

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The Work of the Home Secretary, HC 192](#)

Wednesday 21 July 2021

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; Dehenna Davison; Ruth Edwards; Laura Farris; Andre Gwynne; Dame Diana Johnson; Tim Loughton; Stuart C McDonald.

Questions 183 - 256

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Home Secretary; Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Paul Lincoln OBE, Director General, Border Force, Home Office.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Priti Patel, Matthew Rycroft CBE and Paul Lincoln OBE.

Q183 **Chair:** Welcome to this evidence session of the Home Affairs Select Committee. We are taking evidence this morning from the Home Secretary and the Permanent Secretary. We also have Paul Lincoln from the border force with us this morning. Welcome to our witnesses. We are very grateful for your time this morning.

Can I begin with a quick first question about the Covid border arrangements? Obviously the Delta variant is now responsible for the highest Covid rates that we have ever seen and it is clear from the scientists' evidence that there were multiple introductions of the virus over several weeks that helped it spread so fast. The system that you have in place to prevent new variants spreading clearly did not operate quickly enough to prevent that happening. Why is that?

Priti Patel: Good morning. Why don't I come in and outline the checking systems that we do have?

Chair: We probably do not have time to go into the factual things that everybody knows. Given that this system clearly failed, I am keen to understand why it failed and therefore what will we need to do to prevent future new variants coming in.

Priti Patel: First, it is important to say that the system has not failed. This is a comprehensive system across the whole of government. This is not just Border Force and the Home Office. This is a system that has been put in place across government, working with the Department for Transport in particular but also working with the JBC, who I understand has given evidence in private to the Committee recently. We do have an end-to-end comprehensive approach when it comes to border security, and importantly, health measures at the border, and that is through the 100% compliance, the checks that we have in place and, of course, as the country will be very well aware, with the red, amber, green traffic light system in place. However, I am very happy to ask Paul to come in to speak about the measures and how we are making absolutely sure, through the genomic sequencing that is taking place, that we are able to spot variants of concern. In addition, we deal with them when it comes to the MQS process and through the red-listing of countries and how that is managed across government.

Q184 **Chair:** But it clearly did fail because in many areas of the country we have more cases of the Delta variant than we have ever had of any other Covid variant. It clearly failed. There may be specific reasons, but it clearly failed. How can you possibly say that it did not fail to stop the new variant spreading right across the country?

Priti Patel: What I am saying, Chair, is that we have a comprehensive, end-to-end system when it comes to managing health measures at the



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border and the Government have had a longstanding record and policy of managing health measures at the border, which is very well publicised.

On top of that, of course, we have the largest genomic sequencing capacity in the world, effectively, which has been able to spot these variants of concern that have been coming into the country. That has also helped to structure the way in which government—across the whole of government, I should emphasise, based on work with the JBC and the Department for Transport—operationalises those measures at the border through order Force. The work is also upstreamed in checks undertaken by carriers.

Q185 **Chair:** It clearly has not worked. The reason why this matters is because given that it has not worked, we need to have confidence in what you are doing for the future and whether you are going to react quickly enough to any other new variants that might somehow threaten the vaccine programme. If you will not even recognise that the system did fail on Delta, it is very hard to have confidence.

One final question on this. On 16 April NERVTAG said it was worried about India and that travel advice needed to be reviewed. You had already seen a soaring of cases in India, doubling every week, in early April, and concerns being raised about potential new variants. Given that NERVTAG said that on 16 April, why did it take a full week, until 23 April, for India to be put on the red list?

Priti Patel: Well, first of all, Chair, it is entirely wrong to suggest that we delayed putting India on the red list, which is effectively what you are suggesting. Other countries, including Bangladesh and Pakistan, were put on the red list early in April. That decision was taken on the basis of the positivity rate of people entering the country and the data that showed the proportion of people testing positive. This comes back to effective measures. We were able to test people coming into the country. Positive tests from people coming in from Pakistan were three times higher than from people coming in from India. The date of the India red-listing—the ban—was 23 April, with everyone arriving from India being put into quarantine in a hotel for 10 days. That is also five days before the Delta variant was formally put under investigation on 28 April and two weeks before it was labelled a variant of concern on 7 May. Even before India was red-listed, everyone from red-listed countries had to quarantine for 10 days on arrival and also take a pre-departure test, take further tests on day 2 and day 8, and that was in addition to the upstreaming of checks through carriers. There is a fine involved for carriers, put in place by the Department for Transport, for them to help us and support 100% compliance checks.

Chair: But it did not work.

Priti Patel: It is important to recognise that it is the testing capability and the sequencing that has enabled us to identify variants of concern. That is fundamental to government policy and will continue to be as



colleagues, Mathew and Paul, can testify, and, I would suggest, Chair, as other colleagues across government will also testify. You have spoken to JBC. You can speak to the Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England about their capacity. They are all important component parts that come together to demonstrate the effective approach that takes place when it comes to the end-to-end border policy.

Chair: All right. Unfortunately, Home Secretary, I don't think there is anybody in the country who thinks that your border policy worked to prevent the Delta variant spreading right across the country. We can see the evidence. It is therefore quite troubling that you are effectively saying that the policy did work and is not being changed in order to react more swiftly. But we need to move on.

Q186 **Stuart C McDonald:** Could I start with one quick question about the EU settlement scheme? I do not want to reopen the debate about that scheme should have been designed. My question is specifically about an elderly person who has missed the deadline and needs medical treatment and because they have not applied in time, a charge is levied for the treatment for their treatment. If that person goes on and applies late and the Home Office accepts that they had a reasonable excuse for that late application, and that is all well and good in terms of their status, their problem as I understand it is that they would still have to pay the bill for NHS treatment. When I asked the Minister about this, when he was here at the Committee last autumn, he said he would have found that outcome bizarre, that it would not have made sense. Is it an accident that that has ended up being the guidance? Why is that the case?

Priti Patel: If could just first speak about the EU Settlement Scheme, there are several important points to make. Applicants have had 27 months to make their applications. It is a success. The way the scheme has been designed and the fact that more than six million applications have been received and more than 5.4 million have been concluded demonstrates the effectiveness of the scheme.

Of course, I will absolutely recognise that we will look at the circumstances of specific cases. We have demonstrated great flexibility around all cases in the scheme. Not only that, when we look at the length of the scheme, how long it has been open, the ways of working—

Stuart C McDonald: You are not answering the question. I don't want to reopen the debate about the EU Settlement Scheme. I simply want to know why it is that somebody who has a reasonable excuse for a late application would still have to pay thousands of pounds in NHS charges despite the fact that they had a reasonable excuse. Perhaps this lady or gentleman has early onset dementia, for example, and did not realise they had to apply. Surely that is something that the Home Office would look at again. That is all I am asking.



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Priti Patel: First, the Department of Health and Social Care has made it clear that when a late application to the scheme has been made, the individual will not be charged for NHS care until the outcome is final—

Stuart C McDonald: That is welcome.

Priti Patel: —and this includes the outcome of any appeal and decision to refuse an application.

Q187 **Stuart C McDonald:** Yes. That is good. That is absolutely brilliant. However, the point is that there will be people who will only realise they have not applied when they go and seek treatment and they will incur those charges anyway. For the NHS, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Home Office, you are talking about tiny sums of money but for these people, many thousands of pounds could be absolutely devastating. It is a tiny tweak. All I am asking is that the Home Office and Department for Health and Social Care just think again about it.

Priti Patel: It is important to reflect, if I can just repeat what I have said, that where there has been a late application, the individual will not be charge for NHS health care. It is important to recognise that—

Stuart C McDonald: But they will if they incur the charge before making the application. It is a tiny tweak that could make a huge difference to people, otherwise you are repeating the Windrush situation.

Priti Patel: I think it is wrong to conflate Windrush—the scandal of Windrush—with the particular example you are using. That is very unfair. It is also very unfair to the caseworker—

Stuart C McDonald: It is exactly what happened to Albert Thompson.

Okay, if you are not willing to look at that again, a simple measure that would cost nothing to your Department but would be absolutely disastrous for individuals, just not even think about it?

Priti Patel: If you would like to hear me answer the question rather than speaking over me, you are basically suggesting that I am not prepared to look at this. The fact of the matter is that any claim will be backdated if there is any example such as you have outlined. It is perfectly true, as we all know, that GP services and primary care are free of charge in the NHS and rightly so. If there is any example of someone being charged, when that application comes in, that individual will be supported and anything else will be backdated. There are ways and processes in government that are joined up across the NHS and the Home Office. This is about how we treat individual applicants. It is right that we spend the time to look at them—

Stuart C McDonald: I will follow up and write on the detail. But it seems there is a possibility—

Priti Patel: It is important that we give the individual—

Stuart C McDonald: You are trying to talk out the time. That is quite



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obvious. If you are happy to look it again, that is great.

