

Home Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 11 November 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 11 November 2025.

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Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Lewis Atkinson; Mr Paul Kohler; Robbie Moore; Chris Murray; Peter Prinsley; Joani Reid.

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Witnesses

I: Dame Antonia Romeo, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Simon Ridley, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Jerome Glass, Chief Operating Officer, Home Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Antonia Romeo, Simon Ridley and Jerome Glass.

Q1 **Chair:** Can I welcome our witnesses for today's evidence session on Home Office departmental performance? Dame Antonia, I know you want to say something, so perhaps Mr Ridley and Mr Glass can introduce themselves and then we will come to you.

Simon Ridley: Thank you, Chair. I am the Second Permanent Secretary at the Home Office.

Jerome Glass: Thank you, Chair. I am the Chief Operating Officer at the Home Office.

Q2 **Chair:** Dame Antonia, you have been there six months now; I wonder if you might want to share your reflections on the Department and what you have found since you arrived?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Thank you, Chair, and thanks for giving me the opportunity to say something about my reflections and priorities. I also wrote to the Committee last week, and I understand the letter has just been published. I would like to start by remembering the 93 Home Office staff who died during the world wars, and the whole Department is remembering them today. I have been in post now for nearly seven months. The Home Office is a remarkable institution charged with delivering some of the most important priorities of the Government.

My first observation is that I have seen first hand the dedication of colleagues who are leading on our crucial work on the frontline, at the border, on illegal working visits, in IRCs, and in our policy and corporate functions. They do some of the hardest jobs in the country. The Department is brilliant at many things, including the ability of teams to lead across Government in a crisis, such as the recent terrorist attack in Manchester, and the extraordinary operational delivery of frontline colleagues, including almost daily incident management in the channel. Secondly, the Department is hugely innovative, leading some of the most transformative public services globally, such as eGates and digital passport applications. However, as I have said in my letter to the Committee, there are areas where we need to do better to deliver for the Home Secretary and the Government. There has already been a lot of change, which I am happy to talk about, but we need to go much further.

My priority is to transform the Home Office to become the most efficient, agile and high-performing Department in Government, and one that is equipped to deliver the Home Secretary's priorities of reducing illegal migration and securing the border, creating a migration system that is fair, restoring trust in policing, and strengthening national security. To frame the challenge, the Home Office is in a constant state of change. The threats we face are not static; we are constantly dealing with new



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forms of crime, immigration and technology, and we need to keep adapting to tackle these new threats.

My problem diagnosis is as follows: first, there can be a lack of accountability for delivery and focus on Ministers' top priorities; some structures are confused, with duplication in roles and processes. Second, we can be siloed and not operate strategically enough; the separation of policy and operations can mean there is insufficient operational expertise feeding into the policymaking. Third, for eight years we have had a limited Government Internal Audit Agency assurance opinion, reflecting a lack of attention on risk management and controls. This is not good enough. There is a lack of commercial mindset. Financial discipline has been weakened from pre-agreed substantial access to the reserve, for well-understood reasons of history. There is a lack of compliance on internal controls, and non-essential spend is inappropriately high. Morale varies, but in some areas it is unacceptably low, and overall pride is lower than it should be, with just 51% of people saying they are proud to work in the Home Office.

I have written to you about my plan to address this, so I will not go into the detail now. I am happy to go into more detail in the session but, just to summarise, I am transforming the Department under five main areas. First, leadership and accountability, including restructuring the top team. Secondly, delivery and pace, including refreshing the performance management system. Thirdly, efficiency and finance, adopting a "broken windows" approach to the small stuff. Fourthly, risk and assurance, to get us out of our limited opinion. Finally, culture change, putting our 50,000-plus people at the heart of the plan; their motivation and morale are central to our ability to deliver. I should also say that this plan is agreed with the Home Secretary. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will start our questioning with the overall effectiveness of the Home Office, and I would like to start with Chris Murray.

Q3 Chris Murray: Thank you, and thank you all for coming in. The Home Secretary has said that "The Home Office is not yet fit for purpose, and has been set up for failure." Why do you think she said that? Do you agree? What are the drivers of the dysfunction that she has identified?

Dame Antonia Romeo: As I have already said, there are some things that are brilliant about the Home Office; there are some things we are really remarkable at and, as with all big organisations, it is not the same thing everywhere. There are some areas where we are not sufficiently equipped and set up to deliver for the Home Secretary. A good example of that is direct accountability and focus on her priorities. We are too siloed; I think this is something that she would say. She would also be focused on our risk and ability to flag risks and, overall, the way we are structured and organised in order to deliver her priorities.

Q4 Chris Murray: Could you explain the structures in slightly more detail?



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Dame Antonia Romeo: For example, if I can talk about something I have done already, I have made a few changes to the top team structure. I have taken the group that was the customer services group responsible for visa and passport applications and for asylum, and I have separated that into two DG commands—one doing visas and passports and one with the responsibility of getting us out of asylum hotels, which is a manifesto commitment of the Government. There are two different types of roles, and I want to make sure that there is someone at board level on the executive committee directly accountable for delivering the top priorities of the Home Secretary.

Q5 Chris Murray: Do you think restructuring the senior team is sufficient to address the challenges?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Absolutely not. As I have said, I have a whole plan called Future Home Office. There is a whole raft of work going on. I have five main themes. One is sorting out accountability. This is the third Department I have run. In running big organisations, accountability and transparency are absolutely at the centre and a lot flows from that. You can tell a lot about an organisation and its ability to deliver its objectives by where the accountability sits and whether that is clear to everybody. It is a crucial first step, but it is not the only step.

Q6 Chris Murray: That is very interesting, thank you. In terms of accountability, can you give us some more detail? What would it look like to have proper accountability for senior officials in the Home Office? What kind of things would happen that currently do not?

Dame Antonia Romeo: To start with, I will stick with the same example I have given because it is a top priority for the Home Secretary: having a single person at DG level who is responsible for leading the work to reduce the supported asylum accommodation population and to get us out of asylum hotels. Obviously, that person will be working with other teams across the organisation—for example, the commercial and policy teams—but they will know that that is their main job. They are accountable for delivering that; I will be holding them to account and there will be a series of metrics. We do not always have the right data in the Home Office; I want to get better data. They need to be held to account. So, it is all about accountability and being clear right from the top to the bottom, the golden thread of accountability of who is delivering what and those things should all feed directly in to the Home Sec's objectives.

Q7 Chris Murray: Are you saying that, up until now, nobody at DG level was held accountable for asylum accommodation in hotels?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There was no single person.

Q8 Chris Murray: There were no metrics that they were being judged on? That has not happened until now?



Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously, there were metrics. We have already made lots of progress in getting out of asylum hotels. The peak was late summer 2023 when we were in about 400 hotels; we are now in about 200 hotels. Metrics were being discussed that people were being held to account on. My point is that I want clearer accountability about giving one person that accountability. If helpful, I can give another example: the Border Security Command. When it was set up, the role of the Border Security Command was essentially to be the systems lead for tackling organised immigration and crime in small boat crossings. We recently had the Border Security Commander here. I felt he did not have enough direct accountability and important levers to actually deliver what he was being asked to do. Responsibility and accountability go together, so we have moved some functions from Border Force and Home Office Intelligence—which was previously split across two groups in the Home Office—into the Border Security Command, so the Commander has more levers to deliver what he has been tasked to do. I am trying to get clarity of accountability down the line, acknowledging that people have to work across the silos, but trying to get out of a matrix approach with more clarity.

Q9 **Chris Murray:** We have had a lot of Home Secretaries over the last 10 years. How much does political churn impact the officials' ability to do their jobs?

Dame Antonia Romeo: First, the job of the civil service is not something that is just confined to the Home Office. I have been a Permanent Secretary for a little over eight years. In that role, I have worked with eight different Secretaries of State, so this is not just a Home Office issue. The job of the permanent civil service is to make sure that the Department can continue to function even within change, either political change or just change within a Government. Obviously, in this particular case, what has not changed is our commitment to the Government's manifesto, our commitments and priorities, the plan for change; all that work has not changed. The Home Secretary has set out her four priorities and my job is to ensure that we are fit for purpose to deliver those priorities and in the best possible position we can be to do that. Well-functioning Departments should not be discombobulated by a change in Secretary of State, although of course, as you would expect, things change because the Secretary of State is leading the policy of the Department.

Q10 **Mr Kohler:** It is almost 20 years since John Reid said the Home Office is "Not fit for purpose." While it is a great idea to have a single person accountable for particular areas such as asylum accommodation, why has it taken 20 years for such a radical idea to actually emerge in the Home Office?

Dame Antonia Romeo: As I mentioned earlier, the Department faces a constant series of changing threats. For example, maybe five or 10 years ago, there would not have been a team doing some of the things we now do on drones. When that phrase was used 20 years ago, there was a



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whole different reason for it being used and a different focus. For example, there was a lead-in to counter-terrorism at the time. I was working in the cc, which became the Ministry of Justice. The job of the Permanent Secretary is to ensure the Department is in the best possible place to deliver what the Home Secretary requires of it. It is my judgment that that means one of the many things I have to do is to ensure we have clearer accountability. I also want to bring policy and operations closer together. It is another example of where you bring the levers together under one outcome. There are other ways you can structure Departments, but it is my judgment that this is the correct way to do it.

- Q11 **Mr Kohler:** You have not really answered my question, though. It is 20 years since it was decided things were going badly wrong. You are now saying there should be a single person responsible for a particular issue. Previously, there were different issues, but it has always been the same problem; there will be big issues. I am asking you to reflect—you were not there for these 20 years—on why it has taken the Home Office so long to come to such an obvious conclusion that it needs someone with responsibility.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say is that at different times the Permanent Secretary was focused on different things. For example, my predecessor, who started in covid, was very focused at the start on implementing the recommendations of the Windrush report. There were different reviews on things that had happened. Different Permanent Secretaries will take a view on how best to organise the Department to deliver. I am not suggesting this is the only solution. I am just saying, for my money right now, this is the best way I can ensure we are delivering. Others may have taken a different view 20 years ago about the best way to reorient the Department. Sometimes people think that the way to break the departmental silos is to organise in more of a matrix approach, to have horizontals and verticals and things. That is a perfectly reasonable thing that people might have wanted to do in the past. I am just saying I want to be clear about accountability.

- Q12 **Joani Reid:** Just to follow up on what Paul was saying, the diagnosis is not really new, is it? That lack of accountability and transparency is something we have heard quite a lot of over the last two decades. What I am trying to get a sense of is what is different this time so that we and the public do not feel that it is just some reorganisations on a bit of paper. What have you identified? Are there any solutions that we have not heard before? We have recently heard through various reports that really quite basic failures in management, governance and risk have been found. Would you agree that the culture of firefighting and denial is quite hardwired into the culture and behaviour within the Home Office?

