



House of Commons
Committee of Public Accounts

Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership

Thirty-Fourth Report of Session 2023–
24

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 23 May 2024*

The Committee of Public Accounts

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Summary | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Conclusions and recommendations | 5 |
| 1 Planning in a fast-moving policy environment | 8 |
| Implementing the Rwanda partnership | 8 |
| Making realistic assessments of value for money | 11 |
| 2 Making plans work for others | 13 |
| Ensuring the well-being of those it intends to relocate | 13 |
| Working in partnership with local authorities | 14 |
| 3 Measuring success and accountability to Parliament | 16 |
| Measuring the success of the Rwanda partnership | 16 |
| The Accounting Officer's responsibilities to Parliament | 17 |
| Formal minutes | 20 |
| Witnesses | 22 |
| Published written evidence | 23 |
| List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament | 24 |

Summary

The Home Office is spending significant amounts of money on its asylum and immigration policies. Despite committing significant sums of money to the Rwanda partnership and its large accommodation sites there is little to show for the money spent so far

Following Royal Assent of the Safety of Rwanda Bill in April 2024, the government plans to begin relocating people under its partnership with Rwanda. By the end of March 2024, however, the UK had made payments of £240 million to the Government of Rwanda but had not relocated anyone. Depending on the number of people who are relocated, it could potentially pay billions more. In April 2024, there were more than 50,000 people living in the UK, with no ability to claim asylum, who are officially “pending relocation”. Yet the Home Office is unable to explain what will happen to these people currently left in limbo.

The Home Office has continually failed to be transparent with Parliament about how many people will be relocated, and the potential costs of the programme. Despite the partnership being under development for more than two years, the Accounting Officer’s assessment of the scheme has not changed since April 2022. We remain concerned over the feasibility of relocating large numbers of people, the Home Office’s understanding of the potential costs, and the value for money of the scheme.

We welcome the Home Office’s progress in closing asylum hotels in communities, but its assessment of the requirements for setting up alternative accommodation in large sites fell woefully short of reality and risked wasting taxpayers’ money. In addition, the new sites will not house anywhere near as many people as initially expected, exacerbating existing accommodation issues. The Home Office’s excuse of needing to work at pace does not absolve it of its responsibilities to manage projects effectively and safeguard value for money.

Introduction

The Home Office is responsible for asylum and immigration policy in the UK. This includes making decisions on whether to grant or refuse asylum applications and providing accommodation to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute. It is also responsible for removing people who have no right to be in the UK. Under the Illegal Migration Act 2023, this includes the majority of people who arrive in the UK by small boat or other irregular means, whose asylum claims are inadmissible in the UK.

In April 2022, the Government announced a partnership with the Government of Rwanda to relocate to Rwanda people identified as being in the UK illegally, or seeking asylum after arriving via an illegal route. Under this partnership, the Home Office has agreed to pay significant sums to Rwanda and, at the end of March 2024, had paid £240 million. This covers payments to the Economic Transformation and Integration Fund, which is designed to support economic growth in Rwanda, and payments to cover asylum processing and operational costs for individuals relocated to Rwanda. The government hopes that the partnership will deter people from making dangerous journeys across the English Channel.

The government is introducing these measures in response to growing numbers of people arriving in the UK to claim asylum, many of whom the Home Office will support while it considers their claim, or until it can remove them from the UK if their claim is deemed inadmissible. In the 2023–24 financial year, the Home Office spent an estimated £4.7 billion on asylum support, including £3.1 billion on hotels. The Government counts much of this spending against its Overseas Development Assistance target, meaning it reduces the amount spent on overseas aid projects. At the end of December 2023, there were more than 100,000 asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation, including nearly 46,000 in hotels. The Home Office intends to reduce the number of hotels it is using and reduce costs to the taxpayer. As part of this, it is identifying alternatives to hotels, such as vessels or ex-military bases (large sites) for single adult males, while also increasing room-sharing. It expects its programme to open four large sites to cost £1.2 billion.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **We are concerned that the Home Office does not have a credible plan for implementing the Rwanda partnership.** The government intends to start flights to Rwanda as soon as possible now that the Safety of Rwanda Bill has received Royal Assent and UK-Rwanda Treaty has been ratified. There are currently more than 50,000 people who are deemed to be in the UK illegally, and that the Home Secretary will have a duty to remove. On 22 April, the Prime Minister set out some high-level proposals to begin relocations. But during our session, the Home Office was unwilling to say how many people it is planning to relocate to Rwanda, and how it would do this. The Home Office asserts that it has robust operational plans, which are dependent on the flow of relocations. However, we are concerned by the Home Office's inability to explain the practical details including, for example, where those people who may be subject to relocations currently are and the arrangements for escorting them to Rwanda. Further, it could not provide clarity on escort or flight costs, including whether training costs were included in its contract with Mitie. We are left with little confidence in the Home Office's ability to implement the Rwanda partnership, and its understanding of the costs, particularly given its track record in delivering other major programmes.

Recommendation 1: *In its Treasury Minute response, the Home Office should set out its implementation plan for the Rwanda partnership, including a breakdown of current cost estimates. This should include an update on the arrangements for—and cost of—transporting people to Rwanda. It should also explain how it has assessed the feasibility of relocating people, based on the revised plan.*

2. **In its haste to establish large accommodation sites, the Home Office made unacceptable and avoidable mistakes, and failed to protect value for money.** The Home Office asserts that its need to deal with a “national emergency” meant it had to take quick decisions, and so it pressed ahead with setting up expensive large asylum accommodation sites without an adequate understanding of what would be required. The Home Office's estimates of the set-up costs for the large former military sites fell far short of reality. It estimated that it would cost £5 million to ready each of the sites at Wethersfield and Scampton. But costs spiralled to £49 million at Wethersfield, and has cost £27 million so far at Scampton. It also failed to maximise competition in awarding its contracts by simply amending current contracts or using frameworks. Furthermore, these two previous RAF bases will now accommodate significantly fewer people than the Home Office envisioned. Fewer people on sites means a higher per person cost. These errors may ultimately cost the taxpayer £46 million more than if the Home Office had simply retained the use of hotels instead. It is essential that departments ensure that taxpayers' money is protected, even when required to work quickly.

Recommendation 2: *As part of its Treasury Minute response, the Home Office should set out what it will do differently in the future so it ensures it undertakes sufficient due diligence at the outset of projects and protects taxpayers' money when working at pace.*

3. **We are not convinced the Home Office has put in place sufficient measures to safeguard those pending relocation while they wait to hear what will happen**

to them. The Home Office is not processing asylum claims for more than 50,000 people who have arrived in the UK via small boats and other irregular means and are deemed ‘inadmissible’ to the asylum system. Currently, the only viable option for many of them is to remove them to Rwanda, as other potential third-country partnerships would need significant lead times to be up and running. Meanwhile, these people remain in limbo – some people have now been waiting for over a year to be told what will happen to them. Many of them are living in temporary Home Office accommodation, where there have been numerous reports of self-harm and suicide. While the Home Office told us it incorporated safety measures into its contracts with providers, it could not provide information about any penalties for falling below standards, despite reports of significant safety failures on sites.

