

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Immigration: skilled worker visas, HC 819

Thursday 8 May 2025

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Members present: Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Chair); Mr Clive Betts; Nesil Caliskan; Anna Dixon; Sarah Green; Lloyd Hatton; Chris Kane; Sarah Olney.

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

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Witnesses

[I](#): Dame Antonia Romeo DCB, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Simon Ridley, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Dan Hobbs, Director General, Migration and Borders Group, Home Office; Marc Owen CBE, Director for Visa, Status and Information Services, Home Office.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Immigration: Skilled Worker visas (HC 745)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Antonia Romeo, Simon Ridley, Dan Hobbs and Marc Owen.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Thursday 8 May 2025. Following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, the Home Office introduced the skilled worker visa in December 2020. This route is intended to support economic growth by attracting people with the skills the country needs and was designed to offer flexibility to respond to the skills shortages across the UK labour market.

Since 2021, a number of changes have been made to the entry requirements to respond to changing circumstances and demands. In 2022, the route was opened to care workers to address shortages in this sector following the covid-19 pandemic. In March 2024, entry requirements were tightened to address the Government's aim of reducing net migration. Use of this skilled worker visa route has been significantly higher than the Home Office initially anticipated, with 1.18 million applications to the route having been made since 2021.

Today we will be questioning the Home Office on how it manages the skilled worker visa route, given the huge volume of applications, and how the Department processes these applications to provide a good service to customers. In addition to this, we will be examining how the Home Office is addressing non-compliance and abuses of the skilled worker visa route, given widespread reports of exploitation of the route, particularly within the care sector.

To help us with all that, we are very pleased to welcome the new permanent secretary to the Home Office, Dame Antonia Romeo. We know you from your previous role as Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Justice. I was thinking—I am going to say it—that I am not sure you have not jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, but we shall see in due course.

With you, to support you, we are very pleased to have Simon Ridley, the second permanent secretary. Simon was the interim Permanent Secretary prior to Antonia Romeo taking up her role and of course has appeared before this Committee a number of times.

Dan Hobbs is the director general for the migration and borders group. Dan became director general for the migration and borders group in August 2023.

Finally, but no means least, Marc Owen CBE is director for visa, status and information services. Marc is responsible for all the visit, work, study, family and settlement applications and previously carried out a wide



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range of senior roles within the border, immigration and citizenship system. A particularly warm welcome to you, Marc. It is your first time before the Committee, I think; I am sure that you will find the experience interesting, so a very warm welcome.

I would also like to make everybody aware that there will be a two-minute silence at 12 pm today to commemorate the 80th anniversary of VE Day. Just before 12 pm, I will pause the Committee briefly and will invite all those who are able to and wish to stand. I have to leave just after noon as I have another commitment. My very able deputy, Clive Betts, will then take the chair. I understand that, Permanent Secretary, you must also leave at 11.30 am to go to the VE Day celebrations.

Without any further ado, let us get into the session. I hope, Permanent Secretary, that you have been advised that I am going to ask a question on the Treasury minute on Northeye. Thank you for the Treasury minute. I have to say that it was a fairly hard-hitting report with fairly hard-hitting recommendations and I thought that, on the whole, your Department took a pretty realistic view of the whole thing, so I am grateful for that. There are one or two things arising from that Treasury minute. How satisfied are you that your new Department has received a limited opinion from the Government Internal Audit Agency for the last seven years?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Thank you very much for having me in this new role. I am not at all satisfied. As an incoming Permanent Secretary, it is actually quite helpful to have a position where the GIAA has set out areas of concern in the control environment in the organisation, because it helps me identify some of the areas that I need to look at. I should say that quite a lot of work has been done already on this in the Department.

Arriving new—I am in my fourth week—there is quite good down-the-line accountability through the Home Office operating system that my predecessor, with Simon, put in place. There are clearly areas, as identified by the GIAA, where, particularly in terms of compliance, risk control and joining up and perhaps linking what is happening in the business areas to the top strategic oversight of the Department, we need to go further. The GIAA also said that the prevailing control environment was weak. These are things that I have seen before in other organisations. I feel as though there is work to do but, as I say, a lot was done by Simon, my predecessor and the whole of the exco to focus on this already. We are not starting from a standstill, but there is further to go.

Q2 **Chair:** That is another realistic answer. Thank you very much for that. The Treasury minute responding to our report on Northeye suggests a degree of complacency about addressing a culture that has undervalued assurance and control. How will you strengthen the control environment within the Home Office?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I very much agree that these issues are cultural issues. There are two things one needs to do. The first is to make sure



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that the right processes are in place. As I say, we have some quite strong processes in what we call down the line. The area where I am focusing most initially is how we are joining up that accountability to the conversations that are happening at the strategic level with the executive committee and the board. There is further work to do there and that is, in a way, a process issue. It is about the risk registers. What is the flow through? How regularly are you meeting? We have an executive committee strategic risk deep dive every quarter. We look at the risk register every month. That is not enough because, of course, it is in the culture.

Another thing about process that I have done that I felt was quite successful at the Ministry of Justice is ensure that, every time exco meets formally, which is every fortnight, we are focusing on the single biggest risks in the Department. We always have an urgent business section where we are talking about the things that we are most concerned about and the directors general are sharing the information and the data. Everybody knows not just the thing they are worrying about in their area but what we are worrying about collectively. We have just started doing that and I have found that useful in the past.

In terms of culture, to change the culture you have to change the incentives. In lots of areas we are very effective at risk management. There are some obvious areas in the Home Office where risk management is like the bread and butter of what is being done operationally and in terms of policy advice. The question is how you make it such that everybody feels incentivised to worry about compliance and assurance, do the checks and make sure they are flagging things up the chain.

That is the work of several months, or maybe years, but we are already talking about it. The more we are talking about it and putting in place the right processes and holding people to account for worrying about those things, the swifter we will see behaviours change. I hope that we will get out of our limited internal assurance from the GIAA in some period. I do not want to set myself a target, but one hopes that it will be soon, in a number of years.

Chair: Again, I welcome that answer. I suppose that the proof of the pudding of the effectiveness of your reply will be how often you appear before this Committee, so we shall see.

Q3 Sarah Olney: The Victims and Prisoners Act that was passed at the very end of the last Parliament included within it putting on a statutory footing Operation Encompass, which is a requirement on police forces to inform schools if they have attended a domestic abuse incident and there are children involved. Concerns have been raised from an independent school in my constituency that the plans for the implementation do not fully involve independent schools at the moment. I wonder whether you could comment, either directly now or perhaps as a follow-up, on what the



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plans are to ensure that independent schools are fully involved in that implementation.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think, with the Committee's permission, it would be best to come back to you. As you say, this is already in place. It is where officers involved in a domestic abuse incident make sure that they feed it into the safeguarding lead at schools, so that appropriate action can be taken. This works alongside existing statutory guidance that covers all schools, so there is already something in place that has universal coverage. We are going to announce plans on commencement before recess, in the VAWG strategy, so I suggest I write to the Committee at that point.

Sarah Olney: I would be very grateful. Thank you.

Q4 **Chair:** That is really helpful. Thank you. We are now going to get into the main session. We have already acknowledged, Permanent Secretary, that you are only, as you say, four weeks into the job. You have very able people here to support you. We are perfectly happy if you answer any of the questions or if you wish to deflect; that is perfectly acceptable.

I have a set of slightly general questions to get into the session. I am sure that you will all be aware that *The Times* has a big headline on its front page that all migrants will have to be fluent in English. The question is how that will operate, particularly in relation to this scheme.

Dame Antonia Romeo: You would expect me to say this, Chair, but it would not be appropriate to comment on any speculation about what might be in the immigration White Paper. The immigration White Paper, which aims to join up skills, immigration and the labour market requirements—a very important way of thinking about immigration in the context of what is needed in the labour market—is going to be published shortly. At that point it might be better to give more detail on what you have just mentioned, should it be in the paper.

Q5 **Chair:** That is fair enough. Again, Permanent Secretary, I am very happy if you answer this, but it was really designated down to Simon Ridley to answer this. How well has the skilled worker route been meeting its objectives since its introduction, as I have already said, in 2020?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Perhaps I will say a couple of things and then Simon will come in; as you rightly say, he knows a lot more about it than me. Seen strategically, the aims of the route were to have a fair and flexible visa system that enabled the UK to attract the skills it needed and support economic growth. It is fair to say that it has been a mixed picture, with a lot of those things achieved. There is no doubt that it was flexible and it has been used over the period to be flexible in a way that has been very successful. It has been specifically used to target skills that were required and was successful in that.

There were areas, as we are going to come on to, as set out in the Report, where things might have been done differently, but it is good to



note at the start that this was implemented just before covid. There were a lot of things where I think we are going to find, as a theme of the session, that things that happened during the visa route changes that were made—things that one might expect to be done in peacetime—were not done necessarily to the level that we might now want them to be done. Let me hand over to Simon.

Simon Ridley: I agree absolutely with everything Antonia has said. As a sort of architecture, the skilled worker route has been important. We have been able to operate it consistently throughout. As has been said, where there have been particular needs in the UK labour market, we have been able to adapt within that architecture to address pressures as they have arisen. I am sure that we will come to health and social care in particular later in this session, but that is one of the crucial ways in which we were able to respond quickly in 2022 to the acute needs in the care sector.

There are some really important things that we have learned over recent years and that are part of the considerations at the moment. They relate to how we design new routes under the skilled worker route for particular sectors; how we develop more sophisticated ways in which we work between the overall labour market needs of the country and the work that is being done in the Industrial Strategy Council and elsewhere; how we work with Skills England and other parts of Government; and how we work with DWP and other Departments seeking to bring UK workers into the labour market and make sure that migration is feeding into what we need, looking at the labour market in the round in different sectors.

There is a lot of work we are doing with the MAC—we have done that work over the years and will continue to—but there is more we can do to join that up across Government. That will ensure that, where we are designing the specifics of particular ways in which an aspect of the immigration rules can work for particular routes, we are working off the very best shared analysis for the Departments that are expert in particular sectors and those sorts of things. Overall, the route has been successful, post Brexit, as a construct.

There is then a separate debate, which is much broader than the skilled worker route, about net migration in the round, which has gone up very considerably over the last few years, and that the Government are clear is too high. A number of changes have already been made and work is under way to continue to bring net migration numbers in the round down.

Q6 **Chair:** That is a really helpful answer and we will be aiming to dissect bits of it, if not all of it, before we are finished. Dan Hobbs, what have you learned from your evaluation of the route, which is due to be published this year?

Dan Hobbs: The evaluation will publish later this year and you would not expect me to pre-empt that report at this moment. It will look at where we set salary thresholds, where the implementation of those things work



and how we join up. As both Simon and Antonia have said, it is how we bring together much more clearly labour market strategies, the industrial strategy and our work with Skills England and the relevant bodies in the devolved nations to understand how we can flex the system. It is also worth noting that, at the same time as we have been amending the system and delivering the skilled worker route, there has been a significant transformation in how we deliver that service, with things such as eVisas, our transformation of the border and the modernisation of our digital systems, which has run alongside the delivery of the skilled worker visa.

