

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Home Office, HC 505

Tuesday 4 February 2025

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Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Shaun Davies; Mr Paul Kohler; Ben Maguire; Robbie Moore; Margaret Mullane; Chris Murray; Mr Connor Rand; Bell Ribeiro-Addy; Jake Richards.

Questions 1-81

Witnesses

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir Matthew Rycroft and Simon Ridley.

Chair: Thank you so much for coming before us today. It is always good for the Home Affairs Committee to meet the people who are running the Department. We have a number of questions, which will be quite varied, but I will try to make sure that we stick to time and do not spend too long on any one area if we can avoid it.

Q1 **Shaun Davies:** How have the Department's priorities and organisational structure changed since the general election last summer?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Thank you very much for this opportunity, Chair, and thank you, Committee members, for the questions. The Home Office is proud to have one of the five missions and two of the three foundations of this Government. All three big things that the Home Office does are well up there in terms of this Government's priorities: migration and the border, which is where the border security foundation comes from; policing and crime, which is where the safer streets mission is reflected; and thirdly, homeland security, which is the national security foundation.

Our structure maps on very well to the Government's priorities since the general election at the top level. Within that, we have moved people around. Most quickly, over that first weekend after the election we took the 1,000 people who were running the Rwanda scheme for the previous Government and put them on other duties. We have made other changes since then—for instance, building up the capability within the safer streets mission part of the Department to reflect this Government's prioritisation of police reform, halving violence against women and girls, halving knife crime and so on, all of which are a higher priority broadly for this Government than in our previous structure.

Q2 **Shaun Davies:** Other Departments have an outcome delivery plan, but I understand that the Home Office has not delivered one since 2021. Is that right? Do you plan to have a formalised delivery plan?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We had an outcome delivery plan for each of the years under the previous Government. I thought they were published, but I will check that. I am pretty sure they were published annually, and in our annual report and accounts we set out what we consider we have done under that outcome delivery plan.

Q3 **Shaun Davies:** The information we have received is that one has not been published, so it would be helpful to see that. Do you think the reputation the Home Office has among some—of being siloed in its mentality and the way in which it approaches work with other Whitehall Departments—is fair?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I absolutely know where that reputation comes from. Five years ago, I had never worked in the Home Office, and frankly I had that view of the Home Office. Coming into it nearly five years ago,



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that was one of the first things that I wanted to shift. The Windrush review came out literally the week before I started this role, and underpinning Wendy Williams's 30 recommendations was a very significant recommendation to shift the culture of the Department to make it more open and more joined up. That was the direction of travel I took on five years ago.

We have made some good progress at the top level. The executive committee—the permanent secretaries and the directors general in the Department—are a very collaborative, un-siloed group of people who are collectively running the Department. If you go one or two levels down, I think you could say the same thing, but the further down you go into the Department, the more people feel their identity is to one part of the Department rather than to the whole thing.

When it gets to questions in the people survey annually about things like pride, what we see is that people are very proud of the work they do, but they are not particularly proud of being in the Home Office as an institution. They might be proud of being in Border Force Heathrow or immigration enforcement north-east, but they are not particularly proud of the Home Office. Simon and I and our colleagues on the executive committee have been trying to work on that over the last year. It is a work in progress. We still have to work day in, day out to break down those silos and join up with other parts of Government.

Q4 Shaun Davies: Do you ask other partners across Whitehall, or local authorities and other organisations across the country, how they perceive the Home Office and its approach?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We do. I am very keen that we are a learning organisation. The only way you can learn is to know how you are doing, and that includes how other people think of you. I have already mentioned the annual people survey, which gives every one of our civil servants the opportunity to set that out, but we also do structured polling or assessing of the views of other people.

It remains the case that the Home Office is not that straightforward a partner for local authorities or some NGOs delivering our services. We are very keen to work on that and learn the lessons of the Windrush report to make sure that that sort of scandal can never happen again and that we are genuinely open to challenge, whether that comes from within or from one of our trusted partners outside.

Q5 Shaun Davies: Sir Matthew, you have been at the Home Office for five years. The perceptions that others have, you had when you arrived. On the Windrush report, are you confident that the culture and organisation of the Department now mean that it would not be possible for those mistakes to be made again?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am very confident that those mistakes will not be made again. We are also seeking to prevent anything like that scandal happening again in any part of the Department. That is an ongoing challenge. As you know, it is a large Department. It is dealing with



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complex and politically sensitive work. A large part of it is casework: thousands and thousands of decisions can be made each year, and only one or one small group of those going wrong would amount to a crisis.

That is the work that we are doing to make sure that we have the quality control and the systems in place, but also the capability within the workforce—not only so a Windrush crisis cannot happen again, but so nothing like that could happen again. It is hard to absolutely guarantee that we will not have that, but rest assured that the top official team and the ministerial team are working really hard to prevent that sort of thing from ever being able to happen again.

- Q6 **Shaun Davies:** I am coming towards the end of my questions. We are holding an inquiry into asylum hotels at the moment, and there is a huge amount of concern around some of the operations that are taking place. Do you feel that under your leadership the Home Office has a culture in which people have the confidence to genuinely speak up, both within the organisation and among partners if they see things that are culturally wrong? When people do speak up about concerns, are those concerns acted on in an appropriate way?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I really do, but I know that there is further to go. In the most recent people survey, there was an uptick in the number of people who felt safe to challenge, but no increase in the number of people who felt that if they did make a challenge, something would happen as a result. That absolutely gets to your question. There is much further to go on that: that work will never be fully complete. We have to keep going to genuinely instil a sense that challenge is not only a right—one should be able to challenge—but almost an obligation. If you are an expert and you can see something going wrong in your area, I would hope that you would feel compelled to do something about it and raise your voice. You will be backed if you raise something constructively.

I have a mantra about maximum challenge before Ministers take a decision and maximum implementation and delivery after they have decided it. That is very simplistic, but it is a starting point for a debate about challenge. It is a good way in. People should be challenging not just Ministers, but senior officials and each other. The same applies to people outside the Department before things get locked down. Once things are locked down, broadly speaking, the job of the civil service is to get on and deliver. Even when you are delivering, though, you can challenge how you are delivering. There might be a better way within your part of the business where you can improve things even after a decision has been taken.

- Q7 **Shaun Davies:** Finally, the missions of the Government and those owned by the Home Office, together with the priorities, all require a huge amount of partnership work across Whitehall Departments and organisations up and down the country, but it takes two to tango. Does the Home Office have the culture and the mindset that it cannot just deliver these things by itself and that it does genuinely need to empower and co-operate with others to do so?



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think I will give a version of the same answer that I gave previously: I am proud of the progress we have made on that score, but we have absolutely not completed that journey. There is definitely further to go.

I think we have very good relationships at senior levels with, for instance, the Ministry of Justice and the rest of the criminal justice system. You would expect that, given the day-to-day working that we have to do, and I think you saw the benefit of that during the widespread disorder in the summer, in the response of the criminal justice system. But, as your question implies, we also need to be just as strong at working with local authorities, including in Simon's areas, and with our colleagues in education and health. I am sure we will come on later to the consequences of the Southport tragedies, but joining up across the system is a never-ending task, and we need to be much better at it.

Q8 Chair: We have just checked the outcome delivery plan. The last one was published on the gov.uk website in June 2021, so you might want to check whether it has just not made it to gov.uk or whether there is something else there.

I want to pick up on the point you made about people being proud to identify with Border Force at Heathrow. Is it that they do not feel that they are part of the Home Office, or is it that they are embarrassed about the Home Office?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I really hope that no one is embarrassed by the Home Office, although I expect one or two people are. It is such a large organisation and the way that that we run it, we do not want people to suppress their other levels of identity.

Border Force is a very strong organisation with its own brand. It literally has its own uniform, and the people who wear that uniform are quite rightly proud to work for Border Force. I think Border Force is all the stronger by being a part of the Home Office. In previous times, before I was at the Department, it had been totally separate. That does not solve the problems that we need to solve. The way Phil Douglas, the DG of Border Force, has run Border Force over the last few years has been very much integrating with Simon and me as part of the Home Office. He is a member of our executive committee, just as the other DGs are.

I think it is a mixture of different things, some of which I am very, very keen to change by having a strong Home Office level of identity on top of that strong Border Force identity.

Q9 Chris Murray: Thank you both for coming to the Committee again. I want to ask some questions about staffing.

Sir Matthew, you have been permanent secretary for five years. Home Office spending is now 86% more than it was five years ago, and 53% more in real terms: it is £2.9 billion. However, in asylum support, resettlement and accommodation, which is obviously one of the big priorities of the Government now, the staff headcount is going down by



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3,500. Could you explain why?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely. In big-picture terms, in the time that I have been in the Department, the total size of the civil service in the Home Office has gone up from 35,000 to a peak of 53,000 a few months ago. That is the uplift of around 80% that you talked about. It is now on its way down: it is 51,000 and reducing. That is the total: within that, some parts have gone up or down at different times, but on average that is what has been happening.

There are three big reasons for the increase. The first is covid: the pandemic put different requirements on the Home Office. The second is the UK's exit from the EU: particularly at the border, that gave us additional responsibilities that we had not had previously. The third is the fact that different immigration policies at different times have required extra caseworkers to do different parts of the thing.

There are other changes as well, but the whole Department knows that 53,000 is too big and that we are therefore on the way down. Within that, Simon and I have set requirements for different parts of the Department. It is not a blanket "Everyone has got to reduce by 10% over the next year" or anything like that, because that leads to some perverse incentives. In fact, there are some parts of the Department that actually need to carry on growing, including immigration enforcement. If we are to do all the returns and the raids on illegal working and things like that, we actually need more people on that side, whereas in other parts—broadly speaking, the things that can be digitised, which includes a lot of the border and a lot of the caseworking—you would expect those numbers to go down over time.