Can I ask you about Napier Barracks now? There was an interim report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. At the time, nobody made statement in Parliament about it because it was an interim report. Is it correct that the final report has been with you since May?

Priti Patel: First, if I may, in response to your last comment, it is not a case about talking out time at all. I think that is very unfair. You asked me to answer the question and that is effectively what I have been doing.

On Napier Barracks, I would like to start by saying that we have taken all the appropriate measures and steps. The report itself will be published in due course, which is part of the protocol—

Q188 **Stuart C McDonald:** Is it going to be published on Thursday by any chance? Am I correct in understanding that it is going to be published on Thursday, despite having been with you since May?

Priti Patel: There is a date for publication.

Stuart C McDonald: Thursday? The last day of term?

Priti Patel: Before Parliament rises. There is a date for publication.

Stuart C McDonald: And you expect us to be grateful for that? This is classic Home Office, an absolutely scathing report that you have had since May and you are going to punt it out on the last day of term. Are you going to make a statement about it or answer questions in the House?

Priti Patel: If I may, I think that is incredibly unfair. I think it is important to reflect on and recognise that the Home Office takes all reports seriously. It is right that we have time to go through them in the same way as with court judgments and findings that are also published, or other reports that come to us. What you say is a disservice, particularly for Home Office officials who do a great deal of work to follow advice, look at reports that come through, to make sure that we are looking at all the details and that we learn lessons.

Another point to be made, if I may, about the report itself, the Home Office has only received the interim report.

Stuart C McDonald: The Home Office received the final report, the full inspection report in [inaudible].

Priti Patel: That is incorrect. We have received an interim report, not a final report.

Q189 **Stuart C McDonald:** So the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales is wrong when he says the full report was sent to the Home Secretary in May. Or have you just not seen it.



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Priti Patel: We have received an interim report. I don't know if Matthew wants to come in on this. Matthew will know about the sequencing of the reports.

Matthew Rycroft: The Home Office is working to continually improve our transparency. That is an important part of the Windrush lessons learned, a really important recommendation. [Inaudible.]

Q190 **Stuart C McDonald:** Do you have the final report from the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration? The prison inspector says it was sent to you in May. Can you confirm that, Mr Rycroft?

Matthew Rycroft: There are two reports, one from the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, and another from the Inspector of Prisons. We will make sure that whatever needs to be published is published.

Q191 **Stuart C McDonald:** I am reading from the annual report of the chief inspector from yesterday. The Chief Inspector of Prisons said yesterday, "The ICIBI published a summary of the findings in March this year and the full inspection report was sent to the Home Secretary in May". Is he wrong?

Matthew Rycroft: We have had the full report from him, from the Inspector of Prisons. We have not yet had the full report from the ICIBI.

Q192 **Chair:** Have you published the full report from the Inspector of Prisons?

Matthew Rycroft: That is what will be published before the end of this parliamentary term.

Chair: So that one will be published on Thursday, too late for us to be able to ask you questions about it.

Matthew Rycroft: It will be published before the end of this parliamentary session.

Q193 **Chair:** There is something really Kafkaesque, Permanent Secretary, about you saying you will publish whatever needs to be published. It is our role to scrutinise and we therefore want to see the reports that you have had for many months.

Home Secretary, why has the report from the Inspector of Prisons not already been published?

Priti Patel: We will check as to when that report came into the Department. We will check and come back to you during these proceedings. Obviously there is some conflation between the two reports and about what has been received and what has not been received.

Q194 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I would like to carry on discussing Napier Barracks and also public health guidance on dormitory accommodation.

Home Secretary, I want to refer you back to 24 February 2021 when you told the Committee that Napier Barracks and Penally Camp had been



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adapted in line with, and in light of, public health guidance. You told us, “It is all working in line with public health guidance and with local authority partners throughout all this, so we have been following guidance in every single way”.

I think the problem, Home Secretary, is that since that date we have found out from the ICIBI’s report that both sites were opened before Public Health Wales’s and Public Health England’s recommendations had been actioned. A report by the local health board that in mid-November 2020 said they still had not received assurances from the Home Office that the guidance and advice they offered to aid Covid-19 security had been acted upon. We know that there is a letter from Public Health Wales that said that in September 2020 there had been no plans by the Home Office to implement Covid-19 risk pathways on site, to segregate dormitories into Covid-19 bubbles, or to segregate parts of the Penally Camp for Covid-19 reduction, and a letter from Kent Resilience Forum that they had been clear with the Home Office that accommodation for asylum seekers should consist of single-room accommodation with en suite facilities as recommended by Public Health England guidance and that it was difficult to envisage that Napier Barracks could be considered to be Covid-safe given the proposed numbers of service users at the site. In light of this, why did you tell us that you were following guidance in every single way? Were you aware of these pieces of advice when you last appeared before us at this Committee?

Priti Patel: Thank you for your question. I think there are some important points to make about Napier Barracks.

First, the Department, based on the information that was provided to myself and to Ministers, has always believed that we were taking reasonable steps to give effect to advice and that specifically applies to the steps that should be taken, or course, when it came to making dormitory accommodation as safe as possible. We have always, throughout the pandemic, worked closely with health bodies, taking regard of advice and guidance that has come to us. That, of course, is both in dialogue that takes place with officials at Public Health England and written advice. But I do think it is really important, and it is worth just reminding everybody that the situation that was faced with regards to accommodation—

Q195 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I just stop you there, before you go on to that? I just read out to you quite a long list of the evidence that we have now been sent and know about, and that does not match what you told us in February. Are you saying on reflection that what you told us in February was correct or are you saying that you were not given the information, that you were not given the advice, that you did not know about that?

Priti Patel: I absolutely believe that what I said to the Committee was based absolutely on the information that was given to me at the time.



Q196 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So your officials did not give you the information. Is that what you are saying?

Priti Patel: We believed that we were taking reasonable steps, as I have said, to give effect to Public Health England advice. Post the various reports—and Matthew will expand upon this—the court findings and the interim report, of course there has been a lot of work that has been undertaken since.

With regard to the court finding, that was a reflection of a particular time in terms of the situation on the ground at Napier.

There have been improvements throughout the establishment of Napier. It is important to recognise that.

Q197 **Dame Diana Johnson:** What is worrying me, as a Member of Parliament, is that as a Minister you seem to be saying that you were not given the information when you were making decisions about Napier and Penally. Is that correct? You are saying that you did not know that all these bodies and organisations were raising concerns? You were not told that?

Priti Patel: As the Permanent Secretary and I explained in February, it is important to recognise that there is a difference in that public health bodies do not certify standards but they gave us advice on standards to which we were operating, and officials worked with that advice and on that basis they went on to make the best decisions at the time.

Q198 **Dame Diana Johnson:** But you took the decisions, didn't you?

Priti Patel: Clearly decisions are taken across the Department, with officials, with practitioners, because obviously it is operational and operational decisions are made in conjunction with accommodation providers.

Q199 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Just to reflect on that then, are you happy that that was the situation that you were put in, in terms of not being given all this information, advice and guidance that was being put to the Home Office? Do you feel that that is—

Priti Patel: No, well, look, I think we absolutely have to reflect upon the situation that we were facing when we established Napier but also the evolving situation around the pandemic and changes in guidance. Guidance in September was very different from guidance in December. Guidance was constantly changed and operationalising that is very difficult. There has been a great deal of work across the Home Office—Matthew will happily expand upon that—post the interim report and also the court finding, in the ways of working and also how we have made adjustments to arrangements in basically what has been a very challenging operating environment. I think we have to reflect, although we have been in a pandemic, the pandemic has not stopped illegal



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migration; it has not stopped the need to house people. We have a statutory duty to house people.

Q200 Dame Diana Johnson: Okay. I don't think I am going to get any further on this but obviously you have a duty to house people in a safe way and when all the advice is that it is not safe to put people into dormitory accommodation, I am rather flummoxed as to why in September you were deciding to do that.

I want to ask you now, because I know time is pressing, about people who are accommodated in Napier Barracks now. How many people are currently sharing a dormitory? How many of them are unvaccinated? What is your assessment of the likelihood of a significant Covid outbreak?

Priti Patel: First, if I can bring Matthew in on the numbers, what I can tell you is that there are 14 accommodation blocks in use at Napier now, each of which could accommodate—Matthew will correct me if I am wrong—between 24 and 26 people. We have dropped the capacity of the site and that is absolutely to make sure that Covid measures are in place, that there is Covid compliance, and also flexibility. This pandemic is moving. We have to have the ability to adjust our accommodation sites in light of what we are seeing with the pandemic.

You just asked about vaccines. We make it an absolute priority to offer vaccines to everyone across the asylum estate. Everyone at Napier has been offered the vaccine. Matthew might want to come in.