Recommendation 3a: *The Home Office should, before the end of July, write to the Committee to explain how it is ensuring the wellbeing of people pending relocation and what plans it has to provide clarity for their future.*

Recommendation 3b: *The Home Office should also update the Committee quarterly on the number of people awaiting relocation and how many are being supported by the Home Office, including specifying how many have waited for more than one year.*

Recommendation 3c: *The Home Office should also update the Committee quarterly on any penalties issued relating to safety matters (including health and welfare). The update should state for each penalty the size of the penalty, the reason for it, the location concerned, and the contractor to whom the penalty has been issued.*

4. **We are concerned that the Home Office has not engaged effectively with local authorities about the impact its work is having on local areas.** The Home Office is making progress in its plans to reduce its use of hotels. By the end of March, it had exited 100 hotels, with around 300 still in use. But it still could not say when it intends to stop using hotels altogether. The Home Office’s actions to reduce its reliance on hotels risk having unintended consequences such as driving up rental costs, increasing homelessness and putting unacceptable pressure on local councils. There are also substantial additional costs for local areas where the Home Office develops alternative accommodation such as large sites. West Lindsey District Council, in which the site at Scampton resides, estimates that it and its neighbouring councils have faced additional costs of nearly £0.5 million as a result of needing to employ additional staff and updating infrastructure. We are pleased to hear the Home Office is now sharing more data with local authorities about the asylum seekers in their communities and that it has put in place dedicated liaison officers.

Recommendation 4: *The Home Office should, within three months, write to us setting out what it will do to better understand the impact its asylum policies are having in local areas and how its liaison officers will help resolve the litany of problems raised with us by councils.*

5. **The Home Office does not yet know how it will evaluate the impact and value for money of the Rwanda partnership.** The success of the Rwanda partnership is dependent on whether it deters people from making dangerous and illegal journeys to the UK, including small boat crossings. The Home Office estimates that illegal

entries need to fall by one third from 2022 levels for the Rwanda partnership to be considered value for money. However, measuring the deterrent effect of the partnership will be complex as it will require an understanding of: the motivations of asylum seekers (including why they are not coming to the UK); the impact of other government policies to deter illegal entry to the UK; and the full costs of the Rwanda partnership and asylum accommodation in the UK. Despite the deterrent effect being critical to the partnership's success, the Home Office has not yet worked out how it will measure success or what data it will need.

Recommendation 5: *As a matter of urgency, the Home Office should develop a robust evaluation strategy to assess the deterrent impact of the third country asylum processing policy, carefully considering whether it is possible to assess the success of this policy in isolation. It should also explain how it intends to assess value for money.*

6. **We are disappointed that, despite the Committee previously raising concerns, the Permanent Secretary is still not providing the necessary transparency to enable Parliament to hold the Home Office to account on its asylum and immigration plans.** We have previously raised concerns about the Accounting Officer's transparency to Parliament. Despite this, the Home Office published the summary Accounting Officer Assessment for the Sovereign Borders Programme nine months late, and 15 months after it approved the programme. The assessment did not cover the implementation of the Illegal Migration Act, despite this representing a major change to asylum policy. The Accounting Officer asserts that it is up to ministers when to make these assessments public, but other departments have repeatedly shared assessments in a much more timely manner, without Ministerial approval being a barrier. The Accounting Officer was also unwilling to share any details on negotiations with other countries over other potential third country asylum processing partnerships. While respecting the need for a level of confidentiality, we are concerned at the Home Office's unwillingness to engage with the Committee on its only "plan B".

Recommendation 6: *As a matter of urgency, and no later than one month after the publication of this report, the Home Office should:*

- *Publish all outstanding Accounting Officer Assessments, including those where there has been a significant change to an ongoing programme, and in the future should publish all Accounting Officer Assessments in a timely manner; and*
- *Write to the Committee to explain how it intends to share information about negotiations with other countries it is considering for third country processing, while respecting confidentiality.*

1 Planning in a fast-moving policy environment

1. On the basis of two reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Home Office about its partnership with the Government of Rwanda and its plans to accommodate people seeking asylum.¹

2. The Home Office is responsible for asylum and immigration policy in the UK. This includes making decisions on whether to grant or refuse asylum applications and providing accommodation to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute. It is also responsible for removing people who have no right to be in the UK. Since 2020, the number of people arriving in the UK to claim asylum has increased. In the 12 months to December 2023, the Home Office received more than 67,000 applications, nearly double the number it received in 2019. By December 2023, there were about 95,300 outstanding asylum applications, representing 129,000 people, and many of whom will have inadmissible claims. The increasing number of applications means that the Home Office has required more accommodation, and has increasingly used hotels as a contingency measure. The Home Office estimates it spent £4.7 billion supporting people claiming asylum in the 2023–24 financial year, including £3.1 billion on hotels.²

3. The Home Office is introducing policies and programmes to try to reduce the cost to the taxpayer of supporting asylum seekers in the UK. It has done this primarily through introducing new legislation such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which declare asylum claims are inadmissible if someone arrives in the UK by small boat or other irregular means. Under the Illegal Migration Act, the Home Secretary will have a duty to remove all people who have arrived illegally in the UK. In April 2022, the Government announced the Migration and Economic Development Partnership with the Government of Rwanda to relocate to Rwanda some people whose claims are inadmissible, including those who arrive by small boats. The government hopes that the Illegal Migration Act and the partnership will deter people from making the dangerous crossing across the Channel.³

4. The Home Office also intends to reduce costs by reducing the number of hotels it is using to support asylum seekers. As part of this, it is identifying alternatives to hotels, such as vessels or ex-military bases (large sites) for single adult males. Additionally, it has worked to speed up processing claims so that people flow through its accommodation quicker, and it has increased the amount of room sharing in hotels, so it can accommodate more people in fewer hotels.⁴

Implementing the Rwanda partnership

5. To facilitate the partnership with Rwanda, the UK government has agreed to pay up to £370 million into the Economic Transformation and Integration Fund, which is designed to support economic growth in Rwanda, and then further payments depending

1 C&AG's Report, [Investigation into the costs of the UK-Rwanda partnership](#), Session 2023–24, HC 577, 1 March 2024 and C&AG's report, [Investigation into asylum accommodation](#), Session 2023–24, HC 635, 20 March 2024

2 C&AG's Report, Asylum accommodation, paras 1.1–1.4

3 Q 51; C&AG's Report, UK-Rwanda partnership, paras 1.1–1.3

4 C&AG's Report, Asylum accommodation, paras 1.1, 1.5

on the number of people relocated. At the time of our evidence session, the Home Office had paid £220 million to the Government of Rwanda under this arrangement, and had agreed to make further payments of £50 million each in April 2024, 2025, and 2026. It will also pay up to £151,000 over five years for each person relocated for asylum processing and operational costs. The Home Office had also paid the Rwandan Government £20 million as an advance payment against which future processing and operational costs will be offset.⁵

6. In response to the Supreme Court ruling that the Government’s Rwanda policy was unlawful, the UK government signed a provisional treaty with the Government of Rwanda and, in December 2023, introduced the Safety of Rwanda Bill. Implementing the Rwanda partnership depended on Parliament approving the Bill: on 22 April 2024, Parliament approved the Bill and on 23 April the Prime Minister outlined the timetable to begin the process of relocating people to Rwanda.⁶ Our evidence session took place before both events. We therefore asked the Home Office about its plans for implementation of the partnership. The Home Office told us that it had robust plans to implement the partnership, and that Government policy was to start flights to Rwanda as soon as possible, but it was not willing to provide any detail on these.⁷