Our projections for the future do require some ongoing investment in technology in order to digitise the border or the caseworking functions, to take those two examples. If we are able to achieve that, I would fully expect that 51,000 total number to carry on coming down through this year, the next and beyond.

Q10 **Chris Murray:** Okay, but why is asylum support, resettlement and accommodation going down against the grain of every other component?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon might want to come in on this. This Government, as their predecessor did, have a policy to exit hotels and spend less on asylum support than we were previously spending. The Treasury has given us some challenging targets in that area for the rest of this year and the next financial year; no doubt it will do the same through the spending review for the 2026-27 year onwards. That is why those numbers are coming down.

Simon Ridley: The only other thing I would add is that as we get on top of asylum casework, bring down the backlog and reduce the amount of casework that we need to do in that area, we can move caseworkers around the Department into other areas where we need to do more work and have been growing our casework teams—for example, the removal of foreign national offenders.



Q11 Chris Murray: So you are getting through the backlog so swiftly that you can take out basically 3,500 staff members?

Simon Ridley: We have not taken all of them out. That is not the number of caseworkers that we have taken out of asylum; I was giving you an example of how we can reduce the numbers. Some of that is through changing the technology and the base on which we are doing things, as Matthew says, but the volume of work that we have in different areas moves over time.

We had to build up our asylum caseworkers very significantly through 2023 to get to the point of reducing the legacy backlog. We are now in the process of reducing the asylum backlog and we can move caseworkers back out. We also reduced the numbers of caseworkers who were geared up for the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which we are obviously now not implementing under the new Government.

Q12 Chris Murray: Can I also ask about consultancy work and the temporary workforce that you use? The Home Office spent half a billion pounds on its temporary workforce last year, which is roughly a sixth of your staffing budget. Do you think you are over-reliant on a temporary workforce?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: There is a good part and a bad part of that. The good part is that if people come in temporarily because there is a summer surge, a winter surge or whatever—a seasonal requirement—they typically come in on a short-term contract, and that would be reflected in some of those figures. That is the good part: it is flexibility in action.

The bad part is an over-reliance on consultancy. This Department, along with all other Government Departments, is part of the manifesto commitment to halve consultancy spend over the course of this Parliament, so we now have higher thresholds in place before we are prepared to authorise contracts in relation to consultancy.

We do still need consultants on some very important parts of work. There are some skills that we just do not have in the civil service, and we would not pretend to be able to grow them at the pace required to do the work. In those areas, it is quite right to be able to spend some money on consultants, but by and large I would say that there is a bit of a culture of over-reliance on consultants. That is something that we are now beginning to repress as part of that halving commitment.

Q13 Chris Murray: Don't you think it is more than just a bit of an over-reliance? We have looked at Home Office consultancy on Northeye. The National Audit Office said that you put in place arrangements to oversee the work of contracted staff, and because you were given incorrect consultancy advice you had to pay £0.9 million extra. There was also the six-week timeframe that consultants applied to the contract, which you have acknowledged ended up costing you more money for every six months. The Home Office itself has acknowledged that you lacked the capacity to assess the terms that the consultants had agreed for you. It is not just about an over-reliance, is it? It is about curing something that is not fit for purpose.



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Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, I agree with that. I gave evidence to your colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee in relation to that issue; I cannot remember exactly what I said, but broadly speaking I agreed with the National Audit Office that we needed greater expertise in-house. Even in the last year or two, never mind in recent months, we have been increasing our in-house capability, for instance to acquire accommodation where necessary, rather than using external consultants to do so. So I would say yes to all of that.

There are other occasions when it would not be the best use of public money to build capability within the civil service. It could be a very particular technical bit of expertise on the IT underpinning the police national computer, for instance. A very small number of people know how that works, given that it has been running for 50 years. We are busy updating it and putting it all on the cloud and so on, but you would not expect to find some of that expertise within the civil service. That would be an example of a reasonable use of public money to buy in consultancy spend, I would say.

Q14 Chris Murray: Absolutely. My question was not driving at the principle of consultancy in general—I accept that on some occasions it is absolutely appropriate. I was driving more at the times when the Home Office is using temporary staff for consultancy and not getting what it wants for money. We have some clear examples that the Home Office itself has admitted to, such as Northeye.

There are quite a few examples in recent history where Home Office money has not delivered on consultancy and on the procurement of special services. Can you tell me about what happens when you realise that? In particular, what happens to the people who manage those contracts when it is clear that they have failed in their capacity to do that, and significant amounts of public money have been lost, or when contracts have been agreed, the terms of which then expand and expand over the course of the contract to cost far more than was envisaged? What do you do with people when the procurement processes have failed? Do they get exited from the Home Office? Do they stay in their role? Do they get promoted?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Let me respond, and then Simon might want to add to it. The short version of what happened in that particular case is that the person who was a consultant but working for the Home Office exited. That is relatively rare in the civil service, I admit. I would like to see a much more robust performance management system where people do take responsibility and do leave with much more frequency in worst-case scenarios. That is the culture that I would like us to be moving towards.

When we procure external consultancy, as a general rule, one of the conditions for accepting the recommendation and the contract is that there is some sort of knowledge transfer into the civil service from the consultants or the other experts we are procuring. As a general rule, it is okay to buy in a capability that we do not have, provided that there is



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some passing on of that expertise from the external consultants into the civil service. That is the general principle.

On the other part of your question, the Department is doing things that a few years ago we were not. Five years ago, there was not a huge accommodation requirement for asylum seekers because the number of asylum seekers in the system was smaller than the amount of accommodation in the private rental market, for instance. The whole area of running hotels, large sites or other types of accommodation under the previous Government is a relatively new function, so we are building up our ability to run that function effectively almost from a standing start.

Chris Murray: So you are comfortable with the level of performance management that is currently taking place, and you do not think there is a case for toughening that at all.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: No, I think there is a case for toughening it. There is also performance management within each contract.

To carry on with the example of asylum accommodation, they are huge contracts and each of them has a dedicated contract manager in the Home Office whose sole job is to run that particular contract. Each of them has 10 key performance indicators. Whenever there are breaches of any of those performance levels from the contractor there are service credits that can be withdrawn by the Home Office so that there is a commercial penalty to our providers. That is the framework, and I think that is what you would expect of a Government Department spending public money on these sorts of things. I think we need to get more and more robust and rigorous at being able to effectively manage those contracts.

Q15 **Chris Murray:** What are you doing to increase the representation of women, particularly at senior levels in the Home Office?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think we have got a pretty good story to tell, but it is not perfect. Overall, 52% of our workforce are women, and within the senior levels it is 47%. It should be 50% or 52%, but it is not quite—there is a bit of a drop-off. At the very senior levels—within the executive committee—at one point in my time more than 50% were women, which I think was rare in Whitehall. It has changed slightly with just a small number of changes.

There is more and more that we need to do. Visible representation is absolutely crucial for women, for people from ethnic minorities and for people from all under-represented groups—and I would say that women are an under-represented group in general within the civil service. There are actions that we can take within the law—not positive discrimination, but positive action—such as mentorship schemes, sponsorship schemes, giving people opportunities to be stretched and to have challenging roles and giving those sorts of responsibilities disproportionately to, in this case, women. All that is under way, but none of that is meant to sound complacent. We have a reasonable story to tell, but there is more that we need to do.



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Simon Ridley: I am very happy to say that at director level, which is the level immediately below the executive board, the last three recruitments in Border Force and IE were all women. That is rebalanced in the right direction, so we are seeing the benefits of the work we are doing.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is significant, because Border Force and Immigration Enforcement are uniformed parts of the Home Office. The pipeline through which people come into those parts of the Department is overly male, as are the military, the police and other uniformed services.

Q16 **Chair:** May I ask, on the back of that, what horizon scanning you are doing? I was struck when you said that asylum hotel accommodation is a relatively new phenomenon. Are you working with agencies and partners to see where shocks might be coming down the line in the system that might require a change in focus in terms of the Home Office's priorities?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a really good question. I am glad to say that yes, we are. Some of that is cross-Government. The Foreign Office does a product every year on the future of the world, then each of us can take that global context and apply it to our own departmental objectives.

The chief scientific adviser network is also very strong in this area. The Home Office has a chief scientific adviser, and so do most other Government Departments, and together they are a network who are either really good at analysis themselves or know which academics and others to draw on to bring expertise into Government. That is a very fruitful source of horizon scanning.

Within the Department, for this Home Secretary, we have set up a weekly horizon-scanning product. It is much shorter term—we call it a radar. If we say, "What are the issues that are not yet on your radar, Home Secretary, but which need to be?", we have a way of ensuring that we are looking round the corners and spotting things. We are seeking to do that in not just the short term but the much longer term.

Again, a bit like I have said in my previous answers, I am glad that we have done all that, but we absolutely cannot rest on our laurels. We have to constantly get better and better at doing this. The private sector is very good at this as well, so it is about finding ways to collaborate with partners or some of the organisations we are working with anyway. It is also about doing it with other countries, because some like-minded countries are good at this as well.

It is absolutely about doing it with our agencies and our operational partners, because the threats we are dealing with are changing fast. Technology is changing fast. The global context we are operating in, with the United States, Europe and China, is changing incredibly fast and has a direct bearing on the big issues that the Home Office deals with, especially migration, national security and transnational crime. Those are all trends that are likely to change significantly in the coming years.

Q17 **Jake Richards:** To follow up on the horizon-scanning radar, you mentioned other countries that are potentially doing this well. Are you able



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to say which ones? How does the process of learning lessons from other countries work? Is there a lot of informal dialogue, or is there a process by which that happens?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I would say it is mainly informal. First, in this job, the main international partners are the other members of the Five Eyes—the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, along with the UK. They are like-minded, and there is a very strong intelligence-sharing relationship, and that expands into many of the Home Office policy issues.