Matthew Rycroft: The total maximum capacity at Napier has been reduced to 308. The total number in Napier today stands at 103. Within that 103, some people are in single or double rooms and a total of 59 are in the dormitory accommodation.

At no stage did PHE say that it is not acceptable to use dormitories. PHE very explicitly gave us advice on how to make dormitory-style accommodation as safe as possible and it is that advice that we were following and that the Home Secretary referred to.

Q201 Dame Diana Johnson: Finally, I want to ask you about local authorities that have come forward to house asylum seekers. As you say, Home Secretary, there have been concerns during the period of the pandemic about being able to house people who are claiming asylum.

Home Secretary, do you think it is appropriate that local authorities that come forward and offer to work with you and accommodate asylum seekers are unilaterally told that numbers will increase, with no consultation, with no regard to issues of local community cohesion, and so on, whereas other local authorities never take asylum seekers, do not engage with the Home Office, and are allowed to get away with that whereas those that do engage are treated in this very highhanded and arrogant way? What is your feeling about that, Home Secretary?



Priti Patel: I am very clear on this. I think that is thoroughly unacceptable.

Q202 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Why are your Ministers doing it?

Priti Patel: There is a lot of change underway in this Department and that equally applies to how officials and the Department engage with local authorities. Matthew may want to come in on this. There is a great deal of work taking place and I do want to give the Committee some assurances and insight on this. Committee members are always very welcome to come in and bring their own experiences about local authority engagement into the Department for officials to hear. I speak to colleagues constantly, as do Ministers. The number one principle should be that all local authorities should be engaged in an equal, fair, open and transparent way. There are many outstanding local authorities across the country that quite frankly do incredible work in supporting not just the Home Office but the country and our statutory national duties around housing asylum seekers. Nobody takes that responsibility lightly. It is a very serious responsibility. However, we must also reflect and put this in the context of the pressures. Everyone—every Member of Parliament and across the local authorities—recognises that there are pressures on housing and housing stock. We struggle to find dispersed accommodation. It is even harder throughout the pandemic. We all know that last April, not just in the Home Office but also in MHCLG and across MOJ, major changes had to be made on housing the people we have a national statutory responsibility for—in the case of the Home Office, asylum seekers. In our case, it meant dispersed accommodation, new types of dispersed accommodation. We used hotels. We have had to use hotels. We have had to work with local authorities—

Chair: We need to keep moving.

Priti Patel: But also, when it comes to even the point about Napier, we have had to look at different ways to accommodate people.

Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Home Secretary, sorry—

Priti Patel: —and that will continue.

Dame Diana Johnson: If I may, I will write to you. I will write to you with my concerns because they are specific. Thank you.

Priti Patel: I would ask all members of the Committee to.

Q203 **Chair:** That is fine, Home Secretary. We need to clarify some of the responses you have just given to Diana Johnson.

On 7 September your officials said, “PHE advice is that dormitories are not suitable”. PHE also told your officials in September, “I don’t know how dormitories can be Covid compliant”. Are you saying that you did not know about that PHE advice?

Priti Patel: I am saying that through the advice that came to me, we as a Department absolutely believed that we were taking—



Q204 **Chair:** Did you know? It is really important that we do not have any misinformation about this. Did you know that PHE were saying, “I don’t know how dormitories can be compliant” and were advising that “dormitories are not suitable”? Did you, as Home Secretary responsible for the key decisions on this issue, know about that advice? Yes or no?

Priti Patel: Look, I think we do have to step back and look at the range of advice—

Q205 **Chair:** No. I think we need an answer. The answers that you have given to Diana Johnson implied that you did not know what the PHE advice was. That is really serious because you need to be given the best, proper and full advice. So can you confirm, did you know about that PHE advice? Yes, or no?

Priti Patel: Well, the advice that was given was based on PHE—I will come back to the point: PHE, public health bodies, do not certify standards. They give advice on the standards to which we have to operate and it is on that basis that decisions were taken and officials worked—

Q206 **Chair:** I have copies of the advice here. It says, “PHE advice is that dormitories are not suitable”. That is from an email, from your officials, on 7 September. There is also a further document that was sent to your officials in which the PHE says, “I don’t know how dormitories can be Covid compliant”. The courts looked at all these details and concluded that the bottom line is that the arrangements at the barracks were contrary to the advice of PHE. All of this is clear. It is copper bottomed. The question is whether or not you knew about it; yes or no?

Priti Patel: Well, obviously I did not see emails that went to officials and I can only make decisions based on the advice that comes to me. This is a difference between certifying standards, but the advice that came to me was based on the guidelines or the approach that we should be taking in terms of stepping up our facilities, making changes and making dormitory accommodation as safe as possible.

Q207 **Chair:** Okay. A question to Matthew Rycroft: why did the Home Secretary not get shown this advice?

Matthew Rycroft: Chair, Public Health England did make clear during discussions early on in the process for acquiring Penally and Napier that the best way to minimise risk was to provide single rooms with en-suite facilities. But they also accepted that that is not always possible. They were explicit that there were ways of making other types of accommodation, including dormitories, as safe as possible. We took reasonable steps to act on that advice. That advice was confirmed later on for the guidance for providers of accommodation for asylum seekers back in December last year. It was a moving picture with different types of advice at different stages. The advice we were acting on was the formal one from December 2020.

Q208 **Chair:** Okay. Was the Home Secretary given the advice from September



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that dormitories were not suitable, yes or no?

Matthew Rycroft: She has already answered the question about seeing individual emails from PHE to members of staff.

Q209 **Chair:** But was she told explicitly that PHE said dormitories are not suitable, yes or no? We need to know whether you are giving the Home Secretary proper advice.

Matthew Rycroft: We are giving the Home Secretary proper advice.

Q210 **Chair:** Did you give her that particular advice that PHE advice was that dormitories are not suitable? Did you tell her that, yes or no?

Matthew Rycroft: I did not tell her that and she did not see that email, as she has just said, but the advice from PHE—

Q211 **Chair:** Was she told that PHE said this?

Matthew Rycroft: I cannot recall that. I am seeking to focus on the big issue here, which is that—

Q212 **Chair:** The big issue is you had an outbreak of 200 cases in dormitory accommodation and anybody across the country could tell you that putting people into dormitories in the middle of a pandemic would be a risk. That is the big picture. I want to know whether you showed the Home Secretary the guidance and the advice from PHE, yes or no.

Matthew Rycroft: That outbreak was in February 2021. A full two months before that, the PHE advice was not the advice that you have been reading out, Chair. It was confirming that it was possible to make other types of accommodation that were not single rooms as Covid-safe as possible. That advice was put to the Home Secretary in the—

Q213 **Chair:** Yes, but the courts have made clear that not only did you fail to follow PHE's clear recommendation that dormitories are not suitable, but you also failed to implement its risk mitigation advice. "The precautions which were taken were completely inadequate to prevent the spread of Covid-19 infection."

Home Secretary, you told us that you were working in line with public health guidance and with local authority partners throughout, "We have been following guidance in every single way". In the light of the advice that I have just told you about, which it is not clear that you actually saw, do you now admit that what you told us was not true?

Priti Patel: No, I do not on the basis that I came to the Committee and presented information based on the reasonable steps, the information that came to me and also some of the work that has been undertaken with local authorities. It is wrong to say that we ignore advice or that we are not working with third parties. It is so important to remember the level of changing guidance and the level of changing rates of Covid, and the different aspects that were taking place around the pandemic.



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If I may, there will also be a public inquiry around Covid at some stage. These will be momentary aspects that we must all reflect upon because the Government have to make a range of decisions based on information that comes to us. As Matthew has said and as I have reflected upon as well, guidance has changed in incredible ways, sometimes in fast ways. All stakeholders and all partners and all operational partners have to adjust accordingly. We have always acted in good faith. That is important to emphasise.

We have acted in good faith to also put in all sorts of measures around safeguarding and Covid compliance, and there are also all sorts of welfare facilities to adjust and adapt to all sorts of advice and recommendations that have come from third parties.

Q214 **Chair:** Fine. To clarify a final factual point on this, do you still have people in dormitories with up to 14 people within a dormitory and up to 28 people within a block? Is that correct?

Matthew Rycroft: We have made a huge number of improvements since the outbreak including—

Chair: I am just interested in the dormitory and the bed situation.

Matthew Rycroft: I have already answered that question, Chair. To repeat, 103 people are in Napier today, of whom 59 are in dormitories. We have made sure that there are distances between beds and that we have only 60 to 90 days total length of time for any individual. In Napier, we have a strengthened cleaning regime—

Q215 **Chair:** You had distance between beds last time. Are you still having 12 to 14 people in a room in sleeping accommodation?