Dame Antonia Romeo: When I started in this job, I obviously spent a lot of time talking to the 50,000-plus staff, and they have told me that that is true. A lot of our staff feel as though we are at our best in crisis mode, and we are exceptional in crisis mode. We owe our thanks to the



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people who work on those crises; they are delivering for the country, and by the way, they are working across Government. They are working with the police and other Government Departments. As I wrote in my letter, there is a question about whether we have adequate urgency in the way we work and deliver when we are not in crisis mode. That is why one of my five themes is delivery and pace. I strongly believe that one of the ways to change the culture is through things like performance management and getting the processes correct. I understand these things seem dry and kind of process-y, but they are not dry. I want a culture of pride, but that pride has to come from high performance, and that high performance is going to come from how we are organised, how we are looking at risk, and the extent to which we are all pointing in the same direction, working together across the silos.

Q13 Robbie Moore: Again, to follow on, accountability comes with having specific targets associated with performance, and we know that the Home Office's annual report and accounts sets out actions to deliver priority outcomes, but there are no specific performance targets. To what extent do you see having clear targets as being important for driving better performance within the Department?

Dame Antonia Romeo: First, it is hugely important to have the right metrics. What gets measured gets done. Having the right metrics means that you can keep on track. We need to do that; that is a crucial part of accountability. It is a bit of a mixed picture. You mentioned the annual report and accounts. In some areas we know what we are measuring; it can be outcome-based. For example, VAWG—violence against women and girls—is a good example. We are working with the ONS on a specific measure of prevalence of VAWG. It is slightly different to previous measures because it combines things. That was recently published for the first time and will be something that we will be measuring progress against. That is an outcome measure. Obviously, you want to have everybody throughout the organisation to have something in their own plan of what they are doing that contributes to that outcome measure. Again, my diagnosis is that we do not have it everywhere; we have it in a number of areas. We know what we are doing on knife crime and we know what we are doing with the police on—

Q14 Robbie Moore: You have mentioned knife crime and violence against women and girls—but correct me if I am wrong—there are no granular targets that have been distributed to the public domain so we can properly understand how we are achieving the direction that has been set by the Prime Minister of halving that.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Do you mean underneath the overall measure that we are measuring?

Robbie Moore: In terms of absolutely being able to hold the Home Office to account in terms of its performance in achieving those objectives.



Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously, publication for targets and measures is a matter for Ministers. My point is that people should know what they are working to, and that should feed into the overall outcome measure. The level of granularity of particular measures would be a decision taken by Ministers.

Q15 **Robbie Moore:** How can we as a Committee hold the Department to account when Ministers will come and go, and ultimately it is you in your role and your team in the civil service that are responsible for ensuring the Home Office is going in the right direction, if we do not have the granular detail to be able to hold you to account?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Let us stay with VAWG: what is an example of something that would be helpful to know in the VAWG space beyond the information that we are already publishing and the target that we are working up?

Q16 **Robbie Moore:** My understanding is that the Prime Minister wants to halve violence against women and girls, which is a great aspiration and something that we should all be behind in achieving. I feel frustrated by not having the granular detail for us as a Committee and the wider public to be able to hold the Home Office to account in terms of the timeframe in which that is going to be set and the granular targets of how that is going to be achieved. Rather than it just being a decision for Ministers, how do we hold the civil service to account in terms of supporting the Ministers in achieving those objectives of halving violence against women and girls?

Dame Antonia Romeo: On VAWG specifically, the timeframe is within a decade. That is a public, published target. As I said, that piece of information—

Q17 **Robbie Moore:** But measured against what? My point is, if we do not have the granular detail—

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is the baseline. The new measure we have come up with the ONS is an attempt to give you, I think, what you are after, which is an actual number that then every year you can see whether we are making progress or not, and that will be public and published. I think we are trying to give you what you are seeking.

Q18 **Robbie Moore:** It would be great to have that though, so that we can then have the ability to hold the civil service to account, as well as Ministers.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I completely agree. That number is public, I know it is, and that will be published in the ARA. The main point I want to make is that I completely agree you should have as much information as possible so you can hold us to account. The reason we are here now is so you can hold us to account. I am very keen and happy to be held to account. Jerome might want to add something as our COO.



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Jerome Glass: Targets are one thing. There is a whole suite of metrics that are obviously set out in the annual report and accounts covering all our missions, going into quite a lot of granular detail, covering all the work of the Department. Obviously, we would expect to be held to account for those metrics as well.

Q19 **Robbie Moore:** What is the definition of violence against women and girls?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The new headline measure is going to be the prevalence of violence against women and girls, which will be one figure.

Q20 **Robbie Moore:** Has that definition been signed off by a Minister?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, that is the Government definition.

Q21 **Robbie Moore:** Is it 100% confirmed that there is a defined definition of violence against women and girls?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Government use a single definition of violence against women and girls: crimes that disproportionately, but not exclusively, affect women and girls.

Q22 **Robbie Moore:** Has that been signed off by a Minister?

Dame Antonia Romeo: As far as I am aware, yes, but I want to check because you are asking that as though you think it has not been. If you think it has not been, I am going to make sure that this is checked while we are in this room because we should get to the bottom of it.

Q23 **Joani Reid:** This definition point is really important because we are assuming that that is going to be the definition that drives and measures the success of the strategy. Forget about the granular detail for a moment. Whether it is having knife crime or violence against women and girls, either of those two big targets or commitments, there has been no published strategy or, therefore, definition of what exactly we are having. Is that your understanding?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, the Minister has written to this Committee and said that the Home Secretary is currently considering it and we will be publishing the VAWG strategy as soon as possible.

Q24 **Joani Reid:** When my colleague asks the question around the definition of halving violence against women and girls, are you aware of whether that will be the definition used within the strategy when it is published?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is the current definition. We are actually doing some work to look at better alignment. In some cases, policing bodies do not use the same definition as Government. We are doing some work to try to align that, so I suppose it is quite possible that that work to align will come before the strategy. Perhaps if I can refer back to Mr Moore's question: the answer is, yes, that definition has been signed off by a Minister.



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Q25 **Joani Reid:** That is the definition that we use—

Dame Antonia Romeo: At the moment.

Joani Reid: With regard to police and police data, is that the definition that is going to be used when we are assessing the commitment from Government about halving violence against women and girls?

Dame Antonia Romeo: What I have just given you is the Government definition. We are doing work to align that with the definition used by policing bodies. Would it be helpful if I said the definition that we are working on with the ONS?

Chair: Yes.

Q26 **Joani Reid:** It is ultimately quite straightforward. Is that definition going to be used when we are measuring the Government's commitment to halving violence against women and girls? There has been a lot of discussion about how you define that and therefore how you measure that. Are you saying that the official Government definition is the one that will be used in the strategy to achieve the manifesto commitment, or the Government's commitment?

Dame Antonia Romeo: You are asking me to commit to the inclusion of something in a strategy that is yet to be published. What I am saying is that it is the current definition we are using; it is the current Government definition. The strategy is going to be published as soon as possible. As it happens, I know that we are working to look at whether we can align it. I do not know if it will be exactly the same, but I would have thought it would have been. It is the current Government definition, so I would have thought so, but I cannot commit to that because the strategy has not been published yet or, indeed, signed off by Ministers.

Q27 **Chris Murray:** I just want to come back to the point that Robbie was making around targets and having clear, identifiable targets. One really frustrating thing when you read National Audit Office reports—or even our own inquiry reports—into the Home Office is that sort of catchphrase, "Lessons will be learned." That is like the definition of a badly-structured target. It is not clear; it is not measurable; you do not know. Many reports about the Home Office with loads of recommendations just sit on the shelf and are clearly not implemented because the same things come up again and again. Can you tell us how you will be able to make the Home Office learn lessons from previous problems? How much will setting clear targets be part of that?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There are two parts to that very useful question. First, do we go back to reports and make sure that we are still learning the lessons? I completely agree we must. In fact, at the moment we are doing a review of the Windrush report to make sure that we are still holding ourselves to account for those recommendations, because you are rightly suggesting that you respond to the recommendations and then forget about it and a whole raft of other things go wrong. I agree we



should do that. I cannot guarantee right now that we have done that on everything. You are on my hymn sheet, basically, because this is exactly what we should be doing. We need to have a growth mindset. It is like the classic Microsoft transformation from know-it-all to learn-it-all. We have to keep learning the lessons and testing ourselves against them.

The important thing about targets is that transparency is the absolute sidekick to accountability. It should be quite clear; everybody should know what it is they are meant to be doing and what they are going to be held to account to do, and transparency on that, as much as possible, is right.

Q28 Lewis Atkinson: Mr Glass, you mentioned the metrics that were included in the annual report and I wonder if I could zoom out. Dame Antonia, you took over leadership in April or May this year. Clearly, the last published report we have of the performance of the Home Office is up to March of this year. In the annual report that we have, there are about 40 or 50 pages of performance analysis which includes metrics that you mentioned, Mr Glass. Do you see that the metrics you report on next year, the nature of the reporting, and the granularity of those will change? Do you think the level of reporting so far has been sufficient in your annual report? How do you envisage that changing in the future to help embed that accountability culture you talk about?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have quite a lot of stats in this report, and they tell a good story. For example, I am just looking at the page about overall returns; FNO returns are going up hugely. There are things in this that tell you whether you are going in the right direction or not in a way that is really important and absolutely goes to the heart of the Government's agenda. It is easier on operations. My general sense is that on operational things it is always easier because you can measure what is happening at the border or how many return flights you have. Where it is a bit harder can be on some policy areas. What we are seeking to get to in the VAWG outcome is something that can be measured and that should be a good thing. I would expect that once we have that measure exactly sorted and the strategy published, that will then be in here and be measured and published. Again, I am always happy to have views, very keen to have views actually of the Committee—which has been involved in this space for, in some cases, longer than I have—on what data would be more useful to have in the report.

Q29 Lewis Atkinson: I do not ask that with a particular example. Does the entire reporting infrastructure need to be reviewed or are you broadly happy with the reporting that has been done, but you know the pressure and clarity of accountability for delivery against those metrics is on?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I want to come back to that question, but Jerome wants to come in.

Jerome Glass: Yes, I just want to add that, clearly, there are lots of metrics in there. We are continually thinking about them and seeing if we



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can get them to be better. For example, let us take violence against women and girls. The performance report last year had a prevalence of domestic abuse, stalking, and sexual assault. What we are working towards is a combined metric. As well as that, the ONS produced a new measure—the number of adults who have experienced domestic abuse, sexual abuse and stalking in the last 12 months—and that was published. We are continually trying to work to get a better handle on it and, to put it back to you, if there is anything you think would be helpful to have in here, we will obviously listen to that. We publish lots of statistics all the time and we are very open about a lot of the data, so there is nothing to hide and we are very happy to take further suggestions.