- Q7 **Chair:** I am glad you mentioned the devolved nations. We have had quite a detailed letter from our colleague, Claire Hanna, a Northern Ireland MP. Rather than asking the questions here, if I may send it to you, Permanent Secretary, and you respond to her, that would be really helpful.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Of course, yes.

- Q8 **Anna Dixon:** Good morning. I should briefly declare that I know Mr Ridley from a leadership programme some years ago. It is very good to see you. I would like to clarify with Mr Hobbs, if I may, when the evaluation that you just mentioned was actually commissioned.

Dan Hobbs: I think that it was commissioned earlier this year. Excuse me; I would need to check. There was a post-implementation review done on certain elements in 2023. As I said, we are in the final stages of finalising the evaluation that will then be published, we expect, in the coming weeks.

- Q9 **Anna Dixon:** Very significant changes were made to the route, in particular—I am sure we will spend quite a bit of today's session on this—the inclusion of care workers in 2022 and then further changes to eligibility requirements in spring 2024. I want to understand what work was done to assess the impacts ahead of implementation and to evaluate the impacts of such major changes to the route. I will come to you, Simon, to say what impact assessment was done. The NAO Report suggests that it did not include things such as success criteria or evaluation plans, or even cover some of the very many compliance risks that have clearly crystallised since.

Simon Ridley: There were a few things in there. If I start with the work that was done when the scheme was extended to care workers in early 2022, that work was done in the wake of the pandemic, when the care sector was under acute pressure. DHSC and the Government at the time were very concerned about vacancies and the workforce in care. There was a MAC report that we had commissioned late in 2021 that made the same points and talked to the acute need to temporarily develop the route to enable us to bring more care workers into the country.

We worked with DHSC on what the scope and scale of that might be if we made the change that we did, which was to reduce the skills levels of the route. We introduced two new job codes at RQF 2, a skills level down, to



enable us to bring in care workers. At that point, the Government of the day made those decisions quite quickly on the basis of that analysis, so that it came into force in February 2022. As we have said, we were using the flexibility of the skilled worker route architecture that we had.

We have done a number of things in the time since then about the expansion of that route. It is right to say that the numbers that came through that route and the misuse of that route was on a larger scale than was anticipated at the time in early 2022. When we made the changes in 2023 that came into force in 2024—so those are the changes to dependants and salary thresholds—we published at the time an initial assessment of the likely impacts in late 2023. We did a larger impact assessment that was published last year, I think in September 2024. That work was done prior to September 2024, but the Government of the day did not choose to publish it. We published it post election in September.

Dame Antonia Romeo: There are two types of things that we might have done that we did not do. One cluster of those things is because of the nature of it being in covid. Had we our time again, we would have ended up in the same position. The other cluster is things that maybe, with lessons learned, we might think about doing differently.

In the first category, I would put the fact that we were expanding a model designed for skilled workers to a different area and demographic. That led, necessarily, to some unexpected things happening. That was because, as Simon has said, we had to do so because of the acute pressure we were under. I would also say there was a pace issue. Pace was absolutely the No. 1 criterion at the time. That was the position of the Government, and it was what the MAC was recommending.

There are some areas, though, where—as Dan and Simon have said, an evaluation will be published—with some of the things that we have already learned, we could have put more time limits, conditions, tests and gateways in. Perhaps, if we were doing it again, while some of the things would have stayed the same and I do not think that we would necessarily have been able to do them differently, there were some areas where we could have had more tests, conditions and things for, for example, safeguarding and compliance.

Q10 **Anna Dixon:** We are going to come on to what was done and whether it was done in a timely enough way to protect very vulnerable workers coming into this country with good intentions and for good reason. There are nearly 2 million—I think it is 1.8 million—workers in the care sector doing an amazing job every day looking after older and disabled adults. There was an issue with very large vacancy rates and obviously the scheme, to some extent, has worked. Those vacancy rates are now down to 131,000 or thereabouts.

International recruitment figures suggest recruitment went up—these are Skills for Care numbers—from about 15,000 in 2021 to 105,000 in 2023-24. Clearly, opening that opportunity led to a lot of people coming in.



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Since you have changed the salary thresholds and, in particular, are not allowing workers to bring in dependants, international recruitment has now fallen back again. My understanding is that in the quarter from April to June 2023 it was 26,000. That is down to just 8,000 now.

It is very much that you have quickly turned this tap on, seen the problems and turned it back off again. For the care sector and those care workers who have come, this is obviously leading to quite a lot of problematic impacts. I wanted to follow up and ask what your own analysis is of the impact of these changes, both the turning on and the turning off of the tap, on the labour market and the wider economy.

Simon Ridley: We have shown that we have a flexible enough system to respond to very acute labour market needs. The first thing we assess is that the scheme worked to, exactly as you have laid out, bring a number of care workers into the system and the country quickly and to enable some of those gaps to be filled. It also shows that, seen in isolation, migration is a very blunt tool. As I said, it is really important that we have the best sectoral workforce analysis and strategy that we can have that looks into the long run and is getting the balance right between using the UK labour market, the skills pathways that we have, and migration where it is needed.

Impact analysis that we have done shows the benefits of bringing workers, and particularly higher-skilled workers, into the economy. There are different challenges in terms of pressures on other public services and housing where there are very high numbers. A lot of that is important to the wider net migration debate and overall population position.

The other thing that I would say is that we have learned a lot, through the care worker route in particular, about the propensity for people to try to take advantage of the route. We have seen that with employers. The care sector, as you know, is a particularly heterogeneous sector, which makes it easy for bad actors to set themselves up to take advantage of people. We have seen facilitators set themselves up to bring people in and some evidence of trafficking through these routes. We have seen individuals see the opportunity to come to the UK, not always with the intention of working in the care sector, but to make use of the route. They have had the ability to do that because of other bad actors in the system.

That has created a number of issues, which, as I say, we have learned a lot from. We might come back to this. From summer 2022, through the data in the applications, we could see things that were throwing some of these anomalies to light that we have then followed up as we have gone through, and we might come back to some of that.

The final point to say is that—and we are working very closely with DHSC, directors of social care and others on this—there are a large number of people in the country who, because their employer was not offering genuine roles, find themselves vulnerable in the UK. We have



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done a lot of work to set up regional partnerships to try to match people into jobs so that we can fill the vacancies in the best way.

- Q11 **Anna Dixon:** I want to come specifically to the care labour market, because there are particular characteristics, as you are saying, of the care labour market, not least that these are quite low-paid workers. I do not like to say “low skilled” because they are doing important and skilled work. It was very easy for organisations to set themselves up initially, and many of these were agencies. They were not even care providers. There was a lot of unethical practice, which has massively impacted the ethical providers in this sector that were seeking to provide good work and conditions.

It is all good to hear. My own director of adult social services has provided me with lots of information about how the Yorkshire and Humber hub is now up and running and some of the way they are now trying to mop up the mess of these displaced workers, who were brought over on false pretences and found themselves effectively in modern slavery conditions, and trying to match them up now with more ethical providers. Going back to when this scheme was implemented, would you agree that there was insufficient engagement and understanding of the labour market in the care sector and the regional differences? That was not done and hence there are some of the problems that we have seen.

Simon Ridley: As I said, we work very closely with DHSC. We, the Home Office, are not experts in the social care labour market. That is true. We made a set of decisions, exactly as Antonia said, very quickly in the wake of covid, because of the acute need in the sector, which the Migration Advisory Committee had also set out for us in late 2021 in its report. In making the decisions that quickly, there is definitely more we could have done to understand the way in which the care sector is structured and some of the risks that might have come about in setting up this route.

I completely agree with you about the phraseology around “low skilled”, but the way we used the system was to open a route at a lower-skill level. As well as the structure of the care market, that enables a far wider number of people to find their way into the route, or to be brought into the route by bad actors.

- Q12 **Chair:** Prospectively, when a Department comes to you and says, “We would like to open up a new route for a new group of workers”, just very briefly talk us through the process. What probing questions do you ask? It seems to me that, particularly in the care sector here, we are bringing in a whole load of very low-paid people, which is not necessarily benefiting our own people, because it is keeping wages down; it is a huge cost in terms of immigration. What really probing questions will you be asking in future when a Department comes to you and wants a new category?

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that, in the past, we asked Departments a number of questions, particularly to try to understand the



likely levels of demand through the route and the numbers that they would expect the workforce would attract. We ask questions about the skill levels and the skill needs in order to make a set of decisions we need to design the specifics of the immigration rules. In the future we can and need to do much more across Government to have a clear view of workforce strategies in critical workforces for the economy, to understand how that can be met in a number of different ways using the skills system and UK workforce, so that migration is locked into that broader analysis before we make decisions about particular routes.

Q13 Chair: Specifically on the care sector category, what work are you doing with the Department of Health and Social Care so that that feeds into its long-term health workforce plan to make sure that it is thinking about how to employ and train up indigenous workers and hopefully provide prospects for them?

Simon Ridley: The work we are doing with DHSC at the moment, and with directors of social care, as I have said, in the main, is helping to support the people who have come in through this route. We tightened up the route in a number of ways in autumn 2023, and that came into force last spring. We are continuing to look at that with DHSC. Crucially, we are working to support individuals. As we have revoked sponsor licences for employers, that has left individuals without roles.

There are also a number of people who have come into the country and found they did not have a role and a number of people who have come into the country with debts of various sorts because they have been taken advantage of. The work we are doing is mostly managing that at the moment. There is a lot of learning from the route and that comes to the evaluation, more broadly, that Dan has talked to. We are feeding that into the thinking we are doing about how we do this across our migration routes and skilled workers more generally.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Perhaps I can briefly add something on the forward plan. There are two different things here. This Government's approach is to be very focused on linking immigration and migration policy with the labour market and requirements, via the workforce strategies. The quad, as it is called, is a group of Skills England, the Industrial Strategy Council, DWP and the MAC. It is going to be working closely together to come up with workforce plans and scrutinise workforce plans. That will be the place that brings together the sorts of issues you are identifying now.

If a Department wanted a new route, you would expect that the quad will be testing whether it has a good workforce plan, what that looks like and developing it. Skills England will be heavily involved in that. That was not in existence at the time.

Bluntly, the position—others will correct me if I am wrong—was that we had an acute need. There was a gap. There was a skilled work visa route that it was decided to use. In an ideal world, we would have set up a



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different route, because we acknowledge that this was a different demographic, as has been already noted, but that was not the world we were in. The world we were in was, "What are we going to use to fill this gap? This is urgent. This is important. This is crucial to the country." The MAC recommended it and the Government wanted to do it, so we worked to mitigate the risks as much as possible, but that was the absolute core priority at the time. That is why we did it the way we did it.

- Q14 Anna Dixon:** To illustrate this briefly, most of the shortage in care is in rural areas and in domiciliary care, yet that was not where most of the people were being brought to. There was a complete mismatch, both regionally and in the type of workers. Now that these revocations have happened, that means that the people who are left lack UK care experience and do not have access to transportation—they do not have a UK driving licence—and they have poor employability skills and poor communication and English language skills. Therefore, we have brought in people who are not fit for the jobs that are needed.