Secondly, there are our near neighbours. Obviously, almost all the migration into the UK comes from some combination of France, Belgium, Germany and Ireland in particular, so working with them and with the European Union and other European institutions is incredibly important as well.

Thirdly, there are the countries that are good at this sort of thing. I would pick out Singapore as probably the best example, from my experience. With a relatively small civil service, it is innovative, technology-minded and good at organising itself to do horizon scanning. I do not have it myself, but colleagues on the executive committee and peers—other permanent secretaries and other Departments—have a strong relationship there and bring in those sorts of insights.

Q18 **Mr Rand:** I want to touch briefly on expenditure. Obviously the Government are in a difficult financial position, and the Budget outlined a planned £1 billion of savings in the asylum system. Could you outline how that will be delivered and how confident you are that it will be delivered?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon will want to say more on this. I am very confident that it will be delivered. This year, the savings are from ending the Rwanda scheme and reducing our use of hotels for asylum seekers, and we are very confident that we will meet the numbers required for the rest of this financial year. The same applies for '25-26, and then beyond that we have not yet done the spending round for those years.

Although I am very confident about those savings, it is a very, very tight settlement for the Home Office. We are going to be coming in this year right on the wire, and next year things are going to be tough. Broadly speaking, in round numbers, we are trying to make some savings on the migration and asylum accommodation side of the Department and then spend more on policing. Policing, as you know, has had an uplift of over £1 billion for the next financial year, and that is what is needed, partly because of inflation and pay and so on, but also to do more—to carry on doing what they are doing and to start recruiting the 13,000 additional neighbourhood police officers, for instance.

When you have a very high ambition, as this Government has in this area, and when you have a very strong focus on delivery, as we do, we have to make sure that the funding is going to the right places, but these are all very tough trade-offs and choices and it is going to be tight, I would say, for the rest of this year and for next.



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Q19 Mr Rand: On the £1 billion, in terms of the balance of the savings there, how much is saved by not proceeding with the Rwanda scheme vis-à-vis how much is expected to be saved from hotel accommodation?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Rwanda saving was £700 million for this year and £1.4 billion for next year. That was compared to the previous Government's projections. And then the hotel savings are—

Simon Ridley: We are seeking this financial year to save £300 million, and we need to save £700 million by the end of next year. The vast majority of those savings come from exiting hotels. That is where a lot of the cost is. We will do that through a combination of seeking to reduce the number of people we are accommodating, which is a function, in short, of intake and processing the casework more quickly—there are some big challenges in that, but those are the core lines of work—and then continuing to work with local authorities and our providers to increase non-hotel accommodation. The cost differential between hotel accommodation and non-hotel accommodation is very significant.

Mr Rand: We will return to some of those asylum accommodation issues shortly, but thank you for that.

Q20 Chair: You said the hotel saving was £700 million by the end of next year. Is that £700 million in-year, or £700 million including the £300 million this year?

Simon Ridley: It is £700 million including the £300 million this year.

Chair: So it is £400 million next year.

Simon Ridley: It is bringing it down, from our baseline the year before, by £700 million by the end of next year.

Q21 Chair: Likewise with Rwanda, is that £1.4 billion next year, or is it £700 million added to the £700 million this year?

Simon Ridley: That is a total cost compared to the plans of the previous Government—

Chair: So it is £700 million each year, which is £1.4 billion together.

Simon Ridley: Yes.

Chair: That is fine. I just wanted to be clear whether the estimate was doubling, or whether it was the same and just—okay.

Q22 Shaun Davies: To clarify the £1 billion figure—but this is linked to the other figures you mentioned—those are savings to the Home Office, but what is your estimate of the cost shunt to other Government Departments and other parts of the state? The saving to the Home Office is one thing, but the saving to the overall taxpayer is another. What is the other?

Simon Ridley: To talk about asylum specifically, we are making the saving, as you say, against the Home Office budget. There is a relationship particularly to the spend of local authorities, in potential temporary



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accommodation costs, as people who are granted asylum leave our accommodation and sometimes need local authority support. We are working very closely with local authorities to try to minimise that and to smooth the path from our accommodation into work and being settled.

We have done a couple of things. In December last year we announced that we would only move people on after 56 days, rather than 28 days. We have put a number of asylum move-on liaison officers in place, to work with granted asylum seekers to help them to find their way into work and housing.

In terms of the precise costs around that, we are working with MHCLG to make sure that we have shared assumptions about the movement between our accommodation and any potential increases in temporary accommodation.

Q23 Shaun Davies: In the example you have given, the other outcome is that a person has their claim assessed and then is deported if they do not have a right to stay. Is the cost of you removing an individual net from that saving?

Simon Ridley: Yes, that is all inside the Home Office. We are having to live within a control total, and therefore we are allocating between immigration enforcement, the cost of removal and the asylum budget. We are managing that inside our own budgets.

Q24 Chair: How many hotels do you estimate you need to exit to make these savings of £300 million this year and £400 million next year?

Simon Ridley: There is not a precise number on that because it is a function of a range of different things. Hotels are different sizes. We are obviously trying to make best use of the money we spend on hotels by maximising the utilisation rate. We are doing work, as I said, across the different lines of effort—on reducing intake, moving through the backlog, working with the Ministry of Justice to move through the appeal system more quickly and so on—in order to meet the number. We have a plan, but exactly how we meet it will vary depending on a whole number of factors.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Ministers will want to keep the Committee and Parliament updated on the total numbers, which have fallen from over 400 to 218, but I do not think you should expect a gradual decline of that number down to zero neatly by the end of this Parliament. Our aim is to get to zero by the end of this Parliament, but there will be ups and downs.

Q25 Chris Murray: Can I come back to the point about refugees moving on from hotel accommodation? By definition, if someone has moved on from Home Office accommodation, you have recognised that they are a refugee, and there will be vulnerabilities. They are often people with children or with adult social care needs for whom local authorities have a statutory duty to provide accommodation. We know that every local authority in the country has massive problems in trying to provide services and accommodation for the people to whom they have a statutory



obligation.

You talk about minimising, but can you flesh that out a bit? Hopefully it is more than just a couple of move-on officers being put in place. Significant social tensions could arise, because someone with a statutory obligation will go to the top of a local housing queue, while other people may have been on it for a very long time, and that will be politically very sensitive. How much work are you doing with local authorities so that they know exactly what that pipeline will look like? It can be very hard to know when the Home Office is going to make a decision on an asylum case. Are you getting joined up with local authorities, so that they are not suddenly discovering a whole set of people to whom they have a statutory obligation?

Simon Ridley: We have done much more in the last 18 months or so. There is more we need to do. While we have moved some things in a much more positive direction, we definitely still have issues.

We are doing a number of things. First, we meet regularly with regional migration partnerships and individual local authorities. We are sharing increasing amounts of information and data about the accommodation we have in different local authority areas and the people in there. We are trying to give the best indication we can of when numbers are likely to move on. We are not at the moment in a position to say exactly when individual cases will come through the system in those areas, but we are sharing what information we have and having regular discussions about that.

As I say, we have extended until at least the summer the period of time from people receiving a discontinuation letter, as we call it—the point at which they have been granted and they get notice that they will leave accommodation—from 28 days to 56 days, to give much more time to work with that individual and local authorities. The move-on officers are there to help us manage that communication on the ground between individuals, local authorities and other service providers. That is something we did in 2023, when we moved a number of Afghans from hotels into more settled accommodation. That worked well and was very much a joint effort between us, the DWP, MHCLG and local authorities. We are building that up in the asylum space.

There is definitely more we need to do, but we are on an increasingly positive footing in that area. We will keep working to do it, because as your colleague said, there are costs that are borne if we do not get this right.

Q26 Margaret Mullane: Mine are expenditure questions. As you mentioned, 13,000 new neighbourhood officers and police support officers—obviously, the money has gone into that, but given what you just said, it is going to be tight. In the first year, that will be easier for the various police forces. The Home Secretary mentioned the need for efficiencies as well. Beyond year one, do you think that delivery is going to be possible? Do you think efficiencies can be found?



Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes to both halves of that. Yes, it is possible, and that is what we are planning for, to get to the 13,000 additional neighbourhood police officers by the end of the Parliament. And yes, it is also possible to make sure that there are more efficiencies from the police system.

What we have found in this first year—so for the next financial year—is that the efficiencies are not projected to be enough to fund the uplift that we want, to get that programme started. That is why the Home Secretary has just announced not an additional £100 million, but an additional £200 million as part of that extra £1.1 billion for policing—specifically to get started on that programme, even though the police efficiencies are not going to get up to that sort of level in this next year. But as time goes on, we are going to need to put more than that in each year in order to fulfil the 13,000 commitment, and policing is going to need to do a more ambitious job than previously at finding those efficiencies.

The way that the efficiencies part will work will be set out in more detail in the White Paper on police reform but, in a nutshell, what there will be is a much stronger sense of a national centre of policing. One of the things that that national centre will be able to do is to say, “For this particular contract, this is the way that you must all do it”, and not to have 43 different contracts, for instance. We will need to go further than that as well, in order to make sure that the vast majority of funding for policing goes into the frontline and that there are significant savings from the support function.

We have not yet worked out with the 43 forces and their PCCs the shape and trajectory of the uplift for each of the forces—that will come in due course—but rest assured, we will absolutely keep going until we get there, fulfilling this commitment, just as we did for the previous Government with their proposition to increase total policing by 20,000.