Dame Antonia Romeo: May I just quickly add to that? What I was getting at at the start is that there is a difference between data and what is really giving you information about what is going on. In a lot of these cases in operational areas, if there is a certain number of returns, that is what is going on. It is easy to report; this is not me saying what is happening here. I just know from having led organisations that it is easy to report data that actually does not tell you what is really going on. What I am trying to do now is to understand what is really going on. That is why I start with the diagnosis I do and why that data is so important. Actually, a good example that we may come on to is contract management. What are you actually looking at that tells you what is really going on? That is the thing that leaders of all organisations are trying to do. I am trying to do it; I do not know yet if I have all the data that I need to do that.

Q30 Joani Reid: We are clear that a strategy has not been published for the violence against women and girls or the knife crime targets. We are 16 or 17 months into this Parliament. Do you think it is reasonable that we have not yet seen a published strategy for how we are going to get there on these targets? If not, why is it taking so long to put together these plans?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Again, the Minister has written to the Committee to say that the Home Secretary, who has only been in post for just over two months, has wanted to consider the strategy and work out what her priorities are, and democracy would dictate that is a reasonable position.

Q31 Joani Reid: The aim of halving violence against women and girls has not changed with the incoming Home Secretary. That remains our target for the Home Office, right?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Currently, right now so is—

Q32 Joani Reid: But it has been a target since this new Government came in following the election last year. Do you think it is reasonable? It is not a loaded question. It could be very complex; you have lots of partners that you need to consult. Should it take this long? It has been 16 or 17 months, and we have not yet seen a published strategy.



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Dame Antonia Romeo: If the question is whether it is reasonable for the Home Secretary to consider the strategy before it is published, then I think that is reasonable.

Jerome Glass: Let me also add that the Home Office has done a lot over the last 18 months in terms of violence against women and girls. As recently as August, we set out some measures focused on honour-based abuse. In February, we embedded domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms in five forces and so on, so there has been a lot of activity. I would not want you to think we have been waiting for the strategy in order to take action.

Q33 **Chair:** Can I ask about recommendations from inquiries and recommendations we give you as a Select Committee and other bodies that report to the Home Secretary? What work do you do to check progress against those recommendations and delivery on them?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is a good question. Obviously, when the report comes out, particularly if it is from a Select Committee but on all reports with recommendations, we would assess the recommendations and then work out how to implement those that the Government decided to accept. I think part of your question is, once you have done that once, do you keep going back to it? Again, that is something where I am determined we will do that. I cannot commit right now to the fact that we are doing it in all cases. I know that it is easy to let things slip back, and obviously you do not want to be reviewing every single report constantly, but you need to have a way of measuring the most important things in it.

If I can take an example from the Windrush report, one of the major recommendations was that we should be subject to external scrutiny, which is why in my Future Home Office plan, I am working very closely with the non-executives, not just in this Department but non-executives from other Departments. For example, I have a non-executive from MOJ doing a review into contract management, and a non-executive from HMRC doing a review into behaviour and standards in the Border Force, so it is a way of getting that external input. That is something that came directly from a review that has been done. You have to try to learn the lessons, but then actually live the lessons rather than just see them as something you are ticking off. To be clear, I do not want to oversell, but I agree with the direction of the question and that is what I would like to do.

Q34 **Mr Kohler:** In terms of risk management, both the National Audit Office and the Government Internal Audit Agency have criticised the Home Office's risk management. I note the importance you give it in your letter to us, but in the Public Accounts Committee in May, you told the Committee that in lots of areas, "We are very effective at risk management." How do you square those two things?



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Dame Antonia Romeo: I also said at the Public Accounts Committee that I did not think it was acceptable that we have been on limited assurance for eight years, and I do not.

Mr Kohler: That is a different question, though.

Dame Antonia Romeo: True, but we have good risk management in many of the operational areas, for example, the people who are doing daily incident management in the channel, and those doing return flights. We are very focused on health and safety in areas where we need to be. Some of our risk management is great. As it happens, the risks published in the annual report and accounts are not quite aligned in the way I would like them to be or as clear on accountability terms which is why there will be a refreshed strategic risk register in next year's annual report and accounts because we need to be more strategic in how we consider our risks.

Q35 **Mr Kohler:** Are you telling me that risk management is good at the micro level, but not at the macro level?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I would say that particularly on operations where there is threat to life, from what I have seen, risk management right now appears to be good. But when I look back, I know things have happened where obviously that was not the case. The Manston Inquiry would indicate that there have been times when risk, even in those absolutely crucial areas, was not perhaps considered as it might have been. I am not pre-judging the inquiry, but I am just saying there is a question; the fact there is an inquiry would indicate there is a question. I am focused on ensuring that we are good at risk management across the board. I should say the limited assurance is also about a culture of risk and compliance. When I started at the Home Office, I looked at a whole raft of small things that indicate whether it is a healthy organisation. I am a big believer that healthy organisations are healthy everywhere. If you look at a number of small things such as Government procurement card spend, expenses, and in-office working, that tells you whether you have good compliance with the controls you have in place. A combination of the GIAA saying we were limited risk for eight years and what I felt when I looked at those things told me that we do not have good compliance, and that is something I want to fix.

Q36 **Mr Kohler:** You have said to us today that for the Public Accounts Committee, you want to move beyond limited compliance, but then you declined to set a target when you were asked. You have just told us how important targets are. Should you not be setting a target date when you get to that point?

Dame Antonia Romeo: To be fair, when I was in front of the Public Accounts Committee, I was one month in post. It seems reasonable to have not wanted to set a target at that point, but I will accept the challenge now. These things take time, and partly because the GIAA will review us on an annual basis, I do not want to commit to having sorted it



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for the end of this financial year, partly because it is a culture change that is required. There is a whole raft of things that need to happen on risk, but also on culture and compliance. I suppose if I am in front of the Committee, whenever it would be, and I had gone two more end-of-financial-years and we had not fixed it, then I would expect to have questions to answer.

Mr Kohler: If you are still in that post of course, because things move on so quickly in the Home Office.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I hope I do not get booted out just because we are not out of limited, but who knows?

Q37 **Lewis Atkinson:** The low public confidence in the Home Office is reflected in the performance report, and there was an adverse trajectory in 2024-25. Could you outline what you are doing to address the drop in public confidence in the work of the Home Office?

Dame Antonia Romeo: One quite interesting thing about what is in the annual report and accounts is that some key controls and mitigations are basically about comms; quite a lot of them are about comms. Public confidence is going to come from us being high-performing and delivering what the Government wants us to deliver. My entire Future Home Office plan is aimed at increasing public confidence because public confidence will come from high performance and delivery. What I am doing is all the things I previously set out to ensure the Department is more high performing, efficient, agile and better equipped to deliver the Home Secretary's priorities, and I hope that public confidence will come with that.

Q38 **Lewis Atkinson:** Do you think that speaks to a cultural characteristic of the Home Office that it previously had a tendency to see challenges as a communications challenge rather than a delivery challenge?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I do not know. It is important that public confidence is seen as a delivery challenge. I recognise that what is in the annual report and accounts has a lot of comms mitigations. By the way, comms is obviously crucial because the two things feed on themselves; your ability to deliver depends on whether people are confident in you or not. I have to say there are lots of areas where we have high confidence. In the work we do, it is crucial that the public trust us and have confidence in us when responding to a crisis, particularly a terrorist incident. People need to trust us to sort out their passports. I think that is happening. There are a lot of areas where people individually would have high confidence. I do not want to suggest that they do not have high confidence, but I know from the polling figures overall that we can do better. I am hoping that will come from improved performance as well as from improved comms or comms around it, but we need both.

Q39 **Lewis Atkinson:** In terms of your assessment of the particular drivers of low public confidence and delivery priorities, what are those? What



lessons can you learn, perhaps from other organisations or areas, for turning around public confidence that will help inform your approach?

Dame Antonia Romeo: These are difficult things and I have already talked about people doing difficult jobs. To what extent is the public confident in the Government's handling of crime and justice? Is it confident in the criminal justice system? Improving confidence in the criminal justice system is part of the Safer Streets mission. It is something that we are working closely on with the Ministry of Justice. Obviously, the work that was done in terms of lessons learned from previous organisations ensured that the criminal justice system was kept afloat. We never had to tell the police to stop arresting people during the prisons crisis that went on for well over a year. That is an example of, if not boosting public confidence at least not allowing it to atrophy. In these really hard environments and hard jobs, it is important to keep focused on what it is that you are delivering, the reason you are doing it—for the country, the Government, the citizen—and ensuring that, as we do those things, we know what we are trying to do. When we do have successes, that is where comms can come in to talk about them.

Q40 Lewis Atkinson: You gave a good example there about the prison crisis from last year. Are there other examples of where some of your leadership team's actions have been to stop things getting worse? Are you still in that trajectory rather than delivering positive improvements that the public would see?

Dame Antonia Romeo: A good example of this would be the Border Security Command. I think—and Simon will correct me if I am wrong—that to September this year the French essentially stopped 20,000 people crossing in small boats. That is a kind of counterfactual number because it is something that was stopped from happening rather than a kind of boost, but it is something quite significant that has happened through our relationship with France. We are in the business of threat and response. We are in a kind of game-theoretical situation where our opponents, the organised crime gangs or whatever, are innovating and we have to innovate in response to them. Sometimes this is a territory where the counterfactual is the thing you have to worry about. At other times, it is something like turning around the performance of the Passport Office and that is something that is just a benefit. You might have seen today that we have just finished the eGate pilot on the intelligent border using biometrics. That is a great story, but quite a lot of our work is in things that could go wrong.

Q41 Chris Murray: You mentioned the Passport Office and I just want to pick up on that because my view—I do not know if you would agree with this—is that 10 or so years ago the Passport Office was in a real disaster zone. People were missing their holidays; it was on the front page of the newspapers. It has completely turned around and it is arguably the best functioning part of the Home Office now, arguably of the Government in some ways. Do you agree with what I have just said? Why did that happen, and how do you learn that lesson with, for example, the asylum



system?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Great question, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to say something super positive that has happened. Simon runs it so he should be in charge.

Chris Murray: I will allow you one.

Simon Ridley: It comes back to a lot of the themes that Antonia has already been through. You are absolutely right: as we came out of covid there was a huge backlog in the Passport Office, so it is more recent than 10 years ago. It comes from really understanding your position and data, and what has been going wrong. It comes from having really clear responsibilities and accountabilities through the line, so from the director general and the director leading the Passport Office in terms of what they are going to achieve, and then starting to set clear performance targets for people through the line for how we are going to respond. It comes from innovation and using technology.