7. We asked the Home Office how many people it planned to remove under the Illegal Migration Act. At our evidence session, the Home Office told us that it estimated at 28 December 2023 there were 33,000 people that the Home Secretary would have a duty to remove under the Act.⁸ We asked whether the Home Office had a duty to remove the additional 6,700 people who had crossed the Channel to date in 2024. The Home Office told us that it did not have an exact number of how many people were considered as being inadmissible and that it would have a duty to remove. It accepted that the total figure was at that point probably in excess of 40,000, and noted that the next statistics would be published in May.⁹ The latest statistics, published on 22 April 2024, showed there were more than 50,000 people living in the UK with no ability to claim asylum, who the Home Secretary will have a duty to remove.¹⁰ The Home Office also told us that it was extending its Voluntary Returns Service to offer failed asylum seekers £3,000 to relocate to Rwanda if they have not accepted to go back to their own country. The Home Office was unable to tell us how many more people could be relocated to Rwanda under this arrangement.¹¹

8. The Home Office confirmed that the agreement with Rwanda was designed to start relocations quickly and then scale up to significant volumes of people. We asked about the Home Office’s ability to manage the practical implications of relocating people, and the capacity of Rwanda to accept and accommodate them. The Home Office explained it had modelled the number of people Rwanda could take and by when but there were “too many variables” and it would provide no further detail on the number and timing of relocations. We therefore asked how many people the accommodation in Rwanda can take. The Home

5 Qq 45–49, 106; C&AG’s Report, UK-Rwanda partnership, paras 7, 8, 2.1

6 C&AG’s Report, UK-Rwanda partnership, para 1.4; HM Government, [Press Release: PM Statement on Safety of Rwanda Bill](#), 23 April 2024

7 Qq 42–43, 89

8 Qq 51, 52, 58–60

9 Q 52–53, 55–58, 62

10 [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee - Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership](#), dated 25 April 2024; Home Office, [Statistics relating to Illegal Migration: data tables to 21 April 2024](#), 22 April 2024

11 Qq 134–138

Office told us that it had invested in building up Rwanda’s capacity and capability, and that it knew that Rwanda was able to provide and organise enough accommodation for the number of people that it planned to relocate.¹²

9. The Home Office acknowledged that there were many constraints that it would have to take into account when running the programme of relocations, and told us that it had developed plans and contingency options. It told us that its operational plans depended on the “flow” of relocations, but did not think it appropriate to provide detail on its operational planning.¹³ We asked whether the Home Office knew the location of those it wanted to remove, given that it did not have a good track record in this area. The Home Office told us that it had addresses for each of the individuals and that they were subject to regular reporting arrangements. We have previously examined the Home Office’s delivery of major programmes and raised concerns about over-optimism and the absence of plans, for example the Emergency Services Network.¹⁴

10. The Home Office has estimated that it would cost £11,000 to fly each relocated individual to Rwanda. Witnesses told us that this was an internal estimate and actual costs would depend on a number of variables. The Home Office will also need to pay additional costs to escort people to Rwanda but did not provide an estimate of these as they will depend on the number of flights and the risk assessment of the individual. It expects to incur costs of £12.6 million in 2024–25 for training escorts and then £1 million per year thereafter to scale up its operations to run regular flights.¹⁵ The Home Office contracts Mitie to provide escorts for its existing removals. We therefore asked why the Home Office needed to pay additional money if its contract with Mitie was to provide trained escorts. However, at the evidence session, the Home Office was not able to explain its contractor’s—Mitie—contractual obligations and why it was paying such large sums to train escorts when Mitie already provided these.¹⁶ It subsequently wrote to us to explain that these costs relate to the recruitment and training of new staff. The Home Office told us this was necessary to ensure there is the right number of trained escorts to run the scheme and that these were additional costs.¹⁷

11. We asked the Home Office how it proposed to report any additional costs to Parliament so that they could be scrutinised. The Accounting Officer told us that he was committed to transparency and reiterated that the costs of the partnership will be set out annually in the annual report and accounts although, on some occasions, the department will bring costs earlier to the Committee. In January 2024, HM Treasury published advice to Accounting Officers on parliamentary communications. This stated that accounting officers should consider sharing information on a timelier and/or more frequent basis for matters with a high degree of parliamentary interest. Where Ministers instruct an accounting officer that the public interest is best served by keeping information confidential (for example if disclosure would undermine the government’s position in commercial negotiations), it may be appropriate for the accounting officer and the Minister to agree whether there

12 Qq 68, 77–78, 80–82

13 Qq 83, 92

14 Qq 127–128; Committee of Public Accounts, *The Emergency Services Network*, Sixty Fourth Report of Session 2022–23, HC 1006, 14 July 2023, paras 1 and 5

15 Qq 93, 95–97

16 Qq 98–103

17 Qq 102–104; [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee - Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership](#), dated 25 April 2024

is the option of sharing the information with the relevant parliamentary committee(s) on a confidential basis and so facilitate scrutiny while maintaining the public interest concerned.¹⁸

Making realistic assessments of value for money

12. The Home Office has established four large accommodation sites – the Bibby Stockholm vessel in Dorset, former RAF bases in Wethersfield, Essex and Scampton, Lincolnshire, and former student accommodation in Huddersfield. The Home Office estimated that, by the end of March 2024, it had spent £230 million on the sites, and it expected the Large Sites Programme to cost £1.2 billion over the life of the sites. Two of the sites (Wethersfield and the Bibby Stockholm vessel) were in use at the time of the session and housing approximately 900 asylum seekers. In total, the Home Office expected these four large sites to accommodate more than 4,500 asylum seekers when fully up and running. It planned there would be 3,700 across the two former RAF bases, approximately 500 aboard the Bibby Stockholm vessel and around 600 in the former student accommodation in Huddersfield. At our evidence session the Home Office told us that it expected to accommodate a maximum of 400 people on board the Bibby Stockholm vessel by June 2024, and that each of the former RAF bases would now accommodate 800 people.¹⁹

13. We were concerned by the Home Office’s assessment of the set-up costs to convert the two former RAF bases to accommodation. At the outset, the Home Office estimated that such costs would be £5 million for each site, but the costs increased to £49 million at Wethersfield and £27 million so far at Scampton. We asked the Home Office how it got its estimates so wrong. It told us it was dealing with a “national emergency” and that it considered that it “should be doing what our colleagues during Covid had done”. It explained that it had decided to “press on quickly” to increase its stock of accommodation and to take a “novel and creative” approach to setting up the sites. The Home Office acknowledged there was “a very significant optimism bias” in its estimates and some unforeseen costs, but repeatedly stated that the Home Office was working “at pace”.²⁰ The Home Office listed some of the unforeseen costs that arose, such as gas and electrical requirements, and fire requirements, remedial works, improving security and installing CCTV. We questioned why these elements had not been foreseen. The Home Office stressed again that the government needed to find accommodation that was not previously available because it was spending too much on hotels. It told us that it only carried out non-intrusive surveys and pre due-diligence checks before purchasing the sites. We reflected that if a similar sort of assessment were produced in the private sector, such shortfalls might have resulted in negligence claims. The Home Office acknowledged its mistakes, and said that it did not have the right expertise on the programme at the time, and that some of the problems were “definitely avoidable at the time”. It said it had now recruited very experienced programme directors and sought more external advice.²¹