I am reassured slightly by your view about how this is going to happen in the future. Even with the speed at which this was done, which is the excuse being given post covid, there seemed to be a real lack of very basic engagement with the care sector and with care providers to understand the labour market dynamics that were already in existence.

Dame Antonia Romeo: To be clear, I totally recognise all of that. I am not seeking to make excuses. I am seeking to recognise that, but I am explaining why the position was as it was, but also why, given the new focus, I do not think that that would happen now because of the new strategic focus. It does not mean that we do not still have an extant problem that you are describing that we need to fix.

- Q15 Sarah Green:** The number of people using the skilled worker visa route is much higher than expected. Mr Ridley, I am curious to hear from you what you think this tells us about how the route is being used.

Simon Ridley: The big increases in the route are largely driven by the big increases in the health and social care worker route. If we look at the numbers over the last few years, there is essentially a very big surge—mostly in 2023, and particularly the latter half—of people coming through the health and social care route. That speaks to some of the issues we have already covered as people came in.

More broadly, we see the persistent use of the route in some key sectors. The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to report on some key sectors, including IT and engineering. It will be reporting later in the year so that we have a greater level of evidence for those sectors that use the route the most that we can feed precisely into the process that Antonia has laid out, so that all the different parts of Government can have the deepest shared analysis of different workforces that we can bring together.

- Q16 Sarah Green:** What actions is the Department taking to address some of



the unintended consequences and unintended outcomes—for example, the increase in asylum claims from those using the route?

Simon Ridley: You are right to point out that there has been an increase in applications into asylum from people using the skilled worker route. There are a number of important things that we do and that we need to add to. The first thing to say is that, to come in on the skilled worker route, there is a requirement to be able to demonstrate that you can support yourself at the beginning. There is a requirement to demonstrate that you have a genuine role to come to.

As we have described, particularly in the case of the new social care route, some of that, particularly around genuine vacancies and genuine roles to come to, broke down somewhat. There is a lot we have done to tighten that up and we will continue to do. We are also working very closely with individual countries where there is a higher prevalence of people coming into the asylum system so that we can, where we are not granting asylum, effect very quick returns and make sure that the system is working as effectively as possible.

Chris Kane: I want to talk first about paragraphs 2.4 and 2.9 of the Report. Paragraph 2.4 says, “In considering entry requirements on the Skilled Worker visa route, the Home Office must balance government immigration policy with the priorities of other departments and the route’s objective to enable employers to recruit the skilled workers they need”. Paragraph 2.9 says, “There are inevitably tensions where Home Office objectives to reduce net migration come into conflict with differing objectives and priorities of other departments. Despite this, other departments’ feedback on the extent of consultation was mixed, with concerns that impacts of rule changes on the departments’ plans were not sufficiently considered.” Antonia, what are you doing to ensure that the collaboration with Government Departments and changes to rules on skilled worker visas are as effective as possible? We have concentrated on the care sector so far, so I wonder whether you could talk about that in other areas.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Thanks for the question. This Committee knows that I always like the opportunity to talk about cross-Government collaboration. There has been a lot of good informal collaboration. As Simon has already described, we worked very closely with DHSC in setting up the route. Indeed, we were using its modelling a lot of the time in terms of predicting things, as well as our own.

We need to formalise some of that cross-Government working at official level. There are Cabinet committees that exist and the usual processes for agreement to policies, so nothing should actually be launched without that level of agreement, but to make the official level join-up really smooth, we are looking at ways we can do this. This Committee will know about, for example, on the CJS side, the criminal justice action group, which has been very effective. We need to be looking at, in areas where the Home Office needs to work most closely with other Departments,



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including the one you have described, putting in place some more formal processes.

The aforementioned so-called quad is a place where this is going to come together, because it is deliberately designed to bring together the Industrial Strategy Council, so DBT; Skills England, so DfE; DWP; and the MAC, as connected to migration in the Home Office. It is a place where we should get a good picture.

This Government's approach is to reduce net migration, but also to encourage investment in the UK workforce, boost skills and training, and grow the economy. To do those things is a whole-of-Government effort. The quad is going to help do that at a strategic level, but we are also looking at how we are going to formalise some of those official level systems. In my experience, relying on informal connections gets you so far—I should say that the people at the Home Office are brilliant, dedicated, highly committed and working really hard across Government—but sometimes, if you do not have a formalised process, things can fall between the gaps.

Q17 **Chris Kane:** Recognising how new into the job you are, can you give us an indication of how long you think it will take to get these processes in place? I am not looking for a date.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is not a flash to bang immediately. Once the immigration White Paper is published, shortly, there will be, as it were, the policy proposals to take forward. Then the system will set up the processes that are required to take those forward across Government. We are already working out what that might look like. Dan might want to comment, but there are a lot of things that we already do across Government.

My own view is that, from my experience, it is better when you have made them a bit more formal and they meet regularly. It is not all about the meeting, but that you know who is responsible for what, who is accountable and how it is coming together. We are looking at how we might formalise that. I would expect that to be done in a matter of months, although I am not suggesting that there will be no problems ever in the future. We can try to get those processes, systems and structures in place in a matter of months.

Dan Hobbs: My team and I discuss extensively with lots of our colleagues across Government and equally with the business sector. I have attended at least three roundtables with cross-sections of users of our system, both as sponsors and recruiters.

The mission-led Government approach also means that there are some formal structures around some of the key Government priorities. I sit on a number of official level groups that then feed into the ministerial groups on things such as housing, skills and the growth agenda. There are formal mechanisms in which migration plays a part. As both Simon and



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Antonia have explained, there is a clear ministerial intention to bring together Skills England and the devolved nations with the MAC and DWP to think about what role migration plays in supporting those agendas, but with migration not necessarily being the sole lever that we will pull to solve labour market challenges.

- Q18 **Chris Kane:** Thank you both for that. Can I now move on to paragraph 2.10 of the Report? This is about the Government's plans, announced in July, to develop closer links between immigration policy and sectoral labour market policies, with all the intentions listed in that paragraph. Simon, how will improving the links between immigration policy and labour market policies improve the ways that you assess the potential impact of future changes to visa rules?

Simon Ridley: The short answer to that, which I am happy to add to, is that we want to bring together the analysis that these different bodies do from their different perspectives on particular workforces around sectoral workforce strategies, so there is a really clear view, whether it is for social care, engineering, construction or anything else. The Department or body responsible for that workforce will have a clear workforce strategy in terms of the demand on that sector and what we think we need in terms of labour market.

There is then a shared analysis between the different bodies of what can be met in what timescales through skills pathways, what the options are, what the opportunities are in the UK labour market in terms of bringing people into the workforce and, if we need a new or different migration route, how that would add into it. There is a much deeper shared evidence base on which, in the case of migration, the Home Secretary can then go on and make the decisions that she may need to.

- Q19 **Chair:** It is not clear to me how this route works for the different devolved nations. There is the letter that I have referred to from our colleague in Northern Ireland. Clearly, there are distinct skills shortages in Northern Ireland. There may well be in Scotland; I do not know. How are you able to differentiate between the devolved parts of this nation?

Simon Ridley: It is a really important question. There are different parts of the system that I have described. Some are UK-wide, such as migration. Some are devolved in terms of skills. When I am talking about Skills England—I apologise—it is really a shorthand for making sure that we can draw in the skills, needs and opportunities in other parts of the UK.

- Q20 **Chair:** I realise that skills is devolved, but immigration is not. Therefore, I am asking how you can vary this route for different parts of the devolved nations.

Simon Ridley: Do you mean the social care route in particular, or the skilled workers route?

- Q21 **Chair:** I mean the whole skilled worker visa system, because it will not



just apply to care workers. It will apply to other skills as well.

Dan Hobbs: The MAC has an important role in advising and doing the labour market analysis. As part of that, it takes into account and has looked at the issues around salary levels, for example, in different regions of the United Kingdom, including the devolved nations, and advises on that. For example, on the immigration salary list there are specific flexibilities that are afforded to certain industries, particularly to reflect the needs of Scotland on fishing. There is an ability, as there has been with the creation of the adult social care elements of the skilled worker, to be able to flex it to allow certain levels below RQF 3 to 5 to be enabled under the system, or to adjust the salary thresholds in that regard.

Often, it is done on advice and with the input, and the Government meet regularly with the devolved nations. The Home Secretary and the Ministers have had various roundtables and discussions with their counterparts. The MAC takes that into consideration when it does its call for evidence on sectoral analysis and when it did its review of what was previously the shortage occupation list. The Government then decided, on the basis of their own analysis and feedback from Departments and others, that they would maintain the exemption for the fishing industry, as one example where it was bespoke for a certain region.

Chair: Chris, I am sorry to interrupt, but I hope I have helped.

Q22 **Chris Kane:** You have; I am happy to ask a few more questions on the devolved approach to this. Listening to what you are saying on the devolved nature, while recognising that any variations are a Government decision, if that were to be the case, can you give me the assurance that, in terms of collecting the data and engaging with the devolved nations, you have and will continue to have an up-to-date picture on where the shortages are? I would hate to think that there is a difference between the connections in England and the connections in the devolved nations for understanding, at a granular level, what is required.

Dan Hobbs: We continue to collect the evidence when the MAC does its report. We have our connections, so I can assure you that they are taken into account. But obviously, we operate an immigration system, as the Chair said, that covers the whole of the United Kingdom.

Q23 **Chris Kane:** When I look at that integration between immigration and skills in the devolved nations, I want an assurance that, in terms of the policies, procedures and, Antonia, all the changes that you have suggested for getting the data and an assurance, these structures will be as strong for the devolved nations—so that you have a UK-wide picture, not just a better understanding of what is happening in England.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The intention is that the quad will work very closely with the devolved nations. I mentioned that the Industrial Strategy Council is part of it. That is looking widely, including with the devolved nations, at the skills requirements, investments and businesses



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across the whole piece. I expect that that will be where it comes together. I think that there will be more on this in the immigration White Paper that will help shed light on how the policy is going to work in practice.

Q24 Chris Kane: In paragraph 2.10, it says that the Government are launching Skills England, a new arm's length body, "to form a coherent picture of skills gaps" across the United Kingdom. Is that correct that it is Skills England's job to form a cohesive UK picture?

Dan Hobbs: As the Permanent Secretary has said, the view in terms of how the quad will work is that it is Skills England and its respective counterpart organisations in the devolved nations that will form part of building that collective evidence base to understand the dynamics of those labour markets and their link to industrial strategy. It is intended that the MAC, DWP, Skills England and the respective counterparts in the devolved nations would be part of that shared evidence base, which would then inform the development of migration policy.

Q25 Chris Kane: I am going to push this one more time; it is important, because words matter. When I am reading that Skills England is responsible for a coherent picture of skills gaps across the United Kingdom, it can be perceived as a tone-deaf name, Skills England, for what really is Skills UK. I want to make sure about that.

Dan Hobbs: I think that this refers to the manifesto commitment of the Government to establish the body called Skills England, as you say, reflecting England. It does not mean that we would not take in the evidence from the respective organisations in the devolved nations as part of the quad. There is a point here that Skills England can obviously only, by nature, because it is devolved, cover England, not the entirety of the UK.