Q27 **Margaret Mullane:** In this discussion, although I appreciate that the White Paper has yet to come, we only hear about IT systems—they cannot all have different IT systems—but it will have to be much more complex than that on the efficiencies, if we are going to get to that on the budget. AI, too, I assume will have a part to play. Also, for instance, at the current time, the Met is struggling to recruit, and if it does not recruit and does not have that, how do you think that will play out?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Again, I agree with both parts of the question. On artificial intelligence, I remember when the Home Secretary was here before Christmas, we were talking about facial recognition, which is one example of AI in policing, and the additional £3 million of Home Office investment in that. Within a context of regulation, of making sure that there is an ethical framework, there is a lot of checking and ensuring that, in these frontier technologies, we do not go too fast, and that policing does not go too fast either. But it is important that they invest, and that we invest with them, in these new technologies. As the Home Secretary was saying at the weekend, AI is a driver of some of the harms affecting our society, but it can also—as your question implies—be a driver of some



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of the response to those harms and of the protection of our society, our citizens and our children. That is the investment that we seek to do with policing. Sorry, I have forgotten the other part of your question.

Q28 Margaret Mullane: I was saying that when police efficiencies are spoken about, the general point made is, "Oh, everyone needs a different IT system" and that kind of thing. That will not cut it. How do you see that playing out?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Apologies for forgetting. The efficiencies agenda needs to be wide and deep. It cannot just be one bit of IT over here or one bit of procurement over there. It will start with IT and procurement and the fleet of helicopters and cars and things, and doing once rather than 43 times what can be done once, but I think that it will need to go further and faster than that.

Ministers have been clear that we want to do this reform with policing, not to policing. That is definitely the way to do it in order for it to be sustainable. So far, the impetus for particular efficiencies is absolutely coming from policing, and that is a really good thing, so I really want to incentivise that and continue that. We have a joint team working together—the police literally alongside Home Office civil servants—in the Home Office on the content of these big reforms and this future model for policing. I really hope and trust that we can continue that joint working through this process.

This is quite a long process. The White Paper will just be the next step—that will come in the next few months—and then after that we will be getting on with delivery.

Q29 Mr Rand: It is clear that my constituents in Altrincham and Sale West and people across the country are very keen to see more active, visible neighbourhood police officers on the streets, tackling low-level crime and antisocial behaviour. Could you speak a bit more about how we will ensure that the funding uplift announced will make it through to the frontline, and about how that is already feeding through in terms of recruitment?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The Government totally agree with that. The purpose of the £200 million that the Home Secretary has announced for the beginnings of the neighbourhood policing guarantee being implemented in every force up and down the country is a sign of that importance. This will be a pooled fund that the forces can bid into in order to secure some uplift in their area, whether that is for new recruits coming in or to move someone currently doing a back-office function on to the frontline and backfill them with someone who can do the office work.

There are lots of different ways of the 13,000 commitment beginning to be implemented, and at this stage, we are leaving the shape of that to each force. The ball is now in their court after the announcement last week, and we look forward to hearing how they will get on with that. Rest assured, we in the Home Office—both Ministers and officials—will be encouraging ambition across the police in order to demonstrate to your constituents that there is something changing here: this is a more visible police



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presence to tackle exactly the things you have been talking about. Shoplifting would be one example, but there are lots of other things as well. Of course, the crimes that matter most vary by constituency and type of region, so that is why we are not saying that there is a single way of doing this.

- Q30 **Shaun Davies:** You talk about ensuring that there will not be 43 ways of doing the same thing and that it should be done only once. Do you believe that police force reorganisation will emerge as part of that answer?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I would not want to prescribe or constrain the ambition at this stage. We are just embarking on something, which I think will be quite a long-term programme. I think that that issue is not front and centre at the moment. There are things that we can do before that within the existing set-up of 43 police forces that will get significant benefits, including on the efficiencies side and on being much stronger about what is being done once and only once at the national level. If we think about policing, there is a national level and a local level, and in between there is some sort of regional level. Broadly speaking, it is about keeping that structure but optimising it and making it more fit for purpose, so that there is better value for money.

In the end, this all comes down to public trust and confidence in policing. The mission that the Government has for safer streets is partly about reducing the harms we talked about—violence against women and girls and knife crime—but at least half of it is also about public trust and confidence. That is something where the neighbourhood police guarantee is so important. There will be more action in that space over the years of this Parliament.

- Q31 **Shaun Davies:** I take your point about wanting to work with police forces, but do you feel that from the centre at the Home Office, you can mandate that change and reform, given the independence that the police quite rightly enjoy?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is all about getting the balance right, and I think that this Government are seeking to shift the balance. The Home Secretary set that out to you and elsewhere in Parliament and to the police chiefs and the PCCs. This is about the Home Office having a much tighter sense of the data, a much stronger sense of what standards are required for policing and not having new powers for the Home Secretary to mandate, but using the existing powers to say, "Here is one force that is doing that particular thing really well. All of you: do it that way."

That is the sort of thing we are talking about in this first phase as we build up the national centre of policing and work out how to optimise the national, the regional and the local. We are not talking about taking away the responsibilities locally for accountability of the PCCs, and we are not talking, at this stage, about reducing the number from 43 down to any other number of police forces in the UK.

- Q32 **Robbie Moore:** Thank you for your time this afternoon. I want to build on the point Connor just made around the settlement wanting to achieve



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13,000 as a combination of neighbourhood police officers and PCSOs. I assume that there is a cost differential between recruiting PCSOs as opposed to neighbourhood police officers. Do you know what that cost differential is?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I do. I do not have it in front of me at the moment, but we have a range of ways of, essentially, each force being able to work out for itself how much it needs in this first phase, depending on the mix of different ways of contributing to the 13,000 that they are planning to do.

At this stage, we are not being prescriptive; we are not telling the forces how to do it. As I say, they know that the ball is in their court to work out how they will do it in their area. One thing we are prescriptive on is that they must not meet this requirement at the expense of the total size of policing. We will be keeping a very close eye on that nationally as well as in each area.

I forgot to answer the bit of the question about the Met. You are absolutely right that the Met did not meet its recruitment targets under the last Government, and there are obviously significant challenges about recruiting into this labour market in London. But nationally, we need to find ways of making sure that other forces make up for any shortfalls in the Met.

Q33 Robbie Moore: Just expanding on that, how is the Home Office planning on meeting the challenge, inevitably, where different forces want to potentially bid for a different combination of PCSOs and neighbourhood police officers? I assume that it has not indicated the figures, but if it is cheaper for PCSOs to form that part of the recruitment, how do you then substantiate the correct balance to achieve the overall settlement of 13,000?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is a little bit cheaper. I am happy to write to the Committee with the precise detail. The big point is that we will not prescribe that precise mix for each force at this stage: we will allow each force to work out for itself the best way of making its contribution to this overall target. We reserve the right to change that and to be more directive at later stages of this programme. We are not in the first year of the programme yet, so we are building up to that into the next financial year. We then have the rest of the Parliament to fulfil that commitment.

Q34 Robbie Moore: It would be useful to have that in writing. If police forces are saying to us, "In order to facilitate keeping as many police officers or PCSOs out on the streets as possible with our existing numbers before the additional recruitment, we actually need more backroom staff to be able to allow the existing officers to spend more time out on the beat," where is the Home Office's thinking on allowing the capacity for backroom staff to be increased or enhanced by certain forces that may request that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: If a force has a very particular person or group of people currently doing backroom support functions who could be put on to the frontline if they were backfilled, that will absolutely count towards the



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13,000. What we are not going to do is give a blanket statement—"Here is a bit of extra money for your support functions"—because that will not automatically deliver this Government's ambition for delivery. We are all about the delivery now for this programme and ensuring that it really gets to the intent of the Government, which is more visible neighbourhood policing as part of the neighbourhood policing guarantee.

Q35 Robbie Moore: Just finally on this point, correct me if I am wrong, but I assume that the 13,000 are additional staff over and above those who may be retiring, falling ill, taking leave, having contracts terminated and so on.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes. It is a net number, just as the 20,000 number was for the previous Government.

Q36 Robbie Moore: I will move on to visas. What considerations do the Home Office take into account when deciding the level of visa fees?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon might want to come in here. It takes into account a number of different things. At one level, this is a product that the Department sells. Times are tight; we need to maximise our income to make our budget add up. In big numbers, our total spending power as a Department is £27 billion annually, of which £7 billion is income. We are getting quite a significant proportion back from visas and other things that we are selling. But we are not actually a business. We are not commercially driving the highest number for every product line. However, we are trying to generate a little bit of that commercial spirit in the Department.

We are also conscious that growth is the primary mission of this Government, so we would not want to shoot ourselves in the foot by putting up the price of a visa that would have a particularly dramatic, positive impact on growth if that would put people off coming or using that visa and therefore have a net negative impact for the Exchequer as a whole. We need to think about the Home Office's budget, but within the context of the Government as a whole.

Q37 Robbie Moore: That brings me nicely to my next follow-up point. How do you balance the competing priorities of controlling net migration, making sure that you still have revenue coming into the Treasury—if not increasing it—alongside workforce demands across different sectors and the ambitions of growth?

Simon Ridley: As your question implies, it is a balance. The Government have set some very clear direction on the need to reduce net migration. As part of the spending review discussions last year, we agreed a budget with the Treasury that included some fee increases, as a balance between that and money from the Treasury, to fund the Home Office's delivery of the Government's ambitions. Where there are trade-offs that other people in Government might have, for example with growth—although it is not always as binary as that—we go through the normal processes of cross-departmental agreement to reach a decision.



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Q38 Robbie Moore: How do you go about that process of cross-departmental agreement? Putting up the price of one visa could have an impact on the amount of revenue coming in.

