understand the process; what we don't understand is the solution. Permanent secretary, is it therefore possible, if not probable, that all or a large part of that 40,000 may be subject to some form of amnesty, because practically you just can't remove them?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Government are not planning to do that, Mr Loughton; the Government are planning to operationalise the Safety of Rwanda Bill as soon as there is Royal Assent, which is imminent, probably. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary will be setting out essentially the answer to your question, which is what steps are required in order to get the first flights off to Rwanda. The cohorts on those flights will be from that group of people.

Q70 **Tim Loughton:** Right. But it is 40,000, and the Home Office is not anticipating anything like 40,000 in the near future. They are going to remain in limbo, aren't they, unless you grant an amnesty?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary will set that out very soon.

Chair: I have to say that the Home Office never wants to talk about an amnesty, but I do recall that when I was first elected in 2005 there was something that was effectively an amnesty, for similar reasons. But I can see that Sir Matthew would not want to say that here in the room today.

Q71 **Olivia Blake:** I have another numbers question. When will the Government expect to process the 22,268 claims that were made between 7 March and 19 July 2023, because that is another group in



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limbo?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are working through those cases now. Jo, do you want to come in?

Joanna Rowland: All our asylum cases are worked in cohort order. Our decision makers are currently finalising all the claims that were received under the Nationality and Borders Act, as far as they are workable. As soon as that is complete, we will be starting to work on any that were received on 7 March. Obviously the degree to which that processes to a decision will not be for some months, because the process of working any claim is a multi-month process. There are substantial checks that need to be made, and obviously there are interviews undertaken before the evidence is put to a decision maker.

Q72 **Olivia Blake:** Do you have a ballpark figure for when you expect to get to the bottom of that pile?

Joanna Rowland: I would think that we would start working on them next month.

Q73 **Chair:** The beginning of that cohort?

Joanna Rowland: That is the beginning of the processing, yes.

Q74 **Chair:** And then you will be working through in order?

Joanna Rowland: We work in order, yes.

Q75 **Chair:** When do you think you will have completed those, on your current trajectory of caseworker decision-making timetables?

Joanna Rowland: I would not want to give an exact timescale at the moment.

Q76 **Chair:** A range would be fine. Within which six-month period do you think—?

Joanna Rowland: As you know—we will probably cover this later—we have increased our productivity of decision making to about six decisions a week per decision maker, but that was on previous rules. These are new rules for our decision makers. It is going to take a short while for us to understand what a reasonable productivity expectation of them is, and then I will be able to give a timescale.

Chair: Okay. We will come back to some of that in a moment.

Q77 **Mr Djanogly:** We have gone somewhat painfully around the numbers on the duty to remove, so may I have a look at the number of people who will be able to be accommodated in Rwanda? Various numbers have been put about—the weekend press had all sorts of figures—before I join the speculation, may I ask you for some numbers, Matthew?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Of course the Home Office has done a lot of modelling, but there are so many variables, and as you know—we keep repeating this—the scheme is uncapped. As the NAO Report sets out, some of the funding for the agreement between the UK and Rwanda was



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designed to incentivise the Rwandans to accept a quick first series of flights, and, with separate funding, significant volumes in due course. It is up to our Rwandan partners to provide and find the accommodation for those people, so we are not going to speculate about numbers.

Q78 Mr Djanogly: Surely you can say what the numbers on day one will be.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: What we are going to do is ramp up. We will not set out how fast we want the ramp-up to go, but we are working actively with our Rwandan partners on that.

Q79 Mr Djanogly: I have seen figures of 300 and 500. What are we talking about?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is a lot of different numbers out there, but I think there are too many variables to add to that mix.

Q80 Mr Djanogly: My surprise is that you have been discussing this with the Rwandans for a long time now—this is not something new. You have pretty much bottomed out what you are going to be paying them. You know where they are going to be going and you have seen the facilities, so you know what the facilities are. You must have some model with ballpark figures for the numbers they could take and by when.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have modelled that. We have worked closely with them on that, but one of the many things we have learned over the last two years since the partnership started is not to speculate about things like that, given the number of variables. We have plans to operationalise the partnership as soon as the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill receives Royal Assent and the treaty is ratified, and we will take it from there.

Q81 Mr Djanogly: I can see that you would have an issue if you were talking about further accommodation, but there is accommodation there—the previous Home Secretary went and walked around it—so you must be able to give us a figure for the numbers they can take.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is the responsibility of our Rwandan partners to provide that accommodation. They have assured us—we have tested this over the month, and indeed over the last two years—that they have the capability to accommodate the people we will be relocating.

Q82 Mr Djanogly: Am I right in saying that you have just said that, however many you provide, they will provide for the numbers?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is right. The scheme is uncapped, but one of the many variables and constraints is the capacity and capability at the Rwandan end. One of the reasons why the UK has invested in the partnership is to build up that capability. We know they have the capability to provide and organise enough accommodation for those who will be relocated there.

Q83 Mr Djanogly: So as far as you are concerned, the issue is the question of how many people we can transport there, rather than the accommodation being there when they arrive.



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: There are all sorts of constraints, and there are all sorts of factors that we need to take into account, but we have been spending the time between the publication of the partnership and today preparing for all sorts of eventualities. We have plans, options and contingency options.

Q84 **Mr Djanogly:** This is my last question. As far as you are concerned, they are prepared, willing and ready to take as many people as we transport there?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Q85 **Dame Diana Johnson:** May I return to the 40,000 who could be removed to Rwanda? Once the part of the Illegal Migration Act that allows them to be detained is enacted, would the funding from ODA then not be applicable? Is that correct, or is it correct that as soon as it is enacted, the 40,000 are not eligible to be supported through ODA funding?

Dan Hobbs: Part of the accounting officer advice that is kept under review, going back to the very first answer, is about whether it is classified as ODA if they are treated under the Illegal Migration Act. It is something that is currently being reviewed as part of the overall accounting officer advice.

Q86 **Dame Diana Johnson:** And that is because they are subject to detention.

Dan Hobbs: It is not the case of detention that is the issue. The duty to remove here is very similar to the duty to remove on foreign national offenders. That does not necessarily trigger the ability to detain. We can detain now where there is a reasonable prospect of removal, so it is not that change; it is the classification of the individual that can change the ODA rules.

Dame Diana Johnson: Sorry, can you just say that again?

Dan Hobbs: It is the classification, as the Permanent Secretary was talking about earlier; so if someone is classified as an asylum seeker in a country's asylum system for the first year, that is classified as ODA. It is the changing nature of how those people are treated, not necessarily the detention.

Q87 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Because they are in limbo. Because they cannot claim asylum.

Dan Hobbs: It is in relation to the inadmissibility, and that is the issue under review by our finance colleagues and with the Treasury regarding the ODA rules and applicability in that sense.

Q88 **Chair:** Presumably you are talking to the National Audit Office about this.

Dan Hobbs: The finance teams in the Home Office are exploring it.

Q89 **Dame Diana Johnson:** My second question is about when they become eligible to be removed if this is enacted, which I think we are all



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assuming it will be. What is the plan? Are you going to detain 40,000 people on the basis that they will then be removed to Rwanda? What is going to happen?

Dan Hobbs: As the Permanent Secretary said, there are plans both to operationalise the UK-Rwanda agreement under the existing legislation, and then for when the Illegal Migration Act is enacted in full and the duty commences. The Illegal Migration Act is not the only bit of legislation that enables removal; it can be done under existing legislation. The operational plans are advancing on that. As you know, the detention capacity is a limiting factor. Work is going on to expand that detention capacity and work through it, but there are plans and operations to deal with that that are being worked through.

Q90 **Dame Diana Johnson:** You said a lot of words there and have not actually answered my question. Potentially, there are 40,000 people to be removed. I think the capacity for detention is about 2,500.

Dan Hobbs: Approximately, yes. There are plans to expand the detention capacity.

Q91 **Dame Diana Johnson:** By how much?

Dan Hobbs: I think a further 1,000 are coming online, with two further sites being brought online—Campsfield and Haslar.

Q92 **Dame Diana Johnson:** That assumes you are going to have waves of people being detained. Is that what you are planning in this operationalisation?

Dan Hobbs: There is a variety of operational plans that depend on flow. It is probably not appropriate to go through full operational planning, but as you suggest, the plans will look at both the existing population and what flow happens. In terms of the decision to detain, some people will not be appropriate for detention for obvious reasons. But those plans are under way within the Department.

Q93 **Tim Loughton:** I will deal with costs now. The PAC has a very different approach from ours. Can we look at the actual flight costs and the nature of the flights? There has been a degree of opaqueness about what aircraft may be available or not. In the partnership Report, the Home Office estimates a cost of £11,000 per relocated individual for flights. That is some in-flight entertainment going on there. What action does it include?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: This is based on an internal estimate, which we shared with the National Audit Office, as is our statutory obligation, to give a sense of the sort of aspects of operationalisation that would need to take place. There are, as I have said in another context, so many variables. I would not want the Committee to say that it will definitely be £11,000 per person for putting them on the flight. It will depend on a lot of different things, including which aircraft is used.

Q94 **Tim Loughton:** Would it not also depend quite a lot on escorts?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: It would. Of course, as the National Audit Office Report sets out, there is a separate cost for escorting and training escorts and so on.

Q95 **Tim Loughton:** There is a separate cost for the training of escorts, estimated at £12.6 million for 2024-25, and then £1 million per year in future. Where is the actual cost of the escorts included? Is it included in that £11,000 or as an additional cost on top of the £11,000 per individual and the £12.6 million training budget?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think the cost of the actual escorting of the flights is included in the £11,000. Is that right?

Q96 **Chair:** Can Oliver Lodge from the National Audit Office answer?

Oliver Lodge: As far as I understand, it is not included in the £11,000. But we didn't break down that cost explicitly in the Report, because it depends on the number of flights that are put on. We did not include it, because to do so we would have had to make an assumption about how many people would have been transported and when. So it is an additional cost.

Q97 **Tim Loughton:** This is why this is a very variable figure, because we don't know. It has been suggested that there are going to be small numbers per flight, but more flights, rather than trying to fill up a complete plane with lots of people where there are the economies of scale. However, different types of individuals require a different level of escort. Some may require none; some may even require three, depending on the risk factor attached to them. That £11,000 per individual is completely spurious, isn't it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is a proxy. It is an estimate, and it absolutely will vary person by person.

Simon Ridley: To agree with Sir Matthew, there is a number of variables here, as you have just pointed out, Mr Loughton. It is an estimate. You are right that the number of escorts per person will vary according to the risk assessment of the individual, so the overall cost of a given flight, taking in all of that, will vary considerably.

Q98 **Tim Loughton:** Let's look at the training costs. You already retain a firm to do the escorting duties for existing people who are being deported. Which firm is that?

Simon Ridley: Mitie.

Q99 **Tim Loughton:** Will you be using Mitie to do this in the future, or is this a completely separate contract?

Simon Ridley: We are working with them to expand the number of escorts that we have.

Q100 **Tim Loughton:** The escorts that you already use through Mitie are already trained. Why is there an additional £12.6 million required for training escorts from a firm that is already contracted to supply trained



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escorts?

Simon Ridley: The main reason is that we are scaling up our removal operations in order to be able to run regular flights to Rwanda under the new scheme.