Matthew Rycroft: That is the maximum that it is possible to fit in a room in a way that is as safe as possible. We have reduced the total number to 59.

Q216 **Chair:** Safe as possible? Last time you had an outbreak of 200 cases. We now have the Delta variant circling, which is even more infectious. How long will it be before you have another outbreak in your dormitory accommodation?

Matthew Rycroft: In addition to the other changes that I have already described, we have also strengthened the cleaning regime. We have improved the ventilation. We have improved the signage. We have ensured that if any individual in Napier has any vulnerability, they are moved to alternative accommodation. All of those things have happened since the previous outbreak and we are continuing to follow the advice on how to make that sort of accommodation as Covid-safe as possible.

Q217 **Chair:** You guys do not learn lessons, do you? The court has already come to a damning conclusion about your arrangements. As a result, the taxpayer may have significant compensation liabilities and you seem to



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be continuing to run up even more of them. It is astonishing. It is irresponsible that people are being put in Covid-unsafe situations and it is irresponsible for the taxpayer as well.

Priti Patel: Can I come in on this? I just do not accept that. Bear in mind there is an asylum crisis right now with the highest level of migrants coming to the UK in a considerable period of time.

Matthew has already outlined, first, that the court judgment was for a particular moment in time. Guidance has been shifting. We have been clear about that. We are in a pandemic. It is wrong to say that we are not learning lessons. Matthew and I have outlined pretty clearly the changes, remediations and enhancements that have taken place—changes to accommodation, changes to welfare and changes to provision. Let us not forget as well the vaccinations that have been put in place and giving vaccinations to individuals to make sure that they are secure.

It is an easy option to try to decry our accommodation facilities, but at the same time I have also been asked by Diana Johnson about working with local authorities around asylum accommodation and authorities that are not working with us to house asylum seekers. We are doing our utmost to fulfil our statutory duties, responsibilities and obligations as the Government to house people in the right way, which we are doing, and in a safe way.

With regard to the court judgment, it is wrong to say that we are not learning lessons. The other point to make about the judgment is that it did not even put in or reflect upon the range of improvements that are constantly being made by all teams that are working incredibly hard in the Home Office on a challenging situation.

Q218 **Chair:** We need to move on, but you have just said that this is the highest number of people arriving in the UK. Can you confirm the number of asylum applications in the year to March was 26,903 and the number of asylum applications in the previous year was 35,230, a drop of 24% compared to the previous year, so this is not the highest number of asylum applications that you have ever had?

Priti Patel: That was in relation to small boats, Chair. We need to actually separate out—

Chair: That is not what you said and we need accurate information for the Committee.

Q219 **Andrew Gwynne:** If I can move on to the Nationality and Borders Bill, Home Secretary, one reading of the new Bill is that anyone who arrives here in the United Kingdom illegally from a safe country would be denied asylum or deported to that or another safe country.

I want a quick answer. How many return agreements do you actually have in place?



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Priti Patel: There is a range of returns agreements that are already in place. I have signed removals agreements with India and Albania for good reasons. Indians make up one of the highest numbers of people in the United Kingdom with no legal basis to be here. There are more foreign criminals from Albania in the UK than from anywhere else in the world.

Q220 **Andrew Gwynne:** You have two in place. How many return agreements do you have under negotiation at the moment so that people can be returned?

Priti Patel: We do not give a running commentary in terms of our return agreements, but we are in discussions with a whole range of countries around the world when it comes to return agreements. It is important to recognise as well that we are in active discussions with EU member states on bilateral arrangements. I have spent a great deal of time with the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. Last night I was speaking to my French counterpart as well.

There is significant recognition of a migrant crisis. Of course, the numbers are high. As Covid measures and restrictions have been lifted across Europe, millions of people are on the move. There is not just an issue for the United Kingdom. This is an issue for European countries as well. We have formal pre-existing readmission agreements with Switzerland, Bulgaria and Romania, and we continue to process returns on that basis. There is a significant amount of work taking place on return agreements. From discussions with my counterpart last night, there is a recognition with France that we need to do much more together collaboratively when it comes to returns.

Finally, when it comes to returns and removals, our policy is to remove people with no legal basis to be here. That is part of our approach when it comes to removing people through charter flights. These are negotiated with countries on an ongoing basis.

Q221 **Andrew Gwynne:** Let us be clear here because there is a lot of rhetoric here but the way you can implement this policy is determined by whether you have return agreements in place. What proportion of asylum seekers do you anticipate returning to another safe country this year?

Priti Patel: I cannot give you that figure right now because a great of work is already underway. When you look at the removals that we have, we remove people on a weekly basis from the UK who have no legal right to be here, including asylum seekers, people whose asylum cases have failed and they have exhausted all their appeal rights and have gone through the courts several times, including FNOs. We are constantly removing people. On that basis, we have a range of scenarios to assess the possible impact of the Bill, as you touched on, under the existing operating system that we have, which is charter flight removals and the return agreements we have in place with other countries, and more return agreements will come in future.



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This is not a fixed matter of saying, “We have X number of agreements and we expect X number of people to be removed”. When it comes to removals, it is well known and well established that a number of barriers and hurdles are in place to removing people. We are seeking to address some of those barriers and hurdles to removals through the Nationality and Borders Bill.

Q222 Andrew Gwynne: Of course, again, there is a lot of rhetoric, but you will be judged on your actions. What do you propose to do with the people you cannot deport after a reasonable period of time waiting for a country to accept them?

Priti Patel: This is not just about waiting for a country to accept them. As always across the Government, we will strain every sinew to remove people. It is quite interesting off the back of the second reading of the Nationality and Borders Bill, which is focused on removing people through not just return agreements but through charter flights, that we are not just speaking about failed asylum seekers. We are also speaking about individuals who have participated in criminality and foreign national offenders. We are—

Q223 Andrew Gwynne: Look, I get all that, but what do you propose to do with the people you cannot deport?

Priti Patel: This is not a case of what we will do with them. We will make sure that when it comes to—

Q224 Andrew Gwynne: It is. If you cannot deport them, you have to do something, Home Secretary.

Priti Patel: That is the point. We are. The current challenges that we face have already been spelled out in the Nationality and Borders Bill—all the measures that thwart us, endless appeals and all sorts of issues that come in. We will continue. We will challenge appeals as well.

It is important to reflect, if I may, Mr Gwynne, that we had a second reading last night of our Bill, which is focused on removing people. A substantial part of Parliament voted against that Bill, including your own party. We will continue to remove people from the United Kingdom who have no legal basis through our return agreements, through readmission agreements and through charter flights, which we are running weekly. We are removing people with no legal basis to be in the United Kingdom and we will continue to work on that basis while seeking to negotiate readmission agreements with—

Q225 Andrew Gwynne: With respect, Home Secretary, you have not answered my questions and you have had 11 years to do all of that as well.

How many additional people do you estimate the Home Office will need to accommodate as a result? You cannot tell us what you are doing with the people you cannot deport. They will have to be accommodated. What



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assessment have you made of the numbers of people that you will need to accommodate as a result?

Priti Patel: First, on the basis of the Nationality and Borders Bill, the numbers of people to accommodate will go down. Actually, we should go back to the first principles around what this Bill will do. This is a comprehensive reform, the first reform in decades, if I may say, and I have not had 11 years to look at this. I say to my predecessors—

Andrew Gwynne: The Government have.

Priti Patel: No, if I may, all my predecessors as well have worked vigorously through agreements, return agreements, charter flights and deportations, much of which have been thwarted by last-minute appeals, which I think all members of the Committee are familiar with, and also a lot of campaigning by parliamentarians as well, who tried to stop our removal flights and deportation flights.

We will continue but, off the back of the reforms that we are looking to bring in, we want to create a deterrent. We cannot continue to support what we are seeing right now, effectively people trafficking, smugglers and criminal gangs exploiting our asylum system to bring in economic migrants and people who, quite frankly, are circumventing our legal migration routes to come into our country illegally.

This is difficult. There are difficult reforms here. But the Bill has a set of comprehensive measures that look at the entire system from an end-to-end perspective, from illegal migration to clandestine entry, economic migrants masquerading as asylum seekers, people smuggling, prosecutions that we will bring in place and also—

Q226 **Andrew Gwynne:** Look, we get that. I was there when you introduced the second reading debate. I heard your speech at length.

Priti Patel: If I may say so, you also voted against these measures.

Andrew Gwynne: We have not had an answer. That is the point. I asked what assessment has been made of the number of people who will need to be accommodated as a result of these changes. All we have had is waffle.

Q227 **Chair:** Is there an estimated number?

Priti Patel: I completely dispute that, if I may, Chair, on the basis that we have introduced a Nationality and Borders Bill, which the honourable Gentleman again has completely rejected—

Q228 **Chair:** Apart from the policy debates, which can continue, is there an estimate anywhere for the number of additional accommodation places you will need?