Simon Ridley: We own the policy in the Home Office of visa fee setting. But as with any Government policy where a number of different Departments have an interest, we do a Cabinet write-round and Departments with different views can respond. Ultimately, the Prime Minister makes a decision.

Q39 Shaun Davies: Is there merit in differential amounts of money for visas or amounts of possible visas to drive economic growth? For example, very high-worth individuals could access visas at a differential price compared with others, or certain industries or sectors could access them for free—for nurses wanting to work in the NHS, for instance.

Simon Ridley: There are a number of things in your question. The first is that, as I said, the Government are clear that net migration overall needs to come down. It has been very high in recent years and the Government's clear policy is to continue to bring it down.

When we were here with the Home Secretary just before Christmas talking about some of these issues, she set out that we need to make sure that the migration system, particularly for work and study visas, is properly integrated with what we are trying to do as a country in terms of the labour market—that we are not just reaching for migration, but have a properly integrated system between skills, getting people back to work and training, and migration where it is really needed. The Migration Advisory Committee is currently considering the position for the IT and engineering industries. There is policy setting in terms of where we think migration is necessary for the labour market, as opposed to training, skills and bringing more people into work.

There is then a subsequent set of decisions to be made about where the fee levels are for different things. We take that into account. Depending on what is happening to demand, the total net income can change. That is what we have to manage across what, to be honest, is quite a complicated set of fees for all the different visa lines that exist.

Q40 Chris Murray: I have a very short question about visas. Some sectors are really affected by Home Office processing times and the requirement for visas. I am thinking particularly of the cultural sector, because I represent central Edinburgh—not only am I the MP for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh, but I am the MP for the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe, sometimes. Have you ever given any consideration to the mechanics of how visa liberalisation for the creative and cultural sector would work? You mentioned the growth agenda; I am interested especially in the impact visa liberalisation could have on one of the Government's identified growth sectors.

Simon Ridley: A number of different visas are considered at different times. We talked about the high net worth visa route, which is relatively new. Our UK visa teams work very hard to make sure that we are



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processing and making decisions inside our service level agreements. There are also some priority and super-priority routes—they cost a bit of extra money, but there are routes where you can get a decision in 24 hours, and others where you can get a decision within five working days.

There is one question about the policy, and there is a separate question to make sure that we are turning around the decisions that we need to make quickly and efficiently.

Q41 Chris Murray: Nothing on the creative sector? You have not done any analysis or engagement with the sector to understand—

Simon Ridley: At the moment, as the Prime Minister announced before Christmas, we are working on an immigration White Paper. That will address how we will achieve the Government's aim to bring net migration down in the context of all migration considerations.

Q42 Jake Richards: In terms of the balance between visa fees and levels of migration, is that the same calculation for the immigration skills charge? Is there a different cross-departmental negotiation regarding that, as opposed to visa fees?

I also have a broader question—as a new MP, I am using my right to ask what is perhaps a stupid question. Is there a document or a person within the Home Office who is doing this modelling for you on numbers, or does the Home Office rely upon others to do that? Is that information publicly available? When I say modelling, I mean, “If you pull this lever, this is what we expect to happen here and there.”

Sorry, I have just remembered a third question, on the conversations the Home Office has about the labour market and immigration policy. Presumably, they are fundamentally with the Treasury. When you talk about cross-departmental conversations, is that really with the Treasury?

Simon Ridley: I will start with your last question. No, it is actually with a wide range of Departments. The Department of Health and Social Care is responsible for health and social care workers and making sure that they can deliver the Department's health and social care objectives. The discussions we have had over recent years about the health and social care work visa route and the extent to which we have used migration in recent years to support that sector are very much with the Department of Health and Social Care.

Similarly, on the skills surcharge, the money actually goes from us to the Treasury to support training. There is a number of things that we consider around that, but it is fundamentally the same process in terms of what is the right level. It was set in 2017, and I think I am right in saying it has not been changed since.

We have teams inside the Home Office doing the analysis both in terms of potential different levels of demand for different visa routes and what that would play through to. It is internal analysis to support our budget management.

Q43 **Mr Kohler:** Thank you for attending today. Many of your answers have shown how important it is to have accurate estimates of costs and savings, so I will turn us to the Home Office's contribution to the infamous black hole.

Sir Matthew, under your leadership, the Home Office got into the habit of not providing an accurate estimate of asylum expenditure in each June's main estimate memorandum laid before Parliament. What was the reason for that?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I set this out to the Home Affairs Committee and the Public Accounts Committee at the time. The reason was that, in that spending review—the 2021 spending review, I think—the then Home Secretary and Chief Secretary to the Treasury agreed that, given the uncertainties in the asylum intake and therefore the costs that we would need to be spending on accommodation, rather than having that on our baseline in our budget, we would have an in-year negotiation to receive that amount of money.

That is why, in the last two financial years, we had quite a significant addition to our budget at the supplementary estimates. After the election and in the first round of this spending review, that was corrected for this financial year, so we do not have that issue for this financial year. I do not think we will have it from here on, because the current Home Secretary and Chief Secretary have reached agreement on a different way of managing the Home Office's budget.

Q44 **Mr Kohler:** I see that. I have your answer from December 2023 and you are absolutely consistent in your approach. Were you right, though? Under the Treasury guidelines, you are the accounting officer and you must ensure that the estimates are "complete, accurate and consistent with parliamentary and Treasury requirements" and "consistent with their best forecasts of requirements". So even though you were told not to include those figures, were you right not to include them?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: It is good challenge, if I may say so. I think that we were clear all along that the amount we had on our baseline would need to be topped up, and we did not know by how much it would need to be topped up. That is why I was keen to ensure that this Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee knew that that was the agreement of the politicians at that time.

Q45 **Mr Kohler:** Is that good enough? Should you not have said to power, "Look, no, I have to give an estimate. Of course I can't be exactly accurate, but I can give a better estimate than nothing"?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Well, that is what we are doing now.

Q46 **Mr Kohler:** But why did you not do it then? Are you the right person now to say to power—to Government—"No, that's not right"?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I definitely have a track record of speaking truth to power, so I am not worried about that aspect. I also think that there are different ways to skin a cat. On this occasion, at that time, there was a



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requirement for the Home Office to accept a settlement that did not allow us in totality to be able to meet our statutory obligation to provide asylum accommodation to asylum seekers. Because it was a statutory obligation, we knew therefore that we needed an additional top-up, and we reached an agreement at that time—it was all part of a single agreement—that there would be an almost automatic top-up from the reserve for what we needed. It was not a total blank cheque, and it should not have been, because we needed to be keeping costs down in the normal value-for-money way. I think it was a reasonable way of dealing with a not brilliant situation. We regularised the situation at the last spending review.

Q47 **Mr Kohler:** So you have no regrets about not providing an estimate.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I tend to use the phrase “with the benefit of hindsight” quite a lot in this role. With the benefit of hindsight, there are other ways that I and we could have managed that situation; but within the constraints that we were operating in at that time, the agreement that the then Home Secretary and Chief Secretary reached was acceptable, provided that we were clear with the Committees that that was how we were going to get our baseline topped up.

Chair: We have completed our questions about the workings of the Home Office and we are going to go on to policy issues. I am conscious of time, so I encourage colleagues to be succinct with their questions. We will start on asylum accommodation with Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Apologies, Chair, I have a quick question about fees.

Chair: If it is very quick—we do need to move on.

Q48 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** You mentioned visas being a product and I wondered if that is the same approach as you have to citizenship.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely not.

Q49 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Okay, then why is it still the case that you are making it an additional £640 for children to register their right to be British citizens, when it is, in fact, their right. The High Court ruled this unlawful in 2019. I know there is now a fee waiver in place if you cannot afford it, but children are still being asked to register when it is their right to be citizens, and they are paying over and above.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: The fee waiver is the crux of the answer to your question. If there are any cases where, for some reason, the fee waiver is not being accepted, we had better look into that, because that sounds like the fee waiver is not working in the way that it should.

Q50 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Now that the fee waiver is in place, are you saying that the Home Office is now not making the hundreds of millions that it was before, specifically from child citizenship fees?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I do not have the figures in front of me, but we can have a look at that.

Q51 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you. You told the Public Accounts Committee



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last year that the Home Office is resetting its asylum accommodation programme. What progress have you made? When should we expect alternatives to hotel accommodation being delivered?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We have touched on this already in this hearing. What I said then was that the previous Government had a policy of exiting hotels partly by acquiring some large and novel sites, such as barges, former military land and so on. The current Government's policy is also to exit hotels but to do it in a different way, with a large number of smaller sites. Some of those will be acquired by the Home Office, but to the extent possible, we will be going more back into the private rental market, which is where we were before we got into hotels in the first place.

The new strategy, which is being done right now jointly with our colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, has a greater emphasis on smaller sites, local buy-in and—learning the lessons from our previous experiences—greater engagement with local authorities, communities and others along the way to acquiring these sites. The overarching aim continues to be to exit hotels by the end of the Parliament, but as we said earlier in the session, the journey is off to a good start. It is down from more than 400 to 218. It will continue to go down, but it might also, on some occasions, go up, because it is a statutory obligation to provide that accommodation and sometimes hotels are the only possible way of doing that.

Q52 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The Minister said in January that there was a plan to close nine more hotels by the end of March 2025, which is soon. How is that going?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We are on track to do that, although I think it is 10 by the end—

Simon Ridley: —by the end of April, but we are on track to do that.

Q53 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: How many of those still waiting for their application to be resolved are being moved from one closed asylum hotel to another? Because you have to make sure that you do provide—

Simon Ridley: We have to move people around our accommodation estate for a number of reasons, exactly as you imply. We absolutely have to do that as we are closing hotels. Most of our hotels are on a rolling three-month contract, so once we serve notice, we have a period of time to start to move people to other parts of the estate, so that it is empty in time.

