

# Seventy-sixth Report of Session 2022-23

## Home Office

### The Asylum Transformation Programme

#### Introduction from the Committee

The Home Office is responsible for making decisions on whether to grant or refuse asylum applications, and for supporting and accommodating destitute people while they are waiting for a decision. At the end of June 2023, around 175,000 people were awaiting a decision and the Home Office was providing accommodation for around 113,000 of them. Over half of the people waiting for a decision had been waiting for at least a year.

The Home Office started to develop the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) in 2021, to create a fair, supportive, and efficient system. So far, the Home Office has prioritised increasing the number of decisions it makes so it supports fewer people, and increasing its supply of accommodation so it can move people waiting for a decision out of hotels and into somewhere cheaper. The Home Office expects the Programme to save £15 billion on the cost of supporting people seeking asylum over the period 2022–23 to 2031–32.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence on 10 July 2023 from the Home Office. The Committee published its report on 27 October 2023. This is the Government's response to the Committee's report.

#### Relevant reports

- NAO report: [The asylum and protection transformation programme](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 1375)
- PAC report: [The Asylum Transformation Programme](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 1334)

#### Government response to the Committee

**1. PAC conclusion: Despite the Home Office's confidence that it will clear the backlog of asylum decisions by the end of December, it still faces a huge challenge to do so.**

**1. PAC recommendation: The Home Office should update the Committee, as part of its Treasury Minute response, on its progress in increasing caseworker numbers and decisions and clearing the legacy backlog. It should also set out how it intends to reduce the backlog of newer claims that it has allowed to build up.**

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

#### Recommendation implemented

1.2 The legacy asylum backlog target has been met with more than 112,000 asylum cases cleared in 2023. Fundamental changes to the decision-making process and boosting efficiency has resulted in 112,000 asylum decisions this year, and the highest annual number of substantive decisions in a year since 2002. This is in part due to the Home Office (the department) stepping up processing, deploying an additional 1,200 caseworkers, meeting our target to double the number of asylum caseworkers and tripling productivity to ensure more illegal migrants are returned to their country of origin, quicker. The increased efficiency has seen the Home Office not just clear the original 92,000 legacy asylum backlog but exceed it. In one 4-week period from 20 November to 17 December 2023, there were 20,481 initial asylum decisions made. This is more than the number of asylum decisions made in the

entirety of 2021. While all cases have been reviewed and 112,000 decisions made overall, 4,500 complex cases have been highlighted that require additional checks or investigation for a final decision to be made. These hard cases typically relate to asylum seekers presenting as children – where age verification is taking place; those with serious medical issues; or those with suspected past convictions, where checks may reveal criminality that would bar asylum. Moreover, the grant rate for asylum seekers has gone down this year. The grant rate for asylum decisions in 2023 is at 67%, lower than in both 2022 and 2021, which were 76% and 72% respectively. The Home Office achieved the commitment to increase the number of asylum caseworkers to 2,500 by September 2023. On 31 August 2023, there were 2,510 decision makers in post, demonstrating that during this month we exceeded our target. Numbers rose to 2,529 in October before falling slightly due to natural attrition as individuals change roles or leave posts. Our recruitment campaign continues, and we expect to maintain to have 2,500 decision makers going forward.

1.3 Flow claims will be prioritised from 2024 onwards now that legacy claims have been cleared. Individual claims lodged on or after 28 June 2022 may be prioritised on a case-by-case basis due to exceptional and compelling circumstances. Please see [Case by case prioritisation on GOV.UK](#) for further information about how individual asylum claims may be prioritised.

1.4 The department has quadrupled the number of decision makers over the last 2 years and is continuing to recruit more. There are recruitment strategies in place to maintain staffing at the required levels to allow the department to manage asylum intake and reduce the overall time to make initial asylum decisions, including rolling recruitment campaigns.

1.5 The Home Office has successfully [tripled decision productivity](#). This was made possible through streamlining and modernising the end-to-end process, with improved guidance and more focussed interviews, speeding up asylum processing whilst maintaining the integrity of the system. Productivity will continue to fluctuate as the department works through different case types. The department will continue to build on existing processes and systems in our approach to the remaining backlog of cases, including those made on or after 28 June 2022, 'flow' cases.

**2. PAC conclusion: The focus on streamlining decision-making may inadvertently lead to more flawed decisions, or the withdrawal of genuine asylum claims.**

**2. PAC recommendation: Alongside its Treasury Minute response the Home Office should write to the Committee setting out:**

- ***The number of administrative decisions made each month since the introduction of its streamlined asylum process;***
- ***How its internal quality assurance arrangements have changed to reflect the introduction of the streamlined asylum process, what these arrangements have shown about quality of decisions made under the process, and how learning from this has been used; and***
- ***What further evaluation of the streamlined asylum process is planned, in particular to ensure that the Home Office makes the right asylum decision.***

2.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

### **Recommendation implemented**

2.2 The Home Office has written to the Committee (9 January 2024) in a supporting letter addressing the bullets in this recommendation.

**3. PAC conclusion: The Home Office does not have a credible plan for ending the use of hotels to accommodate people waiting for a decision and the unacceptable cost this creates.**

**3. PAC recommendation: The Home Office should, as part of its Treasury Minute response, set out how and by when it intends to reduce its use of hotels, and when it intends to stop using hotels altogether, under its different planning scenarios about the number of people applying for asylum.**

3.1 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

3.2 The Home Office has always been clear that the use of hotels as temporary accommodation for asylum seekers was a short-term measure to ensure that the department met its statutory obligation to accommodate asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute, during a period of unprecedented numbers of small boat arrivals.