Q101 **Tim Loughton:** Why is the Home Office paying for the training? Surely, you pay for Mitie to provide trained escorts. These escorts are going to be no different from the ones that are providing existing operations, are they not?

Simon Ridley: We have worked very closely with our contractors to ensure that we have the capabilities that we need to run the scheme. That is a set of commercial discussions and negotiations. The cost to the Home Office for training under the Rwanda scheme is the £12.6 million that is laid out in the Report. Those are the commercial arrangements that we have come to in order to ensure that we have the right number of people and that they are trained appropriately for a novel scheme that will come under a lot of scrutiny.

Q102 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Ridley, I understand all that. The question is why? Presumably the contract at the moment with Mitie is to provide x number of escorts who are already trained to a suitable standard. That will require some enhanced training for when they are dealing with violent criminals who are being returned at the moment; they are unlikely to be the sort of people who are being returned because of their asylum status. Why do we appear to be spending £12.6 million alone to train people who should already be trained by the firm that you have contracted?

Simon Ridley: The terms under which we have contracted to provide the workforce that we need, trained to the relevant skill level, is the cost that is set out in the Report. We have done that to ensure that we have both the number of people, and the adequate training, to run what is a new scheme. We have some assumptions about the behaviour change of asylum seekers who are going to Rwanda. You are right that we do already remove some violent criminals, and people are trained around that. But we are running a new scheme at a different level, and we want to make sure that we are—

Q103 **Tim Loughton:** A new scheme to do the same thing. Do we pay the training costs for the existing escorts who are provided by Mitie?

Simon Ridley: I do not have the details of our existing contract in front of me.

Q104 **Tim Loughton:** I think we need some more details on that, because I do not think we pay training costs for Mitie's current contract. We take on trained people. It is up to Mitie to provide trained people, and their rate will be paid for depending on their suitability. Here we have this additional, not inconsiderable, figure of £12.6 million for the training of people to carry on doing the job that they are already doing but under a different scheme. In the past there have been many instances where Mitie, or whoever was doing the operation before, has failed to turn up at the requisite time to Brook House or somewhere else to transport people



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to the plane and potentially escort them as well. What recovery costs are there if they fail to show up to do the job?

Simon Ridley: On the first point, because of the need to scale up numbers, we needed to ensure there was the scale of training facilities that we need. We also needed to do that quickly. There are additional costs from us doing this for the Rwanda scheme at the scale and pace that has been required. Those are reflected in the costs. We can certainly come back with some more detail, subject to the necessary commercial confidentiality, but this is not the normal run of business that we are working with our partners on.

Q105 **Tim Loughton:** What other contracts are there between the Home Office and a firm providing staff where the Home Office pays for the training? Do you have any examples?

Simon Ridley: I would have to have a think about it.

Chair: I am sure it is not rocket science. Could you look into that and come back to us in writing, please? Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, deputy Chair, has the next set of questions.

Q106 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Mr Ridley, you may be the right person to answer these questions. It would be wrong to have this part of the session without fully understanding the total costs of this partnership. I would like to be absolutely sure that we have understood them. Could I take you to paragraph 2.1 on page 12 and run through the costs? I think what those paragraphs tell us is that the economic transformation and integration fund payment over five years is £370 million. It is also telling us that if 300 people are relocated over five years, which is not unreasonable—60 people a year does not seem to be an overly ambitious target for all this work—£20,000 per individual relocated would be another £6 million, and a further £120 million once 300 people have been relocated, and a further £150,000 in round figures per each one of those 300, which is another £345 million. According to my maths, at those figures the total paid to the Rwandan Government would be £541 million over five years if 300 people are relocated. Is that correct?

Simon Ridley: That is a correct summary of what the NAO has laid out in the Report, but it is important to say, as Sir Matthew and Dan have, that this is an uncapped scheme. This is about paying money up front for a scheme that would go far beyond 300 people.

Q107 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Understood; it is an uncapped scheme, and it might well be more or less. But at those numbers, which are all that is reasonable to suppose, is that what the cost would be?

Simon Ridley: Yes, the Report has correctly laid out both the ETIF points and the per-person points.

Q108 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** That is really helpful. How did you assess and review the Rwandan Government's estimate of processing and integration costs?



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Simon Ridley: I might hand over to Dan, who had most of the discussions with the Rwandans.

Dan Hobbs: In terms of the direct costs, setting aside the economic and transformation partnership, it was a negotiation that we worked through with them on the breakdown of the various elements of the package that they were supporting—the accommodation costs, the integration and education and the facilities that they would provide. We worked through the costs of those elements. It was never intended that this would be sought to be done at significantly lower cost to the UK. This was about having a quality scheme that delivered for the individuals and gave a five-year package of support. It was agreed that it would diminish over the period. The annual payments reduce over the period because you would expect people to become more self-sufficient. There are higher costs at the beginning due to the processing of the individuals and their assimilation and integration into Rwanda. Over the period of the five years, we would expect them to become more self-sufficient. That is how the agreement was structured: one was on the evidence that they provided on the costs that they would incur in support the individuals, and the other was that it would tail off over the period as people become more self-sufficient.

Q109 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I think you said at the beginning of that answer that these costs were equalised with those of the UK, so these are not Rwandan costs—

Dan Hobbs: No, not equalised. We were not seeking to do it at a lower cost. There was never an intention of seeking to make this a purely cost-driven agreement in terms of the comparative between the UK and Rwanda; it was based on the evidence Rwanda provided to us of what the direct cost to them would be of providing the services.

Q110 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Could we assume, then, that if all these people were processed in the UK, as opposed to being sent to Rwanda, the costs would be the same?

Dan Hobbs: The illegal migration economic impact assessment sets out the counterfactual of costs related to the asylum system and the “do nothing” option as a comparator, and that was published. That foresaw that the accommodation bill would inflate to something like £11 billion a year and that the comparative proxy cost was £160,000 over the five years. That was set out in the economic impact assessment.

Q111 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** How will this change once you have met your other policy objectives, such as getting out of hotels? This cost that you are incurring at the moment, which we referred to at the beginning—the £4.3 billion.

Dan Hobbs: In terms of the UK costs, a big part of providing support to those who would otherwise be destitute is the accommodation costs. As I say, there is a figure in the economic impact assessment on that per night, which does in part relate to hotels. Obviously, the intention of the policy is partly to deter individuals coming from safe countries—



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incentivising people to claim in the first safe country, or where they have found sanctuary. There would be other costs that we would not incur should the deterrence effect impact, including our Border Force and Manston operations, and other elements. It is quite a complex figure to get to with the deterrent, but the economic impact assessment set out the various levels of cost in a public document.

Q112 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We will come back to that in the next part of this hearing. Sir Matthew, how do your current relocation plans affect your assessment of the feasibility of the partnership?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I continue to assess that the partnership is feasible. There are risks in relation to feasibility, but there is also a huge amount of work by Home Office staff, under Simon's direction, to get the partnership up and running.

Q113 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: At what point will you have the evidence to conclude whether this policy represents value for money, which is why you have got a ministerial direction in the first place?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I keep that assessment under constant review. Once the flights to Rwanda are up and running and once there have been some of them, it should be possible to see whether there is a deterrent effect. Analysts are working on this issue in the Home Office, and they will update me each quarter, or more frequently if there is some significant change.

Q114 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I want to probe you a little more on that, because that is critical—the deterrent effect is critical to the whole success of the partnership. How many people need to be deterred, in your view, for you to be able to make the assessment that the policy is value for money?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First, I agree absolutely that it is essential for the judgment of whether it is value for money to judge what sort of deterrent effect the policy has had. Secondly, the initial modelling, which we made public, suggested that from the previous year there needed to be a roughly one-third reduction—that is from 2022 levels—for the policy to count as value for money. Of course, it is difficult to assess what part this policy plays in any reduction, compared with other policies that the Government are pursuing, such as the Albania agreement that I referenced earlier and other things that the Government are doing. That is the analysis job that needs to be done.

Q115 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I don't have the figures for '22, but no doubt you have them at the top of your mind. Is it round about 35,000? Is that the sort of figure we are talking about?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That's right. As it happens, there was about a one-third reduction between 2022 and 2023 because of Albania and other things. Of course, the Government will be looking for a further reduction on top of that, and that is why we are working so hard.

Q116 Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I think the '23 figure was 45,000, wasn't it?



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I can't remember what the '22 figure was.

Simon Ridley: They were the other way round.

Q117 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** So given that you think you need a third to make that assessment, you are going to need a reduction of about 10,000.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Approximately, but I will come back to the Committee once that work has been done. Certainly, I will be looking at it every quarter, and more often than that if there is a significant change. I have discussed that assessment with this Committee and the Home Affairs Committee in the past, and there were some questions about whether it was possible to expect some sort of deterrent effect before the flights were up and running. I think it is now fair to say that that is not likely, but once the flights are up and running, it should be possible to make that assessment.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Q118 **Chair:** But of course if you reduce the cost of asylum management in the UK, some of which we will be covering in the next bit of this session, you will see a different figure, won't you?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is absolutely right. The comparator is the per person per night cost for accommodation, plus all the other costs that we need take account of—the "do nothing" option, as Dan put it—and that number is also changing. That is one of the challenges.

Q119 **Chair:** Before I move on to Mr Grant, let me say that I have actually visited Rwanda. I visited a UNHCR camp with, in that case, mostly Congolese refugees, and I saw the conditions they were living in. They were potentially free to get work, travel and so on, but there were lots of challenges in that situation. Have you considered that the offer of going to Rwanda that is now being made to people who arrive in the UK on boats is an incentive? People may seek to relocate to Rwanda via the UK, rather than through other routes. It could be driving people to get a £120,000 package to settle somewhere, rather than being stuck in a UN camp. In that case, generations of children had grown up in that camp.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, I don't think there is yet evidence to suggest that that is a driver of behaviour. As you know, Chair, the Government's assessment—Ministers strongly believe this—is that the deterrent effect is likely to outweigh any other type of behaviour. It will deter them from leaving one safe country—in the case of small boat arrivals, France—to come to the UK. That is the journey that the Government is seeking to deter through the Rwanda partnership.

Chair: Except that the French aren't offering £120,000 relocation packages. I will leave that, as it is more about the policy.

Q120 **Peter Grant:** Staying on deterrence for a minute, what you are saying is that the likelihood of drowning in the channel doesn't deter people and the likelihood of detention without trial, effectively without a time limit,



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on something like the Bibby Stockholm doesn't deter people, but the likelihood of being given lots of money to start a new life in Rwanda is going to deter people. That is the Government's interpretation of what will deter and what won't. Am I correct?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, the Government's policy is to deter people from making unnecessary and dangerous journeys. That is why we are working with our colleagues and partners in France to reduce the number of crossings. We also work further upstream with countries where many of these asylum seekers come from to create conditions that mean that they do not need to leave their home countries in the first place. As Dan said earlier, if they do, they should be seeking asylum in the first safe country that they come to. There are, of course, lots of other factors at play, but the overall purpose of the Rwanda policy is to deter people from coming to the UK if they do not have the right to be here.

Q121 **Peter Grant:** A minute ago, you said that the intention was to stop dangerous illegal crossings, and now you have said that the intention is to stop people from coming—

Sir Matthew Rycroft: If they do not have the right to be here, not least as one of the ways to get here is very dangerous.