Some people in any hotel may well be granted asylum and move on, out of our estate, but quite a lot will be moved to other parts of the estate, because in managing that number of people and that size of estate, people are dispersed across it. We try to move people from hotels into dispersed accommodation as much as we can, but obviously that is not always possible.

Q54 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I want to find out how much money the Home Office has been spending on acquiring new sites for asylum accommodation. I



know there was a bit of a concern about the Northeye site, and the fact that it was acquired so quickly that it wound up costing the Home Office more than it needed to.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: We set out those costs to the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office. That is what your colleague was referring to in earlier questions. We have learnt a lot of lessons from that experience and are applying them to this future accommodation strategy. Unfortunately, that was not the only large site where there were some significant costs associated. Of the literally 1,000 lessons we have learned from that stage of our accommodation journey, some are about capability within the Departments, which relates to the questions that your other colleague was asking earlier about consultancy and so on, and some are about our processes. That includes making sure that we have a very strict stage gate process that we go through before we acquire any site; making sure that we do the due diligence that in that case we did some of, but not all, because we were previously operating at pace; and making sure that we have an outline business case, a formal decision making moment before we actually acquire any site. Those lessons are now embedded in our decision making about acquisition sites. We will make sure that is part of this new accommodation strategy that we are working on.

Simon Ridley: It is worth repeating the earlier comment that our plans over the course of the last year and the coming years are to reduce the costs overall, and so to reduce the total amount of money we are spending on accommodation. That is driven by coming out of hotels.

Q55 **Mr Rand:** Just to broaden the point, we have already reflected a lot as a Committee on the significant concerns we have about the asylum accommodation system. I know that it is bad for the taxpayer, local communities and ultimately the people going through the process themselves to spend a significant amount of time in hotels. We heard from the Home Secretary—as you repeated this afternoon, Sir Matthew—that the Government intend to end the use of hotels for housing asylum seekers. Could you update us on the progress that the Department is making with clearing the backlog, first of all?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely. Just on the accommodation, I do not think our predecessors wanted to get into hotels in the first place. That was forced upon them and us because there was literally no other type of accommodation available. If you have a demand that suddenly surges and then will go back down again, hotels are a very good way of responding to that. The problem is that it never went down again, or at least not fast enough.

The Government absolutely agree with you that hotels are there for tourism, business, and other things. They are not being built to house asylum seekers. On the whole, their use is not ideal either for the local community, or, as you say, for the asylum seekers themselves. Getting back into the private rental market as the largest part of the asylum strategy is absolutely where we want to be, but if there is no free accommodation in that market, then we have to do something else.



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The other part of this is speeding up decision making, so that people are in the system for a shorter amount time. Simon will want to add to the detail of this. We have continued to bring caseworkers into the Department and continued to seek to accelerate the journey through the asylum system.

Simon Ridley: In terms of progress on the initial backlog, the decision making is essentially a pipeline from setting up interviews, to people coming to them, getting to a decision, and beyond that moving on from our accommodation when they are granted or removed. The number of asylum interviews was just under 1,200 in June 2004. By September, we had built it up to about 11,000 a month. We have kept going at that rate, essentially working from the capacity that we have. We will maintain that rate of decision making as we work our way through the initial decision backlog over the course of this year. The last published numbers were for the end of September, when there were 97,000 people awaiting an initial decision. That number is on the way down, and we will publish the next set of statistics at the end of the month.

Q56 Mr Rand: Just to be clear, reducing the backlog is not just about dispersal accommodation; surely the aim is to reduce asylum accommodation as a whole?

Simon Ridley: Yes, absolutely. It is important that all the things we are talking about in terms of the decision making and accommodation are a system—a system that is really out of balance at the moment. Part of the challenge is that we have too many people in it and they are in it too long, and part of the problem is that because we have had to build up the hotel accommodation, it is particularly expensive and there are the disruptions to communities that hotels can sometimes cause.

So we have to do a number of things. First, we are trying to reduce, obviously through the work on border security, the number of irregular arrivals and therefore some of the numbers coming into our asylum system. We are trying to make sure that others who come into our asylum system are not misusing other routes in. So we are reducing intake.

We then need to make our decisions more quickly, and a key part of that is reducing the backlog so that we have fewer people in accommodation. Some of those people, where they are not granted asylum, then appeal. We have another line of work we have to do with the MOJ to get that number down, so that overall we have fewer people in our system.

Q57 Mr Rand: The huge increase in irregular arrivals that we have seen over the past four or five years is obviously a significant factor, but the huge drop in asylum decision-making productivity and the lack of decisions taken in 2023 in particular are obviously a hugely significant factor in the way in which the asylum accommodation system has had to be flexed up and the reason why so many hotels opened over the last few years. Fundamentally, how was that allowed to happen?

Simon Ridley: Two different things happened. First, through covid, we weren't able to return, and the number of people in the asylum system really grew. That is the thing that caused the first wave of hotels. We



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cleared what was called the legacy backlog through 2023 and made a very large number of decisions, and some of that is what drove the first reduction of the number of hotels we have.

But then, as the Home Secretary explained before Christmas, the Illegal Migration Act that the last Government brought through essentially—well, one of the key parts of it meant that people who arrived irregularly were subject to the Secretary of State's duty to remove. It was never commenced, but there was a duty to remove that meant that they were inadmissible to the asylum system. So after we cleared the backlog of cases—in very simple terms; this is, I'm afraid, simplifying—we ran out of cases that we were able to process, which is why the number of decisions, which at the back end of 2023 was running at 10,000 or 11,000, came right down, by late spring 2024, to 1,000 or 2,000.

Essentially, we could not process people who arrived after 7 March 2023 so the numbers built up in the system until this Government removed those retrospective clauses from the IMA; the current Bill before the House will repeal the duty to remove and other aspects of that. So a second backlog built up essentially as a function of policy.

Q58 Mr Rand: That backlog and the impact it has had in terms of asylum accommodation have obviously had a huge impact, including on my community. We have obviously seen this Government very strongly ramp up decision making and looking to clear that backlog. Has that had an impact on the quality of decisions being made?

Simon Ridley: That is a really important question. We have done an awful lot to mitigate that risk and we are in a much better position this year than when we first really built up the capacity a couple of years ago.

It is worth saying a couple of things. The first is that we had to recruit very fast through 2023. We have done much more training with our caseworkers and they have more experience, which enables us to have more confidence in decisions in general terms. Secondly, we are doing a lot of sampling of decisions. We have done various internal reviews to test against quality. It is a really important thing we need to keep our eye on, but we are seeking to mitigate that risk in a number of different ways.

Q59 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I want to ask about the management of this volume and the fact that you feel you have been able to get it under control. We know that the Ukraine permission extension scheme launched today.

This programme will allow Ukrainian nationals and family members to apply for up to an additional 18 months to stay in the UK. That is absolutely right, but when the scheme was initially launched for Ukrainian nationals to come in, there was a huge amount of work surrounding it. At that time other applications were not being considered because the majority of the caseworkers were dealing with the Ukrainian cases. What do you think the impact of the UPE scheme will be now?

Simon Ridley: A number of things have happened since we first launched the Ukraine schemes. We have built up a lot of caseworking capacity. In



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order to be able to do the Ukraine schemes and through the asylum backlog we have built up our caseworker numbers over the last two years very significantly.

We also made a number of technical changes, which were necessary at the time we brought forward the Ukraine scheme. It enabled caseworkers to work more flexibly on different systems and meant improvements to some of our systems, which increased the scope for productivity. We are much more able to move capacity around the Home Office. I am confident that we will be able to manage the Ukraine permission extension scheme without a very significant knock-on to our other delivery.

Q60 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: In the first nine months of last year, around 10,000 asylum cases were listed as having an administrative outcome, and 11,000 have been withdrawn. I want to understand what happened to these people.

Simon Ridley: That is a really important question. The first thing to say is that withdrawal of claims is a long-standing part of the asylum system overall. There are broadly two types of withdrawal. The first is where a claimant withdraws their claim, as is their own preference. That is called an explicit withdrawal. The second is where the Home Office withdraws a claim. There is a lot of guidance for caseworkers and a number of controls around it, and they are set out in the immigration rules.

There are a number of reasons for withdrawal. It is essentially about people staying in touch with the system and making themselves available for interviews and the like. If people continuously do not turn up for interviews and engage with the process, we have the scope to withdraw.

You are right that that number was much higher than usual as we cleared the legacy backlog in 2023. Some of the reason for that was that we were dealing with very old cases, where people had been in the system for a very long time and were less likely to be in touch. They may have left the country, or there may be various other reasons. We are now seeing that number come back down from those highs. There are still withdrawals from the system for those reasons, but as the cohort of asylum seekers we are answering cases on gets more recent, if you like, it is much less likely to happen.

Q61 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: How many when they are withdrawn just end up going back into the system?

Simon Ridley: Some people do go back into the system—you can effectively claim that the withdrawal was done on the wrong basis and then come back into the system. I do not have the precise number with me today, but we manage that through the process. We have also put in place a new team, which supports people as we get in contact with them. They are a sort of interview contact team, because that is the key place where people get withdrawn.

Q62 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Could you explain the difference between a case with an administrative outcome and a withdrawal? How do they differ

specifically?

Simon Ridley: Why don't we write and set the details out of exactly how this happens?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you.

Chair: I know he needs to leave, so I call Ben Maguire.

Q63 **Ben Maguire:** The Home Office is undertaking to ensure that the measures recently announced by the Home Secretary on tackling extremism are implemented effectively. I know there are other questions on the Prevent scheme, which I will steer away from for now.