Priti Patel: It is important to say in terms of estimated numbers and projections that we have worked through a number of scenarios to assess the range of possible impacts of the Bill—this is relating to the Bill—under



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our existing operating system. These are the variables that we deal with right now when it comes to the number of people in accommodation and the number of people, if I may, in terms of return estimates, including failed asylum seekers and foreign national offenders. We will be publishing that shortly because it is part of our impact assessment for the Bill as well.

Chair: Okay, so we do not have a number now.

Q229 **Tim Loughton:** Home Secretary, good morning. You will be glad to hear that the majority of this Committee voted in favour of the Nationality and Borders Bill last night. We need to see those measures in place.

However, can I come on to the thorny issue of Channel crossings, which part of the Bill is intended to address? At the end of last year, you agreed with the French to give them €31.4 million, you reported, to help with the prevention of cross-Channel migrants coming in. We were told when you wrote to the Committee in March that that money would be used for the doubling of the number of gendarmes, a suite of technology measures to improve detection, improvements to security infrastructure and provision of accommodation centres.

Since that time, a record number of boats has come across the Channel and the number of interceptions by the French has fallen. Last night, you announced that we will give the French another £54 million to do the same thing. Is that throwing good money after bad?

Priti Patel: First of all, if I may, Mr Loughton, we will always continue to work with the French authorities. This is a shared problem.

Specifically to last year, if we can reflect upon the pandemic and what that has meant for migration, we have seen all sorts of changes in patterns of behaviour. Specifically last year, we doubled the number of patrols around the beaches of France with a great deal of technology, investment, surveillance and intelligence. That continues.

We have to look at the purpose of the new agreement in the context of what we are seeing. This is never a static situation. This is an evolving situation. The number of migrants attempting these crossings from France has increased considerably. Also, as the French Interior Minister and I were discussing last night, over 60% of the inflow into France is from Belgium. This is an increasing trend and pattern. Gérald Darmanin, the Interior Minister of France, and I speak frequently about the trends we are seeing. Of course our operational counterparts in France as well as our operational partners in the UK, which involves our intelligence partners, Border Force people and the PAF, have seen a complete change in modus operandi in terms of the crossings and the geography as to where the crossings are coming from. Originally, we were seeing much more focus on Calais. Now we are seeing widespread dispersal along the entire French coastline. This has been the pattern for the majority of this year.



Q230 Tim Loughton: Okay, Home Secretary, that is even more worrying because all our focus has been on France, giving money to the French and working with the French security forces. You are now saying that a large increase in people coming across the Channel is coming still from France but via Belgium, so people in Belgium think it is easier to get across the Channel by coming into France, despite the fact that we have given them €31.5 million last year and you are about to give them another £54 million to do the same thing. Why will it be different this time?

The French are not doing their part. We have taken evidence on this Committee about interception of crafts in the water. International maritime lawyers gave us evidence that the French authorities are entitled within international maritime law to intercept boats in the water and return the passengers to French territory or to allow Border Force to return the migrants to French territory if they are picked up in British territorial waters. Yesterday a French military naval vessel escorted one of the boats into British territorial waters and then tried to hand the occupants over to a boat full of journalists. This is ridiculous and it makes a mockery of it.

Just giving the French more money to carry on what they are doing badly will not solve the problem. When will you get the French to admit they can intercept and get them to intercept? Only that will cut off that supply of people coming to Calais thinking they can get across the Channel when in fact they should not be able to get across the Channel if the French do what they are entitled to do under international law. Rant over. Is that correct?

Priti Patel: First of all, if I may, France is intercepting more boats than this time last year. We have to reflect upon that. That is because the numbers are so high. The numbers are going up.

I have mentioned Belgium and you have mentioned Belgium as well. A lot of work is taking place both with the Belgian authorities and with the authorities in the Netherlands and Germany as well. These countries are pivotal to stopping the flows of illegal migration then coming into France. You specifically spoke about tactics at sea. I have discussed this directly with my French counterpart and have made it abundantly clear. This is not news for the Committee. I have raised this previously. Paul Lincoln will want to come in on this as well. We have been looking at what we can do at sea in terms of maritime tactics, all within a legal framework of safety of lives at sea and international maritime law. The French are aware of that as well. They know exactly what the responsibilities are and we have made it abundantly—

Q231 Tim Loughton: But they are ignoring it. Do you accept that the French have the power under international maritime law to intercept boats in French territorial waters and return them to French territory? What has your French counterpart told you when you have said—



Priti Patel: They recognise that. They argue that they are doing their bit, but there is an important point to differentiate here in terms of tactics at sea. That is different to pushing boats back or saving lives at sea. They have a different application. Paul and his team have spent a lot of time having those operational discussions with the French. They have a different interpretation of safety of lives at sea and the way the SOLAS principle applies. As I have said, we are looking at all aspects in terms of pushbacks and how we can have territorial waters—

Q232 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but, Home Secretary, that is an excuse from the French. The French having a different interpretation is the French giving you an excuse for not doing what they are not only able to do under international law but actually obliged to do under international law because the occupants of those boats are committing two crimes. One is trying to enter the UK illegally and the second is paying money to organised crime, both of which provide grounds for those boats to be intercepted and the occupants apprehended in as safe a way as possible and returned to France. You are getting fobbed off with excuses.

To move on, of those people who have come in the last year to the UK and have then applied for asylum, how many have been granted asylum and what is the state of play for the rest?

Priti Patel: First of all, I can bring Paul in on the operational aspect with France. Paul spends a great deal of time talking to the French specifically about interceptions and the stopping of migrants coming over. So far this year, there were over 7,500 interceptions from the French side. Last year, it was 2,600. You can see the difference in numbers. That is through joint working and that is through co-operation.

I come back to what I have said about boats at sea and tactics. We are still investigating these tactics right now. Paul can elaborate on that.

In terms of individuals who have received asylum since last year and have come into the UK, of course we are processing cases. Again, throughout the pandemic, our asylum process has changed dramatically. It is subject to lengthy discussion as well, but we give statutory support to everybody who has come to the UK seeking to claim asylum. Of course, many of those cases are complicated and will be going right now through—

Q233 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, can you just give the figures? When Dan O'Mahoney was here last, he gave us the number of people who had come and were claiming asylum through this route. He said that 50% of them had been processed by that stage and 70% were found to have no claim because they had gone through a safe country. Only 20% had been recognised as having a legitimate claim.

What is the comparable number now—a record number—of those who have come across in the first six and a half months of this year? What is their status? What is happening to them? How many of them have been deported?



Priti Patel: First, from the beginning of this year, anyone coming from a safe EU country is inadmissible to the asylum system.

In terms of numbers, Matthew may be able to give you some numbers, but we can write to you with a specific breakdown because it is different from the start of this year since we have left the EU to last year. As I have already outlined to Mr Gwynne, there are returns taking place every single week. Your question is specifically asking about the cohort of small boat entrants. We will need to write to you, unless Matthew has those figures, with those specific figures.

Q234 **Tim Loughton:** Do you have a ballpark figure of how many people have arrived in the UK on a boat across the Channel and have been returned to wherever in the EU?

Priti Patel: No, we have to write to you with that specifically. It depends, first, over which time period. As I have said, since the start of—

Q235 **Tim Loughton:** Since 1 January this year, how many people have been deported?

Priti Patel: We will have to write to you with the details on that.

Tim Loughton: Can we get Paul Lincoln to comment? He was going to come in.

Q236 **Chair:** Okay. Paul Lincoln, do you have that figure for the number of people who have been returned?

Paul Lincoln: I do not have those figures, Chair. I can tell you that when you look at the number of interceptions the French made, at the end of June—which of course is the last full month we are dealing with—last year they made over 2,100 interceptions and, by comparison, this year they made 6,000. Despite the trebling in the number of people who have attempted to come across, the French have also trebled the number of interceptions made. The Home Secretary is referring to that in terms of the increased action by the French.

Q237 **Ms Diane Abbott:** The Committee has seen the Home Secretary's letter to our Chair about some of the changes in the Windrush compensation scheme. Research on the Census has shown that about 20,000 people migrated from Commonwealth countries before the immigration laws changed in 1973. That is a broad figure for the number of people who might have been affected by the Windrush scandal. In 2019, the Home Office's planning assumption for the number of claims you expected was around 11,500. From the terms of the letters you sent us, you have now dropped your planning assumption to 4,000 to 6,000.

Home Secretary, are you letting the victims of the Windrush scandal down?