Q122 **Peter Grant:** You haven't assessed the costs and benefits of the Rwanda scheme against the costs and benefits of actually providing a safe and legal means for people to come here and apply for asylum in the correct way. You haven't done that assessment, have you?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As you know, Mr Grant, there are safe and legal routes for some people already and the Government are committed to assessing whether there is the possibility to create further safe and legal routes in the future.

Q123 **Peter Grant:** Thank you. I want now to look at the measures that you are taking to ensure that this scheme does not get abused, because potentially there is a lot of money going to be floating around. How confident are you that the necessary safeguards are in place to ensure that taxpayers' money is not frittered away through fraud or other abuse of the scheme?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have a shared interest with our Rwandan colleagues in ensuring the success of the scheme and the appropriate spending of all the money, so we have set up both a joint committee and a monitoring committee to help ensure that all UK money spent in Rwanda is spent in the way that was intended.

Q124 **Peter Grant:** What lessons have you learned from the massive losses through fraud and wastage that a number of your colleague Departments incurred during the covid pandemic?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am not sure that there are direct lessons to learn from spending during covid in the UK to apply to spending outside covid circumstances in Rwanda, other than the importance of transparency and regular monitoring. The governance efforts are where we have put our



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effort, and we have been spending the last two years before the operationalisation of the partnership setting up those arrangements.

Q125 **Peter Grant:** Does keeping Parliament waiting nine months for an accounting officer assessment contribute to the transparency that you just mentioned?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am committed to providing this Committee and the Home Affairs Committee with as much as possible.

Q126 **Peter Grant:** Thank you. Mr Hobbs, can I come back briefly to the question of the 30,000 or so people who will fall under the scheme if and when it is enacted? Where are they just now?

Dan Hobbs: If they were otherwise destitute, under our legal requirements we will be providing them with support. That may be in the form of accommodation or subsistence or both. Or they may be in the UK subject to immigration bail, not supported if they have other financial means to support themselves.

Q127 **Peter Grant:** Do you actually know where they all are?

Dan Hobbs: We will have addresses and details for individuals. They are required to update the Home Office and they are generally required to report regularly. That is part of our ongoing policy and operations around enforcement and reporting of those in the UK who are subject to immigration control.

Q128 **Peter Grant:** But does that mean that you know where they are, or that you know where they say they are? Because let's face it: the Home Office historically does not have a good record on knowing where people are, whether they came here legally, illegally, or as refugees or asylum seekers.

Dan Hobbs: We will have details of residences that are provided for each of the individuals. They are required to update those and, as I said, they will be subject to regular reporting requirements, which will enable us to keep contact. Where they do not, that allows us to action any absconding elements and use our trace and locate services where appropriate.

Q129 **Peter Grant:** Thank you. Part of the scheme sets out that there is a payment each year for five years to the Rwandan Government while somebody is in Rwanda. Those payments stop if the person chooses to leave Rwanda. How will you know if they have left Rwanda?

Dan Hobbs: Because under the agreement, the Rwandans are required to provide full, detailed information to us on a regular basis. They are in the process of readying the implementation of tracking individuals and whether they choose to stay, and being able to report on their ongoing residence in Rwanda. Obviously, Rwanda is required to provide their accommodation, so it will know whether there are ongoing accommodation and other costs associated with that individual, but there is a reporting requirement on the Rwandans as part of the financial measures under the treaty.



Q130 **Peter Grant:** Have the Home Office independently assessed the ability of the Rwandan Government to implement a tracking scheme for potentially 30,000 or 40,000 people?

Dan Hobbs: Through the joint committee and the independent monitoring committee, there are measures in place to do the reporting. The Rwandans have reporting requirements in terms of accountancy and their systems and processes, and we continue to work with them. We have Home Office staff located in Kigali in readiness for the transfer of individuals, and we continue to work with them on their operational readiness and ours in terms of preparations for go live of the policy once the Bill and the treaty are ratified.

Q131 **Peter Grant:** How do you make sure that someone doesn't just keep going round in circles—go and live in Rwanda, come out of Rwanda, turn up in the UK as an asylum seeker, get sent to Rwanda again and pick up another package? How are you going to know that that is not happening?

Dan Hobbs: It is important to say that the package does not go to the individual; the payment is made to the Government of Rwanda. It is unclear that there would be an incentive for a person with five years-worth of support, because the payments set out in the NAO Report are not direct payments to the individual; they are payments to the Rwandan Government to provide those services.

Q132 **Peter Grant:** You are going to be making sure that the Rwandan Government are spending the money on providing services for those people?

Dan Hobbs: Yes, they have to provide accountability and reports to the joint monitoring committee, and the independent monitoring committee also have the ability to oversee that. That is done through their Auditor General and in line with international accountancy standards.

Q133 **Peter Grant:** How much would it cost to provide the same services in the UK to these people?

Dan Hobbs: We don't have that figure immediately to hand. As I say, the economic impact assessment on the Illegal Migration Act looks at the immigration system costs—the direct costs in terms of the immigration system. It does talk about the non-quantifiable costs, in terms of those elements, but there is not a direct comparator figure for providing the same support.

Q134 **Peter Grant:** Thank you. I know questions have been asked previously, Sir Matthew, about the scheme—which I understand is not actually part of the Rwanda agreement—whereby the Home Office will offer to pay failed asylum seekers in the UK if they agree to relocate to Rwanda. Has that offer been discussed with the Rwandan Government? Are they comfortable with it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It has been discussed. You are right to say that it was not part of the original memorandum of understanding, but it was an



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additional agreement that the two Governments came to relatively recently. So yes, it has been fully discussed with—

Q135 **Chair:** What is the figure? It is £6,000 to relocate back to your home country for someone who has a failed case. What about to Rwanda?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It's £3,000.

Q136 **Chair:** So they have the choice of £3,000 to go to Rwanda or £6,000 to go back to their own country?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: This is in relation to people who by definition have not accepted the offer to go back to their home country.

Chair: I just wanted that to be clear. Thank you.

Q137 **Peter Grant:** Have you made any assessment of how many people per year are likely to take up that offer?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have done some modelling and we were very much seeing this as one of the ways of testing the broader partnership with Rwanda.

Q138 **Peter Grant:** What was the outcome of your modelling?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I don't think I have any numbers to pass on, but the offer is there for people in that cohort.

Q139 **Peter Grant:** But if the Rwanda partnership agreement works, you don't need to do that modelling, because they are not going to be here. There won't be any failed asylum seekers, because they will all be deterred from coming here.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In the long run, absolutely; in the short run, there are a lot of failed asylum seekers in the UK.

Q140 **Peter Grant:** How long is the long run in this context?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, it's a five-year partnership.

Q141 **Peter Grant:** Finally, am I right in understanding that the 30,000 or so that we think are going to be sent to Rwanda, or most of them, will all come under the main headings of the scheme? What is it—a £150,000 payment to Rwanda over the five years for 30,000 people, plus £11,000 a head to get them there? That adds up to, what, half a billion pounds?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have of course done modelling on lots of different numbers. If the scheme is of that sort of volume, it will be a very significant set of payments to the Government of Rwanda, but those sorts of payments actually are dwarfed by the amount that this Government are currently spending on accommodation and that we are projected to spend on accommodation if we do nothing.

Q142 **Peter Grant:** That is because the running of the accommodation and the processing of asylum applications have been such a mess for decades, isn't it? It would be possible to save billions of pounds on support for



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asylum seekers just by doing it properly and getting the applications assessed on time instead of waiting years to do them.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: As Jo was saying in answer to a previous question, we have been working on the productivity of each asylum caseworker. She didn't say, but let me add, that we have more than doubled the number of asylum seekers, so we are making—

Chair: Caseworkers.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Sorry, caseworkers. So we are making significantly more decisions each month than previously, as one of the many measures that the Government are taking in order to tackle this set of challenges.

Peter Grant: Thank you. I think we might be looking at the costs of accommodation for asylum seekers in a few minutes' time, but that is all from me for now.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Grant. Sarah Olney MP.

Q143 **Sarah Olney:** Sir Matthew, the rationale for the scheme is primarily deterrence—that people will be deterred from crossing the channel in the first place by the prospect of going to Rwanda. How many people need to have been deterred in order for the scheme to represent value for money?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In answer to a previous question, I said that in 2022 it was approximately one third.

Q144 **Sarah Olney:** One third of?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: One third of the 2022 numbers. Of course, it will depend on a lot of variables. That is one of the things that Home Office analysts are looking at right now, which I have just committed to report back to the Committee. They will be updating me every quarter.

Q145 **Sarah Olney:** How are you counting that? How will you collect the data to say that these people would have come, but now they are not?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a very good question. It is my question to the analysts as well, but I am leaving it to them at the moment to come up with the best possible answer.

Q146 **Sarah Olney:** We do not currently have a mechanism for producing the key metric that will demonstrate value for money for the programme. We do not currently have a way of measuring that or collecting that data.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have not yet set out exactly what will go into the assessment about the amount of deterrence that might have happened as a result of Rwanda. That is correct.

Q147 **Sarah Olney:** But you are confident that we will?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is the challenge to the analysts, and I look forward to discussing it with the Committee in due course. I don't think it would be reasonable to have it yet because we have not begun the flights.



Q148 **Sarah Olney:** You don't think it would be reasonable to have a metric for assessing?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Once the flights are up and running, it will be possible to make the judgment. At that point, I will be keen to say more about the sort of factors that will be going into that assessment.

Simon Ridley: It is not a question of a metric. Because of the complexity and the number of variables, this is ultimately about an assessment based on a number of different pieces of work that we will need to do. There is obviously the monitoring of the numbers, which will show us a reduction, but the challenge is to be able to mark causality because the Rwandan scheme is one part of the work we are doing—as we said earlier—to stop the boats and reduce illegal migration. We need to do a combination of qualitative and quantitative work, and then bring that together to be able to assess the impact of the scheme.

Q149 **Sarah Olney:** You are saying that there is a further complexity in that once we start to see your expected reduction in crossings, you will not necessarily be able to isolate the extent to which that was the Rwanda plan.

Simon Ridley: The metric is small boat crossings, at some level. We want that to go down, and the Rwanda scheme is a key part of the strategy, but then we need to assess what is driving those numbers down among lots of different things that we are doing. That is about understanding the motivations of the individuals, and the things that gangs and those who are providing the boats are doing.

Q150 **Sarah Olney:** And the motivations of the individuals who have not made the crossing.

Simon Ridley: Yes, or the motivations of the people who are still making the crossings, unless we have succeeded in deterring it completely.

Q151 **Sarah Olney:** If they are not deterred by the Rwanda plan, what might have deterred them?

Simon Ridley: Yes. Ultimately, that is absolutely right. This is a complicated assessment where there are a number of actors—both in the criminals who are moving people across Europe and into small boats, and the people who are coming across and getting into small boats to travel here. We need to understand those motivations alongside the raw numbers, which we are monitoring in a number of different ways.

Q152 **Sarah Olney:** On those raw numbers, my understanding, Sir Matthew, is that we are not currently seeing a reduction in crossings. At what point do we expect the deterrent effect to kick in? Is it as soon as Royal Assent is achieved?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We will be working on a whole series of things, not just Rwanda. As I said before, there was a reduction last year, a large part of which we have put down to the agreement with Albania.