On the range of cyber and tech-enabled crimes taking place on the internet, the Committee has heard from lots of experts in policing and elsewhere that this is becoming a widespread and prevalent problem, including online radicalisation and terrorist-related activity. Obviously, the most recent case we have seen of that was in Southport. What is the Home Office's role in maintaining oversight of the internet? What strategy do have on that going forward, given it is such an urgent and prevalent issue?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I very much agree that it is an urgent and prevalent issue. If you go back a few years, there are three recurring themes that keep coming out of our reviews in this area. One is this about online radicalisation of people, increasing their propensity to violence—sometimes extreme violence. The second is about how young so many of them are, in increasing proportion. The third is about mental health. Of course, all those things do come together, and have come together in relation to Southport, tragically.

The processes the Home Secretary has announced to learn lessons from Southport will inevitably deal with all three of those. The Home Office, or the Government as a whole, do not have a role in monitoring the whole of the internet. I think this Committee would probably be the first to complain, quite rightly, if they did so it is not about that. It is about ensuring that, when crimes are committed online or when there is a moral obligation on a tech company to do something about it, there are mechanisms in place that require those big platforms to take action.

That is the emphasis at the moment: implementing the Online Safety Act from last year and assessing in time, in response to Southport and other incidents, whether we need to go further with more legislation.

Q64 **Ben Maguire:** Thank you for that answer. I saw the Home Secretary at the weekend talking to Laura Kuenssberg about this issue, touching on your point of big tech companies not taking down content as the Department has requested. Building on that, are you working closely with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to tackle this? Is it part of your ongoing strategy to work closely with it?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, exactly. The strategy for the implementation of the Online Safety Act, the additional requirements on the tech



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companies to take down content in some circumstances, the increasing role for Ofcom as the regulator—all that—is very joined up between the Home Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

We need to ensure that, as a Government, we continue to speak with one voice, even though we are coming at it from slightly different perspectives. This is an example where the security interests of the Home Office and the growth and prosperity interests of DSIT all need to come together. It is not even a question of trading off; it is question of integrating. That means growth through security and security through growth, ensuring we are collaborative with colleagues in other Departments, and together presenting a united front to these tech companies on their obligations, whether legal or moral obligations, as the Home Secretary said.

Q65 Margaret Mullane: Is the Home Office prepared for the increase in referrals on Prevent? If the numbers do go up, or Prevent is expanded, are you ready?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a very good question. Some of the numbers are already going up, particularly in relation to the three categories I just talked about: online, young people and mental health. No decision has been taken about changing the definitions of terrorism, the scope of the Prevent programme or anything like that. One downside, if one were to do so, would be that the system might be swamped.

It is no good creating a bigger front door into a system, if there is nothing behind that door other than what is there already. That is going to be a recipe for disaster. As a country, we would actually end up being less safe if we had too many people coming into a system that was designed to deal just with some very particular type of ideologically driven terrorism, under the current definition, with a different type of person.

That is what we are working through at the moment, and that is what the public inquiry that the Prime Minister and Home Secretary set up after the Southport trial will look into. That is what, in different ways, David Anderson and Jonathan Hall will be looking at as well.

There is a lot of focus on this issue. I think it is premature to say exactly what the right answer to the question is, but we definitely need a way of dealing with this sort of threat, which is not terrorism as currently defined, but the terrorising of communities.

Q66 Margaret Mullane: Is there any kind of worry that once young people are involved with a referral to Prevent and they have a legal team, the legal advice is to say, "No comment", and protect the person you are representing? Do you see that within the Home Office as something you need to look at from a safeguarding perspective?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Absolutely, and Prevent is not meant to be a punishment: it is meant to be an escape from carrying on down the slippery slope towards terrorism or violent extremism, and it is. Clearly it did not work in this particular case, but it does work in hundreds and thousands of others. Lots and lots of attacks have been prevented and



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young lives and others have been turned around thanks to that programme. It is really important that we do not lose the bits that are working as we tackle the bit that clearly has not worked on this occasion. Being open to both of those is really important, so we will not rush into decisions that we might regret, but we will absolutely look across the whole of the system.

As you will know, the perpetrator of those terrible murders in Southport had three contacts with the Prevent system and multiple contacts with other parts of the state, such as the education system, the health system and so on. The whole of the state system needs to come together and work out what lessons to learn.

Q67 Chris Murray: I want to ask some questions about Border Security Command. Sir Matthew, I noticed you have said previously that it is more of a “convening power”—I think you used the phrase “controlling mind”—rather than operating operationally. What does that mean exactly? What is it actually doing just now? Can you quantify for us who is in jail now because of the Border Security Command who would not have been in jail already?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am glad I used the words “convening” and “controlling mind”, because those are the words that I would also like to use today to describe the Border Security Command. That is the intent; that is how the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have directed us to set this up, and that is what we have done.

Border Security Command has about 120 people, which in civil service terms is not huge. If it was doing the doing, it would need to be thousands and thousands and thousands of people being drawn in from the National Crime Agency, the rest of the intelligence community, policing, other parts of the Government and all the rest of it. It is not doing the doing, but it is the convening and controlling mind.

Border Security Command is looking end to end at the whole system. If we take any particular asylum seeker, what is the country that they are currently in? Which countries do they have to go through to get to the UK? What happens to them when they are in northern France on the beaches there? What happens to them as they cross the channel and enter the system in the UK? It seeks to prevent unnecessary and dangerous journeys where people are risking their lives and sometimes the lives of others.

Border Security Command is about going after the criminality and seeking to put the criminals out of business financially. They are doing it for money, so we have to follow the money and find ways of making it too expensive for them. A lot of work is going on through our partners to those ends.

Some of it is diplomatic and about engaging with the countries that I talked about. The Home Secretary had a very successful visit to Iraq, and the Foreign Secretary has just been in Tunisia. In the countries where



these people often originate, that is one of the first things that we can do. We can help to work with the authorities in those countries to create the sort of conditions where people do not want to leave and risk their lives coming all the way to the UK. That is just part of it.

As time goes on, there will be more and more examples. There are already some examples, which we can send if you have not seen them already, of where the National Crime Agency or other bits of territorial policing have made arrests of facilitators—pilots of vessels crossing the channel and so on—and there will be more of that to come, because we will relentlessly focus on this and deliver.

Q68 Chris Murray: What real-time KPIs are you using to monitor how effective this work is? In the six months since it has been established, have you seen anything moving in those KPIs that has led you to adjust what Border Security Command is doing?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Simon might want to add to this, but the obvious metric to start with is the number of crossings, although that is clearly not the whole story—to the point I made earlier about the money, monitoring the cost of a crossing is also important. It is very important not to declare victory too early, because there are lots of other factors including, most obviously, the weather, but there were fewer crossings in January than in previous Januarys.

We are working day in, day out with our colleagues in France as well, as the most crucial part of the whole journey. We are working with them on technology, on surveillance monitoring, the extra gendarmes on the beaches and so on. There needs to be a law enforcement part of the response as well as all that preventive upstream action I was talking about.

Simon, do you want to say more about other metrics?

Simon Ridley: Yes, but the first thing I would say is that Border Security Command came into being only six months ago. We appointed Martin Hewitt as the first border security commander last autumn, and we are working closely, through that command, with Departments across Whitehall and with our international partners. But it is still the first months of the Border Security Command.

Where we are making an impact directly is in providing a single focus for the intelligence assessments that we, the services and the NCA do, and then directing that in a co-ordinated and aligned way across the key routes. That is why there is a focus on the route from Iraq and Kurdistan, and on the criminality and the facilitators through that route. Similarly, as Matthew has said, we are working with our near neighbours and continuing the work we have had going for a while in the western Balkans, given those routes through.

We have directed more money at the NCA. We are doing a set of things that are, absolutely, only inputs, but we are increasing the number of investigators, so we have got more law enforcement capacity and



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intelligence capacity. The sorts of metrics are exactly the things that Matthew has set out. We want to focus our effort in some areas so that we can do more disruption, more seizing of boats, engines and equipment, and more bringing of facilitators and the criminals to justice. The other thing we are doing is tracking illicit finance, both here and with international partners such as Italy.

Q69 Chris Murray: You have just talked about an enormous amount of stuff: Iraq, the western Balkans, France, the European Union, tracking illicit finance and working with the NCA. That is an enormous amount of work to do, and the scale of what you are talking about is massive—there were 36,000 crossings last year and 48 people died crossing the channel—and you have been given £150 million and 200 staff. Do you think that is commensurate with the scale of the task you have?

Simon Ridley: It is an additional £150 million on top of everything that the NCA has been spending and we have been spending, including the money that we have spent through the Sandhurst agreement with the French in terms of the work at the border. You are right that irregular migration is a significant global enterprise, and it is going to take an enormous amount of dedicated and co-ordinated effort.

Some of what we are doing through the Border Security Command is bringing together the money and the capabilities that already exist and then adding to them. The money that I described was for the second half of this financial year and next financial year. We have not yet had the spending review; beyond that, we are going to have to keep building the capability that we have in the Home Office but also more widely across Whitehall.

We are also keying in much more strategically with our colleagues in FCDO, both in London and in key embassies around the world. Martin Hewitt, the border security commander, went with the Foreign Secretary to Tunisia at the end of last week. That is part of bringing the strategic effort of Government together at a much bigger scale. We would not crack it with £100 million or something like that. This is a whole-of-Government effort, over time, to disrupt a complicated criminal enterprise.

Q70 Chris Murray: I would like to move on briefly to e-visas. The Home Office is planning to introduce e-visas but has decided to push that back, which implies that you did not think you were ready for your initial date. How confident are you that, by 1 April, the system will be up and running without flaws?