Q26 Chris Kane: Thank you for that; I appreciate the clarification. Moving on slightly, in my constituency, Stirling University, like all universities, is finding that our policies are having a negative impact on the desire to attract the best PhD students and researchers. Given how much value we place in this country on skills and innovations and on our universities, are we engaging with universities—not just Departments—to understand the impact there?

Dan Hobbs: In terms of the wider immigration system and the operation of international students and graduates, yes, we talk with the Department for Education, the respective bodies in the devolved Administrations and the university bodies. The skilled worker route already has salary flexibility for those who are under 26, are new entrants and have PhDs. We have the graduate visa route that supports us retaining highly skilled students who remain in the UK after their studies. There are flexibilities, particularly for PhD students switching into the skilled worker route.

Q27 Chris Kane: If it is useful feedback to hear, I am hearing a lot of



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frustrated researchers and professors at universities say that it is not working for them. Their frustration is palpable when they are writing to me, but thank you for that. Antonia, you look like you want to say something.

Dame Antonia Romeo: We are responsible for immigration policy in the Home Office, but some of the conversations that we will be having will be with DfE. This is why it is a whole-of-Government approach, because we have to make sure that the views of every sector—the individuals in the university sector, but also all the other sectors—can feed in and be represented. That is part of why we need different workforce strategies across the sectors.

I would not want to give the impression that we thought we were the people doing all the liaising with all those sectors, because that is why we have this quad, which, by the way, to address your previous point specifically, Mr Kane, has a remit to work with the devolved nations. That is why the quad will bring it together. We will be having a lot of those conversations ourselves, but we are not just relying on those conversations, because there will be other Departments that are the lead for certain sectors that will be feeding in and producing the workforce strategies, which the MAC will then be considering to give recommendations on immigration policy.

Q28 **Chris Kane:** Can I finally ask about paragraph 1.11 in the Report? This is about the additional charges that are levied. There is a section on the immigration skills charge where it says, "DfE does not directly receive this income, so it is unclear how the money is allocated by HM Treasury, or spent." I do not know who wants to take this one—perhaps Marc—but what are you doing to ensure that the immigration skills surcharge paid by sponsors is being used for its intended purposes?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Marc might want to say something, but perhaps I should, as principal accounting officer, say that this is rather above my pay grade. This surcharge arrives and is paid into the Consolidated Fund. The way in which it is then distributed or used by which Department for what is essentially a matter for the Treasury and that Department. Marc may well have lots of other things to say.

Marc Owen: If it is above Antonia's pay grade, it is probably above mine as well.

Q29 **Chris Kane:** Let me ask it this way. Is there a curiosity being expressed by your Department as to what is happening with this? Are you engaging with the Treasury to get a better understanding of it?

Dame Antonia Romeo: A big part of the plan and the Government's approach is for immigration not to be used as a way to solve these gaps. The way to solve the gaps is to train up the UK workforce. That investment and the surcharge is designed to bring money in to support that investment. The way in which that happens and the negotiations between the Departments that would actually fund that investment and



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the Treasury coffers where it is held is not something that we would get involved in. Because we are trying to lower net migration, and for many other reasons, including growth in the economy, we are very enthusiastic that funding should be used to invest in UK skills building. The flows of funding that will allow that to happen are beyond the remit of the Department.

Chair: Chris, we need to take this up with either the Treasury or DfE. We can use another forum in this Committee to question what you are asking.

- Q30 **Chris Kane:** I have one final point. In my constituency, Camphill Blair Drummond is a remarkable residential service for people with learning disabilities. It attracts volunteers from all over the world to work with residents. It is reporting to me that the high increase in, for example, the health surcharge is limiting who they are able to attract as volunteers. I recognise that you have skilled workers, but volunteering is a subset of skilled workers. International volunteering seems to be being caught up in this. Is volunteering something that registers in the thinking of the Department about this?

Dan Hobbs: I am not aware that volunteers pay the immigration health surcharge. A skilled worker is expected to be employed if they are on a temporary skilled worker visa. Their prime purpose of being in the UK is linked to their sponsorship, which attracts a number of fees, including the immigration health surcharge. We will have to look into that specific issue.

- Q31 **Chris Kane:** Thank you. I can write you on that one, but certainly it is being caught up in that. It is reporting to me that the health surcharge is causing problems.

Dan Hobbs: The health surcharge is paid by the individual, not the employer.

Chris Kane: It is the concept of the impact it is having on volunteering. I think that volunteering helps to build the skilled workers of the future; it is something that they do prior to them becoming the skilled workers we want in 10 years' time. I will happily take that up.

- Q32 **Chair:** Thank you very much, Chris; that is very helpful. Marc, you have been very patiently sitting there. Hopefully, this question comes within your remit. If not, some of our witnesses beside you will probably be able to help.

Notwithstanding what the Permanent Secretary said about changes to the rules on English, you had a contract with Ecctis, a third-party provider, to carry out assessments and issue statements that can be used as part of the application. Previously, Ecctis kept all the money for these services, but you have now decided that you are going to regulate this area. Why did it take you so long to realise that the Home Office was not regulating the fees for services provided by Ecctis?



Marc Owen: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee. My name is Marc Owen. I am director for UK visas and immigration. That is our public brand, as it were, so I am very proud to lead those teams in the Home Office.

Ecctis provides for the Home Office, and has done since 2007, under its former name, UK NARIC, qualification equivalency and English language equivalency services for customers. To a question you asked before about English language testing, you can either go and get an English language test as part of your visa application, or, if you have studied a degree in English, Ecctis would say, "That was done at a sufficiently high level that you do not need to go and get an English language test."

That has operated as a concession. It was a contractual arrangement with Ecctis since 2007. Basically, Ecctis would provide that service to customers, customers would pay it for that service, and customers would then prove that to the Home Office as part of the visa application.

As part of re-procuring that service in 2024, we got advice that, because the service was a necessary or compulsory part of the customer journey, the fee for that service needed to be regulated, which is something that we then did in December 2024. We regulated the fee for new applicants under the old contract. The new contract went into live service last week, on 1 May, also with a regulated fee. Currently, through the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, we are rectifying the statutory basis of the fee collection under the old contract—backdating it, as it were.

We took action as soon as we had advice that the fee should have been regulated. We did not have that advice beforehand, and that is why we did not do it beforehand. As soon as we recognised that we needed to act, we did.

Chair: That is very straightforward. Thank you very much.

Q33 **Mr Betts:** It has been explained to us that, when this scheme started, there was an urgency, mainly driven by covid and the challenges in the social care sector. The scheme was fitted into an existing framework. There did not then seem to be a curiosity about whether that was what was happening, that it was not a perfect system that was being designed from scratch, and that there may be people who would seek to exploit loopholes and flaws in the system. Is that a fair comment?

Marc Owen: Again, I think that you are referring to the inclusion of adult social care within the broader health care visa. That happened in February 2022. There were lots of other things going on in February 2022. Russia invaded Ukraine on 28 February, and we were then busy launching the Ukraine family scheme and then the Homes for Ukraine scheme, with Simon overseeing that as well. We were right in the middle of Ukraine. For a number of weeks, all my staff were, basically, processing Ukraine visas and no others.



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When we turned to processing a lot of the care worker visas in spring 2022, we pretty swiftly identified that there were significant issues in terms of just the volume of visa applications linked to individual sponsors, which seemed to exceed their capacity to employ them. That triggered Operation Rasant, which Simon referred to earlier and which ran from July 2022 through to December 2022. That was targeting discrepancies where the data showed that the number of visa applications per sponsor seemed to be disproportionate.

One reason for that is the compliance issues that have been referred to before, but there is also a deep-seated and structural issue that we uncovered. We did not know about it before, because we did not have any experience of dealing with care within the immigration system. Unlike lots of other sectors that we have been working with for decades, we never really worked with care providers.

One of the real issues, which Ms Dixon touched on in terms of domiciliary care particularly, was the nature of how that is contracted by local authorities. Because local authorities contract for domiciliary care on the basis that they expect the care provider to be able to have sufficient workers to meet that contract, and then also to be able to respond to changes to that contract, depending on how many people are being released from hospital, it meant that care providers were recruiting either speculatively to try to win those contracts, or more than they needed to in order to be able to service those contracts, and bringing people in for whom they did not have guaranteed work.

There is an interesting reference in paragraph 3.17 of the Report, which says, "However, stakeholders from the care sector reported that the Home Office's use of this test"—the genuine vacancy test, the use of which we strengthened in August 2023—"does not always reflect the way that recruitment works in the sector, as it requires them to prove they have a vacancy at the time of application, which does not always suit the way that care is commissioned or how care providers recruit staff in the sector."

The exact point of the skilled worker route is that you have to have a vacancy in order to bring somebody to work in the UK through the skilled worker route. That meant that a lot more people came than were expected—even to genuine care providers, not necessarily abusive ones—and, in addition, people were able to bring their dependants, which led to, first, the volumes, and then, secondly, people finding themselves in the UK working for care providers that had not won contracts and/or did not have guarantees of work from week to week. That is a fundamental structural issue with how the care sector and the immigration sector do not really work well together in terms of how the labour market currently operates.

Over and above that, there are all the other issues that were referred to in terms of genuine providers, agents stepping in, people exploiting



people, migrants seeing it is an easy way into the UK, and so on. I just thought that I would make that point for the Committee, because there is a learning for us collectively—for the quad and others—about how we are going to be able to manage this issue, which is quite complicated.

Mr Betts: So it is a substantially flawed system, then.

Simon Ridley: If I may, in terms of the work that we did at the beginning, and the way that we set the system up, as we covered earlier, if we had our time again—and had more time, as Antonia said earlier—we could have done more to understand how the structure that we used to set up the route quickly might have generated some of the challenges that we saw with respect to care that Marc has just outlined.

After the event, to your initial question, we started to see anomalies. We very quickly started to see things in the data, and we were very curious about those. We did the work that Marc has described, where we saw anomalous numbers of workers being recruited to relatively small organisations. We started doing intentions testing at the border through Border Force officers, but that was after the initial launching of the route.

Q34 **Mr Betts:** Are you now on top of all these problems?

Marc Owen: As Simon was saying, we did a lot of that work through 2022 and early 2023. We were raising the issues with policy colleagues, with DHSC and with others. Two substantive changes took place in August 2023. One was the more rigorous application of the genuine vacancy test. That is at the issue of certificate of sponsorship stage by sponsors, where we were then scrutinising that the employer did indeed have guaranteed work for people. Many care providers struggle, and have struggled, to show that, despite there being vacancies, partly as a result of the nature of contracting care, which I have referred to.

We also introduced a genuineness test at the migrant application stage, so that we could better scrutinise the intentions of migrants. If you look at the overarching arc of numbers in terms of entry clearance, which is the initial visa to come to the UK, that dropped quite considerably from August 2023 when we started applying those tests.