Q153 **Sarah Olney:** So that will not have been the Rwanda plan; you think it



might have been Albania.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a sign that deterrence works. We will certainly be looking for a similar scale of deterrence in relation to the Rwanda partnership. I think it is pure speculation to work out whether that deterrent effect will kick in at any particular moment, which is why I was suggesting waiting until there has been not just one flight but a series of flights. We will then be able to make a slightly more informed judgment. Even then, as Simon was suggesting, there will be more art than science in the judgment. There are some numbers involved, but in the end it is a judgment. The crucial judgment for me as accounting officer is about whether there is enough deterrent effect to mean that the overall scheme is value for money.

Q154 **Paula Barker:** Sir Matthew, as of February this year, the UK Government had not finalised revised arrangements with the Government of Rwanda to reflect the provisional treaty, so the payment schedule still may change significantly. In addition, we may actually take some refugees from Rwanda, and the costs are not measured there. What associated costs have you predicted, and what assessments and modelling have actually been made?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In relation to the first part of the question, the treaty that the two Governments signed after the Supreme Court decision is related to the Safety of Rwanda Bill going through the House at the moment, which is why we talk about Royal Assent of the Bill and ratification of the treaty in the same breath. Those are the two things that need to happen in order for the main Rwanda partnership to be operationalised.

You are right that in the original memorandum of understanding, there was also the possibility of refugees from other countries who are currently in Rwanda to come to the UK. I do not think that we have set out the sorts of numbers that we expect that part of the partnership to add up to.

Q155 **Paula Barker:** So you do not know the numbers. However, it actually states in the NAO Report that “the UK will resettle a portion of Rwanda’s most vulnerable refugees”. What do you understand by “most vulnerable refugees”?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Mr Hobbs may want to say a bit more about that.

Dan Hobbs: When we were negotiating the treaty there was a discussion: as you know, Rwanda hosts a large number of refugees from the wider region, particularly from Burundi and DRC. There was an agreement that we may take a small number of those where Rwanda is not able to provide for their specific needs. It was always envisaged that that would be a low number; no specific number was associated with it. The presumption is that they would be relocated on the same terms as the UK resettlement agreement, where we pay a tariff to local authorities as part of our wider UK resettlement scheme.

Q156 **Paula Barker:** Sorry—Rwanda cannot meet their needs, but the UK can.



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Dan Hobbs: It may be because they have specific medical needs. As is provided for under the Illegal Migration Act and under our inadmissibility rules, it may not be suitable for certain persons, for a variety of reasons, to be relocated to Rwanda. There may be, as we have had under our resettlement schemes, people with particular vulnerabilities where resettlement to the UK may be an important part of their long-term solution for protection. That was the discussion on the agreement. As I say, we always thought that that would be a small number of people. There have been no requests from Rwanda for us to resettle any individuals at this time.

Q157 **Paula Barker:** If we concentrate on what you have just said, Mr Hobbs, and take medical conditions as an example, what assessment has the Department made of potential costs to the health service and cross-departmental costs?

Dan Hobbs: Under our UK resettlement scheme, as we did under Syria, we took the most vulnerable people. We have clear costs. There was an NAO Report on the Syrian resettlement scheme, and we pay a tariff to local authorities that covers primary care and any other needs. If we include them under the UK resettlement scheme, a tariff is paid per person for individuals.

As the Permanent Secretary set out, the Government set out their intention around expanding and looking at options around safe and legal routes. Subject to the consultation with local authorities on capacity, a report is due later this year, so that work is already undertaken as part of our wider resettlement policy and approach, which has been long standing since the Syrian scheme was established.

Q158 **Paula Barker:** One of the additional costs may include costs for training and development of Rwandan officials. Going back to Mr Loughton's earlier point around Mitie and training representatives of Mitie there, why are we paying for Rwandan officials to be trained? If we are entering a partnership with a third country, why are their officials not already trained?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think I would draw a distinction between the partnership between two sovereign Governments—the UK and Rwanda—on the one hand and the commercial arrangement between the Home Office and Mitie on the other. The partnership between two sovereign countries is a partnership. It is something where both parties willingly come together because there are benefits for each of us. There are clear benefits for the UK if there is a deterrent effect, and there are clear benefits for Rwanda.

One of the benefits for Rwanda is the investment in Rwanda's capability that the UK is paying in. That is why in addition to the per person costs, there are also UK payments into the economic transformation and integration fund, which is designed to improve Rwanda's capability. We want Rwanda to succeed. We want Rwanda to be a strong partner, able to



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be even more effective than it already is in working with countries such as the UK on global challenges such as irregular migration.

Q159 **Paula Barker:** A final question from me. I don't know about colleagues, but, for me, everything we have heard today has seemed more opaque as the session has gone on. The costs are quite eye-watering to date, with nobody having gone to Rwanda. How do you propose that any additional cost will be reported back to Parliament to allow us to scrutinise it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First of all, you are absolutely right that the costs are very high. The reason that I required a ministerial direction two years ago was that at that time there was not evidence about value for money. That is why I have the ministerial direction.

The costs are set out annually in our annual report and accounts. On some occasions the Department will bring costs earlier than that to this Committee and to the Home Affairs Select Committee. And of course the National Audit Office Report sets out very transparently the associated costs. The reason that it is not all totally clear is that there are so many variables. We just do not know lots of things that are going to be very relevant to the total cost of this scheme, but we are absolutely committed to transparency and to making sure that this Committee and its sister Committee, the Home Affairs Select Committee, are able to hold us to account.

Q160 **Paula Barker:** You spoke about the monitoring committee earlier. It states that the joint committee will feed into the monitoring committee, which will have "enhanced responsibilities to monitor activity daily" and ensure rapid response to any shortcomings, but that is only for three months. Why is that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, it is increased regularity at the very beginning, but it will carry on for the duration of the partnership. The reason for that is that this is a novel scheme. We recognise that there is a significant amount of risk in relation to this, but the Government went down this route in the first place because there was such cost and risk associated with doing nothing.

Q161 **Chair:** To be clear, on the monitoring committee, would that be people from the UK sent out to Rwanda periodically or local people based in Rwanda?

Dan Hobbs: The joint committee to which the monitoring committee reports are officials. The independent monitoring committee are officials that have been independently appointed, so they are not UK Government officials. There is a mix of individuals of UK, Rwandan and Danish nationality on that committee with a range of expertise.

Q162 **Chair:** Danish? Is that for any particular reason?

Dan Hobbs: One of the members is a Dane.



Sir Matthew Rycroft: It does not have to be Danish. It could be a non-UK Rwandan.

Q163 **Chair:** We were wondering about third countries! I want to quickly check on a couple of things before we move on to the longer-term accommodation. I raised at the very beginning the £50 million that is due. To be clear, there is a break clause. We talked about hypotheticals earlier, so we have done one set of hypotheticals. Let's go the other way. If the Bill does not pass this week, would that mean that the £50 million would not have to go to Rwanda if you do not go ahead with the regime? Or are you now committed to spending that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, that is strictly speaking true. If for whatever reason the Bill did not go through, it would be open to the UK Government to press the pause button. There is a pause button in the agreement and that could lead to the delay. We are not anticipating that, but—

Q164 **Chair:** It does not kick in as a definite at the beginning of the financial year.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Exactly.

Q165 **Chair:** That is helpful to know. On the delay on the accounting officer assessment, you had a change of Home Secretary in November last year, and yet from June to November there was no release of the accounting officer assessment, and then from November to March. Was there a delay in getting it to the new Home Secretary for him to agree it, given that he would have had a lot on his plate as he arrived in the Department? Was that part of the reason for the delay?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There was a series of things. I don't think there is a particular reason for why it was published in March rather than in November.

Chair: Maybe our sister Committee can raise that with the Home Secretary next time he is in front of them. Thank you for that. We will now move on to the large sites, the alternative to hotel accommodation. I think we all agree that having people long term in hotels is not a good solution, but there are issues around the large sites, too. Dame Diana Johnson MP, Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, will kick off.

Q166 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Could we look at figure 7 of the Report, please? I particularly want to ask you, Sir Matthew, about the cost to set up these large-scale sites. In the second column in figure 7, which is on page 27 of the Report, it says, "Setting up the sites and refurbishment was expected to cost around £5 million each for Wethersfield and Scampton." If you move across the table to the latest analysis, it says, "Set-up costs have increased at both sites. Wethersfield is now expected to cost £49 million, and Scampton £27 million." How could you get the figures so, so wrong?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is a very good question. First, I accept that we did get the figures so, so wrong. We were operating at pace. That is not an excuse, but just to set out the context of what was happening a year ago. There was a national emergency, and a sense that on this issue we

should be doing what our colleagues during covid had done, in terms of pace of procurement and things like that. We decided to press on as quickly as we could to increase the stock of total accommodation available to the UK Government.

There were no other accommodation types available, because all the existing private rental market—even hotels—was already being used. We had to act in a novel, and therefore in quite a creative, way, looking at these sites. We made an assessment about how much the set-up cost would be, which in the case of both those sites was woefully short. There was a very significant optimism bias.

Q167 **Dame Diana Johnson:** An optimism bias?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, a very significant optimism bias. There were some—

Q168 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Did anybody go and actually look at these sites, and see what needed to be done to make them fit for asylum seekers to be housed there?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely.

Q169 **Dame Diana Johnson:** They did, and they thought £5 million was the correct figure for both?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: They did, and they thought £5 million was the right figure for both. One of the things that is different from this sort of thing than, say, buying a house and doing a survey, is that there are certain types of survey that can only be done when you have access to the site and people with the right expertise able to look at, for instance the very complex—

Q170 **Chair:** But these were owned by the UK Government.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: For instance, there were gas and electrical requirements, and fire requirements, which the Home Office was only able to access after our initial—

Q171 **Chair:** Really? You could not get the Ministry of Defence to let you have access before then?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It turned out that we needed to get our own people in to look at those costs, and that is one of the reasons why the—

Q172 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Sorry, you have just said it was a national emergency, the Government was desperately trying to find a way of housing people, and the MoD would not let you on to the site or let you find out what exactly needed to be done. Were you just sort of sticking your finger in the air and thinking that £5 million would solve the problems at these sites?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, we were making a judgment under pressure and at pace. We went through a due process, which involved the Treasury approving it as well, so it was not just within the Home Office. It was not a



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finger in the air; it was an assessment based on what was known at that time and with that amount of time available, which subsequently—you are absolutely right—turned out to be massively under-accurate.

Q173 **Dame Diana Johnson:** It was £49 million at Wethersfield. What did you actually have to do at Wethersfield?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Jo might want to come in in more detail, as she oversees this programme, but I have mentioned some of the things already. We had to look at a very complex gas and electrical setup. We had to increase from MoD standards to higher standards for things like the fire resistance of the doors, ceilings and so on, for some of the accommodation on the sites. We had to do remedial works, remove asbestos, improve security and install CCTV. We had other unforeseen costs, some of which we absolutely should have foreseen, but others that in practice it would not have been possible to foresee.