14. We asked the Home Office why it had not submitted to competition five of the contracts relating to the new sites, worth £243 million of the £253 million it had spent through contracts. The Home Office told us that it used framework agreements for some

18 Q 159; HM Treasury, [Dear Accounting Officer Letter – Parliamentary Communications](#), 16 January 2024

19 Qq 179, 203; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, Figure 5 and Figure 6

20 Qq 166–167; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, Figure 7

21 Qq 170–173, 177, 198, 202

contracts, which would have had a competition for the initial framework. It again justified this approach because there was an “emergency” and it needed to operate as quickly as possible.²² We have previously reported how competition can help support efficiency, innovation, and quality in public services, but that while framework agreements had become the most prevalent route for government to buy goods, inappropriate use of frameworks may lead to competition being limited by having insufficient suppliers for a mini competition.²³ In the case of the contract for procuring the Bibby Stockholm vessel, there was only one supplier on the framework used, which meant there was no opportunity for competition. The Home Office also outlined how it had amended some existing contracts with providers, but that these contracts included checks and balances, such as a profit cap over which the suppliers have to return a certain amount of profit, and that the profits are regularly reviewed. The Home Office suggested that setting up new contracts “would have added risk”. We asked for assurance that when these contracts come to an end there will be an opportunity that they will be properly fully competed. While the Home Office said this would be the case, it caveated that this would be “where time permits”.²⁴

15. We asked the Home Office whether it was still satisfied that it was getting value for money, given the costs of the accommodation and the fact that capacity was much lower than anticipated. The Home Office’s latest assessment of value for money from January 2024 suggests that, in total, large accommodation sites will cost £46 million more than the hotels they are intended to replace. The Home Office told us that it was confident that when all the sunk costs were excluded it was still cheaper to continue with the large sites, and considered that it was correct to exclude sunk costs as projections should only be forward looking.²⁵ However, it acknowledged that for the site at Scampton, it would not have gone ahead in the way that it did if it had known more about the site at the outset. It said that the large number of people it anticipated having on the site was driving up the costs because it would have needed additional modular accommodation, and it had recently been in discussions with the local authority about reducing the number of people at the site to “hundreds rather than thousands”. It said that it was planning to reduce the capacity at the two former RAF bases due to cost, operational capacity and safety. They would now each hold around 800 people, which the National Audit Office reported would reduce the value for money of Wethersfield by £54 million. The Accounting Officer told us that he updates the value for money assessments every three months, and will keep that under review.²⁶

22 Q 206; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, Figure 11

23 Public Accounts Committee, [Competition in public procurement](#), Sixth report of Session 2023–24, HC 385, December 2023

24 Q 210; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, para 4.6

25 Qq 179–180; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, Figure 7

26 Qq 182–183, 202; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, para 3.9

2 Making plans work for others

Ensuring the well-being of those it intends to relocate

16. The Illegal Migration Bill was first introduced to Parliament in March 2023, and since this time the Home Office has not been processing claims for the majority of people arriving in small boats and through other irregular means. We remarked that at the time of our evidence session, individuals could not apply for asylum and the Home Secretary was not yet obliged to remove them, so they were effectively left in limbo. The Home Office said it was correct and that at the time they were pending relocation. During the evidence session the Home Office told us that the inadmissibility, once commenced, will apply to people who have arrived after 7 March 2023. This meant that some people had been waiting for more than one year to hear if they will be relocated to Rwanda or another third country, when available. In subsequent correspondence, the Home Office confirmed that the duty to remove people to Rwanda or another country would apply to individuals who arrived from 20 July 2023.²⁷

17. Many of those subject to removal will be living in Home Office accommodation, such as hotels or large sites, despite being unable to claim asylum in the UK. The Home Office spent an estimated £4.7 billion on asylum support (which covers accommodation, and financial subsistence for those who would otherwise be destitute) in the 2023–24 financial year, and the Government spent £4.3 billion of official development assistance budget (one-quarter of all aid spending) on supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, many of whom will not be entitled to claim asylum here. We challenged the Home Office that many members of the public would be surprised that it was spending so much of the overseas development assistance supporting people within the UK rather than overseas, and if it believed that was sustainable. The Home Office told us the UK had no choice but to “score it as [overseas development assistance]” but that the level of spending was not sustainable, which is why it was looking to reduce its reliance on hotels and reduce other costs, so that the official development assistance can be spent elsewhere.²⁸ The Home Office subsequently wrote to us to correct its statement and said that the UK government chose to include all in-country refugee costs as overseas development assistance.²⁹

18. The Home Office is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of people in its care, whether they are claiming asylum or pending relocation. But the National Audit Office reported that, in January 2024, the Home Office was still developing specific measures to assess how well providers were keeping residents safe in large sites. When we asked the Home Office about the safety of asylum seekers at large sites, it told us that there were benefits from the perspective of the asylum seeker of being in a large site rather than a hotel, such as dedicated healthcare provision and because they could have their asylum interviews there. We questioned what the Home Office was doing to address the particular issue of suicide or self-harm for those in its care. The Home Office outlined

27 Qq 62–64; [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee - Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership](#), dated 25 April 2024

28 Qq 28, 29; C&AG’s Report, Asylum Accommodation, para 1.4; Independent Commission for Aid Impact follow-up: [UK aid to refugees in the UK](#), 10 April 2024

29 [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee - Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership](#), dated 25 April 2024

that it undertakes screening to check suitability for room-sharing and that if tensions arise there were “signposted ways” for people to take up their concerns. It did not outline what these ways were, but it said that there was a migrant helpline available to all asylum seekers. The National Audit Office reported that decisions on who shares rooms in large sites were based primarily around people speaking the same language, and that there had been 283 incidents relating to self-harm and suicide which could in part be attributed to the Home Office’s room sharing policy.³⁰

19. The Home Office told us that health and welfare of migrants was “baked into” the way that it runs the sites and the contracts with suppliers. It said there were clear key performance indicators (KPIs) on accommodation being safe and habitable and that the providers have welfare teams on site. However, the National Audit Office reported that the contracts do not specify penalties if requirements to safeguard people are not met. The Home Office told us that there were regular contract management meetings where the KPIs are scrutinised. However, when we asked whether any financial penalties had been invoked in relation to a number of significant incidents—such as the legionella bacteria on board of the Bibby Stockholm vessel and the detection of infectious diseases at Wethersfield—the Home Office was not able to tell us if this had been the case.³¹

Working in partnership with local authorities

20. Since 2020, the Home Office has increasingly used hotels to accommodate people seeking asylum, as demand for accommodation increased and there was an insufficient supply of alternative accommodation. In October 2023, the Home Office announced that it intended to stop using some of its 400 asylum hotels in the coming months.³² The Home Office told us that there were currently around 40,000 asylum seekers in hotels, but that it had stopped using more than 100 hotels. We asked the Home Office whether this was the result of more cases being processed, and the extent to which large sites had contributed to this. It told us that there were a number of reasons it had been able to exit hotels. It explained that fewer people had arrived in 2023 than in the previous year, and that it had made “all the decisions” on the legacy backlog that enabled people who were granted asylum to leave accommodation. It also told us that it had identified a further 11,500 beds within the current hotel estate through “Operation Maximise”, which involved people sharing rooms. We asked the Home Office when it would stop using hotels in people’s communities to accommodate asylum seekers, but the Home Office told us that, although it would continue to close more hotels, it was “very difficult to put a time on that, because of the uncertainties”.³³