We have had a big passport transformation programme under way to digitise the applications that we get in. We have to do that by properly designing the end-to-end process, by simplifying it, and using technology as much as we can for the customer. It then comes from the relentless business of continuing to improve and drive towards that outcome. The Passport Office is a really important example; it is quite a contained and discrete end-to-end delivery. Again, to the point that Antonia was making earlier, we can say to the director in charge of passports, "This is your programme. This is your end-to-end service delivery, and you need to improve that delivery." As you say, what we have seen is not just that we got rid of the backlog but we got to a 10-week service agreement where that is the response the public could expect. A year or so ago, we turned that into a three-week service, and for quite a lot of passports, we beat that, but we have to continue to improve it. So, those are the lessons and it comes back to a lot of the themes that Antonia is talking about.

Q42 **Chair:** Can I just round this off in terms of effectiveness of the Department, and we will move on to some more operational questions? Is there a price for failure? Do people lose their jobs? Do people get moved? Are there sanctions for when things go wrong?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I recently wrote to the Department about the Future Home Office plan and everything that we are doing and I invited everybody to write back to me directly with their views on things that we should be focusing on. A high number of people wrote back talking about performance management. Performance does not flourish in an organisation where there is no reward for good performance. I want us to be super high-performing, so I want to reward good performance and that means that you have to discriminate between good and bad performance. Again, this is the territory. I want to pay tribute to the staff who do incredibly difficult jobs. Everybody is working incredibly hard and people are really dedicated, but I obviously want to ensure that we have



proper performance management systems in place so that there is a difference.

Q43 Peter Prinsley: Thank you very much; I have enjoyed listening this afternoon. I come from the medical world, and the point you have just made about performance is absolutely crucial. We have a system in the hospitals where we pay people to come to work, but we do not really observe what it is they actually do. We certainly do not pay them according to their performance, and this leads to all sorts of unintended consequences. I have a strong suspicion that this is common across the public services. I can imagine that a person who comes to work, one of the 50,000 people turning up at the Home Office every morning, and I just wonder what systems you are thinking of putting in place to actually scrutinise their performance so that we could see whether we are getting value for the money we are paying individually.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It partly comes back to the earlier point about metrics; it needs to come through the line. Actually, this is about leadership and culture. What is the reward for being a good leader? Again, a lot of people lead really well in the Home Office and they do it because they take great satisfaction and purpose—as do those people who work in hospitals—for the fact that we work for the state and for the citizen and people will come and they will want to do a good job; I do not doubt that. The question is whether in all cases we have a proper system where people are having the coaching conversations where they are holding the people who work for them to account for what they have delivered, and that is not true in all cases. It is better in some areas than others. In some operational areas it would be pretty strong because that would be absolutely essential and the metrics would be clearer, but in other areas there are definitely pockets of excellent practice. I am not saying it does not happen; it happens quite a lot; I just do not think it happens everywhere.

The key thing is to start with accountability from the top and then everybody has to step up to that leadership such that they are then worrying about the layer below them or the layer below them. We need to hold people to account for the extent to which they are leading their teams as well as the extent to which they are just doing their own jobs.

Jerome Glass: Could I add a very specific example to that? We talked a bit about—

Dame Antonia Romeo: Jerome is about to say how I am holding him to account.

Jerome Glass: Exactly. As a very specific example, we talked about the fact that we are on limited opinion and we are trying to improve that. One of the most important parts of that, as Antonia said, is accountability. One thing we have focused on, which really matters, is financial management. For all senior civil servants, we have very specifically put in an objective on financial management that reflects the



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standards that we expect, and we then hold them to account for that. That is an example of us going, "Accountability matters; financial management matters, and we are going to change your objectives to make sure that you are managing up to that standard." Alongside that though, we have to coach and help people along as well, so we have put in place financial management training for the senior civil service to help them achieve those objectives. So, it is a bit of both on both sides.

Dame Antonia Romeo: If your next question was to ask whether everybody has done the training, you may not be surprised to discover that the answer is no. That is the next question to ask of those people who have not done the mandatory training that we have asked them to do. Good example.

Q44 **Peter Prinsley:** The point about the Passport Office is really well made because it is obvious to us and to the population that the passport situation has been transformed. You send off for your passport on Thursday and it comes back on Monday morning. New passport; fantastic. We would all love to see the performance of all the other bits of the Home Office look a little more like the Passport Office. In a leadership team, I do not know how you incentivise people to do that, but I guess it is down to trying to incentivise the behaviour of individuals at the end of the day.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Absolutely right; I agree.

Simon Ridley: Huge credit to colleagues who have led and worked in passports, but the work we have done to improve our visa service and the reduction of queues at the border as we have utilised eGates more and more are all things that are going in the right direction.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Illegal working arrests up 63%.

Simon Ridley: And no returns.

Chair: We will move on to more operational questions, and we are going to start with neighbourhood policing.

Q45 **Mr Kohler:** The Government have a target of recruiting 13,000 new officers. How far have we progressed on that?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It actually comes back to the earlier question about breaking down the targets within the entire target, because it is 13,000 by the end of Parliament. The target for this year is 3,000. We publish data at specific times, and we will publish new data in January, which will take us up to September, but I can tell the Committee that we are on track.

Q46 **Mr Kohler:** Will we hear targets each year?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Government have already committed to a police reform White Paper. Overall, the plan on police reform will set



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some policy, but the commitment to the 13,000 is unchanged; it is a manifesto commitment.

Q47 **Mr Kohler:** We have heard from chief constables that politicians' obsession with police numbers actually gets in the way of making decisions on how they run their police forces. Is that an issue for the Home Office?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is probably an example of something that will be taken into account in the police reform White Paper. For example, "What are the things you want to focus on?" Of course, there is a difference between police numbers and neighbourhood policing numbers, and the particular target is about neighbourhood policing. There is a very specific definition of what neighbourhood policing is. The Government's position is that people want to see neighbourhood police on the streets. The Home Secretary has talked about trust in policing and focusing on crimes that really matter in communities, and so neighbourhood policing is a way of getting to that.

Q48 **Mr Kohler:** One of the problems for some police forces is that they just do not have the money; the police allocation funding formula has not been revised for over a decade. We hear there are real per capita inconsistencies. What is the Home Office's plan to address the police allocation funding model?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously, we will be doing the police funding settlement this year. The provisional settlement will be this calendar year, and the Home Secretary will be considering the funding allocation as part of that.

Q49 **Mr Kohler:** Will the funding formula change? There is a real problem with it at the moment.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Noted, and obviously some people comment that there is a problem with the funding formula. The Home Secretary will be considering what the police funding allocation will be as part of the police funding settlement, but I do not want to pre-judge that by talking about the police funding formula.

Q50 **Mr Kohler:** Are you not aware of the big problems with the police funding formula? We hear from chief constables time and time again that there are major inconsistencies. From what you are saying, you do not appear to be aware of that.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I said that people say there are concerns with the police funding formula. That was a way of indicating that I was aware that people said it.

Q51 **Mr Kohler:** Are those structural problems being addressed by the Home Office? Obviously, I know that every year you will make allocations, but will the underlying process, the actual mechanism, be addressed? We hear it is not working at the moment.



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Dame Antonia Romeo: I am not trying to be difficult. I am just saying that I am aware of the concerns that you have raised, and the Home Secretary will be considering funding allocations which will come out in the funding settlement for this year, but I am not in a position to say anything else to the Committee about the funding formula.

Q52 **Mr Kohler:** At the moment, there are 43 local police forces. There are huge inefficiencies: they cannot speak to each other; their software systems are often different; their funding allocation is very different. Is there a case for major restructuring actually doing away with the fact that we have 43 local police forces?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I am tempted to ask if you think there is a case because I think you are going to say that some people think there is a case, and what I would say to that is that—

Q53 **Mr Kohler:** What do you think?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think that the Government have committed to publishing a police reform White Paper which will look at structures, technology, innovation, workforce, leadership—ways that policing can be allowed to do their jobs better by making those changes. I would expect the issues of structure to be considered as part of that White Paper.

Q54 **Mr Kohler:** Does the Home Office have a view on whether or not 43 separate police forces is an efficient way of running our police service?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Our job is to give policy advice to the Home Secretary, and then she will make a decision. That will be part of the police reform White Paper, which is intended to be published this year. Although it was initially committed that it would be published last year, so I do not think there will be that long for the Committee to wait.

Q55 **Mr Kohler:** Is the Home Office not prepared to share its thoughts with us on this at the moment?

Dame Antonia Romeo: You misunderstand that my job is to ensure that we are giving our best advice to the Home Secretary; it is for the Home Secretary to make a decision.

Jerome Glass: I can add that we are very focused on police efficiency generally. Obviously, there has been a recent National Audit Office report on that, and we have launched a police efficiency collaboration project with the NPCC that has identified hundreds of millions of pounds of potential efficiency. Notwithstanding the point that we are going to announce the reform White Paper in due course, we are really focused on efficiency. That work has already begun to try to identify areas of efficiency in the police; it is something we and the police are really focused on.

Q56 **Mr Kohler:** Does that consideration go to the actual structure? It is not set in stone forever that there will be 43. I am trying to see whether there is appetite for change within the Home Office.



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Dame Antonia Romeo: There is a lot of policy work going on looking at everything that could be in scope for the police reform White Paper, and it has already been said that, as well as technology and innovation, it includes structures. So, that will be something that will be considered as part of the policy work.

Q57 **Lewis Atkinson:** Could you just say a little more about that interaction? The Home Office does not employ police officers; the 43 forces do. In terms of meeting the Government's manifesto commitment of 13,000, what is your assessment of the relationships and interface between the Home Office and the police forces that would give you the confidence that when money flows, efficiencies are made, and the police reform White Paper is published you will have confidence in the delivery of the 13,000 through those different forces?

Chair: If I could add, have you looked at how much it will cost to recruit the 13,000 additional officers?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We are obviously constantly talking to the police at all levels, to the MPCC and individual forces. We understand funding requirements, acknowledge that against the actual fiscal situation, and understand what is going to happen as a result of the funding that has been given as a crucial part of it. That is why I said that we were on track for this year because we have already done funding allocations for this year. We have not yet done funding allocations for the remainder of the SR.

To your point about how you know, one thing we have done in the Department is set up a directorate to look at police performance and standards to essentially look at things like this. What is the mechanism for the Department to better understand how police are spending their money? Obviously, there is the police productivity report that we will be discussing but we must ensure that we understand where police productivity is high and best practice can be shared. As Jerome mentioned, the Police Efficiency and Collaboration programme looks at things like central purchasing and productivity enhancing technology. This is ongoing work to help police forces be more productive.