Priti Patel: Good morning, Ms Abbott. First, when it comes to the Windrush compensation scheme, it is important to reflect on the



significant changes that have been brought into the scheme. In particular, since December when I overhauled the entire scheme, £34 million has now been offered or paid to victims. I am also announcing that there will be no formal end date to the scheme to ensure that anyone who was affected by the terrible injustices of Windrush receives the compensation they deserve. Along with that, I am launching an enhanced package of support for bereaved family members applying for compensation to help them obtain the legal documentation required to process their claims.

Ms Abbott, you will be fully versed on not just the history but the complexity in terms of various immigration changes since 1971 and through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and also the changes in legal documentation required over previous decades and Governments to help process these claims. It is vital that we do everything and I believe we are through the continued efforts of our ambassadors, the Windrush community fund and our stakeholder groups.

But with regard to the planning assumptions you have referred to, we have the Windrush help team and the compensation scheme work is focused on ensuring that anyone affected is compensated for the impacts. We are grappling right now with the fact that not everyone who applies for documentation will be entitled to the compensation. Therefore, we are doing all sorts of things in terms of the work within the taskforce, the compensation scheme and our caseworkers to make sure that the people who are making those initial contacts with us, either for documentation or to the scheme directly, are being supported and we can help them in the right way.

Q238 Ms Diane Abbott: But you will be aware, Home Secretary, that 110,000 have signed a petition to have the compensation scheme—not judging whether people are here illegally or not—moved from the Home Office. One reason why the number of people applying for compensation has been so low is that people do not trust the Home Office. Are you willing to consider moving the actual compensation scheme to an independent body?

Priti Patel: It is important to reflect upon the sums of money that have been paid out or offered to victims. £34 million is a significant sum. We have overhauled this scheme and have gone through so many different details of the scheme, looking back and learning lessons and working with members of the community. A structural reform of the scheme or moving it elsewhere will not necessarily increase the number of applicants of claimants coming forward.

Also, it is difficult to estimate the volume of eligible claims that are likely to be received. That is a challenging task. We have a great deal of work taking place and extensive outreach efforts, not just by the Home Office but by members of the communities and our stakeholder groups. The overhaul of the scheme was based upon clear feedback and also the insights of people from the Windrush community.



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We will continue. We do not want to have reduced planning assumptions. That in no way diminishes our commitment to giving support and making sure that those who are eligible for compensation receive the maximum amount. We have to continue to strain every sinew. I do give the Committee every assurance that we are doing that.

I will give you my personal reflection on this. A structural change and moving where the compensation scheme is housed in the Government will not necessarily lead to a change in the number of people coming forward because the same mechanisms within the Government, the same groups and members of the community will continue to do the outreach and the engagement.

Finally, let us not forget the pandemic has changed the way we have been able to get out and about to meet members of the community. Our teams have worked relentlessly. I hosted and chaired the stakeholder group just three weeks ago. On that basis alone, everybody is determined—and I use the word “determined” in a powerful way because that passion and commitment is there—to make sure that those who have been wronged receive justice and, importantly, receive both financial support and, for those who may not need financial support, help and assistance they need to obtain legal documentation if required to process claims.

Q239 **Ms Diane Abbott:** You do not accept that people do not trust the Home Office on this matter?

Priti Patel: We are working with people across all communities to build trust and confidence. Our taskforce and our stakeholder groups are doing that. I recognise that that trust will not be rebuilt overnight. I have said that publicly before. Matthew has as well. We are clear about that. We are working in an engaging way, in every way possible, to build links within the communities and to regain trust and support. As I have already said, I am announcing that there will be no formal end date to the scheme, which means that throughout this time we are determined to work to support people. I have already spoken today about how we will bring in an enhanced package of support for bereaved family members applying for compensation. These measures are based upon building trust and giving people confidence about not just our determination but also the way we are reaching out and giving support.

Finally, I want to emphasise that the pandemic has stopped us from having direct personal engagement. Much of it has been online. We do hope that we can do much more with the way the pandemic is right now. We will respond accordingly to the challenges of the pandemic. We are determined and dedicated as a department to bring about change and to rebuild trust.

Matthew Rycroft: Could I add one thing to what the Home Secretary said?



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Chair: I am sorry, Permanent Secretary. Because we are tight for time I want to get some other questions in. If there is time, I will come back to you at the end or you can follow up in writing.

Q240 **Ruth Edwards:** Good morning, Home Secretary. You have previously highlighted concerns to this Committee about the effect of Facebook rolling out end-to-end encryption on its Messenger service in terms of our loss of referrals of child sexual exploitation. The numbers quoted from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children are staggering. You have also told us that you are working with Ofcom and with tech companies to look at potential solutions so that we do not lose this capability. Can you give us an update on that work, please?

Priti Patel: Yes. Thank you for raising this. End-to-end encryption is a great concern. We are seriously concerned about Facebook. There are many representations and a lot of work is taking place not just on the policy side but also on the technical side with Facebook because we have clear concerns that it will prevent law enforcement securing lawful authorised access to vital content that will enable them to enhance their investigations around public safety and child protection.

But of course, when it comes to child exploitation and abuse, the numbers are shocking and appalling. That is not just in the UK but worldwide. Therefore, it is right that we continue to use all the tools to identify CSEA content that are not commonly used on end-to-end encrypted channels. A lot of work is taking place with Ofcom to analyse different technical options that are available. That work is continuing and those tools are based on identifying CSEA images on end-to-end encrypted channels. Some of those are under development and we will talk about those and what we expect in the near future when we can.

Also, it is important to say that the regulator will expect companies to demonstrate that they have reasonable systems and processes in place to keep users safe and also to work with us when it comes to law enforcement. We want to see people being prosecuted. There is no excuse for not going after the perpetrators of these most abhorrent and appalling crimes when it comes to CSEA in particular. Ofcom will continue to have a tough suite of enforcement powers to use going forward. When it comes to the Online Safety Bill, our work is built around those principles.

Q241 **Ruth Edwards:** Thank you. From the conversations you have had with Ofcom so far, do you believe those tools they are developing are likely to be successful? Are you heading towards an agreement with tech companies? As you say, the Online Harms Bill is coming down through Parliament now.

Priti Patel: First, I cannot comment on ongoing technical work and some of this is sensitive in relation to law enforcement as well. I have absolute confidence in the work that Ofcom is undertaking.



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Alongside that, the Bill will be so significant in terms of putting down the regulatory markers that we need. Tech companies have a massive responsibility when it comes to the content they allow to be hosted on their platforms. I appreciate we are speaking specifically right now about CSEA, which is abhorrent and appalling. I cannot speak strongly enough about what we must do to go after the perpetrators. Tech companies have a moral obligation and a moral duty to work with everyone, with the Government, with regulatory bodies and with law enforcement bodies when it comes to go after the people who perpetrate these appalling crimes.

Alongside that, there has to be a recognition and there is a recognition among tech companies. When we think about the entire spectrum of appalling content that ends up on their platforms, CSEA is the content we are speaking about right now but we have had lots of work undertaken over recent years on terrorist content on those platforms as well.

The Christchurch Call for Action was a specific example. Tech firms, to their credit, came together to address terrorist content.

Then, when we speak about other harmful content on online platforms as well, in fact we have seen the most appalling abuse, racism, antisemitism, hatred, trolling of individuals and female MPs, for example, as well, which is a frequent issue that comes up. Some of this most appalling content, quite frankly, must not go unchallenged. It should be challenged at every single level and I know that all—

Q242 Ruth Edwards: I agree with you that tech companies need to do a lot more to clean up what is on their platforms. You mentioned racism. We had some appalling examples of racist abuse targeted at England's footballers a couple of weeks ago. Lots of racist abuse and general abuse online comes from anonymous accounts.

What work has been done since those incidents a couple of weeks ago to locate and to prosecute the people who are responsible for this abuse?

Priti Patel: First, it is important to say that no one should have to endure racism. The accounts of racism we have seen have been appalling. I have spoken strongly about racism as someone who has experienced it but in particular in relation to our footballers who have to endure racism. That is completely unacceptable. Also, we saw last week appalling levels of racism. It is vital that we all come together in a determined way to stamp out this abuse and to work across every aspect of Government and policy.

You have asked specifically about what work has taken place in relation to the incidents. The police have been working to identify the perpetrators. They have had public appeals around identifying perpetrators of abuse. Work has taken place by the Home Office analysis team as well, which has found that a lot of the abuse out there online



came from overseas. There is much more work taking place on that. That speaks to tech companies and the platforms hosting this appalling abuse.

The final point just to make around football is that we will change football banning orders. That will include a change to the 1989 Act. We will look to bring the online aspect into that Act so that anybody who is caught perpetrating online racist abuse—the type of abuse we have seen—will be subject to football banning orders going forward.

Q243 Ruth Edwards: I have one point I want to clarify. You said a lot of the abuse came from overseas. Is that from individual accounts? I know the head of MI5 last week was clear that this abuse was not a co-ordinated bot campaign, for example, from an overseas nation state.