21. We have heard reports, including from our own constituencies, that some hotels have been left in derelict conditions following the Home Office exiting them. We received written evidence from London Councils which told us that there were concerns across the London boroughs about the standards of accommodation, including (but not limited to) concerns about poor light and ventilation, poor food quality, leaks and fire safety. We therefore asked the Home Office what consideration it had given to managing the impact on local communities, when taking over, and then leaving hotels. The Home Office told us that there were wider disbenefits to local areas of having hotels out of use, but that these

30 Qq 229–230, 240; C&AG’s report, Asylum Accommodation, paras 4.11, 4.14

31 Qq 232–233, C&AG’s Report, Asylum Accommodation, Figure 10, para 4.11

32 C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, Figure 2, para 2.2

33 Qq 215–217; 220–221; C&AG’s Report, Asylum accommodation, para 2.4

were very hard to quantify although it had “work under way to continue to assess that”. We suggested that it was risking placing a burden on local communities to return hotels to their former standards. The Home Office told us that whilst it had liaison officers working directly with every local authority, it “did not have a pot of money to regenerate hotels”.³⁴

22. The National Audit Office reported that the increase in asylum decisions had placed greater pressure on local authorities to support refugees in finding accommodation, and increased the risk of homelessness and rough sleeping.³⁵ We received written evidence from the London Councils, which told us that there were 311 refugees sleeping rough across London in January 2023, after leaving Home Office accommodation.³⁶ The Local Government Association also reported significant rises in homelessness for those leaving asylum accommodation.³⁷ Furthermore, we received reports of councils facing significant cost burdens in relation to the interactions with the Home Office. In its written evidence to us, West Lindsey District Council, the council within which the large site at Scampton resides, told us that it, and its neighbouring councils, had spent more than 1,500 staff hours in meetings with the Home Office, and additionally had spent nearly £0.5 million in staff and other expenses to manage the Home Office’s requirements.³⁸

23. The Home Office told us that it was not “cloth-eared” to the issues that local authorities faced, and that it included the challenges facing local authorities as part of its assessment of which hotels to close and in what order, but could not take responsibility for the whole housing market. It said it was now liaising directly with local authorities “in a way that perhaps in the early days we [the Home Office] were not”. It explained that local authorities now have a “place-based visibility tool” where they can see all the accommodation occupied.³⁹ There are also liaison officers working with all local authorities to understand the challenges in local areas. In its written evidence the London Councils told us that progress had been made in sharing intelligence on standards of accommodation, and the National Audit Office reported that the Home Office has started to share more data with local authorities so they have greater sight of the pipeline of refugees they may need to accommodate in the future. However, both London Councils and the Local Government Association told us there still remain significant concerns, and that they were keen to work with the government to develop a more robust cross-system approach to minimise impacts on local housing and homelessness services and reduce the risks of destitution.⁴⁰

34 Qq 224–227; UKR0010, [Written evidence submitted by London Councils](#), 15 April 2024, page 4

35 C&AG’s Report. Asylum Accommodation, para 2.9

36 UKR0010, page 4

37 UKR0007, [Written evidence submitted by The Local Government Association](#), 15 April 2024, section 3.2

38 UKR0005, [Written evidence submitted by The West Lindsey District Council, City of Lincoln Council and Lincolnshire County Council](#), 15 April 2024

39 Q 226

40 UKR0007, section 3.2; UKR0010; C&AG’s report, Asylum accommodation para 2.9

3 Measuring success and accountability to Parliament

Measuring the success of the Rwanda partnership

24. The success—and value for money—of the Rwanda partnership depends on whether it deters people from making dangerous and illegal journeys to the UK, including small boat crossings. In 2023, the Home Office estimated that illegal entries need to reduce by one third from 2022 levels for the policy to represent value for money. Based on illegal migration levels at that time, this was equivalent to approximately 10,000 people. However, estimated costs are subject to change. For example, any reduction in asylum support costs in the UK, including asylum accommodation costs, would mean more journeys need to be deterred to achieve value for money from the partnership.⁴¹

25. Accounting Officers are responsible for approving, in advance, all significant initiatives, policies, programmes and projects, and should provide assurance to Parliament that those activities are meeting the accounting officer standards set out in *Managing Public Money – regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility*.⁴² In April 2022, the Accounting Officer assessed that they were not able to conclude the third country asylum processing policy, under which the Rwanda partnership falls, would be value for money as there was insufficient evidence that it would deter enough people from making illegal journeys to the UK. They requested a ministerial direction to proceed with the policy and this remained in place at the time of the evidence session. The Accounting Officer told us that they kept their assessment of value for money under constant review. They explained that it should be possible to see whether there is a deterrent effect once flights are running.⁴³

26. Assessing the deterrent effect, and thus value for money, of the scheme will be complex. The Home Office recognised that it will be difficult to isolate the impact of the Rwanda partnership from other government policies intended to stop small boat crossings and reduce illegal migration, such as the agreement with Albania to return failed asylum seekers, work with French authorities to prevent boat crossings and wider work with countries from where asylum seekers originate.⁴⁴ We asked the Home Office about its progress in developing a methodology to assess the deterrent effect and therefore determine value for money of the scheme. The Home Office told us that it had “not yet set out exactly what will go into the assessment” as it had not begun the flights.⁴⁵ It explained that, given the variables involved, and complexity of demonstrating causality, it was planning to undertake a combination of qualitative and quantitative work to assess the scheme’s impact. This will include understanding the motivations of individuals who have not made crossings and the way that criminal gangs operate. However, despite the complexity of the task, it had not yet determined how to collect data on people that would have come, but now are not.⁴⁶

41 Qq 114, 117–118, 143–144

42 HM Treasury, [Accounting Officer Assessments – Guidance](#), May 2023 para 1.2

43 Qq 113, 117, 148; C&AG’s Report. UK-Rwanda partnership, para 1.8

44 Qq 114, 120

45 Qq 146–147

46 Qq 145, 148–151

27. The National Audit Office found that the Home Office had established arrangements to test whether the partnership was working and to oversee payments. We asked whether payments would stop if an individual left Rwanda, and how the Home Office would know if this had happened. The Home Office explained that under the terms of its agreement, the Rwandan government would be required to provide detailed information on a regular basis, including reporting individuals' on-going residence in Rwanda. We asked the Home Office how it was ensuring that the necessary safeguards were in place to protect taxpayers' money spent on the scheme. The Home Office also told us that it had established two monitoring committees and had staff in Rwanda's capital, Kigali, in readiness for the transfer of individuals. We also asked how the Home Office would ensure that the Rwandan government spent the money provided on services for those that are relocated from the UK. It explained that the Rwandan Government will be required to provide reports to the monitoring committees to ensure that money provided under the agreement is spent on providing the agreed services.⁴⁷