Q35 **Mr Betts:** That scheme has been in operation for two years. In 2024, you checked only 1% of sponsors. It does not sound like a system that is getting the degree of scrutiny that it ought to have, although you know now it is failing in many respects.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Perhaps I will say something first, and then Marc can give some more detail. The first thing to say is that this is not a story of a lack of curiosity. It is a story of a new and innovative problem-solving thing being put in place for, as has been acknowledged, a new demographic. It was different. There were reasons why we did it the way that we did it at the time.



There was a huge amount of work. I might take the opportunity just very briefly to pay tribute to the people in Marc's team and elsewhere across the Department who have done this work, because it has been absolutely extraordinary to do that while being diverted to other routes following the invasion of Ukraine. There was a huge amount going on, and a huge workload in terms of tackling the follow-up from covid.

Issues were identified, and amendments and improvements were being put in place, including the genuine vacancy test and the genuineness test. We are not saying that we are on top of all the problems. We are saying that we are identifying problems and putting in place solutions, within the resources that we have, to fix those problems.

Q36 Mr Betts: Why were only 1% of sponsors being checked in 2024?

Marc Owen: We have totally overhauled the way in which we have done a lot of compliance activity. We had a lot of work. Record levels of net migration also mean record levels of visas that we need to process. The NAO Report compliments us on our ability to have done that and to have taken compliance action. We have overhauled our compliance action. We introduced digital compliance audits pre-licence, which massively expanded the number of digital audits. That means, basically, a booked Teams interview, rather than sending a team round to see people, which expanded things. We established a work services risk hub, which has been taking on all the referrals activity that we have had from a range of sources, triaging them, and carrying out compliance checks.

Q37 Mr Betts: Can you just answer the question that I keep asking?

Marc Owen: The 1% refers specifically to checks that resulted in compliance action being taken as opposed to compliance action being done. I would say that there is a wider range of action that we were taking in terms of digital audits, in terms of triage and in terms of analysis of data.

Q38 Mr Betts: Is 1% sufficient?

Marc Owen: The important thing is that you are targeting your resources on the people who are riskiest and needing them most. Our work services hub does triage cases in that way, so we would be going after people who were clearly trafficking or exploiting migrant workers, or facilitating immigration with no purposes to be in care, more than we would regulatory issues. That would also triage them.

Q39 Mr Betts: Is 1% sufficient?

Dame Antonia Romeo: In a way, 1% is the output, not the input, because 1% is not the number being looked at. It is the ones who, following the initial review, further action is then being taken on. Rather than whether it is sufficient, it is more a question of, "How many are you looking at?", out of which further action is taken against 1%.



Dan Hobbs: There are also further safeguards that we announced in 2023, which require sponsors to be Care Quality Commission-registered. Again, in terms of being able to sponsor, there are other things that go through the process, as Marc has alluded to, which mean that we have tightened the ability for sponsors, and then there is the ongoing overhaul that Marc talked about in us being able to verify those cases.

Q40 **Mr Betts:** What about the sponsors who have already got through—the ones you have accepted in the past? You accept that there is some pretty unacceptable behaviour there, with people taking advantage of the system. How far are you now in removing some of those as sponsors?

Marc Owen: In the care sector, between July 2022 and December 2024, we have revoked the licences of 470 care providers.

Q41 **Mr Betts:** Out of how many?

Marc Owen: Do you mean out of how many within the care sector?

Q42 **Mr Betts:** How many were there as sponsors with licences, and how many of those licences were the 470 related to?

Dame Antonia Romeo: While Marc is finding that figure, the other thing to say is that the number of revoked sponsor licences has gone up dramatically since we have been doing this additional work. In 2023, we revoked 336 sponsor licences. In 2024, we revoked 1,514 overall in the year. It is answering a different question, but the point is that we are getting much tighter. There is then also a question of how many we are approving in the first place, which has also gone down significantly.

Marc Owen: We are just trying to get the figure for the total number of care sponsors. One of the issues in the data is that you have the health and care visa, and then care within it, so disaggregating the two takes a bit of time. We will get it for you and try to come back to you with the proportion, which is what you are asking for.

Q43 **Mr Betts:** You are saying that you are revoking licences of people and doing more checks on existing sponsors. What happens to the workers at the end of that process?

Simon Ridley: Let me answer in two steps. From a purely migration point of view, the way that we operate in lots of the routes is that, at the point at which an individual loses the employment that they previously had, we revoke their visa that is on the basis of that job. We inform the individual. Typically, they have 60 days to regularise their status by applying for a new visa in new circumstances or, at the end of that period, they leave the country.

In the care sector, we have taken a very different approach because of the ongoing concern that DHSC and directors of social care had about the sector. We have worked very closely with the Department, and there are now 15 regional hubs that have been set up with money from health. We are directing individuals who lose their employment because of a revoked



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sponsor licence towards those hubs, and the care sector is seeking to rematch people to roles. That is neither funded nor run by us, but we are supporting it through referrals.

Q44 Mr Betts: Do you have concerns that some of those workers may end up working under pressure and in illegal arrangements? Are there any checks on that?

Simon Ridley: There is certainly a risk of that.

Dan Hobbs: There are wider compliance checks that every employer is expected to do when they are employing someone.

Q45 Mr Betts: I know, but these are people who are not going to do the checks, because they are not working legally.

Dan Hobbs: It is the employer that is required to do the check before they employ someone. As part of our standard compliance measures, they are required to use the employer checking service, and our colleagues in immigration enforcement, on a targeted intelligence basis, do a whole range of work to combat illegal working in the UK.

Q46 Mr Betts: You said that, at the end of this process, workers may leave the country. How would you know if they have left the country?

Simon Ridley: We use passenger information data to match various things internally, but people in the country on a visa are free to move around. They are not people who are monitored by us as they do that.

Q47 Mr Betts: Can you explain that statement about passenger information?

Simon Ridley: The way that we can tell whether people are in the country is to match the data that we have on the individuals, which they give us when they apply for a visa, with data that we get internally in terms of people using airlines to leave the country.

Q48 Mr Betts: Is that systematically checked and cross-referenced?

Simon Ridley: We use it in a number of ways. Just to come back to the question on the care route, the first thing that we are seeking to do is to maximise the opportunities for people who have come in through this route to work in the care sector, where there remain a number of vacancies. We are directing people to the regional hubs where the care sector can then rematch them. Where people apply through new visa routes, we then process that as quickly as we can to support that transition and to make it as effective as possible.

Q49 Mr Betts: I will ask the question again. When people leave the country, you say that you have information from the airlines and others. Is that systematically kept, cross-referenced and checked against the information that you have about people who have come here?

Simon Ridley: We are not tracking every single individual who comes into the country.



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Q50 **Mr Betts:** This is the reality: they have not gone through your systems. They just disappear; they are in the black economy. That is the problem.

Simon Ridley: Individuals have come in on a visa and we have taken their information as they have come in. There are a set of clear immigration rules around that visa. If people try to work illegally, there are a set of right-to-work checks that employers can and are expected to do digitally and very quickly. We know that, of course, there are people working illegally in the country, and that is where, as Dan has said, we use our immigration enforcement services to visit illegal workplaces on the basis of intelligence, and to collect and return them. Of course, there are people working illegally, and we are seeking to manage this system as best we can.

Q51 **Mr Betts:** I just do not understand why there are no cross-reference checks about whether people have left. If they have come in and they are not working legally, and you do not have a record that they have left, they are probably working illegally somewhere, but you do not have that information. Most countries check you out through their border control systems and take a record of people who come into the country and those who go out. You do not do that, do you?

Simon Ridley: There is a lot that we are doing to transform our border security systems, and to make sure that they are as digital as they can be and that we can do as many checks as we can. There is absolutely scope to strengthen that. We have brought in eVisas, so that people have a digital status that they and we can check much more easily. We will continue to develop and transform that system, but there is definitely more that we can do to continue to strengthen border security, and we have a lot of that work under way.

Dame Antonia Romeo: You are asking, in a way, Mr Betts, about what we are doing about visa overstayers. The whole point is that there is a lot of work that we are doing to identify and crack down on that. We work with a lot of other agencies that have a role as well, such as HMRC. We work with local authorities. There is a lot of joint working to try to identify the issue. We are not saying that it has been solved. We are saying that we are working to identify the issues where they arise and to fix them. We are now fixing a problem that was created for reasons that we have already discussed in this session. We are putting in place those fixes. We have some things that have already been set out and are working well, and there is still some territory to go.

Marc Owen: In terms of care workers, we have not been cancelling their visas since late 2023. We have deliberately been working with DHSC on the rematching process, so allowing supplementary work and trying to rematch people to genuine care providers as a means of them not being driven into illegal working or into claiming asylum.

Just to answer your previous question, the total number of sponsors in adult social care is approximately 9,000.



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Q52 **Mr Betts:** So you have revoked the sponsorship of about 5% of those.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Was that an annual figure, Marc?

Marc Owen: Some 470 care sponsors were revoked between July 2022 and December—

Dame Antonia Romeo: So it is six months. It is 10% on an annual basis.

Marc Owen: That is December 2024, and there are currently about 9,000 sponsors in care. There is a different time period for those two stats, but it is approximately that kind of range.

Q53 **Chair:** I would like to get one question in, because I know that the Permanent Secretary has to go. Paragraphs 3.18, 3.19 and 3.20 give more information on these sponsorship compliance checks, but Marc and the Permanent Secretary might want to write to us. If you want to clarify this whole area, I would be more than happy for you to do that.

Dame Antonia Romeo: In terms of what we are doing to improve non-compliance, the checks and so on.

Chair: That is correct.

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have a lot of work under way, so it might be helpful to the Committee to set it out.

Q54 **Chair:** That would be really helpful. You have only 46 full-time equivalent compliance officers compared with 65 in 2021.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I can pick that up now, because we are using digital and technological solutions much more now. I have not had the chance to do a full RIF on the Department, but one of the things that we have to do to become more productive and agile is to use technology more effectively. That is something that you would naturally see as we get better about using tech and AI.

Q55 **Chair:** That was going to be my final parting question before you left. How long will this transformation of the sponsorship system take? How long will it take to update the IT systems to go with that?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Do you mean overall in the Department as a whole, or are you talking about the sponsorship issue in particular?

Q56 **Chair:** Before you go, perhaps you can address two of those issues—the sponsorship and overall—because the IT systems are critical to the whole thing.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say about IT and technology is that what I have observed in the Home Office is that there is a huge amount of absolutely exceptional innovation happening across the piece in terms of our eGates, eVisas, ETAs and everything starting with an “e”. We are working with DSIT and UKRI on hyper-local crime concentration



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mapping. There is a lot of really excellent work happening on technology and innovation.

One of the things that I am keen that we do as the Home Office is talk more about it, learn the lessons and roll it out more. There is a lot of really great work happening, including in this space. We have a lot of tech debt as a whole. The Home Office has done a brilliant job of reducing tech debt. It was about £1 billion in the last spending review period. We have now got it down to below £600 million. That is still a lot of tech debt to be carrying.

We do not have as many legacy systems as I was used to in my previous Department, but we still have some of those, and they are very crucial systems. When you are reliant on legacy systems, it is a problem. I say that to offer a caveat to how quickly we can get the new IT systems in place, in that IT systems always take longer than you think they are going to.