Priti Patel: I would like to share with the Committee the information that we have confidentially—because some of this is sensitive—in terms of the identification of the abuse that came in from overseas and the analysis we have undertaken in the Home Office. We should share that with the Committee.

Q244 Dehenna Davison: Thank you, Home Secretary, for being with us today. I am sorry for any background noise. My office looks down on Parliament Street and, as you can imagine, every Wednesday before PMQs it gets quite noisy. But it means I sometimes get to witness some of the horrific incidents that occur at protests.

On Monday this week I saw a number of police officers assaulted, so I was pleased to stand on a manifesto around the police covenant. I understand there was a board meeting last week on the police covenant. I wondered what feedback you have had so far from frontline officers and from the Police Federation on that.

Priti Patel: Thank you. You have spoken clearly. You see it day in and day out. I can only describe the abhorrent and appalling abuse of people who, quite frankly, put their lives in danger to protect us every single day. We saw that last summer. We have seen this far too much.

But you have specifically referred to the first board meeting that we held last week with our policing partners and staff associations across the policing family with regard to the police covenant. There are some challenges and there are some issues that have stemmed from a lot of the work that we are doing and it is detailed work around the covenant. I am more than happy to come back to talk about this at length because there is a great deal of positive and proactive work.

First, it is a manifesto commitment for this Government to deliver on the covenant and rightly so. We are working with not just policing partners but staff divisions because the covenant will apply to family members as well. It is a layered approach to the covenant.

We are looking at a lot of good practice from around the world when it comes to the covenant and reaching out in terms of how we can support



families and also how we support our officers. Bear in mind that the role of policing is constantly changing. The role is evolving when you look at the changing nature of crime and the changing nature of abuse and assaults on our police officers. It is vital that we bring in some clear measures to protect them. For example, we will bring in a chief medical officer for policing so that we can give our police officers the right kind of medical guidance and support for them within the NHS—if they are subject to abuse or violent attacks, how they get their treatment.

Occupational health is critical for our police officers. They see some of the most appalling things, day in, day out. They turn up at scenes and incidents where, quite frankly, some appalling scars can be left upon them and can have a terrible psychological impact upon them as well. Giving them occupational health support is vital. Alongside that of course is giving vital mental health support, which we are committed to doing.

Across the 43 police forces, we want to see consistence and coherence around the support through the covenant. The covenant is an important umbrella we can bring with greater standards, transparency and consistency to all our officers because we cannot have a situation where it varies. Currently, forces do brilliant work. I have to pay tribute to all our forces. They do different work and they have great schemes based on a lot of guidance and frameworks that come out of the National Police Chiefs Council. Of course we are working to strengthen that.

I would like to touch on a couple of other areas around the covenant. We are in the process of recruiting 20,000 more police officers. Of course, the profile of our officers coming into policing right now is also different to our existing police force. They are much younger. They have a different background. They are culturally diverse. They much more reflect the communities they are serving in and seeking to police. We want to ensure that through the covenant we are doing much more to recognise cultural differences and diversities, giving families of different backgrounds much more support. For many of them, this is the first time that a member of their family will enter policing and we want to retain them. A lot of our covenant work is about not just recruitment but retention and how we can give people the support they want.

Much of those was also reflected in the public consultation work we understood around the police covenant.

Q245 Dehenna Davison: Thank you for that. It is great to hear this Government's commitment to our police forces.

I want to touch on a slightly different topic quickly, which is violence against women and girls. The consultation responses were vast with so many people sharing their experiences. Just last week I was followed home from work by someone who did an about turn on a bridge and was asking me all kinds of questions. Unfortunately, far too many young women have experienced this. It is reassuring to see the violence against women and girls strategy published today.



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I wanted to touch on one point in particular, the street safe scheme, whereby people can register and pinpoint the areas they feel the most unsafe. I am curious what publicity that will have and how you will encourage as many people as possible to partake in that.

Priti Patel: You have touched on some sensitive but important issues to women and girls. Your own example of being followed home is just not acceptable. Every day we have this. I have seen this through the consultation. There were 180,000 responses. I have worked with our teams here on the strategy. I have worked with third parties. I have worked with stakeholders. This was harrowing.

Our strategy is to build upon the experiences of people who have spoken, who have been brave and shared their experiences. I am open about this. We need people to be honest and to speak out about the appalling experiences they have had.

The strategy has been published today. You have asked some specific questions. I will speak about how we are publicising much of this work. The strategy is built upon some fundamental pillars.

One is to prioritise prevention. We have to do this. We have to stop this from happening and do everything we possibly can on the preventative side.

The second, supporting victims, speaks for itself. There are too many victims. The trauma of victims is just harrowing.

The third is pursuing perpetrators. I am unapologetic about pursuing perpetrators. I am not shy about being on the record as having a tough criminal justice system that actually goes after perpetrators and supports victims. That ensures that through this strategy we work with the police, education, local authorities, prisons and probation to be more effective.

The prevention piece, which is exactly what you have spoken about, is about the safety of women at night and the work we are doing at the hotspots in particular. We have put £3 million into a national communications campaign focused on raising awareness and, ultimately, trying to do much more around behavioural change.

I believe that every woman should have the freedom to live their lives as we choose to. We should not be living in fear. That is a basic right for us all, whatever your age, whatever your background. This campaign will be crucial to that, focusing on public spaces, hotspots, public spaces at night, making sure we do much more with the safer streets scheme, giving women and girls confidence to speak out so that where they want to see more, for example, new online reporting platforms—

Chair: Home Secretary, apologies for interrupting you. Laura Farris also wants to ask questions about this same issue and I am conscious that we have a statement coming up later in Parliament today. Can I turn to Laura Farris? Then you may be able to continue those points in response.



Q246 **Laura Farris:** Good morning, Home Secretary. Yes, I did want to pick up on the subject of the strategy and I know there is a statement later.

This Committee has recently heard evidence from the London Victims Commissioner in the context of serious sexual violence. She told us that sometimes gateway behaviour—and the example she gave was stalking—was not treated sufficiently seriously by the police. Victims had reported stalking and I regret to say this but it had been dismissed. We have seen some evidence of similar gateway behaviour perhaps not being treated seriously in the Sarah Everard case.

Specifically, what steps is the Home Office taking to ensure that what may seem like quite low-level offending is taken seriously and that the police are acting appropriately?

Priti Patel: I would like to start by thanking you for your question. There is no excuse, quite frankly, whatsoever. Our call for evidence acknowledged that particularly in public places these gateway behaviours were all too common and that, of course, leads to women and girls not feeling safe at all on our streets and across the country. It is vital from a policing perspective that they do more.

You have also mentioned the Sarah Everard case. This is exactly why I commissioned HMICFRS to conduct an urgent inspection into the police's approach to tackling and preventing these crimes, which disproportionately affect women and girls.

That also means now, from the work that will take place through this strategy, that we have to strengthen our system. That means from our side at the Home Office working to introduce a new national policing lead for tackling violence against women and girls. This means a new top police officer making sure that we have consistency across police forces in terms of how they deal with these issues when women and girls report these crimes and any examples of gateway behaviour. I should not have to sit here and say they have to be treated seriously. They should automatically be given the serious treatment and the women and girls must be treated with respect in terms of the way these cases are looked at, how they are reviewed and how they are treated when giving supportive evidence.

We need to have that fundamentally major change in policing. We are introducing a national police lead to address this and to tackle violence against women and girls. This will drive forward a new approach in policing but also a consistent approach across police forces and will also build upon the Inspector's recommendations. There is a lot to do after the Inspector's recommendations in terms of addressing violence against women and girls. There is so much more to do in this space and our commitment—

Q247 **Laura Farris:** Could I pick up on one point that ripples beneath a lot of these issues? It is primarily around girls, actually, and it is the accessibility of online porn, which many young schoolkids can access at



the click of a button. Even if you have the best policing, the best teacher focused approach and the best parental guidance in the home, you cannot really change a culture where we have 13 year-old boys able to access not just ordinary porn but extreme, violent pornography, which affects their attitudes. I am interested to know what the Home Office is doing about this.

Priti Patel: The Home Office agrees completely with the point you have made and I do as Home Secretary. My views on this are strong.

As part of the Online Safety Bill, we have to do more here in terms of having age assessments and gateways to stop access to, quite frankly, extreme pornography, which leads to some of the most appalling behaviours that should never be deemed acceptable. This is exactly where cross-government work is taking place with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in particular. I want to see those proof-of-age measures come in. We need that. As you have said, there is so much more work to do. This is about behaviour change. We have to make sure that education and the other aspects of the Government continue to work in that way.