The Accounting Officer's responsibilities to Parliament

28. The Chairs of the Public Accounts and Home Affairs Committees have repeatedly questioned the Home Office about the lack of information available to Parliament on costs the Rwanda partnership.⁴⁸ Despite raising these concerns over the Accounting Officer's willingness to share information with Parliament in a timely manner, we were disappointed that the summary Accounting Officer Assessment on the Sovereign Borders Programme was only published in April 2024 when it had been agreed by the Home Office in June 2023. Further, the programme was approved by the Home Office's finance and investment committee in January 2023, meaning that the assessment was published some 15 months after the programme was approved. The Committee also noted that the assessment was shared with the Committee on 27 March 2024, after the Easter recess had begun, limiting the time for Parliamentary scrutiny.⁴⁹

29. We therefore asked the Accounting Officer (AO) why there had been such a delay in sharing the assessment with Parliament. The Accounting Officer told us that they kept their assessments under constant review, but that the publication of AO assessment summaries has to be agreed by relevant Ministers. They explained that, on the Sovereign Borders Programme, the Home Secretary had decided to make it public in March 2024. We reminded the Accounting Officer that he is accountable to the Public Accounts Committee and Parliament, noting that other departments have shared assessments in a much more timely manner, without Ministerial approval being a barrier.⁵⁰ HM Treasury guidance states that departments need to publish summary assessments promptly when a project is included in the Government Major Projects Portfolio. In some cases, the timing might depend on other sensitivities, such as commercial confidentiality, and the accounting officer may decide public interest is best served by delaying publication. In such circumstances, the Accounting Officer should nonetheless still share a copy of the summary assessment on a confidential basis with the chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and relevant departmental committees, along with an explanation of the need

47 Qq 123, 129–130, 132; C&AG's Report, UK-Rwanda partnership, para 10

48 Public Accounts Committee, Oral Evidence; Reducing the harm from illegal drugs, 4 December 2023, Qq 1–50

49 Qq 1, 7, 14, 22, 27; [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP, Chair, Public Accounts Committee, Home Office Sovereign Borders Programme: Summary Accounting Officer Assessment](#), dated 27 March 2024

50 Qq 1–4, 10–13

for confidentiality. In written evidence provided after the evidence session, HM Treasury noted that there may be circumstances where the accounting officer determines they are unable to share information with the Committee as they are acting within the authority of the ministers to whom they are responsible.⁵¹

30. The Accounting Officer told us that he received regular advice on a range of Home Office issues including each part, and the totality, of the programme of activity to stop the crossings of small boats and deter illegal migration. The Accounting Officer accepted his obligation to provide AO assessment summaries when there was a significant change to a programme or policy.⁵² HM Treasury wrote to use after the evidence session to clarify that a “significant change” included circumstances where a project no longer met the standards which informed the AO’s previous assessment or there was a major change in the programme’s scope.⁵³ We questioned why the Accounting Officer had not updated his AO assessment on the Sovereign Borders Programme to reflect the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act. At the evidence session, the Accounting Officer acknowledged that this was a significant piece of legislation and told us they were keeping their assessment under constant review.⁵⁴ The Home Office subsequently provided written evidence which explained that the summary assessment only covered the Nationality and Borders Act as this was the scope of the outline business case. The Home Office committed to publishing an updated summary AO assessment after the outline business case is updated to incorporate the Illegal Migration Act and Safety of Rwanda Bill.⁵⁵

31. The Home Office told us that the number of people that could be relocated to Rwanda under the partnership is uncapped. We asked about its ability to scale up to relocate more than 50,000 people to Rwanda and if it had a “plan B” if flights to Rwanda could not get off the ground quickly enough. The Home Office told us that “plan A” was implementing the Rwanda partnership but the Home Office was planning for a range of scenarios, including negotiating arrangements with other countries. We asked about progress with these negotiations, and reports in the media that the Home Office was in actively talks with four other countries about third country removal of asylum seekers, and that more countries have been approached. The Home Office told us that it did not comment on leaks, but that it would not recommend assuming that the information reported was up-to-date or accurate.⁵⁶

32. When asked for an update, the Home Office said that it was important that the substance of any negotiations with any other countries was kept private, and that it would not share the information in public. We noted that it was important that the Committee, and the Home Affairs Committee, were as updated as possible on these matters. The Accounting Officer offered to “pursue the possibility of briefing a number of you behind

51 HM Treasury, [Accounting Officer Assessments – Guidance, May 2023](#), part 4; [Letter from David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP, Follow up to 15 April – Asylum Accommodation and UK Rwanda partnership](#), dated 8 May 2024, paras 12–17

52 Qq 11–12, 16; [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee – Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership](#), dated 25 April 2024

53 [Letter from David Fairbrother, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP, Follow up to 15 April – Asylum Accommodation and UK Rwanda partnership](#), dated 8 May 2024, paras 2 - 6

54 Qq 16, 18–19

55 [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee – Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership](#), dated 25 April 2024

56 Qq 30–32, 39–40, 64–66, 77, 82, 106

the scenes”. They acknowledged that there would be a significant lead time, similar to that of the Rwanda partnership, to agree to and implement any further partnerships.⁵⁷ The Home Office provided written evidence after the session and confirmed that, working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, it had approached other countries to assess their level of interest in working with the UK as third country asylum partners. It told us that there had been no direct funding for negotiations with other potential third country asylum partners. The Home Office said that for this reason it was unable to provide any details at this stage to protect the privacy of discussions.⁵⁸

57 Qq 30–32, 40

58 [Letter from Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office, to Dame Meg Hillier DBE MP and Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chairs, Public Accounts Committee and Home Affairs Committee - Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership, dated 25 April 2024](#)

Formal minutes

Thursday 23 May 2024

Members present

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, in the Chair

Mr Jonathan Djanogly

Richard Fuller

Peter Grant

Sarah Olney

Matt Warman

Declaration of interests

The following declarations of interest relating to the inquiry were made:

11 December 2023

Olivia Blake declared the following interest: Co-Chair of the APPG on Migration and a recipient of research support provided by the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Project, of which she is a Principal.

15 April 2024

Olivia Blake declared the following interest: Co-Chair of the APPG on Migration and a recipient of research support provided by the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Project, of which she is a Principal.

Paula Barker declared the following interest: that a family member had a pecuniary interest in relation to the Committee's inquiry into Asylum accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership.

Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership

Draft Report (*Asylum Accommodation and UK-Rwanda partnership*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 32 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Thirty-fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

The Committee adjourned.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 15 April 2024

Sir Matthew Rycroft KCMG CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; **Simon Ridley**, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office; **Dan Hobbs**, Director General, Migration and Borders Group, Home Office; **Joanna Rowland**, Director General, Customer Services Group, Home Office

[Q1-258](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

UKR numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Fleury, Dr Saphia (Research Fellow, University of Hull) ([UKR0004](#))
- 2 Hodgson, Dr Natalie (Assistant Professor in Law, University of Nottingham); and Pelliconi, Dr Andrea Maria (Teaching Associate in Law, University of Nottingham) ([UKR0002](#))
- 3 Hopkins, Professor Peter (Newcastle University); Benwell, Dr Matthew (Newcastle University); and Finlay, Dr Robin (University of Sunderland) ([UKR0001](#))
- 4 Local Government Association ([UKR0007](#))
- 5 London Councils ([UKR0010](#))
- 6 Refugee Council ([UKR0006](#))
- 7 Stop Wethersfield Airfield Prisons ([UKR0009](#))
- 8 The Fields Association ([UKR0003](#))
- 9 The Migration Observatory ([UKR0008](#))
- 10 West Lindsey District Council; City of Lincoln Council; and Lincolnshire County Council ([UKR0005](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2023–24

| Number | Title | Reference |
|--------|---|-----------|
| 1st | The New Hospital Programme | HC 77 |
| 2nd | The condition of school buildings | HC 78 |
| 3rd | Revising health assessments for disability benefits | HC 79 |
| 4th | The Department for Work & Pensions Annual Report and Accounts 2022–23 | HC 290 |
| 5th | Government's programme of waste reforms | HC 333 |
| 6th | Competition in public procurement | HC 385 |
| 7th | Resilience to flooding | HC 71 |
| 8th | Improving Defence Inventory Management | HC 66 |
| 9th | Whole of Government Accounts 2020–21 | HC 65 |
| 10th | HS2 and Euston | HC 67 |
| 11th | Reducing the harm from illegal drugs | HC 72 |
| 12th | Cross-government working | HC 75 |
| 13th | Preparedness for online safety regulation | HC 73 |
| 14th | Homes for Ukraine | HC 69 |
| 15th | Managing government borrowing | HC 74 |
| 16th | HMRC performance in 2022–23 | HC 76 |
| 17th | Cabinet Office functional savings | HC 423 |
| 18th | Excess Votes 2022–23 | HC 589 |
| 19th | MoD Equipment Plan 2023–2033 | HC 451 |
| 20th | Monitoring and responding to companies in distress | HC 425 |
| 21st | Levelling up funding to local government | HC 424 |
| 22nd | Reforming adult social care in England | HC 427 |
| 23rd | Civil service workforce: Recruitment, pay and performance management | HC 452 |
| 24th | NHS Supply Chain and efficiencies in procurement | HC 453 |
| 25th | Scrutiny of sound financial practice across Government | HC 673 |
| 26th | The BBC's implementation of Across the UK | HC 426 |
| 27th | Government resilience: extreme weather | HC 454 |
| 28th | Student loans issued to those studying at franchised higher education providers | HC 455 |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--------|
| 29th | Progress in implementing Universal Credit | HC 458 |
| 30th | Non-executive appointments | HC 460 |
| 31st | Department of Health and Social Care 2022–23 Annual Report and Accounts | HC 459 |
| 32nd | Delivering value from government investment in major projects | HC 456 |
| 33rd | Value for money from legal aid | HC 481 |
| 35th | Supporting mobile connectivity | HC 650 |
| 36th | Investigation into whistleblowing in the civil service | HC 457 |
| 37th | Decarbonising home heating | HC 653 |
| 38th | Rail reform: The rail transformation programme | HC 652 |
| 1st Special Report | Eighth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts | HC 628 |

Session 2022–23

| Number | Title | Reference |
|--------|--|-----------|
| 1st | Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy Annual Report and Accounts 2020–21 | HC 59 |
| 2nd | Lessons from implementing IR35 reforms | HC 60 |
| 3rd | The future of the Advanced Gas-cooled Reactors | HC 118 |
| 4th | Use of evaluation and modelling in government | HC 254 |
| 5th | Local economic growth | HC 252 |
| 6th | Department of Health and Social Care 2020–21 Annual Report and Accounts | HC 253 |
| 7th | Armoured Vehicles: the Ajax programme | HC 259 |
| 8th | Financial sustainability of the higher education sector in England | HC 257 |
| 9th | Child Maintenance | HC 255 |
| 10th | Restoration and Renewal of Parliament | HC 49 |
| 11th | The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine programme in England | HC 258 |
| 12th | Management of PPE contracts | HC 260 |
| 13th | Secure training centres and secure schools | HC 30 |
| 14th | Investigation into the British Steel Pension Scheme | HC 251 |
| 15th | The Police Uplift Programme | HC 261 |
| 16th | Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic | HC 29 |
| 17th | Government's contracts with Randox Laboratories Ltd | HC 28 |
| 18th | Government actions to combat waste crime | HC 33 |
| 19th | Regulating after EU Exit | HC 32 |
| 20th | Whole of Government Accounts 2019–20 | HC 31 |

| Number | Title | Reference |
|---------------|---|------------------|
| 21st | Transforming electronic monitoring services | HC 34 |
| 22nd | Tackling local air quality breaches | HC 37 |
| 23rd | Measuring and reporting public sector greenhouse gas emissions | HC 39 |
| 24th | Redevelopment of Defra's animal health infrastructure | HC 42 |
| 25th | Regulation of energy suppliers | HC 41 |
| 26th | The Department for Work and Pensions' Accounts 2021–22 – Fraud and error in the benefits system | HC 44 |
| 27th | Evaluating innovation projects in children's social care | HC 38 |
| 28th | Improving the Accounting Officer Assessment process | HC 43 |
| 29th | The Affordable Homes Programme since 2015 | HC 684 |
| 30th | Developing workforce skills for a strong economy | HC 685 |
| 31st | Managing central government property | HC 48 |
| 32nd | Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity | HC 46 |
| 33rd | HMRC performance in 2021–22 | HC 686 |
| 34th | The Creation of the UK Infrastructure Bank | HC 45 |
| 35th | Introducing Integrated Care Systems | HC 47 |
| 36th | The Defence digital strategy | HC 727 |
| 37th | Support for vulnerable adolescents | HC 730 |
| 38th | Managing NHS backlogs and waiting times in England | HC 729 |
| 39th | Excess Votes 2021–22 | HC 1132 |
| 40th | COVID employment support schemes | HC 810 |
| 41st | Driving licence backlogs at the DVLA | HC 735 |
| 42nd | The Restart Scheme for long-term unemployed people | HC 733 |
| 43rd | Progress combatting fraud | HC 40 |
| 44th | The Digital Services Tax | HC 732 |
| 45th | Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy Annual Report and Accounts 2021–22 | HC 1254 |
| 46th | BBC Digital | HC 736 |
| 47th | Investigation into the UK Passport Office | HC 738 |
| 48th | MoD Equipment Plan 2022–2032 | HC 731 |
| 49th | Managing tax compliance following the pandemic | HC 739 |
| 50th | Government Shared Services | HC 734 |
| 51st | Tackling Defra's ageing digital services | HC 737 |
| 52nd | Restoration & Renewal of the Palace of Westminster – 2023 Recall | HC 1021 |
| 53rd | The performance of UK Security Vetting | HC 994 |
| 54th | Alcohol treatment services | HC 1001 |