Marc might want to say what we are specifically doing on technology in this space, but I would just caveat that we are working with old systems. You cannot immediately leap to the new, whizzy system, and what we need to do is to fix some of the basics first. Then we can employ the new, more innovative AI and other tech tools over the top, which we really want to do, and which will solve some of the problems in due course that Mr Betts was identifying. For now, we do not have all the basic infrastructure in place, so it is a bit of a medium haul, unfortunately. I will hand over to Marc.

Chair: I am conscious that the Permanent Secretary has to go any second. Thank you very much, Permanent Secretary. We will take a break for five minutes now, and be back at 11.35 am. We will then pick up with Anna on some of these points. Thank you very much, Permanent Secretary.

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Q57 **Chair:** Marc, I am sorry that you were rather cut off in your prime there. This Committee is very keen on IT systems, and we would like to hear anything that you want to add.

Marc Owen: Our sponsorship IT system dates back to 2008, when sponsorship went live. In jargon terms, it is known as tech debt. It is old and clunky, and not really as good as it could be, so we have been looking to modernise that for some time. As the NAO pointed out in its Report, there have been some delays to the sponsorship IT transformation. That has mainly been as a result of the sheer amount of transformation going on in the Home Office, and prioritisation decisions that we have had to make—for example, launching the Ukraine routes or prioritising other things such as eVisas and so on.



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We have started releasing elements of it, which is good, such as, in jargon-y terms, private betas around elements of the new sponsorship IT system. We hope that that will continue over the next two or three years and mean that both my staff but also employers and educational institutions will get a much better service. On sponsor compliance, which we touched on earlier, we are also exploring how we can do that in a different way, using Microsoft Power Apps as a cool AI, modern way of managing all the compliance data that we have, rather than lots of spreadsheets and so on.

Work is being done. It has taken longer than we would have liked. We are very conscious that many employers out there would like us to have a much more usable system than they currently have to use, and that is a priority.

Q58 Chair: Does that include real-time updates on where their case is progressing?

Marc Owen: That would be less on the sponsor side of things than on the visa applicant side. The NAO Report also talks about how responsive we are to customers. I sit in something called the customer services group. Our vision is to put customer needs at the heart of everything that we do and to be responsive and adaptive at all times, so I will be held to account on that basis. A lot of the customer feedback that we have in the main areas across visas are around application progress and where we are at with applications, with contact and with application forms and guidance, and how straightforward they are. Within my remit, those are the areas that we have been focusing a lot on.

On visa application tracking, we have clarified a lot of things in terms of our service standards and how long things take. There is a visa times processing tool, which is now live on gov.uk and tells you when you can get your application. It does not quite yet tell customers what they would like, which is, "When am I going to get my application?" That is partly because exactly when they are going to get their visa decided is a function of how many applications we have, how many staff we have, and how we flex across different routes, which means that it is quite hard to accurately predict that, "You will get it on Friday or Monday." We try to make sure that we stay within our service standards, so you will get it by the service standard. We have short-ish service standards that are certainly competitive with most countries, and, by and large, we meet them.

Q59 Anna Dixon: I would like to draw on some further evidence that we have received and to home in on a couple of aspects relating to care that you have brought in to effectively address the historical problem, the first being the hubs. These are for people who have found themselves here, who have come in under the work visa, only to then find themselves without work.

I had an example of this brought to my attention over two years ago by a



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trade union rep, who alerted to me a man in my constituency who had been hired as a care worker from Ghana, and had tied accommodation and a zero-hours contract. Many of the work opportunities that were provided required him to travel. He subsequently, therefore, got into debt because he was not earning enough even to pay the rent. He raised concerns about this with the employer and was fired, with no ability to get another job, even in the care sector, and no recourse to public funds, so was, effectively, homeless and destitute.

You have put in place these hubs. I have evidence from Bradford council in relation to the Yorkshire and Humber hub. According to data that they have shared, there were approximately 3,750 international recruits who have been affected by revocations—the withdrawal of sponsorship—in Yorkshire and Humber. Some 117 people have been successfully placed, but you can see the numbers still without any placement are large. They are pointing to a number of things, both on the employer side, in terms of why they are not taking them, and on the employee side. I want to touch first on the employee side, and then I will come to the employer side with you, Marc, in a moment.

On the displaced worker side, they are saying that there is fear of deportation, fear of repercussions, fear of being unable to secure new sponsorship and fear of authorities whistleblowing. They are exploring other solutions. We heard that many are seeking asylum. Some are being trafficked. Many are continuing to work for 20 hours for non-sponsored employers, which I understand has been brought in, but why go down the sponsorship route if you can get those 20 hours anyway? What are you going to do to address those issues, which will presumably mean that the solution that you have developed is not going to work?

Simon Ridley: I can say a couple of things, and then Marc will want to come in. It is always difficult to generalise, because lots of individuals are in different circumstances, but I will just say a couple of things.

The critical thing is that we are seeking to do what we can from the Home Office side, working with DHSC and local areas through the hubs, to support people into other employment in the care sector where we can. That is the fundamental purpose of us setting up the hubs. We do not run those, so precisely how they operate is, I am afraid, not a question that we can answer in detail.

We seek to maximise the information that we give the individual in terms of writing to them and directing them towards opportunities for being matched into a new role. We are not, as I said, cancelling individuals' visas, so they remain here on a visa and, as such, while I totally acknowledge that people have a fear of deportation—it is a complicated system that is hard to understand, particularly for an individual in a vulnerable, distressed situation—they are here perfectly legally on a visa. If they need to change that visa as they change their employer, they remain here with rightful status, and we are doing that transition as quickly as we can. I am sure Marc can say more about that.



There are absolutely cases where we identify the risk of human trafficking. We have modern slavery provisions to support people where we identify that, which we direct people to where we can. Essentially, our objective here is to be as flexible as we can within our immigration systems to support people towards employment in the sector that they came here to work in. I am sure that there are limitations to that, and that is what we are continuing to discuss with DHSC and others.

Q60 Anna Dixon: My understanding, just to clarify, was that if they lost employment with the sponsor, they were then, effectively, no longer here legally. Often, if the accommodation is tied, they find themselves basically destitute. Until this matching process works and another sponsoring organisation takes them on, there is a period that, for some individuals, can be quite lengthy, during which, I understand, they have no recourse to public funds and are at risk of deportation.

Marc Owen: The first is more of an issue than the second. I have here a copy of the letter that we send to migrants in the situation that you describe, where we revoke the sponsor licence. Basically, it says, "Your permission remains valid for the time being." It then flags people towards the DHSC and regional hub support processes that we have described. It gives a list of licensed employers within the care sector, should they wish to go and find a job otherwise. It then flags up who are and are not ethical recruiters. It details what the signs of exploitation might be, or otherwise, and then points people towards modern slavery helplines and so on if they feel that they are being exploited.

You would hope that migrants who found themselves in a situation where they did not have a job because of a care provider's licence being revoked would then try to, and be incentivised to, go through the matching process, because that would be the best option for them in many ways. As you say, that has not always worked. It is for DHSC and for the hubs to try to make it work. There are a variety of reasons why other employers have not been taking them on, which you touched on earlier, and that can mean that people will find themselves destitute or without accommodation in the meantime. Other support services are available for them. Indeed, we have also seen people claiming asylum as an outcome.

Q61 Anna Dixon: I want to come back to some of the evidence that we have received. Unison surveyed 3,000 people who had come to the care sector. It was saying that one in seven had paid money to an employer, and one in 11 to a recruiter or agency, before coming here. We will get on to this shortly.

In terms of the conditions that those people are being kept in, nearly a quarter are living in care company accommodation where they are expected to share a bedroom with other workers. Unison goes on to say that employers exploit their vulnerability to working excessive hours, remaining on call even during time off. Workers endure discrimination and harassment without redress.



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The Work Rights Centre says that policy interventions to deal with labour exploitation under the skilled worker route have had a limited effect on individuals perpetuating abuse, and have left wide protection gaps for workers. They have failed to be effective because they have not addressed the power imbalance at the heart of the employer sponsorship as a whole. What other steps are you taking to reduce the risk of exploitation in the care sector?

Simon Ridley: There are a number of things that we have done. This is, without question, a wider systems problem than we can tackle through Home Office immigration rules, but we have been doing a lot to try to address this issue. Some is the work that we have already talked about in terms of identifying sponsors that are not behaving appropriately, taking advantage of others or not offering genuine vacancies and so on. We have been revoking licences, as Marc and Antonia were previously describing.

Coming back to the immigration skills charge, which we touched on earlier, and which should be paid by the employer, there have been cases where some or all of that cost has been pushed on to employees, either directly or indirectly, and we are working to ensure that that does not happen. It should be absolutely clear that that is paid for by the employer.

As described, and without trying to repeat myself, we are seeking to support people into other employment in the sector as best we can. We are absolutely identifying the modern slavery routes and so on where people think that they are being exploited.

Marc Owen: All of the things that you mentioned are contrary to sponsorship guidance and are the reasons why we have been revoking sponsor licences. UKVI, my team, works very closely with a whole bunch of different agencies. Under the forum of the director of labour market enforcement, they bring together a range of agencies in this space, including GLAA, HMRC on the national minimum wage, ourselves and immigration enforcement.

This Government have been particularly front-footed, as it were, about trying to tackle exploitation within the labour market. UKVI plays a role. We share information. We work with different agencies on a range of issues, not just in care. We recently played an active role in a Border Force and Police Scotland trafficking concern in the fishing industry in Scotland, which UKVI lent in on quite heavily to facilitate the Ghanaians, in that particular incident, finding alternative employment.

It is a problem. This has just shone a lens on a wider problem within the labour market. We have insisted on CQC registration now, but CQC registration is mainly around patient care issues rather than employment regulation issues, and my view would be that more could be done on the care sector.



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Q62 Anna Dixon: I was going to come to the fact that, again, all of this just seems like it is closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. We have brought in all these people, and we are now suddenly doing lots of things to close down bogus sponsors. It would have been a basic thing to have made sure that these were legit care providers to begin with. The fact that the CQC registration was not required at the beginning means that a large number were recruitment agencies that literally had no contracts for providing care services.

You made the point earlier about your new checks and compliance activity in the social care sector in terms of looking for genuine vacancies. You mentioned CQC registration. The Homecare Association, though, has suggested—you were alluding to this point—that the High Court has ruled that the Home Office approach to assessing guarantees of commissioning in care sector organisations is irrational and does not correspond with how the public sector commissions care.

A lot of care is contracted by the NHS or by local authorities on a spot basis—on very flexible contracts—with no guaranteed hours in those contracts, which makes it impossible for providers to guarantee the full-time hours. If they do that for overseas workers, we are setting up a situation where we have unequal terms and conditions—and, indeed, pay—between those who have come on the skilled visa scheme and domestic workers. Again, I want to probe whether you think that your compliance checks in this sector are working.