Q58 **Lewis Atkinson:** Does the introduction of that new unit within the Department address what you thought was a lack of capability previously? Has there not been that co-ordinated capability?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It predated my time, but the fact was that it did not exist as its own directorate, even though some people might have been doing things. It will also connect with the police reform White Paper. To the theme of this session, we are attempting to understand what data we need to really understand what is going on and work with police forces because they are operationally independent.

Q59 **Chair:** And the cost of the 13,000?



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Dame Antonia Romeo: We know what money we have given them for this year. The money we have given them is sufficient for them to stay on track for the target of 3,000 for this year, which will lead to the 13,000. In terms of what it will cost for the remainder of the SR, we have not done the allocations yet and it will obviously be part of that.

Jerome Glass: In the main memorandum that we shared with the Committee, we allocated £200 million this year to help achieve the guarantee. That is money for this year but we obviously need to scroll that forward now that we have a spending review. To add on the metrics, we are very focused on the breakdown and the backfill. What is really important is whether it is real as an uplift, so backfill is something that we are focused on when looking at that number. As the Permanent Secretary said, we will be publishing the number for September in January, but it is something we are tracking very closely.

Q60 **Joani Reid:** I am going to turn to violence against women and girls. We have already addressed much of what I was going to ask, but just to clarify that I have this clear, you have given us two bits of information in relation to that. First, there is an agreed definition which is going to align with agencies across Government on violence against women and girls. Secondly, the strategy is with the Home Secretary and is ready and waiting for her sign-off to be published imminently.

Dame Antonia Romeo: On your first point, there is a definition we have been working on with the ONS, as Jerome and I have said. The answer to your first point is yes, but to check that I have understood what you said there is a definition. The ONS is bringing together three different targets, which we have been publishing, into one. That is what we are going to measure. It will tell us if we are going to deliver on the manifesto commitment. On your second point—

Q61 **Joani Reid:** You have buy-in from the agencies and other Government Departments, so is it going to be across Government?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The measure has already been determined. We have been working with the ONS on it for some time. We are working with police bodies that, in some cases, use a slightly different measure to align. Obviously in an ideal world, everyone would use the same one, so we are working with them to align. That is probably all I can say at the moment unless Jerome wants to say more.

On your second point, I am not saying that it is with the Home Secretary ready to be signed off. I would expect her to have a lot of thoughts. I know she will have her own views about the policy direction, so we are working with her and Minister Phillips to develop the strategy. It will be published as soon as possible.

Q62 **Joani Reid:** Moving on to group-based child sexual exploitation and the national inquiry, can you give us an update on the inquiry and talk about what the problems are and why it is taking so long to appoint a chair?



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Dame Antonia Romeo: As Minister Phillips has said, the appointment of the chair is at a critical stage and we hope to confirm its conclusion soon. Baroness Casey is supporting the work of the inquiry and is involved in the chair appointment process. In terms of how long it is taking, as the Home Secretary has said, we have to get this right and we have to take time to do so. That is the position on timing. The Government have been completely clear that this is an egregious and heinous series of crimes. We want the inquiry to begin as soon as possible, but we want to make sure that it is progressing at a rate that will give it the thoroughness it deserves. We also want to put victims and survivors at the heart of the process.

Q63 **Joani Reid:** When should we expect a chair to be announced?

Dame Antonia Romeo: What Ministers have already said is that we have to take the time to do so, and we are doing it as swiftly as we can while giving it the thoroughness that it requires.

Q64 **Joani Reid:** Why do you think it is taking so long to find a chair?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We are doing it with the thoroughness it requires. We are putting victims and survivors at the heart of the process, which is very important. Baroness Casey is involved. We all want to move as quickly as possible but we have to get it right, and Ministers have been really clear that we need to take the time to get it right.

Q65 **Joani Reid:** Of course we have to get it right. I will just move on. It is fine. It does not matter. You mentioned the Windrush recommendations. There has been widespread acknowledgement, and in fact Alexis Jay was scathing, of the lack of progress that has been made, predominantly by the previous Government but also this Government. Do you have any insight into why none of the recommendations were implemented or taken on board until very recently? Why, as an institution, were those recommendations not pushed through, or do you lay the blame primarily with the politicians overseeing it? Do you think lessons have been learned to inform the national inquiry?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I do not have insight into why it took as long as it did, I am sorry to say. What I can tell you is that we are now moving forward at pace. These recommendations are not just for the Home Office; they are also for the Ministry of Justice, DSIT, DFE and DHSC. We are all working together to try to move forward on the recommendations as quickly as possible. There is actually a lot of work happening across Government on these.

Q66 **Joani Reid:** We have talked a lot about learning lessons from the past, to make sure we are more agile and accountable. It is fair to say that the lack of implementation of those recommendations is a huge unmitigated failure, given that none of them had been looked at or implemented until very recently. If we are going to improve the Home Office and how it operates, why have lessons not been learned? Why are you not looking at what is accepted to be a huge failure?



Dame Antonia Romeo: My general approach when something has not happened as quickly as it could have is to crack on and do it and then focus on why it had not happened sooner in the first place. We all have our shoulders to the wheel in terms of delivering on those recommendations for which the Home Office is responsible and moving forward as quickly as possible at the speed that the Government now want to move forward on. There is doubtless a question as to why some things did not happen. I am afraid I do not have the answer to that but agree that it is something we could then go and look at.

Q67 **Joani Reid:** How can you be confident that the same mistakes will not be made again at the end of the national inquiry?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The same mistakes in what regard?

Q68 **Joani Reid:** The recommendations have not been implemented by Government. How do we know that that will not happen again with the additional inquiry that we have before us?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We can see that the inquiry is going to be set up. The NCA-led police investigation is being set up. There is progress being made. It is a reasonable question when something has not been implemented in the past, but what I am saying to you is that, on the IICSA report recommendations, we are now moving those forward across Government. Likewise, on the grooming gangs inquiry, we are moving forward as quickly as possible with the thoroughness that is required and will produce recommendations that will be taken forward at pace. From the Prime Minister to the Home Secretary, Minister Phillips and other Ministers, everyone has been as committed as they could possibly be to righting this wrong and addressing this terrible issue.

Q69 **Joani Reid:** Finally, do you feel that sufficient funding has been allocated, not just for this inquiry but for the other inquiries that have been committed to by the Government? Southport is one but I cannot remember the third one.

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have five live inquiries and two new inquiries, of which the grooming gangs inquiry is one. The new ones obviously came post the SR so the funding given to them—I would not expect this just to be Home Office funding because there are a number of Departments involved—is something that we are tackling through the allocations process. I should just add that it was a particular recommendation—recommendation 12, I think—of the Casey audit that resources must be found.

Q70 **Robbie Moore:** Sticking with the same theme, there are 20 IICSA recommendations and not one has been implemented to date. Act on IICSA, part of the organisation that supported Alexis Jay, has been clear in saying that. When we get to March next year, we will be the same amount of time into this new Government as the previous Conservative Government had in taking action on those 20 recommendations. For you to simply say that you are moving at pace is not accepted by me or, dare



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I say, many of those victims and survivors out there. How can we be reassured that these recommendations are going to be put in place by this Government?

Dame Antonia Romeo: What would provide reassurance?

Robbie Moore: Action and delivery.

Dame Antonia Romeo: What I am trying to tell the Committee is that action is happening. There are conversations. I had a meeting on this myself this week, so it is moving forward.

Q71 **Robbie Moore:** Not one recommendation has been put in place yet. I would suggest that simply saying that we are having meetings is not good enough, given that the IICSA report came out in 2022. Whether this lies with the civil service or Ministers, we need to see action in terms of those recommendations being put in place.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Noted, thank you. It is also noted that, from the Government's position, they want to move as quickly as possible to ensure that the recommendations are taken forward for the victims and survivors.

Q72 **Robbie Moore:** Have you read Baroness Casey's report that was published in June this year?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, I have.

Q73 **Robbie Moore:** Data retention is incredibly important, as Baroness Casey indicated. We only need to look at historical failures previously and, as Baroness Casey said in her report, Rotherham council covered up the loss of up to 50% of children's data after 21 laptops mysteriously vanished. On this point, if you have read the report you will know that, on page 151, it clearly set out a directive on the Home Office that while this inquiry was being set up—which is the period of time we are in at the moment—police forces and other relevant agencies should be required not to destroy any relevant records relating to grooming gangs.

I submitted a freedom of information request to West Yorkshire Police asking to see the instructions or directives from the Home Office requesting them to retain all data and for no records to be destroyed. West Yorkshire Police responded saying that it did not hold any recorded information from the Home Office on this. Can I simply ask what correspondence has gone out from the Home Office to police forces, and all relevant agencies, asking for all data to be retained since Baroness Casey's recommendation came out in June?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Let me first say that the Home Secretary has written to chief constables to say that the current data collection across ethnicity and nationality is unacceptable. This data must be improved as a matter of urgency for when we look at the annual data requirements to support this process. I accept this is not exactly the question that you asked but I am going to have to write to the Committee on that.



Q74 Robbie Moore: In terms of the panel, it is clear that a number of survivors have walked away from the survivor liaison panel citing major concerns around the fear of the scope widening. The Government have denied that but evidence shows that survivors on the panel were explicitly asked the question: should the inquiry have an explicit focus on grooming gangs or take a broader approach? Why was this asked if it contradicted the recommendations made by Baroness Casey?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say is that the Home Secretary has been clear that the focus is on grooming gangs and it is not going to change or be widened. In response to your question, what has been said is that it is important that all voices are heard during the consultation, hence the inclusion of that question, but just to reiterate, the focus is on grooming gangs and it is not going to be widened.

Q75 Robbie Moore: Can I be reassured that the panel and process is completely independent if those survivors, who were on the panel at the time, were asked whether or not the scope should be widened?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously, there are a lot of divergent views. However, just because views diverge does not mean views should not be heard. It is important that all voices are heard during the process, but the important point is that the focus is on grooming gangs, and that is not going to change.

Q76 Robbie Moore: In terms of moving forward, I am also aware that those victims and survivors who removed themselves from the process have had little communication, if any, from the Home Office despite the Prime Minister saying that he was willing to keep a level of engagement continuing. I am sure you will agree that the amount of experience those individuals are able to bring to the process is invaluable. Why has a level of engagement not continued since those victims and survivors removed themselves from the process?

Dame Antonia Romeo: What has been said is that the door is very much open. Are the victims and survivors hoping for more correspondence or interaction with the Home Office? Is that what you are suggesting? We are certainly in a position where the Minister is working incredibly closely, as is Baroness Casey, with the victims and survivors on the panel and those formerly on the panel. I will need to go and check whether, as you are suggesting, there has been inadequate interaction.