Q174 **Dame Diana Johnson:** You would know that you would need security and CCTV—that is just a given, isn't it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Exactly, so there is a mix of things there that I think were foreseen, and quite a lot of unforeseen things. I will just go back to the point I was trying to make at the beginning, which is that the Government needed to find accommodation that was not previously available. We had to increase the total stock of accommodation in order to solve this problem, which is that we were spending too much on hotels.

Q175 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay, but the MOD were obviously not wanting to really provide you with much assistance at that time.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think there was a reasonable level of co-operation with our MOD colleagues.

Q176 **Chair:** We have looked—our sister Committee will not have—at defence accommodation. It does not have a good record; it is in pretty poor condition. I wonder what your officials were doing. Did they believe what the MOD told them or, as Dame Diana said, did they actually visit some of them? Some of them were in really poor condition.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: They did visit them, and that is what led to the judgment that £5 million would be a good estimate for the set-up costs.

Q177 **Chair:** What were the skills of the officials who visited?

Joanna Rowland: That is key. When we undertook the initial surveys, they were non-intrusive surveys into the sites.

Chair: So there were surveys. You had chartered surveyors or quantity surveyors—

Joanna Rowland: There were pre due-diligence checks. It was not that nobody had visited the sites and no surveys were undertaken; it was the more intrusive surveys and detailed surveys that were undertaken post purchase. As Sir Matthew says, that is where some of the costs were unforeseen. However, it is very fair to say that we did not have the right



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expertise on the programme at the time, and that is something we have now rectified. We have recruited some very experienced programme directors, as well as now more external advice.

Chair: Thank you for that honesty, Ms Rowland.

Q178 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I just want to be clear: does “non-intrusive” mean that you stand at the gate and just kind of look at what is going on in the RAF base? Is that non-intrusive?

Joanna Rowland: Some intrusive surveys actually contain damage to the property—for example, tracing asbestos and so on. We undertook that. As I say, and as Sir Matthew has set out, we were working at pace. It was a risk-based decision to do the intrusive surveys once we were on site and in ownership. If we had longer, I think we would have undertaken more surveys before purchase.

Q179 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I want to ask you about the Bibby Stockholm, because we found out on the Home Affairs Committee that £22 million had been spent on obtaining the Bibby Stockholm, its mooring and everything else. Could you just comment, Sir Matthew, about the Bibby Stockholm and value for money? It has an 18-month life, I understand, and the figures you were working on—on the basis of full capacity—would mean it would be value for money. Can you update us today as to whether it is still value for money, because I do not think you have ever gotten to full capacity?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is correct. We are operating on the basis that about 400 would be the maximum capacity, and we have not reached 400 people on the Bibby Stockholm. The numbers do fluctuate, so that is why we do not give a running commentary. We have a plan to get up towards 400 by mid-June. You are also right that the initial contract is for 18 months, with a possibility of renewal.

Q180 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Are you satisfied that it is value for money, considering that you have spent £22 million getting the thing and you have not been able to put as many asylum seekers on the barge as you were planning to? We know the cost of hotels fluctuates, and that is part of your value-for-money assessment. Are you still satisfied that it is value for money with all those sunk costs that you have had to put forward?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The last time I made an assessment on this was in January, and the next one is due later this month because they come round every three months. Last time, the net present value was positive, which means that it is value for money. I should clarify for the Committee that the Green Book—the Treasury Bible that tells you how to do these things—says that you are supposed to not include sunk costs when you make your projections. They are supposed to be forward-looking only. When you exclude the sunk costs, the Bibby Stockholm continues to be value for money. If that changes, either in relation to Bibby Stockholm or any of these other sites, then—

Q181 **Chair:** I am going to bring in the National Audit Office. Mr Lodge is the



director responsible for this Report.

Oliver Lodge: Sir Matthew is correct that if you are making a forward investment decision from a point in time, you would not want to consider the costs you have already incurred. I think the Committee's questions about the quality of information on which those initial decisions were based are still very pertinent, though. In our Report, we zoom out and look at the value for money to the taxpayer as a whole, which incorporates everything that has been spent on these projects.

Q182 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I just ask about Scampton? This is figure 9. It says that approval to proceed was granted on the basis of "advice in March 2023" and the "Expected end date for site" is July 2025. Your initial estimate was that it would "Cost £5 million less than using hotels". It now says on "Updates in January" that it "Cost £45.1 million more than hotels, with site used until March 2028". Do you want to talk us through that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Again, this is something that I review quarterly. At the last assessment in January there was a net present value of plus £23 million, demonstrating that it does represent value for money on the same basis that the NAO has set out. There is a particular complication in relation to Scampton, which is about the numbers of people on the site. Of course, that is true of all of the sites; it is one of the variables that you will be familiar with. In relation to Scampton, the original plan was to have a very significant number of people on the site, and that actually drove up the per person cost because the only way to get that number of people on the site was through additional modular accommodation, which was costing significantly more per person than a scaled-back model. What the Home Office has recently been discussing with the local authority is a smaller number; there are still hundreds of people on Scampton, but it is hundreds rather than thousands. That will actually increase the value for money, because it will decrease the per person cost, unusually.

Q183 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So it was a mistake to think that you could put thousands of people at RAF Scampton?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In the spirit of what we were discussing previously, if we had known then what we now know, then clearly we would not have gone ahead in the way that we did. But we were operating at pace in response to an emergency, and we were looking for ways to house as safely as possible the maximum number on this site. It was through further work over the subsequent months that we realised that the modular accommodation in relation to Scampton was driving up the cost, and therefore we should scale back to a smaller option.

Q184 **Chair:** On modular accommodation, were you competing in the same market as the schools that have got reinforced aerated concrete and have been buying temporary classrooms? Is it the same sort of supplier?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It could well be.



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Simon Ridley: I do not know the details of all the different suppliers, but it is a very similar market.

Q185 **Dame Diana Johnson:** One last question. You say that it was a national emergency. Obviously, the Home Office was using lots of hotel rooms—procuring hotels up and down the land. Ministers had decided, had they not, that they wanted to get out of hotels for various reasons, such as cost and perhaps perception? Just to be clear, was it a national emergency because Ministers had decided to change what accommodation should be provided? It wasn't that you had run out of hotel rooms.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In 2022 and into 2023, there was a record number of people coming across the channel and claiming asylum. One of the things that was of concern to Ministers—quite rightly—was the cost of the accommodation, because so much of it was in hotels, as well as the sense that in most communities hotels are there for reasons other than to house asylum seekers. They are there for tourism or for conferences, and so on. I think it was reasonable for Ministers to press officials to accelerate the move out of hotels, and I am very glad to say that the programme is well on track to meet the targets that the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have set out.

Q186 **Dame Diana Johnson:** One option would have been to go after the backlog, wouldn't it? I know that a certain part of the backlog was being looked at, and more people were being taken on to deal with that, but resources could have been put into just getting rid of the backlog rather than spending lots of money on large sites that then proved, on the whole, not to be value for money.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have been doing that as well. It is not either/or. There is no single bullet here; we are seeking to tackle the complex challenge of irregular migration and the numbers of people coming in and claiming asylum in lots of different ways. There is the Rwanda partnership, partnerships with countries such as Albania, work with our colleagues in France and elsewhere, an increased number of caseworkers and productivity—there are all sorts of different things. It was not one or the other. We were doing both those things, and many others, at the same time.

Q187 **Paula Barker:** Sir Matthew, we started the session with your accounting officer assessment of the sovereign borders programme. Obviously, we have heard that we will have an assessment on the Rwanda plan. I will pick up on Dame Diana's and Mr Lodge's questions. The NAO's asylum accommodation Report clearly states in paragraph 3.3: "The Home Office has incurred costs on plans that will not result in any additional accommodation." Taking into consideration that value for money is forward-looking, would it be fair of me to suggest to you that, given that the Report states that there will be no additional accommodation, your report—your accounting officer assessment—should reflect that and reflect that there is no value for money?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: First of all, you are absolutely right to highlight, as the National Audit Office Report did, that there was some Home Office spending on sites that did not come to fruition. There are a number of sites. In particular, there is one at Linton-on-Ouse. And the other was additional barges, like the Bibby Stockholm, but elsewhere. Those two strands of activity ended up costing £2.9 million and £0.5 million respectively, before it was proven that those routes were going to be unsuitable.

There are absolutely lessons learned. The programme has already learned the lessons from that, in ways that Jo has set out, in terms of bringing capability into the Department that we did not previously have. That has been reflected by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority in its most recent judgment programme, which has gone from a red to amber, meaning that it is now on a stronger footing than it previously was.

Paula Barker: Thank you. I think the Committee will look forward to your accounting officer assessment.

Q188 **Chair:** You mentioned the Green Book earlier. Did declaring this as an emergency mean that you didn't have to go through the normal processes in the Green Book?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, we did go through the normal processes. Everything that we procured was through a normal contract, either—

Q189 **Chair:** It's just extraordinary that you spent money on something and then you realised that you didn't need it, or use it.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I absolutely accept that there lessons to be learned, but I think that in the scheme of things, when we were looking to create new types of accommodation that were not available, then putting some investment into different lines of activity is likely to create some spending that doesn't come to fruition. I think that is the issue.

Q190 **Chair:** It is just that the Home Office does other asylum accommodation and you will know that it takes a good five years to start planning the next contract, and it is unbelievable that it would happen so fast—

Simon Ridley: Chair, if I may, we didn't conclude in those two instances that we didn't need them. In terms of Linton-on-Ouse—

Q191 **Chair:** They weren't suitable.

Simon Ridley: In terms of Linton-on-Ouse, preferential bidder access by the MOD was withdrawn and we moved away from it, and that was previously—

Q192 **Chair:** Sorry—a preferential bidder accessed by the MOD. So the MOD sold it to a higher bidder?

Simon Ridley: No, it didn't give us preferential access to the land, as is set out in the NAO Report, so we couldn't get on there with the sort of speed that we needed to, in order to stand up the accommodation.



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We absolutely did need additional accommodation for all the reasons that Matthew has set out, but we couldn't make Linton-on-Ouse work. We couldn't practically put people on it.

Chair: I will get Mr Loughton to pick that up. Mr Loughton, over to you.

Q193 **Tim Loughton:** I am mystified about this huge mismatch between the estimate and the turnout cost for Scampton. Who was responsible for doing the non-intrusive pre-due diligence check on that?

Simon Ridley: We were doing the due diligence checks under the accommodation programme. We had an SRO for that programme and that ultimately fell under my leadership in the Department.

Q194 **Tim Loughton:** So a member of your staff did those checks and made the assessment that £5 million was sufficient?

Simon Ridley: Yes. We used, as is set out, a number of different contractors to support us to do those assessments. We made the best judgment that we could at pace. As Jo has said, since then we have brought a number of additional skills and capabilities into the team, to make sure that we do have the sorts of property and facilities management—

Q195 **Tim Loughton:** We keep hearing this phrase "at pace" as cover-up for the fact that it was catastrophically wrong. Why did the Home Office not look at its existing similar operations? You have been running the Napier Barracks, another MOD site, for four years. You faced similar challenges there. Surely you would have learned some lessons in terms of likely out-turn costs against the state of an existing premises, that you have had several years' experience of the pitfalls. Why didn't you just send somebody to the Napier Barracks, with some experience of having set that up, and then compare it with Scampton, for example?

Simon Ridley: We did have people in the Department who were responsible and who had set up Napier. As Matthew said, we are not using pace as an excuse.