Simon Ridley: We did not push it back—that is the first thing. We have been running the e-visa system, and people have been setting up UKVI accounts through the end of last year and since 1 January. BRPs have been expiring since 1 January. Because there are a number of risks with a big technology change of this sort, where about 4 million people needed to set up accounts and start to use them, we have, as Ministers decided, put mitigations in place over the first quarter of this year. We have given money to some community organisations to support more vulnerable



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people and help them to set up their e-visa accounts, and we have a number of different communication campaigns. Critically—this is probably the key thing you are referring to—we have enabled people to travel on an expired BRP card. We have worked with carriers to make that work, and that is in place until 31 March.

We are monitoring all that very closely. We have put in place a contact centre that individuals can get in touch with, whether they have problems with their e-visa or they just want support to set it up. We also have a carrier support hub if there are issues for travel. We are monitoring what is coming through those centres very closely so that we can learn anything that we need to as we roll the scheme forward.

Q71 Chris Murray: Do we know how many people still need to set up their e-visa account? Do you know that number?

Simon Ridley: That number moves around; it is not a fixed number. Last year, we estimated that about 4.1 million people would have a card expiring and would need to set up a new e-visa account, and that remains our estimate. We estimate that, at the end of last year, there were about a million people who still needed to set up an account. That number is coming down and will come down, both because people are setting up accounts and because people whose cards expire are leaving the country and may not need an account. Our intention is to set out the figures around this on 27 February.

Chair: We have 12 minutes and we have to cover VAWG, modern slavery, the Brook House inquiry and police reform and funding, so we need very, very quick questions. We will only touch the surface of these topics, but we can get some views and then come back to them.

Q72 Mr Rand: The Government have made it clear that tackling violence against women and girls is a priority. The NAO report essentially concluded that, to date, the Home Office has not led an effective whole-system response, nor had a full understanding of the scale of the resources committed across Government to tackling violence against women and girls. How will this effort be different to the 2021 strategy? How will we ensure that it produces output-facing deliverables that further the Government's aim to halve VAWG?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: My quick-fire response to that question is that the priority that this Government are attaching to halving violence against women and girls over 10 years is higher than anything that I have seen in government before. The resourcing in the Home Office is going to be commensurate with that. We are putting more effort, people and money into this now than at the time when the National Audit Office made its criticisms.

That said, there are some valid recommendations by the NAO that we will—I am sure we will accept them formally when the time comes. Meanwhile, we will crack on with delivering this Government's commitment, which involves cross-system working; working with the Office for National Statistics on the metrics, so we have the baseline right



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and ways of measuring progress; scaling up things that are going well, such as Operation Soteria, which some police forces have done and which needs to be scaled up across all the different forces; and lots of other examples that we will work on in the coming years.

Q73 Mr Rand: You talk about cross-system and cross-Government co-ordination. Will there be centrally co-ordinated funding?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes.

Chair: We will move on to modern slavery.

Q74 Chris Murray: I want to ask about the national referral mechanism and devolved decision making for child trafficking cases. I should probably declare an interest: I worked on this before I was elected. It has been going on for four or five years now; what stage of evaluation is it at? Are you thinking about the implications of rolling it out more widely?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: In the interests of time, I think we had better write to you with a precise answer to the children bit of the question. In general, we are on track to recruit and train the additional 200 caseworkers, on top of the existing 650—so there will be a caseworking team of 850—in order to clear the NRM backlog by the end of 2026. We are on track to do that and we will write to you on the children.

Q75 Chris Murray: I think it would not apply to those people, so absolutely, that is great.

The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority is being folded into the fair work agency under the Employment Rights Act, or Bill—I'm getting ahead of myself. Given that that organisation will have a huge number of responsibilities, including sick pay, national minimum wage enforcement, holiday pay and tribunal fees, how confident are you that the Home Office components of it that look at modern slavery, with the expertise that you have, will be preserved, and that the fair work agency will be good at implementing your modern slavery responsibilities?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: That is a really good question. We will make sure that the GLA bits going into the new agency take account of those concerns, because they continue to be extremely important to the Home Office. We will make sure that this becomes a good example of the cross-Government working that we were talking about earlier in the session.

Chair: Thank you. I am particularly interested in that as well. We will come back to you on all these things that we are skirting over slightly at the moment; next time, we will start with them. Now we have Jake on the Brook House inquiry.

Q76 Jake Richards: I am aware of the time, but can we have an update on the Brook House inquiry recommendations? Thirteen recommendations were described as "on track for closure by summer 2025"; I wondered what that meant and whether you could flesh it out. That is probably a question for Simon.

To step back a bit, on inquiries more broadly, we had really interesting



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evidence from Professor Alexis Jay and—forgive me, I have forgotten the gentleman’s name—the secretary of the inquiry. It came out of evidence that they felt there was a lack of any action, really, since the recommendations were made at the end of 2022, by the previous Government. There was then a wider discussion about inquiries—the relationship between inquiries, recommendations and Government, and whether mechanisms could be created to make that work better. Do you have any reflections on that?

Simon Ridley: I shall do the first one. In short, as the Committee is aware, we accepted 30 of 33 recommendations from the Brook House inquiry. We have met and closed 20 of those, as of the end of January, and we are aiming to have all the work in place for completion of meeting the recommendations by the end of the summer.

The only thing to add is that meeting the recommendations is important but, critically, making sure that we have the right processes, scrutiny and culture in all our IRCs all the time is really the point. The inquiry has helped to drive a lot of very good practice—we could talk at length about that—but there are also a lot of challenges and risks in our IRCs, which we are not at all complacent about. We are on track with the recommendations, but there is a much bigger piece of work around making sure that we have the right teams and the right contact between our suppliers and everyone who is in detention in our IRCs.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: To answer your second question, Simon’s point applies to inquiries in general. It is one thing to tick all the boxes of the 30 recommendations or whatever it is; it is another to capture the spirit that the inquiry chair was trying to get to, and to make sure that that is living and breathing through the organisation. That is a much harder thing to do. That is not to disparage the requirement to go through the 30 recommendations; we absolutely must do that and make sure that we tick all those boxes.

In the jargon, these are adaptive challenges—they are huge—and you cannot solve them just by ticking 30 boxes. Sometimes at the beginning of the process you do not even know what additional work you need to do to really get to the heart of it. I would say there is a lot going on in Government on the right role for inquiries versus that for Government, and on how we engage more effectively with inquiries. I was sad to hear what Professor Jay said to you about what she felt was a lack of engagement from the Home Office before the election; I hope that we are more than putting that right now. But in general is it right that it is inquiries that say, “There should be this redress scheme or that huge cost over there,” or something else? Or should it be an initiative from within Government? Those are very much live questions, and we cannot do justice to them in a short period of time, but I hope the Committee will come back to the Home Office aspects of that.

Q77 Jake Richards: I agree that just having the crude recommendations and ticking them off is not the answer. Would you welcome—in theory anyway—Governments engaging with the inquiries before they end?



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Otherwise, you get this list of recommendations and people hoping that they will be ticked off, and maybe that is not doing justice to the spirit of the inquiry, as you called it.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes, in a way, although every time any of us has an actual interaction with an actual inquiry chair—or even the secretary to an inquiry—we have to be incredibly careful about independence. We do not want to be going across that line, and I am sure they do not want us going across that line either. It is quite difficult to engage on the substance of an inquiry in ways that both the inquiry and the Government Department feel are comfortable. That is also worthy of further debate about how to do it, so that we are not waiting until the end of an inquiry.

We have some very long-running inquiries, of which the undercover policing inquiry is the longest running, and there are ways of getting some of the benefits out through different tranches and phases, as the chair of that independent inquiry has been doing. But the real benefit that would come from closer engagement on the content would overstep the line on independence, at the moment, so we are not doing that.

Q78 Jake Richards: I have a final, specific question about Professor Jay's evidence. She said that a special adviser called her, and she had hoped it was to discuss the contents of her report and what the Department would take forward. In fact, it was essentially—I am paraphrasing—to give her a dressing down for calling for the Government to take action. You may not want to comment, but do you deem that appropriate behaviour from a special adviser?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am very happy to comment and say that I do not deem that appropriate. I did not know about it at the time—in fact, I did not know about that until she gave her evidence to you in the last few weeks. If I had known at the time, I would have taken action, I am sure.

Chair: We have three minutes for Paul Kohler to do justice to police reform and funding.

Q79 Mr Kohler: I will make it simple and ask one quick question. Since 2015, at least, the Home Office has known that police funding is a mess. Nothing has happened in a decade. Have you had any discussions with the new Home Secretary about how that is going to be redressed?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: Yes—lots of discussions with the Home Secretary. It is not that the whole of the funding picture is a mess, but the model is a mess. There are ways around that. For instance, the £200 million pot we have been creating for neighbourhood policing, which we were talking about in detail earlier in the session, is something that is not being allocated per the model. It is a new form and we will find a new way of doing that allocation. That does not fix the problem, but it reduces the impact of a model that is out of date. Everyone knows it is out of date, but everyone is trying to pick the right moment to change it, bearing in mind that the losers are always more unhappy than the winners are happy. Clearly, there is a lot of politics involved in how you make any of these changes at a time of constrained resources.

Q80 **Mr Kohler:** That sounds like you are not sure when it is going to happen.

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I am not sure when it is going to happen.

Q81 **Mr Kohler:** It must happen soon, must it not?

Sir Matthew Rycroft: I think it must, and I hope there are opportunities, as this Government tackle police reform more broadly, to do that alongside some of the other changes.

Chair: Thank you very much. We have finished with one minute to spare. There is a lot there we will want to come back to you on. If anything arises that you think it will be important for the Committee to hear about, please write to us and let us know. We are very grateful for your time today. We will come back to lots of these matters because, as you can see, the Committee is very engaged and interested. Thank you very much for giving us your time today.