I am doing everything. I am straining every sinew. I am determined. Naturally, I hold strong views about this. I want to make sure that we protect women and girls. I want to make sure we protect the public and ensure that the public come to no harm. To do that, we have to work collaboratively across the government to, yes, challenge these companies as well about hosting some of this disgusting material.

Q248 **Laura Farris:** Thank you. The theme of public street harassment has been raised quite a lot. I read your article in *The Times* with interest this morning. It seems that a door is being left open in that regard. I have been working on it with some young women in my constituency and with the campaign group Our Streets Now.

It is true that it is already a public offence, but I was struck that lots of young women do not know that obscene shouting and screaming in the street is a public order offence. Again, I have heard reports that when—or probably actually if—they go to the police to report it, it has often been brushed off and dismissed as an unpleasant incident that is best forgotten rather than criminalised.

Talk us through your thinking and where you are on the issue of a discrete offence for public street harassment.

Priti Patel: This is important. Also, our call for evidence acknowledged this about sexual harassment in public places. It is all too common. I am familiar with Our Streets Now and the work you and many other colleagues have been leading on. I have spent time as well with campaigners. It is extraordinary.

First, our priority must be to ensure that women and girls know that they can report these crimes. Also, I want them to have the confidence to do



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this because, alongside the comments I have made about changes in policing, we are bringing in changes in policing and I am unequivocal about that. These changes as part of the VAWG strategy are coming. The police will need to enforce the law properly and give women the confidence that if they report an issue and if they report these crimes, it will be dealt with. Women and girls will watch the police on this. I cannot speak strongly enough about giving women and girls public confidence. That public confidence comes two ways. To have confidence in policing, the public needs to know that the police will take any crime that is reported to them seriously.

I am looking carefully at where there may be gaps in existing laws and how a specific offence of public sexual harassment could address this. You will appreciate as well that this is complex but it is important. I want to make sure that we work with colleagues and we work with campaigners to ensure that anything we do in this space has the desired outcome. We want to make sure that this is fixed and resolved.

Quite frankly, right now, I will do everything possible when it comes to the policing side while supporting women and girls to know that they can report these crimes and have confidence in the process when doing so.

Q249 Chair: Thank you. Finally, we look forward to the confidential information about racist abuse online. That will be welcome. We look forward to you writing to us with the information that Tim Loughton asked for on the number of people who have arrived since January or previously and their current status and how many have been returned.

It would be helpful if you could also clarify before the end of the day the dates on which the Home Office received the interim and final reports from the HMIP and ICIBI on Napier barracks and when those will be published, confirm when the impact assessments for the Nationality and Borders Bill will be published and also ensure that that contains estimates on the numbers requiring accommodation.

I have one final question. I have been told that at the Kent intake unit right now, the Home Office has 14 and 15 year-olds sleeping on camp beds and rolled-up mattresses in offices. They have been there for days. They are living in unsanitary conditions that are not Covid-compliant and are running out of fresh clothes with no way to wash them. They are supposed to be there for less than 24 hours. Can you tell me whether this is true?

Priti Patel: Could I bring Matthew in on this? Steps and measures have been put in place this week around the Kent intake unit.

Matthew Rycroft: Thank you, Home Secretary. Thank you, Chair. It is true that in recent days, when there has been a large number of arrivals in one day, for instance, through the small boats route, we have had a large number of children under 18 in that situation. It goes to the conversation we were having earlier about the importance of working



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with local authorities and more local authorities offering support for those young people in their care. Ultimately, we need to be moving them there. Until they can be moved there, we need to hold them at the Kent intake unit and provide that safeguarding support ourselves.

Q250 **Chair:** Is it true that one of those under-16s has been there for 10 days?

Matthew Rycroft: No one has been there for as long as that, Chair, but if that is wrong I will write to you straight away. I was there last week to see and a number of children were in the situation you describe but none for anything like 10 days. Since then, all of those who were there have been moved to different parts of the country.

Q251 **Chair:** Are there still under-16s sleeping on camp beds and rollout mattresses in offices?

Matthew Rycroft: They are not offices, but there is a space, which is not ideal. It is called the Kent intake unit. As its name implies, people go there if they are in that category at the beginning of their journey. We do the initial screening and so on there. We have a lot of support from the Refugee Council. Holding them there is not ideal but holding them there is better than not knowing where they will go until we can be sure they will go into the care of a particular local authority. We are extremely grateful for the co-operation we do receive from some local authorities. We encourage others to step forward with offers.

Q252 **Chair:** The backdrop is that the number of children and teenagers arriving as unaccompanied asylum seekers was 42% lower in the year to March than in the previous year, but Kent County Council has warned you repeatedly that it was responding to much too high a proportion of those cases rather than having them spread around the country. Kent has also repeatedly told you that the national transfer scheme is not working. HMIP also warned you in October and the Children's Commissioner in February. The Children's Commissioner called on you to put in place contingency plans to prevent this kind of thing happening. Why did you not do so?

Matthew Rycroft: We do have in place a contingency plan and that is happening at the moment. That is exactly the situation I described. I am saying that it is nowhere near as good as having further offers of support from different councils so that we can move those unaccompanied asylum-seeking children into places where they can get the care that they need.

Q253 **Chair:** You have the power to require local authorities to do more and you have the ability to fund local authorities to do more. Why have you not done so? Children who may have taken some traumatic journeys and who may be highly vulnerable are spending days on end in cramped and unsuitable accommodation.



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Matthew Rycroft: The Home Secretary, working closely with the Secretary of State for Education, has been engaging with local authorities on that issue.

Q254 **Chair:** Home Secretary, why have you not required local authorities to do their bit to help Kent?

Priti Patel: We are, actually. It is wrong to say that we are not engaging or requiring local authorities to do more—

Q255 **Chair:** Are you making it mandatory?

Priti Patel: We brought in changes to the national transfer scheme. We have to work with local authorities. This comes back to Diana Johnson's earlier point as well. We have to work with local authorities. There have been plenty of calls to mandate, but we get a lot of pushback from local authorities as well. We have to work with them and that means putting more money in the system, which we have been doing on a regular basis through the national transfer scheme. We are working across the Government, with education, particularly on children, and social services and also with the Department for Communities and Local Government because these are our stakeholders. These are our partners. We cannot work on the principle of imposing requirements of local authorities. We need to continue to work with them. We do that. It is difficult.

Matthew has highlighted as well that we would be delighted to engage with many more local authorities. Many local authorities around the country have, quite frankly, written to us to say that they will not take asylum seekers or children and have been firm in their resistance. It is important that we continue to engage and work in a collaborative manner on this.

Q256 **Chair:** If you have failed to get other councils to do more and you have real pressure now and you need better contingency plans, given that Wendy Williams said that you needed to see the "face behind the case" and provide greater compassion, does holding under-16s in this kind of accommodation for days on end exemplify compassion?

Priti Patel: First of all, Wendy Williams' recommendations are specific to the Department and to Windrush. The welfare of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is our priority. We cannot deliver that on our own. It is important to emphasise that. As a Government, we have statutory duties and responsibilities, which, from a Home Office perspective, we will fulfil. But we can do that only in collaboration with others.

With regards to your point about contingency, we are constantly reviewing, revising, looking at our contingency arrangements. A great deal of operational work and planning has been taking place right now from the weekend. That comes back and speaks to the point about collaboration across the country, working with third-party stakeholders and local authorities.



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But the fundamental principle here again is that we have to do much more to stop illegal migration to the United Kingdom. It comes back to a lot of the work with the Nationality and Borders Bill and why we should make sure that we do not have small boats and Channel crossings coming to the United Kingdom. Chair, as you have highlighted, this puts a lot of strain on our system and on local authorities in parts of the country. In terms of fulfilling our statutory duties, we are committed to doing that but we can do that only in a co-operative and collaborative way with other parties.

Matthew Rycroft: Chair, the compassionate approach that I have seen Home Office colleagues provide in extremely difficult circumstances in recent days and weeks has been brilliant and is a testament to that value, which, as you say, Wendy Williams has highlighted. We are determined to carry on being an extremely compassionate Department. They are demonstrating that and I am proud of that.

Chair: It would be helpful if you could write to us on what action you are taking to improve the contingency planning. If this is happening when you have had a 40% drop in unaccompanied asylum seekers under 18, it raises a considerable concern about what happens in other situations.

Could you also write to us about what the Home Office has done in response to the Inspectorate's recommendations on enforcement in the Channel that we did not have time to ask you about today? The report last autumn raised concern about gaps in criminal enforcement in the Channel and also called for a further wider review of the Border Force's criminal investigation and prosecution capabilities. Further information on that would be helpful. We welcome the further co-operation with France and hope that that will deliver further results.

Thank you very much to the Home Secretary, the Permanent Secretary and Paul Lincoln for your time this morning. We appreciate it and look forward to the further information you are able to provide us. Thank you.