Q196 **Tim Loughton:** You are.

Simon Ridley: No, it was part of the context—

Q197 **Tim Loughton:** Your response included the term "at pace".

Simon Ridley: It was part of the context in which we were working. We also said that we didn't have all the skills we needed in the team and that we misjudged those costs. In hindsight, we can see that. Over the course of the year, we have continued to develop those sites so we have additional accommodation for asylum seekers.

Chair: At great expense.

Q198 **Tim Loughton:** The point I am trying to make, Mr Ridley, is that this was not a first. Your Department had experience of having to acquire at pace similar premises, which you have been running for several years. That



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would have given you a fair idea of the costs of setting it up, converting it and making it run, yet you are treating Scampton as if it were a complete first, and therefore that explains why you were catastrophically wrong on the estimates. It gives me no confidence that when you have to do an at-pace consideration of an equivalent of Scampton in the future, you will not make the same mistakes because you have looked at your experience of running existing comparable units. Why did this go so wrong? Are the people responsible for it still working in your team?

Simon Ridley: The issues we are talking about are not about running the sites; they are about the initial identification of the issues to set it up. We absolutely have learned from the running of Napier, Wethersfield and other sites, and the work we are doing in Portland and will in time do at Scampton. The issues, in terms of the set-up costs, were a combination of not being able to get on site and do all the intrusive surveys, which subsequently gave us further information, not having all the right skills in the team at the time to make an accurate assessment, and making the assessment that we made very quickly. Sir Matthew and Jo have said that we acknowledge that we got that number very wrong. Some of that was definitely avoidable at the time, and some of it was less so. Those are all lessons that we have learned in the programme and the work we have done in the last year, such that we now have the programme on a much stronger footing.

Q199 **Tim Loughton:** You didn't learn them from Napier, because there were some set-up problems with Napier that caused additional costs.

Joanna Rowland: If anything, the fact that we had done Napier led us to assume that we would have a similar path. These sites are very different. They have housed very different MOD purposes, and they are in different parts of the country. For example, Scampton has its own private gas supply, which is proving quite difficult for us and requires different surveys. One of our big lessons is that MOD sites are very different. There have been surprises and unforeseen costs, and they have not been easy to convert because each one is novel in its own right.

Q200 **Tim Loughton:** Are you seriously saying that when Scampton was identified as a potential site, the MOD effectively denied you access?

Joanna Rowland: No, we didn't say that they denied us access. We did not do the intrusive surveys before we owned the site.

Q201 **Tim Loughton:** Why not?

Joanna Rowland: Because we were operating at pace and we felt that we had enough information based on the initial surveys.

Chair: So pace over value for money? I am going to bring in Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, who might want to declare his interest.

Q202 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Yes, I will declare my interest: I am a chartered surveyor. I used to work for the MOD as a chartered surveyor, and I then went on to the private sector.



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I have to tell you, Mr Ridley, that all these sites would have had basic information about the square footage, or square metreage, of the building, the size and type of gas supply, which you are complaining about now, and the size and type of electricity supply, which you are complaining about now. There are modern drone technologies for doing surveys in a matter of hours. Frankly, when I moved from the MOD to the private sector, we were doing complex property transactions of this type, where the clients—both the purchaser and the seller—wanted it, within a week. If we had produced the sort of assessment that you produced—so far adrift—we would have been sued for negligence.

Chair: Have you got anything to say about the MOD's role in this?

Simon Ridley: The MOD did have basic information about the square footage of the buildings and those sorts of things, absolutely.

Q203 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I bet you paid more than £5 million for the lease—the sums just did not add up at £5 million—but let us move on from property point of view to the people aspect. By the way, on the property aspects, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority gave a red assessment three times at various stages of this project. If they can give a red assessment, I do not know why the Home Office could not work out it was wrong. Anyway, let us move on from the property aspects.

When you purchased RAF Wethersfield, you originally calculated that you could accommodate 3,700 people there. It has actually turned out that you can accommodate only 800, so not only were your property aspects dreadfully wrong but your actual estimates of the number of people you were going to be able to accommodate were dreadfully wrong. I assume that the same thing will be true at Scampton; you will be able to house only 800 people. That is 1,600 people on the two sites, as opposed to the 3,700 on the one site that you thought you were going to be able to accommodate. Is that correct?

Simon Ridley: If I may correct the first point, the original planning was for 1,700 on Wethersfield and 2,000 on Scampton, so you are quite right that 3,700 was, in the initial planning, the total across the two sites. You are also correct that our current operations are to run Wethersfield at 800, with the ability to surge to a little over 1,200 if it is required, and that is in place. Similarly, we will reduce the number at Scampton, as Sir Matthew said earlier, and we are in the process of discussing the final plans with the local authority at the moment.

There are lots of reasons for those changes—some about money and some about operational capacity and safety—and we have determined with the current Home Secretary and Ministers that 800 is the right level for those two sites. We are also in a very different position this spring to the position we were in last spring: we have successfully reduced new arrivals; we have successfully made a lot of initial decisions in terms of the backlog, so we are able to close hotels; and we have fewer people on our estate than we did a year ago by a significant amount.

Q204 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I am sure we will want to come back to



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that at some stage, but time is moving on. Can I then take you to paragraph 5.8 on page 40 and talk about detention accommodation? The final line or two of that paragraph says that the Home Office, “has plans to increase this by 1,000 places by re-opening centres at Haslar and Campsfield House. By the end of 2025, it expects to have capacity to detain over 3,500 people.” Is this likely to be anywhere near enough, assuming that you could accommodate 3,500 people?

Simon Ridley: We mentioned this earlier. This describes the plans we have under way to increase our detained accommodation. We may well need further detained accommodation—we have been and we are considering options for that—but the timeline to build new detained accommodation is significant.

Q205 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** You will no doubt keep both Committees updated on that aspect, please.

Simon Ridley: Of course.

Q206 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Can I then take you to figure 11 on page 46, which is to do with the contracts? I note that there are five contracts that were not submitted to competition, and those five amount to £243 million of the total £253 million. Is that not a pretty unsatisfactory procurement exercise, even though you will no doubt tell me that it was done in an emergency, at pace, and everything else? Surely it would have been possible to have competed on a number of those contracts.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: These were under framework contracts, so there was competition for the initial framework. Of course, one of the purposes of having framework agreements in place is precisely to draw down from those frameworks at pace when there is an emergency. We were using those frameworks as a way of operating as quickly as possible within a context where there had already been competition.

Q207 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** So you had a framework for each of these individual contracts, or a range of types of contract that you might want to compete, and you therefore chose that firm at whatever price they put in under the framework.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is a range of answers to that question, Sir Geoffrey. We had the Crown Commercial Service framework, which we used for the Bibby Stockholm and the modular elements at Scampton. Given the close working relationship with the Ministry of Justice and the fact that it provides property services, the Home Office used its contracts for Wethersfield and Scampton. We then had existing contracts in place with our providers Serco and Clearsprings for the additional services at Wethersfield and Scampton. There are three different types—to answer to the question—but all of them were competed.

Q208 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Well, of a sort. Let us turn to the bottom line for Scampton: £72 million, which is not yet agreed. Why was it necessary to procure that under a framework rather than a full procurement exercise?



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Joanna Rowland: Perhaps I can add a few things. First, we have existing relationships with the suppliers that, as Sir Matthew said, were competitively tendered. We have good checks and balances in our contracts. For example, we have a profit cap over which they have to return a certain amount of profit. We regularly review the profit margins, and we have existing contract managers in place that understand the terms of the contracts in detail. To set up new contracts and add new suppliers into that—I realise the “pace” word has been used, but bear in mind that it was at pace—would have added risk.

However, the other thing to say is that this is not a big market. While, at small scale, there are far more players in the market, at this scale, there is no huge market available to us, and we are working with the Crown Commercial Service to grow that market. While it was using existing contracts, it was not without checks and balances.

Q209 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Let us go back to the Scampton project again. I imagine that the biggest part of that contract will be the security. There are a number of firms that will supply this type of security, so it would have been possible—it would still be possible—to compete that contract fully. It just seems to be a practice that the Home Office has got into of procuring in this way, and I am not sure it is achieving the best value for money for the taxpayer.

Joanna Rowland: Full procurements do take some time, they do need to be well thought through and they do need soft market engagement followed by full market engagement. We have not given any contractor exclusivity. We are still free to go to the market at any point with any of our contracts, either to introduce new players into it, to continue with some of the services already procured or to diversify into new sites. But this was, in our opinion, the most appropriate commercial avenue available to us at the time.

Q210 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Accepting that answer at face value for the moment, what I want, Mr Ridley and Sir Matthew, is to get an assurance from you that, when these contracts come to an end—we do not know when they will come to an end, whether they are short or long—there will be an opportunity that they will be properly, fully competed for on renewal, rather than just being renewed to the same contractor.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely, Sir Geoffrey. To add one thing to what Jo said, our contract with, in this case, Serco, is for the provision of asylum accommodation in, broadly speaking, one third of the country. We use that contract reasonably. We adjust that contract reasonably, I think, in relation to changes in circumstances when what we need is additional or different accommodation for asylum seekers in that part of the country. It is not as though we are doing one thing over here based on a contract over there; it is part of the original contract to provide asylum support services, including accommodation, in that part of the country. I think there is a closer link between the original contract and this work than you are worried about, but I will absolutely ensure that, where time permits, we get the benefits of competition in this work.



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Q211 **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I will ask one final question, because I know the Chair is anxious about the time. This link with the MOJ contract with Cushman & Wakefield in terms of procuring sites—can you just explain how that works? To me, it looks as though a client was instructed to do one thing and was taken over by another Department. Was it the same thing or was it different?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Jo might want to add something on this. We work very closely with the Ministry of Justice on all sorts of things, as you would expect. Until very recently, it provided our property services anyway, so given it was a property issue, it was a reasonable thing to be using that route to get this contract.

Joanna Rowland: That is absolutely right: it is a long-standing relationship. The MOJ has a very experienced estates department. We have used it so far only for facilities management and the initial services, so it is not that it provides wider accommodation services to us, but we benefit from its expertise and experience.

Q212 **Chair:** And the same for Kier?

Joanna Rowland: Yes.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: What a pity you didn't take them with you when you went to look at these new sites.

Q213 **Chair:** But that was the same for Kier plc as well.

Joanna Rowland: Yes.

Q214 **Chair:** And when it says that the money for the site is "not recorded" by the Home Office, was it not recorded because there was no additional cost, or is there a cost that we still have to find out from them?

Joanna Rowland: I would need to double check that.

Chair: It is important that we find that out. Thank you.

Q215 **Matt Warman:** How many people do you have in hotels at the moment, how many hotels are there, and what is the cost to the taxpayer?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: All those numbers are going down, you will be glad to know. The latest number was 40,000 in hotels. We have closed over 100. The per person per night cost has not gone down yet, but the total amount is going down. It is now just less than £8 million per day, which is less than previously, even though it is still such a huge number.

The per person costs are actually going up, because we are removing people from hotels faster than we are closing down the hotels. At the moment, we are paying for more unused bed space, because there is a lag in terms of closing hotels. The per person cost has gone up to £166 per person per night, and previously it had been in the range of £125 to £166. We are expecting that £166 number to go down as we close more hotels.