Q77 Robbie Moore: If you could report back to the Committee, that would be much appreciated.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I will put it in the same letter.

Q78 Robbie Moore: With regard to this national inquiry, what level of funding has been allocated to it so far?

Dame Antonia Romeo: As I just mentioned, that is happening as part of the allocations process.



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Q79 **Robbie Moore:** You cannot confirm how much funding?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I cannot.

Q80 **Robbie Moore:** What staffing resource has been allocated so far to the set-up of the inquiry?

Dame Antonia Romeo: In terms of the Home Office, there is a team of about 60 people who work on violence against women and girls and several of these—

Q81 **Robbie Moore:** Specifically for this inquiry?

Dame Antonia Romeo: People do multiple things.

Q82 **Robbie Moore:** Has a staff member specifically been focused to work—

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes.

Q83 **Robbie Moore:** How many?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have one SCS lead. We can report back on how many people are in their team. They sit within this larger group of 60. How many would be sufficient?

Q84 **Robbie Moore:** That is completely the wrong question to ask a member of the Committee who does not have the level of access that you do to this question as the Permanent Secretary.

Am I right to conclude, given this is probably the biggest national scandal that has hit this country and has had huge levels of public outrage, that there is only one senior civil servant working on this?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is not correct. There is a director general who is responsible for the Public Safety Group. Within that, there is a director who is responsible for violence against women and girls and in that team there are about 60 people. Within that, there is a specific senior civil servant who is responsible for this inquiry and they will have a team.

Q85 **Robbie Moore:** Finally, do you feel it is reasonable at the moment that there is not a defined number of people specifically working on the grooming gangs inquiry? If not, is that something you are requesting the Home Secretary is made aware of and that there is a specific allocation of staff resource for it?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There will be a defined number of people in that team and, while I am sitting here, I hope that my excellent team behind me will find out how many people work in that team. There will be people who work on this although, I should say, there will be other people contributing to it because this inquiry is not just about the Home Office. There will be a whole raft of people across Government who are heavily involved.



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Jerome Glass: I should add, as the Permanent Secretary set out, there is a whole set of people focused on child sexual abuse in the Home Office working on that policy and so on. In addition, as the inquiry is set up, it will have a number of people taking action on the inquiry but also undertaking the inquiry; there are two different sources of resource. Does that help?

Q86 **Robbie Moore:** I have two follow-up questions and we can then move on. You kindly said that there had been interaction with other Government Departments on this, and that other people are working on it across Government. Could you write to the Committee and let us know specifically how many people are working on this inquiry, and if you would be kind enough, share the correspondence that your Department has had with other Government Departments specifically on the national inquiry into the grooming gangs?

Dame Antonia Romeo: To answer your question about how many people are in the aforementioned senior civil service-led team, the answer is 11. I can write to other Departments to ask them for the number of people that they have working on this inquiry. The point Jerome made is important, which is that, at the moment, we are establishing the inquiry. It will not, of course, include all the people who work in the NCA on the police investigations so there will be large numbers of additional people. I am describing the policy team specifically focused, from a policy point of view, on setting up this inquiry. I am happy to be the co-ordinator on how many people are working across Government and to give that information to the Committee.

Q87 **Robbie Moore:** Finally, just to do with timings, the previous Home Secretary said from the Dispatch Box that there was going to be five local inquiries in January of this year. That never came to anything, other than a reference made to Rotherham. The previous Home Secretary followed up by stating there was going to be a national inquiry on the back of the Casey report in June. We are now in November and we still do not know who the independent chair is. We do not know the terms of reference. We do not know how much funding has been allocated to it, and we do not even know which local areas it is going to focus on despite me having campaigned consistently for Bradford district to be one of them. Are we likely to receive any update on specifics before Christmas?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Home Secretary has said that we are going to take the time needed. I can put an update in my letter to the Committee on where we are but I do not think I can commit. We have been clear many times that this is going to take as long as it takes and is appropriate. While we want to move as quickly as possible, the Government have been really clear that we have to get it right.

Robbie Moore: A year in with no action. Thank you.

Q88 **Chair:** Could you include that in the letter?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes.



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Chair: Joani Reid and Lewis Atkinson want to do two very quick follow-ups, and then we will move on.

Q89 **Joani Reid:** Just to follow up on Robbie's point about the local inquiries, are you able to commit to them? Oldham, in particular, has been asking for this. Will they be involved in those national inquiries which were committed to back in November?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That will be a decision either for the chair of the inquiry or for Ministers.

Q90 **Joani Reid:** Do you think they should?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is not helpful for me to come and opine.

Q91 **Joani Reid:** Lastly, just moving on to Scotland, this national inquiry affects only England and Wales. We know that victims go cross-border. Have you heard from the Scottish Government? Have you had any correspondence about Scotland and the extent to which Scotland can be involved in evidence gathering, whether or not it is involved in the actual scope of the review?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is my understanding that there has been correspondence on that. I do not think I am in a position to say now how involved they are going to be in the review, but it sounds as though these will need to be bundled up into one response to the various questions to the Committee.

Chair: That would be helpful, thank you.

Q92 **Lewis Atkinson:** I understand that a charity was commissioned by the Home Office to provide independent support to the victims and survivors' panel. I wonder if you could say a little about how the Home Office went about commissioning and identifying that charity and what you see as the relationship going forward. There is a clear public and parliamentary expectation of accountability to the Home Office for this, how does that operate when you have a charity that is involved in supporting the panel of victims and survivors?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Which charity are you talking about?

Lewis Atkinson: The Minister has outlined that a charity was responsible for liaising with victims and survivors.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Do you mean NWT?

Lewis Atkinson: Yes.

Dame Antonia Romeo: They are a charity we have been involved with for a long period. The decision was taken to use them to help us establish the panel. When you say accountability to the Home Office, what do you mean?

Q93 **Lewis Atkinson:** Clearly, you were getting a number of Parliamentary



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questions about the decisions that victims and survivors may have been asked by NWT. Do you feel that the use of NWT as a charity is still possible in the way you initially envisaged, given the level of public and parliamentary scrutiny about the direct role of the Home Office in this?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The charity has been putting together the panel and working with the panel members. Obviously, Minister Phillips has been very involved. Baroness Casey is now involved. The key point is to put victims and survivors at the centre of the process and it was felt that NWT was the right charity to help do that. I am not sure exactly what you mean by accountability in that particular sense. I am happy to keep answering but I am not sure I have understood.

Lewis Atkinson: That is fine for now, thank you.

Chair: I have indulged the Committee by being a little longer on that section but I know it has taken a particular interest in the area. We are now going to move on to immigration and borders. I am conscious of time, so would urge brevity in questioning. We will start with an expert, Peter Prinsley.

Q94 **Peter Prinsley:** This is a section on border security. The first question is: why did you commission a review of the Border Security Command so soon after its establishment? Were you concerned that it was not delivering results? How are you measuring the Command's success and by when do you expect the Command to achieve a significant reduction in small boats?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I am going to answer the first bit of that and then Simon, who is the line manager in the Border Security Command, will talk about holding to account.

I will come back to where the questioning started. The reason for the review was to get somebody who was not from the Department to look at whether we had given the Border Security Command the levers it needed to do what it was set up to do; namely tackle small boat crossings and organised immigration crime.

It was quite a rapid review, deliberately so, and the outcome was that we moved part of the Small Boats Operational Command into the Border Security Command to give it more levers so it now includes things like the maritime directorate. It gives it more levers. When originally set up, it was 250 people essentially co-ordinating as the system command. It actually needs to be operational to do what needs to be done; that is why we moved in those teams. We have also moved in Home Office Intelligence, which will need to provide intelligence to help it do its job better, and we are going to give it clearer tasking over other people with whom it wants to work. It was a very deliberate part of the ongoing future Home Office plan to make sure that we had good accountability.

Q95 **Peter Prinsley:** So what you are telling me is you arrived, you took a little look at this, and then you changed something. That is right, is it



not?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is correct. The only thing I changed, by the way.

Q96 **Peter Prinsley:** That is great. The question then is: what do you expect the time scale to be for this boat problem to improve spectacularly? It is the single biggest political difficulty that many of us experience, and has a political importance quite out of proportion to the actual number of people who are arriving, which I calculate to be about one bus load a day on average. What are we expecting to see by Christmas?

Simon Ridley: Let me go back to your original question about how we task and hold to account the work of the Border Security Command and then come to your question on what we might expect by Christmas or any other date. The first thing to say, which the Committee will obviously know, is that small boat crossings are the definition of a very complicated and wicked problem. There is not a single linear transmission from one single action, or even multiple actions, to an easily quantifiable reduction in boat crossings.

What we have is a clear plan and strategy, which is the Border Security Commander and the system's job to deliver. It is made up of a number of lines of activity upstream, so working internationally in source countries from where people travel, and there is criminality. The second part of it is the law enforcement activity, particularly around the northern French coast, and the work with the French in terms of direct disruption. The third part of it is doing everything we can in the UK both to disrupt the criminality and to make sure that we are increasing our returns and making it clear to people who may come across in a small boat that they will be returned.

The first thing in terms of accountability is that we are making progress on all those lines of activity. We have a number of metrics in terms of outputs that we are seeking, whether that is arrests, boat seizures, other equipment seizures, the number of people who are disrupted from getting onto boats in northern France, arrests we are making in the UK, or disrupting the transmission of illicit finance.

Martin, when he was at the Committee, described a monthly board which brings in the NCA, the intelligence community, the Foreign Office, and other key partners to make sure that he can drive activity through the system. Further, Ministers and I have had conversations with Martin to press that we are meeting the commitments we have made in terms of the outputs that we need to deliver. The really challenging part of that is what it translates to in terms of small boat crossings.

To Antonia's earlier point, we can demonstrate that we have prevented a lot of activity. We talked about the 20,000 disruptions at the border. We have seized a significant number of boats at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. We have made a number of arrests in the UK and passed



intelligence for a number of arrests in Europe, of both local facilitators and other more significant members of the criminal enterprises that drive this. If we had not done all that, a lot more people would have crossed in small boats than have. Clearly, this year is challenging. Numbers are up on last year. We have essentially seen more crowding of individual boats. We have seen different tactics on the beaches to drive that, and the work we are doing through Martin's teams and with the French is to continue to disrupt that.

I cannot make a precise commitment about when numbers will start to turn down, but we are doing everything we possibly can across Government to achieve that.

Q97 **Peter Prinsley:** I absolutely believe that you are. One thing that is obvious is the number of people who are stuck in the appeals system; this is moving on to a slightly different thing.