3.3 In line with the Prime Minister's [comprehensive ten-point plan](#) (13 December 2022) to tackle illegal migration, a clear plan and range of measures have been implemented to reform the management of the asylum accommodation estate. This includes optimising the use of existing hotels and increasing the number of people room sharing, growing the amount of dispersed accommodation available and delivering alternative forms of accommodation sites. As a result of these actions, the department has now begun to reduce reliance on hotel accommodation and has plans in place to close over 50 hotels before the end of January 2024. Whilst modelling asylum and accommodation demand is complex and inherently uncertain, the Home Office will continue to keep modelling assumptions and estimates under regular review to ensure that accommodation estate capacity remains sufficient for future levels of demand, under a range of different planning scenarios.

**4. PAC conclusion: The Home Office is failing to engage meaningfully with local authorities on decisions that affect their residents and already strained public services.**

**4. PAC recommendation: The Home Office should, as part of its Treasury Minute response, set out how its 'place-based approach' will give local authorities a meaningful say on the use of accommodation in their areas, and what specific actions it will take to improve its relationships with local authorities.**

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

**Target implementation date: iterative to December 2025**

4.2 Through informal consultation, partners told the department that they wanted to build on the Full Dispersal model and adopt a Place-Based Approach to all protection-based immigration demands in an area; there is a desire to build sustainable partnerships, based on a collective responsibility, trust and support. We will be running pilots between January and March 2024 with London, Wales and South West England to test initial design principles for a revised approach.

4.3 The government has endeavoured to improve working relationships with local authorities, through data sharing, including populations for asylum, resettlement, and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children by region and LA. The department has further shared decision service data for Streamlined Asylum Process cases by local authority with the next iteration due to be shared via a new automated visibility tool in Winter 2023-24. Moreover, individual discussions have taken place between the department and those local authorities most impacted by Streamlined Asylum Processing and case clearance this year, to

discuss local authority handling proposals that will reduce impacts. The department continues to follow the same collaborative approach used for engagement for the Full Dispersal project, including launching informal consultations, and working collaboratively through its Regional governance boards, where data is shared, and decisions are taken collectively. Finally, the department will utilise existing well-established governance in place through the Asylum, Resettlement Councils Senior Engagement Group, Oversight Group and regional governance boards, which is the active space for collaboration.

4.4 Based on the feedback the department has had over the past year from local authorities, it intends to refresh the Full Dispersal plans from 2024 ensuring they are evidence based and deliverable. It will be factoring in a range of matters including housing market, social pressures and existing populations. It is also exploring the possibility of broadening the plans out to include contingency accommodation.

**5. PAC conclusion: The Home Office does not have adequate safeguards to protect against the risks of vulnerable people having to share accommodation with strangers.**

**5. PAC recommendation: The Home Office should set out in detail the measures it will take to identify any vulnerabilities individuals waiting for a decision have, and how it will manage the risks to the individual that these may present.**

5.1 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

5.2 The department's headline safeguarding approach is set out in the [safeguarding strategy](#). There is significant safeguarding information available not provided at the Committee session but set out below.

5.3 The department takes the welfare of asylum seekers seriously and at every stage in the process, ensures that the needs and vulnerabilities of asylum seekers are identified and considered. The department works with a wide variety of stakeholders, including local authorities, Strategic Migration partnerships and non-governmental organisations to deliver sustainable, efficient and high-quality support systems to safeguard vulnerable asylum seekers. All departmental staff interacting with applications receive safeguarding training. This ensures that staff are skilled to identify, respond and take appropriate action to support the vulnerable.

5.4 The department and its contractors work closely with the NHS, local authorities, and non-governmental organisations to ensure that asylum seekers can access the health care and support they need. All asylum seekers have access to free NHS services, the same way as British citizens and other permanent residents. All accommodation providers have a duty and requirement to assist people who need access to healthcare, and all frontline staff are safeguarding trained. All accommodation providers employ staff to be present at accommodation sites as welfare support officers. The department and its accommodation providers have robust processes in place to ensure that where someone is at risk, they are referred to the appropriate statutory agencies (police, NHS and social services) to promote appropriate safeguarding interventions. The department operates a Safeguarding Hub to support vulnerable individuals in accessing these services. Safeguarding Hub staff advocate for an individual's needs with the statutory agencies to promote appropriate safeguarding interventions. The statutory agencies retain responsibility for all decisions on intervention activity. Any asylum seekers who need assistance with any matter can get in touch with Migrant Help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**6. PAC conclusion: The Home Office failed to convince us that it understands the full implications of its programme on the wider asylum system, affecting the ability of others to plan.**

**6. PAC recommendation: The Home Office should publish its updated business case so the intentions and impacts of the Programme are clear and transparent to Parliament, the public and other organisations.**

**In its Treasury Minute response, the Home Office should set a date by which this business case will be published.**

6.1 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

6.2 The department does not intend to publish the Programme's Business Case, as it is not standard practice for the department to publish Business Cases. However, the government is instead happy to hold a private meeting with the Committee, once the Programme Business Case has been approved by HM Treasury, to explain how the intentions and impacts of the programme have been modelled and measured. The department anticipates receiving HM Treasury approval by the Summer of 2024.