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Simon Ridley: In the last published statistics, there were 45,768 people in hotel contingency accommodation. That was at the end of December. We will publish the new number when we do the next set of statistics, and it will be considerably down from that.

Q216 **Matt Warman:** Bearing in mind the conversation we have just had about large sites, those numbers are not going down because people are being moved to Scampton or Wethersfield, or anything like that; they are going down largely because the number of people being processed has gone up.

Simon Ridley: They are going down for a number of reasons. They are going down because we successfully reduced arrivals in 2023 by 36%. That means fewer people coming into our system. We made all the initial decisions under the original—

Q217 **Chair:** Just to be clear, that was mostly down to Albanians who were sent back to Albania—and the weather.

Simon Ridley: Well, we had far fewer people arriving last year, through a combination of the work we did to deter Albanians by returning them every week, the work we did with the French on the coasts to interrupt arrivals, the work we are doing upstream to disrupt the supply chains, and the other aspects of our approach.

It is also because we made all the decisions under the legacy backlog. That enabled people who were granted to leave accommodation. It is partly because of Operation Maximise, where we identified another 11,500 bed spaces within the hotel estate, enabling us to close some of the hotels and reducing the cost. It is because we have a number of people at Wethersfield and on the Bibby who would otherwise be in hotel accommodation. But they are a smaller number—you are quite right.

Q218 **Matt Warman:** You have 40,000-odd people in hotels and a much smaller number on large sites. In the medium term, is the proportion of people in large sites expected to go up, or are we simply going to see a similar kind of proportion, meaning that hotels are surely with us for quite a long time?

Simon Ridley: There are a number of variables in that question, in terms of the numbers that affect the number of people we accommodate and the number of people we ultimately have in hotels. We are continuing to seek to drive the number in hotels down, through all the things we have talked about, and also by seeking to increase the accommodation we have in the dispersed estate—that is, around the country. But because of the pressures on that part of the housing market, it is difficult to substantively grow. Our aim is to keep dropping the number of people in hotels as we go through the year, but that is subject to the variables that we have discussed.

Q219 **Matt Warman:** Is it your view that the dispersal accommodation ultimately offers better value for money for the taxpayer, or is it that it puts lesser tensions on local communities?



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Simon Ridley: Dispersal accommodation is cheaper than hotel accommodation per person per night. There are also advantages in terms of spreading people through different communities. Also, as we said earlier, hotels have different functions in the economy, and bringing them back into active use is beneficial.

Q220 **Matt Warman:** I had six hotels in my constituency that were being used. I am now down to one, which is obviously progress. Unfortunately, it is the biggest hotel on the seafront in Skegness, so it has a dominant presence. Can you give me a sense of when someone like me is likely to be able to say that no hotels are being used for this purpose in their constituency?

Simon Ridley: It is very difficult to put a time on that, because of the uncertainties. It will depend on all the things that we have been discussing in these two sessions today.

Q221 **Matt Warman:** So there is not really much light at the end of the tunnel.

Simon Ridley: We have successfully closed over 100 hotels. We are continuing to close more. With all the work that we are doing, we hope to be able to get to the point where we can bring hotels and communities back into active economic use as much as possible, but I cannot put a date on that, Mr Warman.

Q222 **Matt Warman:** You have talked about how, at the moment, you have a big buffer in the number of rooms that you are paying for versus the number that are actually being used, and presumably we can expect another wave of hotels to be closed relatively soon. What is a comfortable buffer for you? How can we think about value for money for the taxpayer and for those communities, because it is obviously even worse in some ways for a local community to know that the taxpayer is funding an empty hotel than it is for it to be used?

Simon Ridley: As we have said, and as I think is in the NAO Report, we hold a buffer of about 5,000 beds to enable us to make sure that we can move people through Manston quickly when there are arrivals. At the moment, as Sir Matthew said, we have a larger number of empty beds. In large part, that is because of the operational necessities of closing hotels, where we have to move everyone out of a hotel that we are going to close, but we close it only at the end of the commercial agreement that we have, which means that we hold a number. That will reduce as we continue to go through the programme. It is certainly not our intention to be holding hotels empty after that.

Q223 **Matt Warman:** Could those contracts that mean you have to keep paying such bills have been better negotiated, so that we did not see this hold-up, do you think?

Simon Ridley: We usually have break clauses of three months—it varies for different hotels. As I said, we are dealing with considerable uncertainty with the numbers, and those are the sorts of lead times that strike a balance between the flexibility that we need and the commercial realities of the situation.



Q224 Matt Warman: You are obviously right to talk about the value to local communities of hotels doing the job that they should be doing, rather than acting as hostels, or whatever you want to call them, for your purposes. What consideration have you or other Departments given to the cost of that to local communities in terms of social cohesion and all that? When I think about the hotels in Skegness that are now empty, they are an eyesore and doing significant damage to the local economy, because where people used to phone up hoteliers to say, "How close are you to these hotels I've heard about?", and to cancel their bookings if they turn out to be next door, now people say, "Well, we wouldn't want to book that one, because it's next to an eyesore," as I said. That is your fault, isn't it?

Simon Ridley: To your first question, we have done a lot of assessments of hotels and value for money on the per person per night costs, but you are right that there are wider disbenefits in local areas to having hotels out of their economic use, as well as the broader community impacts, certainly in some cases. That is something that we have looked at. It is very hard to quantify, but we have work under way to continue to assess that. As we said, the aim of our policies and operations in this approach is to minimise the number of hotels that we are using, and ultimately we hope to stop using them.

Q225 Matt Warman: Finally, you will have read reports of people specifically buying up hotels that were essentially distressed assets to take advantage of the schemes that you were proposing. Have you done any work on what we might call those rogue landlords and the potential for them not only to be taking advantage of the money on offer from the Government, but to be the worst kind of landlords for people when it comes to returning those hotels to their intended purpose? You are potentially putting real burdens on local communities or on future owners. Is your assumption that when these hotels are in a real state, they will be picked up cheap and refurbished and it is not your problem, or do you think that the Home Office has a responsibility to those communities?

Joanna Rowland: In my team now, we have liaison officers working directly with every local authority. As you know, each local authority area has different challenges, and each return of every hotel will have different meaning. That is part of our assessment when we are closing hotels and on in what order to close them. Although the Home Office cannot take responsibility for the whole housing market—obviously across Government we work with DLUHC and other Departments to manage the wider issue of housing and landlords—we are not cloth-eared to the issues that local authorities face. We are in direct liaison with local authorities in a way that perhaps in the early days we were not.

Q226 Matt Warman: What does that mean in practice? Does that mean that there is potentially money on the table for restitution, or is there a possibility that you would not close a hotel if you thought that it might do more harm as an eyesore on the seafront? What does a liaison officer do?



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Joanna Rowland: Ultimately, we can only spend the money that is within the purposes of the Department to spend. However, we are not doing it in isolation from the local authority: we are doing it at a pace that the local authority can manage. We are also doing it in consultation with the community. All local authorities now have a place-based visibility tool where they can see all the accommodation occupied. It is not their personal details, but it is every asylum seeker housed within their local authority area and the type of accommodation that they are in. We are working in partnership as far as we are able.

Q227 **Matt Warman:** I am still not clear what that partnership means other than managing a timeline. It does not seem like it will do anyone any good when it comes to trying to get those hotels back to the state that they were in before they were used for this purpose. Can you put some flesh on the bones of what good it might actually do?

Joanna Rowland: Obviously we do not have a pot of money to regenerate hotels. What we can do, though, is ensure that we work with the local authority so that they understand the timing and, within their local town planning, factor in the return of assets or hotels within their area.

Q228 **Sarah Olney:** I want to talk a bit about the safety of asylum seekers in the large sites. I have had a concern for a hotel in my constituency. I had a lot of complaints both via the local authority and directly from residents in the hotel, principally about the state of the food that they were being served but on other concerns as well. That is here in figure 10 in the Report, which has some really quite grave concerns about the safety of residents on the Bibby Stockholm and at the Wethersfield site.

My experience when I was trying to engage the Home Office in my concerns about the hotel in my constituency was that they are all being outsourced to a contractor, and that it was really very difficult to get engagement on how things could be improved. Sir Matthew, can you tell me what is being done to really address the concerns around the health and safety of residents at these large sites?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: First, I am sorry to hear about the concerns within your own constituency. If you would like to take those up separately, of course we will do that.

Q229 **Sarah Olney:** The hotel, I am informed, is no longer hosting asylum seekers. That is why my concern has now transferred to these sites rather than my own constituency.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Secondly, there are benefits from the perspective of the asylum seeker of being in a large site rather than in a hotel. For instance, they include access to healthcare without having to join a queue in the local community; there is often a specific provision for the large site. There are also benefits in terms of efficiency of asylum interviewing and so on, so there are some benefits to the large sites as well as some disbenefits.



Thirdly, the Home Office runs all this accommodation through suppliers. That does not mean that we are hands-off, though. We run it through the suppliers, and the suppliers have the primary responsibility for providing food of the right standard, for instance, but we manage those contracts through the arrangements that Jo set out in ways that hold our suppliers to account. When there are concerns, as we have heard, about the quality of food or anything else—whether it is healthcare provision or security—we pursue those vigorously with our suppliers.

Q230 Sarah Olney: The Report says that there have been 283 incidents of suicide or self-harm specifically related to room-sharing. What are you doing to address that particular issue?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: This is a very significant issue, as you would expect. We make sure that, first, there is screening of each individual asylum seeker before they are moved on to a large site or into a hotel. If they are sharing a room, we make sure that they and the person they are sharing with are suitable for sharing a room so that we do not create any additional pressures. Thirdly, if there are still incidents that happen or tensions that arise despite those steps, on each site there are signposted ways for each of those people to take up their concerns.

Q231 Sarah Olney: To what extent is the health and welfare of the migrants an objective? Is it a greater, equal or lesser objective compared with the cost of providing a space for them?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is baked into the way the Home Office provides accommodation and the way we run our contracts with our commercial suppliers. There is a minimum standard that the suppliers have to uphold in order to ensure that each individual has those rights protected.

Q232 Sarah Olney: Is there a financial penalty for your contractors if they do not adhere to that?

Simon Ridley: There are clear KPIs on the accommodation being safe and habitable. We have, as you would expect, regular contract management and governance meetings where we scrutinise the KPI returns from our suppliers, so that is absolutely baked into the contract. At Wethersfield and Bibby, we also have on-site health services that are open Monday to Friday. In both cases it is essentially all day; I think it is 10 to 6 at Wethersfield and 9 to 5 at Bibby. The providers have welfare teams on site. We also have a senior member of staff at the large sites to work with the police locally and so on.

Q233 Sarah Olney: Finally, have those financial penalties been invoked in relation to the incidents listed in figure 10—the identification of legionella bacteria on Bibby Stockholm and the detection of infectious diseases at Wethersfield?

Simon Ridley: I do not have all the commercial details, but we have been through those incidents with our providers.

Q234 Sarah Olney: Would you be able to let the Committee know what financial penalties are invoked in relation to those?



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Simon Ridley: I am happy to let you know any facts within the commercial confidentiality of the contract.