According to the document I was given, we had 7,500 people in the appeals system in June 2023 and by March 2025 we had 51,000 people stuck in the appeals system. It seems to me that people who come here on small boats, if a decision is made for them to have to leave, what they are hearing is that they can simply get into an appeals system and stay here. There has been a lot of publicity over the last few days about a Danish model for how we might change our rules. Do you have any thoughts about whether the Danish rules and system could be applicable here and whether it would have any impact, if you are roughly familiar with what goes on there?

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that you are absolutely right to connect the two things. In terms of the work that we can do in the UK, there is law enforcement work and there is work we can do to increase returns. Ultimately, it is a question about how attractive the UK looks to people who have a choice of whether to stay in France or to pay more money and cross in a small boat.

There is no doubt that if people see an easier route to ways to work or stay then that may well be one of the things that drives people across. We have seen over the last few years, which we may come on to, real challenges in terms of the asylum system and the length of time it takes to pull people through it. The appeals system is an important part of that.

We are looking at a number of international systems. The Danes have done some really quite innovative changes and reforms and actually, in terms of the number of people arriving and claiming asylum, they have numbers moving in a downward direction through a combination of much clearer and quicker decision-making. The rights that accrue are less and take longer to accrue, and they have connected their asylum system very directly to their returns which enables them to move people through more quickly. They are operating at a smaller scale than we are but there is a huge amount to learn from them as well as from some other



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countries. We are considering all that as we think about the future asylum system.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Just to add, the Home Secretary is going to make a major announcement on asylum and returns likely this month. She has been paying close attention, as Simon says, to the Danish model. They have had a lot of success in two areas. One is looking at incentives and one is looking at scaling up returns. That is work under, but the Home Secretary will be announcing policy changes directly aimed at reducing the number of people in asylum shortly.

Peter Prinsley: My impression is that the British people are bewildered about why this is so difficult. They cannot understand why a country which is an island, has a navy, a court system, and has a well-recognised system of processing people has been so terrible at this. I am encouraged that the Home Secretary is going to make a new announcement and that she is going to perhaps adopt some models that have worked well overseas.

Q98 **Chair:** As a Committee, we are very keen to see what Denmark has done. We have just identified that the library published a briefing paper on Denmark's approach to it, which we will circulate to the Committee. Have you had the chance to visit Denmark?

Simon Ridley: I have not personally but our teams have been and have very close relationships with Denmark as well as a number of other Ministers of the Interior across Europe.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Our teams have gone several times.

Q99 **Mr Kohler:** Mr Ridley, can I quiz you about one in, one out? We were told at a previous session with the Border Security Command and the National Crime Agency that it was all about disrupting the business model of the people smugglers. This Committee predicted that all the people smugglers would do is put the people on the next boat back to show that it has not disrupting their model. That is indeed what is happening. Do you think, or does the Home Office think, one in, one out is still a viable policy?

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that the one in, one out policy is a very clear and deliberate move to do something different. It does seek to disrupt the model because the reason people get on a boat is to get a foot into the UK and, in almost all cases, enter the asylum system to broadly speaking either get asylum or wait for time to pass. This is an illegal method of entry. The one in, one out is about saying to some people who come across that that is not going to happen; you will get taken straight into detention and returned to France.

It was set up specifically, as the previous Home Secretary said, as a pilot to test a new and innovative model, to check how we could work it operationally, and to check the partnership working with the French



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because, as well as the out, there is obviously an in from France. It is a joint model.

You are right that two people, who we sent back, have now returned on a small boat. They have, in both cases, been identified and taken straight back into detention. The first of those is now back in France. We will continue to test the model and continue to scale it up because it is removing the reason why people are making these incredibly dangerous journeys in the first instance. The agreement with France will last until next summer, and we are continuously evaluating what we are doing.

Q100 Mr Kohler: Have the French made any commitments as to what will happen with regard to the people we return, or are they free to get on the next boat?

Simon Ridley: The French take the people who go back into their system, but they are not detaining them. People are free to move. We are returning people to Paris. They go back into the French system but they are not then detained. What we are doing in our operational work is demonstrating that if you come back out you just go back again.

Q101 Mr Kohler: I would like to move to digital IDs now. One of the main drivers is to address illegal working. Both France and Germany have forms of a mandatory ID system. They have a bigger black economy than the UK, so why do we think digital IDs will address the issue of illegal working?

Simon Ridley: Over the last year, we have been rolling out eVisas to people instead of biometric residence permits so that we can do right-to-work tests on migrants. That sits behind the increase in illegal working visits we are doing, the increase in arrests that are coming, and the increasing returns that are coming as a result of that.

The expansion into digital ID that the Prime Minister has announced will enable those right-to-work checks to go much more widely. It will take paper documents out of checks for British citizens and remove some opportunities for fraud in terms of fraudulent documents. It also enables us to tighten up the risk of accidental non-compliance.

The second thing to say is that digital ID provides an opportunity for lots of benefits beyond illegal working. It is an important part of us continuing to tighten up the regime around illegal working. Alongside it, there are a number of other things we need to do to make it harder for people to work illegally. For example, there are powers in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to enable us to do illegal work checks against people who are in the gig economy. It is an important part of continuing to strengthen the regime, but it is not the only thing that will make a difference to the black economy and illegal working.

Q102 Mr Kohler: You have not answered my point about France and Germany having a bigger black economy even though they have mandatory ID requirements. Why do we think it will help at all given that international



comparisons show it does not address the issue?

Simon Ridley: We are focused on doing everything we can to make it harder to work illegally. There are a number of things we have done and will continue to do on that. Our objective, through rolling out digital ID, is to make right-to-work checks expand across the whole economy through a very simple online platform. One thing it can do is reduce the use of fraudulent paper documents. I am not familiar with the detailed comparisons of France and Germany, but it is one thing that we are implementing to continue to drive down illegal working.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It will also be about enforcement. It is not enough just to have the mechanism to be able to do it; you then have to enforce it. The plan needs to be to do both: to have an ability to do the digital ID check—and eVisas is already proof of concept on this—and enforce it in order to reduce the black economy as a result.

Q103 **Mr Kohler:** This might be an answer to my next question then. The real problem at the moment is that employers are not doing right-to-work checks. That is the main issue. It is not to do with fraud. It is employers deliberately employing people in the black economy. If they are not doing it now, why will digital ID make any difference? Are you saying that it is all to do with enforcing it more?

Simon Ridley: That is definitely one thing we need to do. It is a really important part in the implementation of the programme in terms of having the effect, which is absolutely about compliance and how we can improve and strengthen compliance, and enforcement where people are not complying in terms of doing the right-to-work checks. At the moment, when we come across that with immigration enforcement, we can levy fines for employing people who do not have the right to work. It is also about returning people who we discover do not have status here but are working in the economy. All of that has to work together. It is not just about the platform, but we have to have the platform to enable the checks to be done.

Dame Antonia Romeo: You do not have to wait for digital ID to be able to do some checks. In fact, we are now extending the right-to-work checks to temporary and casual workers. One problem is that it was seen as a loophole. That is work that is happening now and we are obviously doing it with DBT. Because it is about work, we have to respond to changes in how the labour market operates so we now have to extend those right-to-work checks to a larger group.

Q104 **Mr Kohler:** That was going to be my last question. Do we need digital ID? If it is all about enforcement, why do we not just enforce better?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There are other benefits of digital ID, of course. Everybody has one thing. It also means that you can then do the check. If everyone has the same thing they are checking, you can—



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Simon Ridley: In terms of the work we have done with eVisas, the right-to-work check is very easy for the employer in the first instance. All they need to do is get the code and date of birth from the person they are employing. They can go online and do that in seconds. Secondly, nobody is looking around for a piece of paper that is a biometric residence permit or whatever else. You have somewhere to log in which has your credentials including your status. When immigration enforcement officers, on the basis of intelligence, are doing an illegal working visit they can then check the right to work very quickly when they are there. There are huge benefits to having these digitised compared to paper-based versions.

Q105 **Robbie Moore:** I am just keen to understand the flow of decision-making. Is this a policy that has been developed in the Department and taken up by a Minister as a good idea of something that should be pursued, or is this a direction that has been issued by a Minister to the Department asking it to look at rolling out digital ID?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is actually a Cabinet Office policy.

Robbie Moore: Same question then.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I cannot speak for the Cabinet Office, but it is a Cabinet Office policy where we are playing our full part.

Q106 **Robbie Moore:** I will re-phrase the question then. Has this been designed by the civil service going up to a Minister regardless of where they sit in Government, or has this been a direction that has come from the top asking the civil service to look at how this policy could be implemented?

Simon Ridley: As a function of policy-making that has been done across Government and, as Antonia said, is currently led by the Cabinet Office, the Prime Minister announced that we would develop and roll out digital ID to support illegal working and a number of other use cases. The Cabinet Office is now leading that programme. We are working very closely with DSIT and others across Government because we have a huge amount of experience from the delivery of the EU settlement scheme and eVisas. Obviously, issues around illegal working are particularly pertinent to our particular priorities.

Q107 **Robbie Moore:** Two very quick questions. Do you feel the level of enforcement that is being carried out under the current system is sufficient without digital ID?

Simon Ridley: The number of illegal working visits that we are doing has gone up significantly and we will continue to raise it. There is clearly a huge scope and a need to be able to go further in order to identify and then increase returns commensurately. However, we have to live within the fiscal constraints that we have and balance the scope to increase the resources in immigration enforcement alongside other groups.



Q108 **Robbie Moore:** That seems like a long way of saying no. Are you satisfied with having a roll-out of digital ID that enables the Government to carry out better enforcement?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Just to add to that, illegal working visits have gone up by 50% year-on-year and illegal working arrests have gone up by 63% year-on-year, so there is no doubt that that is a good story. That is the result of the investment made into the immigration enforcement team in 2024. The Home Secretary has been really clear that immigration enforcement and returns are priorities for her. As Simon said, we are in a difficult fiscal situation but we want to invest as much as possible into this for precisely the reasons that you suggest.

Q109 **Robbie Moore:** Finally, could you write to the Committee answering Paul's question around why the black market is higher under those European countries that have digital ID? You said you were not aware of it, but it would be helpful to get your analysis on why you think it is higher.

Chair: It may possibly be held by DBT.

Simon Ridley: The analysis of the size of the black market in France and Germany?

Robbie Moore: Just your view on why you feel it may be higher.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is a question for DBT. We are happy to do comparisons of black market economies in different countries. If the question is: what do we think the benefits of digital ID will be in terms of delivering and then enforcing a reduction in illegal working? That is something that would be for us to do if it would be helpful.