Marc Owen: With the genuine vacancy test, we have been testing much more strongly to ensure that care providers do, indeed, have full-time employment for the right salary, and that they will have guarantees of work when they come, in order to avoid a lot of the problems that you are talking about. If we continued to give skilled worker visas where there is no guarantee of work, we would exacerbate the problem that we have been talking about, which is a whole bunch of people coming who did not have any work, and we would be creating more displaced workers.

We have been working quite closely with the sector. A number of people in my team have run multiple sectoral events with people from all over the country, including DHSC and ADASS colleagues, but also with various care provider representatives, to try to support care providers with how they can meet our genuine vacancy test. Different people have then taken different action. Personally, I would like to see more flexibility between local authorities and care providers in terms of how they do things in stronger arrangements.

Q63 Anna Dixon: In a sense, it is an example of the failure of Government Departments to join up, because, in a way, the solution is for the Department of Health and Social Care and local authorities to be providing contracts with guaranteed hours. It sounds like the two are incompatible.



Simon Ridley: The way that I would frame this is that, if we go to the root cause analysis of the challenges of the expansion of the skilled worker route into the care sector in 2022, we made a set of decisions to do that inside the structure of the skilled worker route to enable us to bring it on stream very quickly, given the acute need and the advice that we were getting from the MAC, DHSC and others. Without doubt, what we have learned is that the way that the skilled worker route is structured around sponsorship and genuine vacancies does not map well on to the social care sector in particular and the way that it is structured. If we go back to the beginning in 2022, could we have thought more about how we mitigate some of those risks and, between us and DHSC, have foreseen some of those risks? That is some of what we have learned and some of what Antonia said earlier.

In terms of where we are now, as Marc said, we are trying to be as flexible as we can within that structure to enable the route to work and to support people who are in the country. We have done a series of things that, in broad terms, are working in the sense of them doing what we intended them to do. We are bearing down on compliance. We are identifying employers who, in terms of the way that the licences should have worked, have had theirs revoked, which has left the challenges of rematching the individuals, which we have talked about. We have tightened up the route in a number of ways, such that the number of people coming through it is drastically down from where it was in 2023.

There are still a set of issues with the people who have come in on this route and how we manage them best, which we have talked about. If we were, in the future, to be in a position where we were thinking about an acute need in a sector that is more divergent from those that we generally use the skilled worker route for, there are a set of things that, at the beginning, we would probably do differently from what we did in 2022.

Q64 **Anna Dixon:** I am conscious that we need to pause in a moment for the two-minute silence, but I will ask a brief question and for a brief answer. Given all of that, was it a mistake to use the skilled worker visa for the care sector?

Simon Ridley: At the time, the important thing was to be able to stand up a route very quickly. The only way to do that is in an architecture that we have. Otherwise, there are a series of lead-in times in terms of setting up the applications and the systems, so it would have just been much more delayed. That is a question of the acuteness at the time. I expect that, because of the pressures on care coming out of covid, in terms of using the route, we would have used it. The question is the one about what mitigations we could have put around it in terms of caps, limits or review points, or some of those sorts of things.

Chair: I am going to suspend the sitting now. I want to come back to this; I do not think that we have quite exhausted it yet. Have you finished, Anna? There are more issues to raise on this.



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Anna Dixon: Yes, particularly about what happens overseas. Both Clive and I have concerns about that.

Chair: Let us pause rather than suspend. We are at 11.58 am at the moment. We will be standing just before 12 pm, then we will resume.

The Committee observed a two-minute silence.

On resuming—

[Mr Clive Betts took the Chair]

Q65 **Anna Dixon:** The NAO Report, in paragraph 3.25, highlights evidence of people being charged significant fees in their home countries, which I mentioned briefly. Given the criticism here that there was potentially limited engagement with the FCDO and overseas partners, we have touched a lot on what is going on in the UK, but could you just talk a bit more about how you are ensuring that people are not exploited before they even come to this country?

Marc Owen: In terms of all those obligations, they remain with the sponsors as part of the sponsor guidance. Following the ICIBI inspection of the adult social care route, there was a recommendation to do more in terms of supporting migrants overseas with the risk of exploitation. We created something with, I think, the Work Rights Centre based on GLAA information. We created a brochure that is available in all our visa application centres globally. That is the principal thing that we, within UK visas and immigration, have done in that space. In terms of DHSC and the NHS, there are also overseas ethical recruitment practices that are there, but that is the principal action that we have taken.

Q66 **Anna Dixon:** I have examples currently of people overseas still having agencies advertised to them, and distinguishing between those that are exploiting and those that are fair is really difficult. Those people will ultimately be coming through your skilled worker visa route and may find themselves here already destitute, because they have paid extortionate fees to even get here. Again, I just feel like there is some obligation in terms of that compliance activity.

Marc Owen: Those are requirements within the sponsorship guidance. They will be able to come only if the sponsor has a licence, and that licence is maintained only if they are doing those things. Simon touched earlier on another operation that we did with Border Force, known as Operation Odenite, which was, basically, a referral process in which Border Force officers were questioning and interviewing care workers at the border about, "Did you know what you were doing? Have you been asked to pay this? Do you know what job you are going to? What agents have you been using?" All the intelligence and referrals coming from Border Force colleagues were going into my work services hub, and then we have been taking compliance action against sponsors as a result of that.



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Essentially, the sponsorship system is designed on the basis that the employer is taking responsibility for who they are asking the Home Office to come to the UK and for signing up to various obligations. If they do not, they can no longer do that and, therefore, we suspend or revoke their licence. That is the main control mechanism we have. We recognise that we have some extra work we could do for migrants, which is why we publish this information upstream for people.

Q67 Anna Dixon: The sponsors' requirement extends to where there has been an agency in the country abroad that effectively makes the introduction and charges a fee there.

Marc Owen: Yes. For example, in a university context, if a university wants to use a recruitment agency in Pakistan or Bangladesh in order to source international students for it, and those are not genuine students, and they come here, but do not turn up and do not enrol, or they claim asylum or whatever, that is on the university. The university is at risk, therefore, of losing its licence or of suspension action.

It is for the university, in that context, to ensure that it is using only proper agents overseas, which is why we have worked with the British Council on the agent quality framework to ensure that sponsors are doing the right thing. We cannot really regulate what will be happening in terms of agents in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria and so on.

Simon Ridley: Exactly as Marc said, that is the system through which we seek to control this. The thing we have added is to try to provide as much information as we can to our visa application centres, which is the Home Office footprint overseas, that people come through.

Q68 Chair: University is a bit different, is it not, compared with some of the sponsors in the care sector. It is a different arrangement. It feels different, and the risks are surely greater when you have organisations with no established base in this country that are putting themselves forward as sponsors and are then doing things in other countries that you accept you are not aware of.

Dan Hobbs: Sponsorship requirements do require people, as we set out. There is a difference here between the sponsors using agents, as Marc described, which is not directly within the control of the immigration system. As Simon explained, we provide full information to applicants on what is required, the fees and the expectations of what a sponsor should do. That is both in our online system and through our information in our visa application centres. We then have very clear requirements on the sponsor.

If the sponsor chooses to use an agent in the middle, that is not something that we can currently control directly because those happen outside of the immigration system. The sponsor is required to meet all of the compliance checks, and we make as much information as we can



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available to the applicant about what is required of their sponsor, and the fees and the expectations of their sponsor through our systems.

Q69 **Chair:** When did you become aware that some sponsors might be passing the costs of those agents and the fees paid on to the applicants—the individuals who want to come to work here?

Marc Owen: Relatively soon. As I say, the route went live in February 2022. I think through the course of 2022, we already had some concerns around the volume of people who were coming. We were targeting that. We were getting intelligence referrals from Border Force officers even before we did Operation Odenite, such as, “This person doesn’t know where they’re going. They’re telling me a story. They don’t speak English,” or whatever.

We were also getting referrals from in-country sources about care workers who were raising complaints or issues within the UK. All of that information was being fed in, as I said earlier, to our work services hub, and we have been taking compliance action against those sponsors. We also do checks before somebody gets a sponsor licence. There are a whole range of different requirements to get a licence in the first place around whether they are a genuine business and have the capacity to bring in migrants.

That was strengthened through the CQC registration element as well. But we have had a mixture of people who possibly should not have got a licence in the first place, and also genuine providers who have then either exploited people or not had work for them.

Q70 **Chair:** How far did you use intelligence from the Foreign Office, with any concerns it might have about what it knows from its work overseas?

Marc Owen: I have teams overseas as well who work very closely with Foreign Office colleagues. Wherever we would get any specific intelligence or referrals from the Foreign Office or other UK Government colleagues in-country, we would use and act on that. The work services risk hub is the central pot into which all that intelligence goes and is triaged, and then we take appropriate action to either suspend the licence, take immediate action to revoke it, to put people on action plans and so on.

Q71 **Chair:** Before we move on to the next area, was there any irony in the fact that this system for care workers was established in 2022, at the very time when Qatar was holding a World cup, and the UK Government and the Foreign Office had been complaining bitterly for a long time to the Qatari Government about the kafala system? Elements of that system are exactly replicated in what happened to some care workers under the scheme that was established by the UK Government that we are talking about.

Simon Ridley: Just to stand back, the NAO Report was on the skilled worker route as a whole. We have a structure for the skilled worker route



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that, by and large, has worked very well to achieve its aims. We applied that in 2022 to an acute labour shortage, as we have discussed, that was evident, both in terms of the information we were getting and that DHSC and the care sector were passing on to us.

Some of those structures have worked less well because of the nature of the sector and the way in which it is dispersed, and, in terms of lowering the skill level, the opportunities that that gave to some bad actors. Without question, that has given rise to some bad practice. It is a question of how we controlled for that risk up front. Since then, we have done a huge amount with DHSC, and with the directors of social care, to identify and mitigate those risks as we have gone on.

Q72 Chair: The nature of this Committee is that we tend to look at where concerns have been expressed about the way that something has operated, rather than where everything has gone superbly well. There was a large amount of publicity around the scheme in Qatar, which the Qatari Government were under enormous pressure to change in the run-up to the World cup, yet some elements of this scheme seem to have exactly the same problems. I wonder whether anyone with the natural curiosity that might have been around thought about those issues before this route was used for care workers.

Perhaps we have gone into that in some detail now, and we might just have a look at the application process that most applicants go through to get a visa, and the standards of performance that are laid down, which, for routine cases, appear to be met for the most part. Generally, is the scheme working reasonably well for the simple cases that are put before you?

Simon Ridley: Yes. Marc will want to go into the detail because his teams do this work. Mr Betts, that is absolutely right. We do, as Marc says, centre on providing a clear and prompt service, as much as we possibly can, to the customer. We have relatively short service standards, which compare well, and we have a huge number of applicants and make those decisions. We absolutely hit those service standards for the vast majority of simple cases, where a simple case is both literally reasonably straightforward, and where we get the documentation and the information that we need from the applicant first time round or very promptly thereafter.

There are cases where we are awaiting further information from applicants, where they become so-called complex cases, which go beyond that time, but the vast majority we are deciding within our SLAs of 15 days, or whatever they are for any particular route.