Q235 **Matt Warman:** Picking up on some of those healthcare issues, one of the reasons why it is particularly inappropriate to house people in hotels in Skegness, for instance, is that the local NHS is not set up for people with the sorts of problems that we have seen with asylum seekers. From what you are saying, it is surely the case that the provision of healthcare services on the large sites is not just right for those people, but a massively higher standard and a lower waiting list, for instance, than it would be for typical constituents. Is that what you are really saying, and is that a conscious decision that comes from the Department?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No. What we are saying is that, to ensure that we are not adding unnecessarily to the burden that is already strong in a local community—Portland in relation to Bibby, for instance—we are instead providing a bespoke service for the asylum seekers on that site. That does not mean that we are aiming to give them preferential access; it means that we are seeking to not have a negative impact on local access.

Q236 **Matt Warman:** But you are giving them a higher standard of care than what everyone else could expect.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are providing the standard of care that is appropriate for their circumstances. As your colleague was suggesting, sometimes they are more vulnerable than average, so sometimes it would make sense for them to have that.

Q237 **Matt Warman:** Does that mean that in some ways you are suggesting that the standard of care for Joe Public, for want of a better word, is below what it should be?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, it does not mean that at all. It means that asylum seekers on some sites have some needs that are better provided for by a bespoke service for the people on the site, partly in order not to detract from the existing service for the existing customers of that service—that is, the local inhabitants.

Q238 **Matt Warman:** I think we have heard that, for instance, the wait at Wethersfield to see a GP was about an hour, which is great. I know every one of my constituents would think that was excellent, but it is not what is available. How well do you think you are calibrating what is on offer for people where the need might genuinely not be that urgent?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, on the basis of the last 10 minutes, we have one person who thinks we are doing too much and another who thinks we are doing not enough, so—

Q239 **Chair:** That is an unfair characterisation. It is a fair question from Mr Warman: how do you decide what resource to provide?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are not seeking to provide an unnecessarily luxurious amount of support in any sense, whether that is healthcare, food



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or anything else, but we are seeking to provide an appropriate amount for people to live in dignity.

Q240 **Matt Warman:** I think what you have actually heard—to characterise what we are saying—is that you are not serving the most vulnerable people as well as perhaps you could be, but you are doing the low-hanging fruit too well, if that makes sense. The GP appointment should not be your top priority; it should be the most vulnerable people. This is surely a failure of provision.

Joanna Rowland: Those incidents reported in the NAO Report are not necessarily all incidents of self-harm. We have a migrant helpline that is available to all asylum seekers, whether they are on a large site or in dispersed accommodation. That is 24/7. We also have within all our contracts and with the 400-plus staff I directly employ in accommodation services—they are all looking for any concerns around welfare or safeguarding; and if a concern is raised, an incident is raised, so that we can act accordingly.

We definitely look for equitable care between the two. For any bed occupied within a local authority area, the local authority gets £3,500, in acknowledgement that there is extra population for their services, within their area. However, large sites could have a disproportionate burden, which is why it is appropriate we put our own additional healthcare services in there.

Q241 **Matt Warman:** But, for instance, NICE or various bits of the Department of Health have what they think are reasonable standards for the time that people have to wait for a GP appointment, a dentist appointment or whatever. None of that is an hour.

Joanna Rowland: I think it is very important to acknowledge that the asylum-seeking population is not typical with regard to the population of the UK. Many are coming from very traumatic experiences and backgrounds. Some may have particularly acute health problems that need urgent treatment and, indeed, it is important that does get treated—

Q242 **Matt Warman:** You wouldn't go to a GP for urgent treatment, though.

Joanna Rowland: No. I am just suggesting that therefore it is not a comparable population to the population of the UK.

Simon Ridley: It is also worth saying that we made the judgments on the services in concert with local public service providers and also with national health colleagues, in terms of the decisions around large sites—

Q243 **Chair:** Certainly one of the challenges of hotels was that people often arrived at short notice and put an extra burden on local—

Simon Ridley: That was a particular problem through 2022 and early 2023. The work that Jo has described, in terms of the information we provide to local authorities—

Q244 **Chair:** Can I just ask, finally, where you get these GPs from? We do not



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have that many GPs.

Simon Ridley: That is a question for the local health service. We work with them and provide funding to the health service.

Q245 **Chair:** You are paying the health service. You are providing funding.

Simon Ridley: Yes; it is not Home Office provision.

Q246 **Chair:** But you are providing funding. You are paying directly for the GPs who provide this. It is not a normal NHS service—you are paying extra.

Simon Ridley: Correct.

Chair: Okay, thank you.

Q247 **Mr Djanogly:** I am slightly confused here. We have been talking about closing hotels. That means fewer spaces. We have been talking about opening large sites. That means more spaces, although the large sites are going to have fewer spaces than we thought. What is the number of detention spaces actually needed to operate the asylum system?

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that we are talking about non-detained accommodation—just to be completely clear.

Chair: Yes, we are absolutely clear. This is going back to Mr Loughton's earlier question.

Simon Ridley: The answer depends on a whole set of variables, so there is not a point number I can give. It depends on the number of people arriving, how fast we make decisions, what the grant rates are, how many people appeal and so on. There is a very complicated set of variables. What we try to do is to assess, on a set of assumptions and significant sensitivities around that, what we think we need. It was on that basis that we concluded in October that we expected the population to go down and we could start closing hotels, and that is what we are doing.

It is worth saying that, while you are right that we are opening new beds on large sites, the total population in the Home Office estate is going down at the moment. That is the current direction of travel.

Q248 **Mr Djanogly:** So you will have enough for what you need?

Simon Ridley: We have enough for what we need right now and a little bit more, as we have discussed. What we are trying to do is to get the right balance between what we need and the supply that we have, so we are not overburdening communities or spending more than we need to.

Q249 **Chair:** Before we finish, I just wanted to go back briefly, Ms Rowland, to the liaison officers that you talked about. In this Committee in the past, we have had evidence from colleagues about the lack of liaison between the Home Office and local authorities, so if that is working well, then that is a good move.

However, there are issues around data sharing and homelessness. We have had evidence in this hearing and in previous hearings that when you



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are moving people out of hotels, and also when you are going through the backlog and people are getting their assessment, they often need to be put into temporary accommodation by the local authority. Sometimes, they are bidding for the same hotel spaces or temporary accommodation as you. How are your liaison officers actually making a difference there—or are they, yet?

Joanna Rowland: We have done three things in this area, because you are absolutely right that it is a challenge that local authorities face.

First, I have already mentioned that we have the visibility tool for every local authority. We have also introduced a safeguard to make sure that when a decision letter is issued, the local authority is notified. Previously—

Q250 **Chair:** That was always the case.

Joanna Rowland: It was not happening reliably, so we now have a safeguard—

Q251 **Chair:** For the family amnesty, though—I think it was the family resettlement scheme of 15 or 16 years ago, or even longer ago than that—local authorities were notified then. It had been there and it had not been working very well, and now you have reinstated it as a more effective—

Joanna Rowland: There were reports from some local authorities that it was not reliable enough, so we have put safeguards in there.

The second thing we have done is to work with the DWP. As you may know, it is 35 days before an initial universal credit payment is made. Once we issue the biometric residency permit—that is not instantly at point of decision; it is a short time afterwards—there are 28 days within our accommodation. In order not to wait for the biometric residency permit, we have made arrangements with DWP that they will accept the decision letter as evidence, so people can start their universal credit claim early and access the necessary benefits.

Finally, we also are offering a transition loan. It is paid back through benefits eventually, but it is paid by us to asylum seekers to help them to make that transition from our support into the communities.

Q252 **Chair:** Are you therefore asking some of those people to make their own decisions and find their own housing? Surely, because they are suddenly out there with legal status but with nowhere to live, they will fall upon the local authority process.

Joanna Rowland: We are doing an awful lot while they are in our accommodation to help with that transition, and at the point of decision we are also offering extra services and education to asylum seekers about what it means to live in society, how they access benefit services, run houses and pay bills—

Q253 **Chair:** So from the point of decision to when they have to leave the temporary accommodation, the hotel or wherever they are with you, how



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long is that?

Joanna Rowland: It is 28 days from when the biometric residency permit is issued, but how long it is between the decision and that permit being issued can vary.

Q254 **Chair:** It is not related to this, but I had a case of somebody whose case was decided and it took six months for her then to be sent a letter, and another six months—maybe even longer—for her to be notified, and she still has not received her biometric residency permit. There has been a slowness in the system. Are all these asylum seekers getting their biometric residency permit in a reasonable period of time? What is your average time for issuing it, from decision to issue?

Joanna Rowland: It is a matter of a week or so normally, and then the 28 days. The case that you mentioned sounds like an unusual case and as Sir Matthew said, any individual cases that you have—

Q255 **Chair:** I will write to you. As I say, it is nothing to do with this, but it is interesting that you can do it in a week, but other people who are in this country trying to live their legitimate life, and who have gone through everything legally, still cannot get it and cannot work without it.

That is helpful to know, but local authorities also have to pay for planning costs on the sites, and we have had some evidence from West Lindsey District Council in particular on that; I thank all those who have given evidence. This is a big issue: it is a big, expensive thing when suddenly an empty, derelict site is turned into something. That is a lot of money for a local authority, and some of these are small, cash-strapped districts. Have you considered providing any support or funding?

Simon Ridley: Local authorities get the money as people come on site—

Q256 **Chair:** This is the £3,000 per head?

Simon Ridley: Yes, the £3,500 per head.

Joanna Rowland: In the case of West Lindsey District Council, we are in active discussions with them about the regeneration of the site. It is fully our intention to see that site developed in future, particularly because of its heritage status. All that is still subject to discussion, and it is very early in those discussions.

Q257 **Chair:** We do not have time to go into that, but I am sure local MPs will. Finally, Sir Matthew, you called for a ministerial direction on the Rwanda scheme. On this, we have gone into details about the costs and how they have escalated—if we had £10 for every time you have all said “pace”, we would at least be having a slap-up meal. Did you not consider a ministerial direction for the pace at which you had to deliver these large asylum sites, which are still mostly not delivered?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I did consider that, and I decided that in each case it was feasible to—

Q258 **Chair:** You took each site separately?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is right, as well as the programme as a whole, and then, as I mentioned, I am looking every quarter—the next time is later this month—at all the accounting officer tests. If any of them were to turn negative, particularly value for money, but feasibility as well, I would have to say to the Home Secretary, “We will need to exit that site or, to continue, you would need to give a ministerial direction.” That is something that is a live issue in the Home Office as some of the variables fluctuate.

Chair: It is a live issue; that is helpful to know. We have had a long session, partly because we were covering two important pieces of work by the National Audit Office. I thank them for providing that on this important scheme, which is about to be before the House today with Lords amendments to the Bill in question on Rwanda. We are aware that the issue will not resolve itself overnight, but I hope we have teased out some of the issues of cost and resilience. We will continue to look at it, along with our sister Committee—our colleagues have hopped off to the Chamber to question Ministers directly.

We will produce a Report, probably at some point after the May recess or, with a fair wind, perhaps before. We are trying to keep up our pace. I thank our witnesses, Joanna Rowland, Simon Ridley, Sir Matthew Rycroft and Dan Hobbs, for their time. The transcript will be available on the website, uncorrected, in the next couple of days—many thanks to our great colleagues at *Hansard* for that.