Q110 **Peter Prinsley:** Can I just make a quick point about digital ID? We have been talking about digital ID as if this is some sort of panacea for dealing with the problem of illegal employment and some immigration difficulties. I would like us, and I do not know if you agree, to sell the idea of digital ID as a much wider benefit to the population to make the Government work better. In particular, thinking of ways to link the medical record to the digital ID so that everybody becomes the custodian of their own medical records, giving people agency over their health care.

If we were able to do that then it would be a way of convincing the public that it was in their interests to have a digital ID, whereas there are great fears that a digital ID will be imposed upon the public to deal with a problem that they do not see as their problem. They see it as the Government's problem because, as you said, they should be doing the inspections. I do not know if you agree but there are ways in which the idea of a digital ID can be made much more attractive to the general population.

Simon Ridley: The programme is being led out of the Cabinet Office precisely because it is a whole of Government programme and not one



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just focused on Home Office objectives. The Prime Minister has recently said, exactly as you say, that there are a range of other potential benefits. There will be a consultation on the development of the programme in the coming weeks that will start to explore some of these things.

Chair: We obviously have our inquiry on this, which we started in the summer, and we will be taking evidence next week from a number of organisations. I want to move on to asylum accommodation. I hope we can keep you a little beyond the allocated time because we have questions on a couple more areas.

Q111 **Chris Murray:** Going back to the one in, one out deal very briefly for one second, one of my concerns is that two of the big interventions that we need to crack the small boats issue are the maritime law change in France and the one in, one out deal being scaled up. There are obviously political challenges in France at the moment. How are you mitigating the risk that such a big chunk of our priorities is contingent on the French being able to prioritise this as well?

Simon Ridley: First and most importantly through continuing to work incredibly closely with them through all levels of their system, so from the Élysée down. Within that, over the last two years, we have built very close operational relationships with teams both in their Ministers of the Interior and critically in northern France, and we continue to invest in those. We also have some very specific things that came out of the PM and President Macron summit back in May, which included the one in, one out deal to which we are both completely committed and then the development of the next round of the so-called Sandhurst deal, which is essentially the funding and agreements that support the arrangements in northern France. The political situation in France is uncertain, as you said, but there is no doubt that there is joint commitment to this at the top of both Governments and we are continuing to—

Q112 **Chris Murray:** My question is: are you adjusting in light of the developing political reality in France?

Simon Ridley: Yes, in the sense that we are making sure that, through our embassy in Paris and the relationships we hold in the Home Office, we are meeting and engaging the teams regularly. We are keeping close track of progress against those things and, where we need to form new relationships—there has just been a change in the Minister of the Interior—we form and build those relationships as quickly as we can.

Q113 **Chris Murray:** I want to ask a bit about the new announcements on asylum accommodation and the move to large sites. A couple of years ago, the Home Office tried large sites and the National Audit Office's report into it was utterly damning. It was a catastrophic failure of public procurement. How are you going to ensure that you do not make the same mistakes again?



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Simon Ridley: This comes back to some themes we talked about earlier. Without question mistakes were made. Various reports have been written and various hearings have been held about them. First, we have through all that stood up and made Wethersfield work for some considerable period of time now. We have seen what it takes to set it up and run it. We have taken a lot of those lessons and we are doing a number of things very differently. To name a couple of them, we are working in a much more cross-Government way than we did first time round. We have set up a new alternative accommodation task force which includes us, the Ministry of Defence, the Cabinet Office, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government so that we are bringing all the different skills and experience across Government to bear. We have brought far more expertise into the Department in response to some reports which we have talked about in terms of property and infrastructure expertise, so we are much clearer in what we need to do to deliver.

We have learned a number of lessons about the due diligence we need to do on site and early engagement with the contractors who are going to deliver different parts of the service, both in standing a site up and then subsequently running it so that we get a much more realistic view of costs up front. There are a number of lessons from these different reports and we are feeding those into the work that we are now doing.

Dame Antonia Romeo: This is a good example of where we have learned a number of lessons. There are a lot of capability issues here. You must have property experts and really good contract management, make sure you know what you are doing on due diligence, and be clear about who is doing what across Government. We are doing all those things in a way they were not previously done.

Q114 **Chris Murray:** When it was Northeye and Bibby Stockholm—the name of the other one has slipped my mind—civil servants did not ask for ministerial direction to go ahead with it. The Public Accounts Committee inquiry looked into why that was. Will you now be asking for ministerial direction for the large sites? Are you anticipating doing that well?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Simon is the accounting officer and I am the principal accounting officer on this. There are four very well-established tests as to whether you ask for ministerial direction or not. The one that is usually at play is on feasibility. Is it actually feasible to do? A reason why we are doing all the work Simon has just talked about is to be completely confident about feasibility before going ahead. Regularity and propriety are fairly straightforward, and then value for money. Of course, value for money depends on the way in which you define value. The most value for money option is not always the cheapest provision of that option because it will sometimes depend on what Ministers are trying to achieve. Accounting officer tests on the proposals are ongoing work.

Q115 **Chris Murray:** Depending on the outcome of that, you would or would not ask for ministerial direction?



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Dame Antonia Romeo: If the tests are not met, I would be obliged under managing public money to ask for direction.

Q116 **Chris Murray:** That is good, thank you. I want to come on to the hotel accommodation contracts with the three providers. You will have seen our report that the break clause is coming up next year. What is the current thinking in senior levels at the Home Office on the break clause?

Simon Ridley: The first thing to say is that we are absolutely committed, as per the Government's priority, to come out of hotels. That is important, and what we are asking of our suppliers will change over time.

Q117 **Chris Murray:** Do you think it is possible to come out of hotels in the current contract structure? The problem is that subprime contracting has led you into these hotels. Is it possible to exit them and stay in the contract?

Simon Ridley: Yes, it is possible to exit hotels and stay in these contracts. The contracts were initially signed in 2019 without any hotel provision. The core of the contract is around dispersed accommodation. A number of contract change notices were then developed and signed as the need for hotels grew for various reasons, including as a result of covid and the emergence of small boat arrivals.

We have already reduced from a peak of around 400 hotels to about half of that within these contracts. That is a large part of how we saved £700 million on the asylum budget last year, and we can continue to reduce the number of hotels under these contracts. That commitment is really important context for the discussion. The break clause is from September 2026. That is not a single moment in time. We are able to exercise that break clause any time thereafter with nine months' notice. Whether it is to the break clause or to the end of the contract in 2029, we are already doing market engagement for what we have called the bridging procurement. It is to be decided whether we launch it, but we are doing work with the market to test what the different models of delivery or approaches could be.

The last thing to say is that, for the Bibby Stockholm and a small number of hotels, we have brought a fourth supplier on in recent times. There are a number of important choices and we will determine that strategy in the coming months.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Could I add something on contract management capability generally? One thing I have launched a review into is our contract management capability, partly because of this Committee's report into the asylum contract. They are going to be reviewing all gold contracts but with a particular focus in the first phase on asylum contracts. That is going to be led by a non-executive from MOJ and they will be looking at the issues that got us into the problems that we are now in so we will not get into them in the future. We have already significantly invested in our commercial capability with new appointments



and a team led by another senior civil servant specifically focusing on these asylum contracts. We now have the equivalent of 336 commercial full-time equivalent staff in the Department focusing on this. We have really boosted our capability and would be in a better position this time around if we were letting the same contracts.

Q118 Chris Murray: That is really positive to hear. If Ministers are of a view that they should exit these contracts, is the Home Office in a position to deliver that and put in place alternative provision of asylum accommodation from the moment the break clause comes into force?

Simon Ridley: That is precisely where we need to bring together various things. It depends on where we are in terms of hotel exit. It depends where we are in terms of testing the market and the procurement timeline for these things. That is why it is important that the break clause does not come at a moment in time.

Q119 Chris Murray: The subtext of my question and what I am trying to drive at is how real is the break clause? It is written in a contract but if a Minister asks you to trigger it, will you say that it is not possible to put in place an alternative set of arrangements? You are locked into it unless you want an absolutely catastrophic alternative outcome, or is it a real thing that you could offer as a suite of policy options to a Minister? Does my question make sense?

Simon Ridley: The break clause is real but we have to be clear about what we would be moving to and the timeline to different answers to that question will differ. So the precise time at which one could exercise it, if that is what Ministers decided, would depend.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The purpose of the market engagement, on the large sites and other work, is to ensure that we are in a position to allow Ministers to make that decision so that it is real.

Q120 Chris Murray: I just want to come in on profit clawbacks from the asylum accommodation providers. When they came to see us a couple of months ago, you had not clawed back any of the money from them. I understand that £74 million in excess profits has now been clawed back, which is more than the £45 million we thought they owed you, so what is that differential?

Dame Antonia Romeo: They are two different things. The amount that has been recouped is £74 million of which £46 million is excess profit. The remainder is service charges or service credits and VAT.

Q121 Mr Kohler: Has the Home Office taken on board that the weakness with cost-plus contracts, where the plus is a percentage of the base cost, it that it incentivises providers to up the base cost? We saw the problem with hotels. Have you taken on board the fact that you cannot always do a cost-plus contract based on a percentage?



Simon Ridley: Yes, we have learned a lot from these contracts. They were signed in a very different time from the one we find ourselves in now, but all the work we are doing is to make sure we learn from that.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I completely agree with that. They were signed at a different time. There are a number of reasons why we are in the position we are in but clearly there were decisions made about the nature of the contracts. This goes to the point about building capability. We would not want to be in that position again which is why I have the review going on.

Q122 **Chair:** Thank you. We still have a number of questions but I am not going to detain you any longer because I appreciate that we have gone over our time. If we could write to you with the additional questions that we have, that would be helpful for the Committee. I thank you for coming.

Dame Antonia Romeo: With your agreement, Chair, I have a couple of new bits of information that might be helpful, particularly on some questions that Mr Moore was asking. On IICSA, we have a clear plan of action against each recommendation. Crucially, there are a series of measures in the Crime and Policing Bill which will deliver a number of things from IICSA including the mandatory reporting duty of CSA. Therefore, there is action which will come through legislation. There is also an inter-ministerial group on CSA, which is chaired by Jess Phillips, across Government, evidencing that there is action and that that action is going to lead to legislation.

Can I also add, on another question, that it was NWG not NWT? They have written to all survivors who have withdrawn to offer a meeting with a Minister or a Home Office official. So we have reached out to them, and are obviously happy to do more reaching out, but NWG has written to all the victims and survivors who walked away.

Chair: Thank you very much. I could see you were getting notes that may have been to give additional information.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is always best to close it down in the room if you can; there are other things we will write about.

Chair: Absolutely. Thank you very much for your time today. I know this is the first for you. Dame Antonia. It is not your first time, Mr Ridley, but it is the first time for you to be in front of us. I am sure we will see you again.