Marc Owen: For the skilled worker route, there are two stages to the process. There is a sponsor licensing process, where there is a service standard of eight weeks. Despite an increase in the number of licensed sponsors from about 30,000 in 2019, before the launch of the route, to 110,000 now—a massive increase in licensed sponsors—we have stayed



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within those service standards of eight weeks throughout. The number of days to process sponsor licences has dropped quite considerably.

We also offer a priority 10-day service for fast-tracking certain pre-licence applications, which was capped but now is uncapped. If you need to get on to the sponsor licence and you pay us a priority fee, you will get that within 10 days. For migrant applications themselves, our service standard for entry clearance for visas is three weeks, or 15 working days. For leave to remain applications, it is eight weeks, but for the health and care route, it is, again, 15 working days. We also offer a priority service of five days and a super-priority visa service of next day.

If you are wanting to bring somebody into the UK for skilled work, you can get a sponsor licence in 10 days, and then, for a fee, you can get a visa in a day, which is second to none in terms of global competitiveness for visa operation. Our customer service standards are very high, and satisfaction rates are high. Our target in published stats is 98.5% of applications to meet those standards; the actual day-to-day target is 100%. It is a total given that, at any moment in time, our operation is working to try to process all visas within service standards.

The 98.5% is to allow for the fact that there may be some IT bugs, for example, that mean a case is affected by a bug. It would let the whole target fail because a small number of applications were affected by something like that. A bit earlier in the Report, it drops down to about 94%; again, that was displacement of staff into the Ukraine visa route, which meant we were not processing as highly as 98.5%, but that is currently being met.

Q73 **Chair:** Are you back to 98.5% now?

Marc Owen: Yes.

Q74 **Chair:** The one issue that was raised in the NAO Report was that complex cases are not included in that figure. Indeed, there is no particular target for complex cases.

Marc Owen: That is correct. They are included in transparency stats. We differentiate between straightforward cases, which are cases that basically we can determine on the basis of the application that has been made, and then non-straightforward cases, which are referred to in the Report as complex cases. They are ones that we cannot determine within the SLA, usually for reasons outside of our control. A reason might be that we need to write to the applicant for further information because they did not provide it in the first place, and they may not provide that information in time.

On day 14 of a 15-day service standard, we would write to the applicant and say, "We have not received your information. We are taking your case out of service standard." It does not mean that we forget about it, but it just cannot be resolved within service standard. It may be because there is a pending prosecution. The oldest current live case for in-country



applications is a pending criminal prosecution going through the courts. We have a policy not to determine those applications until that is resolved. It could be because we are carrying out national security or other checks, which a third-party agency needs to do, before we can issue a visa.

We do not have a service standard for those complex or non-straightforward cases because, essentially, we cannot determine it. It is not within our gift to conclude the case. If we could, we would. We do chase them down. If they are a local authority referral, we will follow up with the local authority. If the customer has not supplied the information, we will require it of them. We do publish transparently, in our transparency data, the percentage and the absolute number of applications that are non-straightforward so that it is totally transparent. We are not hiding anything. We just do not think it is something that would be correctly subjected to a service level agreement.

Q75 Chair: An observation in the NAO Report was that the number of complex cases, as a percentage, rises when the number of applications overall rises. You are struggling to meet the time limits on the cases, so you put more cases into complex to avoid the 98.5% monitoring figure.

Marc Owen: That is certainly a reading that you could make of the NAO Report. The period they specify is July to October 2023, and, as referred to before, in August 2023, we introduced both the genuine vacancy test on the certificate sponsorship side but also the genuineness test on the migrant side. We were basically applying far greater scrutiny to applications and asking for more information from individuals at that time, which they were not supplying within the 15 days or which required other work.

It could also be, for example, that if a migrant has made an application to a sponsor, and the sponsor has had their licence suspended—not revoked yet, but suspended pending further investigation—we would not be able to process that migrant’s application. Therefore, it would be put on hold until that suspension had been done, in which case the case would be deferred as non-straightforward at that point. There is a correlation between a busy period and the increased proportion of non-complex cases, but I reject the accusation—not that you were making one, but the suggestion or reading of the NAO Report that one might have—that we were deliberately gaming our performance figures by calling cases non-straightforward when they were not.

Q76 Anna Dixon: As constituency MPs, we get quite a lot of casework through, including relating to visa applications. I just want to share briefly one case, that I think illustrates the challenge of not having any targets for your non-straightforward cases. A care assistant from Zimbabwe arrived in April 2023 under a skilled worker visa. She is a single mother and was required to leave her 10-year-old son in Zimbabwe. She believed that this was temporary. She applied twice for the child’s visa and, I stress, she submitted all required documentation,



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including a sole custody letter, an affidavit from the child's father granting permission and so on.

The visas were both refused because that was not accepted as evidence for sole custody. It went to an administrative review in June 2024. She now has a court order proving sole custody, yet she has been informed that the process could take 12 months or more, during which time a distressed 10-year-old is stranded in Zimbabwe away from his mother. Obviously, this predates the restriction on dependants, so it should not be affected by that.

I just use that as an illustration. You have a very high compliance with your 15 days, but once somebody tips over into non-straightforward, surely there should be at least some measures, metrics and targets around that. There is a risk otherwise that cases such as this then languish for very long periods.

Marc Owen: Just hearing what you were saying there, if you have a case where a sole child is coming to meet a sole carer or parent in the UK, that would raise safeguarding flags for us. If the person is in full-time employment in the UK, how are they going to look after their child? That would trigger a range of checks that we would want to do, not just information from the individual applicant but also safeguarding checks that we might make in the UK, and therefore asks of local authorities or others around that. That may deem the case to be non-straightforward while those are done.

It sounded like, from what you said, that we had then refused the visa. It had been concluded, so it was no longer straightforward. It was decided once those checks were done, but then the admin review process has been ongoing since—that was my understanding. That is different.

Q77 **Anna Dixon:** Are there timescales for the administrative review process to conclude?

Marc Owen: I do not know whether we have targets on admin review. I know that there have been delays. It is a different part of the Department that deals with those, but there have been delays in dealing with admin reviews, and that is certainly something that we should do better on in terms of concluding admin reviews.

Q78 **Anna Dixon:** Would you agree that there is a need for greater transparency, at a minimum, and potentially also to set some improvement targets around these other areas once people are outside of the straightforward cases?

Simon Ridley: It is a really important question, without doubt. The way we operate at the moment is to be transparent about the numbers of non-straightforward cases. As Marc said, we are very active in trying to follow through individual cases, both those where we are just awaiting documents and it should not take that much longer, and the much more complex, much more long-standing ones.



The reason we have not set a service standard for those non-straightforward cases is that there is such a wide variety of cases, on the one hand, and, on the other, there are a wide range of things in lots of them that we just do not control. At the limit, for sure, where we are waiting for a prosecution, to some extent, it takes as long as it takes, but we are not saying that we are not trying to answer cases as quickly as we can in all cases, or that we are not trying to follow them through.

Underneath that, as with any big-volume service and complex service of this sort, there will be some individual cases where we need to make sure that we learn particular lessons or identify bits of the wider system where we need to improve our processes and systems. We will continue to do that, but at the moment we do not have a plan to bring in a particular service standard for those non-straightforward cases.

Marc Owen: Can I just stress that we do not forget about them? We call our caseworkers “decision makers”—their job is to make a decision. We need to know where every single case in our caseload is, and that we are actively tracking those. If we are deferring a case because there is an outstanding policy issue, or because there are checks that are required of a third-party agency that is not ours, we have teams of people in our workflow who will be chasing those up and trying to resolve those cases as quickly as possible, not least because customers ask us where their visa is and whether we have made a decision. We get complaints, and we have to respond to those. Not having a service standard for cases outside of our control in this way does not mean that we do not care or that we are not trying to resolve those cases.

Q79 **Anna Dixon:** Yes, but we know from human behaviour inside organisations that, if you have one element where there are very public targets and service standards and other areas where there are not, there is a risk that those get priority over others.

I want to note my reaction to your comments about a working single parent. Obviously, we do not question working single parents’ ability to look after their children, and I think in most cases we would think that a child’s welfare is better served by being with their mother.

Nesil Caliskan: Quite right.

Simon Ridley: Can I say one thing briefly to the point about the behaviour of organisations where there are some areas with targets? It comes back to something that Antonia said right at the beginning, which is the way in which she, I and the directors general operate our accountability down the line. We have monthly discussions where we are looking at the workflow across all of our different areas of business, and we can see where the number of cases in that workflow is going up, where it is going down, and where our decision making is getting faster or slower. Marc, and indeed other operational directors, move resources around to address that as best we can.

Q80 **Chris Kane:** Can I quickly talk about customer experience? This is about



paragraph 3.7 and 3.8. I am conscious of time, and I did want to get into this a little bit more. Given that figure 8 shows that you are getting good feedback from your customers on the bits of the process that they do not like or they are having difficulties with, what assurances can you give the Committee, and those who have taken the time to engage with you and give you the information, that you are listening, learning and improving the customer experience based on the feedback that you are given?

Marc Owen: I sit within the customer services group, and our vision is to put customer needs at the heart of everything we do and to be responsive and adaptive at all times. One of the ways in which we have looked to carry that out is by, in 2022, setting up service management teams across UKVI. Those are teams who look at the end-to-end customer journey.

Q81 **Chris Kane:** I am sorry, but I am conscious of the time. I just need the assurance that all of this feedback is actually being listened to and acted on, and it is not just read. I want the assurance that it is being ingested into the system and read.

Marc Owen: You can have it. We hold ourselves as strongly to account on driving up customer experience scores through eliminating pain points and generally improving the customer experience as we do anything else. Therefore, if we get feedback that there is a pain point in the customer journey that we can address and do something about, we will.

Simon Ridley: Just to add to that, where complaints come through, looking at the problem side of it, the independent examiner of complaints—a post that was set up coming out of Wendy Williams’ review—writes to the Department when there are systemic issues and she sees a number of complaints in a single area. Directors general meet her, and I meet her on a recurring basis. I share those with the ICIBI. That gives him the opportunity, if he needs to, to do a review in a certain area to make sure that we are using all that information and intelligence to help us improve our services.

Q82 **Chris Kane:** As MPs, we can tell you from the casework that we have received that we do get some frustrated applicants coming in. We can certainly see that there is an issue. Your target is to have an 80% good feedback response. Can I suggest to you that your target should be 100%, and then we will measure against that? Aiming for 80% as the measure of, “We are doing well,” does not seem to be putting the customer experience at the heart of the process. It seems to be putting four out of five customers at the heart of the process. That is more of a comment from me. I would consider a target of 100% to be more laudable.

Marc Owen: Our customer satisfaction target is 80%, and our complaints response target is 20 working days. I completely agree with you; I try to exceed my target. Internally, we use something called the net experience score, which is like the net promoter score, and I try to



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drive that up as high as possible. Yes, 80% would be arbitrary; if it was 90%, it would be even better.

Chair: That brings us to the end of our proceedings for today. I thank the witnesses very much for attending and answering a lot of questions. An uncorrected transcript of this hearing will be published on the Committee's website in the coming days. The Committee will consider the evidence provided today and we will produce a report in due course.