| Number | Title | Reference |
|--------------------|---|------------------|
| 55th | Education recovery in schools in England | HC 998 |
| 56th | Supporting investment into the UK | HC 996 |
| 57th | AEA Technology Pension Case | HC 1005 |
| 58th | Energy bills support | HC 1074 |
| 59th | Decarbonising the power sector | HC 1003 |
| 60th | Timeliness of local auditor reporting | HC 995 |
| 61st | Progress on the courts and tribunals reform programme | HC 1002 |
| 62nd | Department of Health and Social Care 2021–22 Annual Report and Accounts | HC 997 |
| 63rd | HS2 Euston | HC 1004 |
| 64th | The Emergency Services Network | HC 1006 |
| 65th | Progress in improving NHS mental health services | HC 1000 |
| 66th | PPE Medpro: awarding of contracts during the pandemic | HC 1590 |
| 67th | Child Trust Funds | HC 1231 |
| 68th | Local authority administered COVID support schemes in England | HC 1234 |
| 69th | Tackling fraud and corruption against government | HC 1230 |
| 70th | Digital transformation in government: addressing the barriers to efficiency | HC 1229 |
| 71st | Resetting government programmes | HC 1231 |
| 72nd | Update on the rollout of smart meters | HC 1332 |
| 73rd | Access to urgent and emergency care | HC 1336 |
| 74th | Bulb Energy | HC 1232 |
| 75th | Active travel in England | HC 1335 |
| 76th | The Asylum Transformation Programme | HC 1334 |
| 77th | Supported housing | HC 1330 |
| 78th | Resettlement support for prison leavers | HC 1329 |
| 79th | Support for innovation to deliver net zero | HC 1331 |
| 80th | Progress with Making Tax Digital | HC 1333 |
| 1st Special Report | Sixth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts | HC 50 |
| 2nd Special Report | Seventh Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts | HC 1055 |

Session 2021–22

| Number | Title | Reference |
|---------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1st | Low emission cars | HC 186 |

| Number | Title | Reference |
|---------------|---|------------------|
| 2nd | BBC strategic financial management | HC 187 |
| 3rd | COVID-19: Support for children's education | HC 240 |
| 4th | COVID-19: Local government finance | HC 239 |
| 5th | COVID-19: Government Support for Charities | HC 250 |
| 6th | Public Sector Pensions | HC 289 |
| 7th | Adult Social Care Markets | HC 252 |
| 8th | COVID 19: Culture Recovery Fund | HC 340 |
| 9th | Fraud and Error | HC 253 |
| 10th | Overview of the English rail system | HC 170 |
| 11th | Local auditor reporting on local government in England | HC 171 |
| 12th | COVID 19: Cost Tracker Update | HC 173 |
| 13th | Initial lessons from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic | HC 175 |
| 14th | Windrush Compensation Scheme | HC 174 |
| 15th | DWP Employment support | HC 177 |
| 16th | Principles of effective regulation | HC 176 |
| 17th | High Speed 2: Progress at Summer 2021 | HC 329 |
| 18th | Government's delivery through arm's-length bodies | HC 181 |
| 19th | Protecting consumers from unsafe products | HC 180 |
| 20th | Optimising the defence estate | HC 179 |
| 21st | School Funding | HC 183 |
| 22nd | Improving the performance of major defence equipment contracts | HC 185 |
| 23rd | Test and Trace update | HC 182 |
| 24th | Crossrail: A progress update | HC 184 |
| 25th | The Department for Work and Pensions' Accounts 2020–21 – Fraud and error in the benefits system | HC 633 |
| 26th | Lessons from Greensill Capital: accreditation to business support schemes | HC 169 |
| 27th | Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme | HC 635 |
| 28th | Efficiency in government | HC 636 |
| 29th | The National Law Enforcement Data Programme | HC 638 |
| 30th | Challenges in implementing digital change | HC 637 |
| 31st | Environmental Land Management Scheme | HC 639 |
| 32nd | Delivering gigabitcapable broadband | HC 743 |
| 33rd | Underpayments of the State Pension | HC 654 |
| 34th | Local Government Finance System: Overview and Challenges | HC 646 |

| Number | Title | Reference |
|--------------------|---|------------------|
| 35th | The pharmacy early payment and salary advance schemes in the NHS | HC 745 |
| 36th | EU Exit: UK Border post transition | HC 746 |
| 37th | HMRC Performance in 2020–21 | HC 641 |
| 38th | COVID-19 cost tracker update | HC 640 |
| 39th | DWP Employment Support: Kickstart Scheme | HC 655 |
| 40th | Excess votes 2020–21: Serious Fraud Office | HC 1099 |
| 41st | Achieving Net Zero: Follow up | HC 642 |
| 42nd | Financial sustainability of schools in England | HC 650 |
| 43rd | Reducing the backlog in criminal courts | HC 643 |
| 44th | NHS backlogs and waiting times in England | HC 747 |
| 45th | Progress with trade negotiations | HC 993 |
| 46th | Government preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons for government on risk | HC 952 |
| 47th | Academies Sector Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20 | HC 994 |
| 48th | HMRC's management of tax debt | HC 953 |
| 49th | Regulation of private renting | HC 996 |
| 50th | Bounce Back Loans Scheme: Follow-up | HC 951 |
| 51st | Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system | HC 997 |
| 52nd | Ministry of Defence Equipment Plan 2021–31 | HC 1164 |
| 1st Special Report | Fifth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts | HC 222 |

Session 2019–21

| Number | Title | Reference |
|---------------|--|------------------|
| 1st | Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities | HC 85 |
| 2nd | Defence Nuclear Infrastructure | HC 86 |
| 3rd | High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update | HC 84 |
| 4th | EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign | HC 131 |
| 5th | University technical colleges | HC 87 |
| 6th | Excess votes 2018–19 | HC 243 |
| 7th | Gambling regulation: problem gambling and protecting vulnerable people | HC 134 |
| 8th | NHS capital expenditure and financial management | HC 344 |
| 9th | Water supply and demand management | HC 378 |
| 10th | Defence capability and the Equipment Plan | HC 247 |

| Number | Title | Reference |
|---------------|--|------------------|
| 11th | Local authority investment in commercial property | HC 312 |
| 12th | Management of tax reliefs | HC 379 |
| 13th | Whole of Government Response to COVID-19 | HC 404 |
| 14th | Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak | HC 405 |
| 15th | Improving the prison estate | HC 244 |
| 16th | Progress in remediating dangerous cladding | HC 406 |
| 17th | Immigration enforcement | HC 407 |
| 18th | NHS nursing workforce | HC 408 |
| 19th | Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster | HC 549 |
| 20th | Tackling the tax gap | HC 650 |
| 21st | Government support for UK exporters | HC 679 |
| 22nd | Digital transformation in the NHS | HC 680 |
| 23rd | Delivering carrier strike | HC 684 |
| 24th | Selecting towns for the Towns Fund | HC 651 |
| 25th | Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme | HC 683 |
| 26th | Department of Work and Pensions Accounts 2019–20 | HC 681 |
| 27th | Covid-19: Supply of ventilators | HC 685 |
| 28th | The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's management of the Magnox contract | HC 653 |
| 29th | Whitehall preparations for EU Exit | HC 682 |
| 30th | The production and distribution of cash | HC 654 |
| 31st | Starter Homes | HC 88 |
| 32nd | Specialist Skills in the civil service | HC 686 |
| 33rd | Covid-19: Bounce Back Loan Scheme | HC 687 |
| 34th | Covid-19: Support for jobs | HC 920 |
| 35th | Improving Broadband | HC 688 |
| 36th | HMRC performance 2019–20 | HC 690 |
| 37th | Whole of Government Accounts 2018–19 | HC 655 |
| 38th | Managing colleges' financial sustainability | HC 692 |
| 39th | Lessons from major projects and programmes | HC 694 |
| 40th | Achieving government's long-term environmental goals | HC 927 |
| 41st | COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme | HC 689 |
| 42nd | COVID-19: Government procurement and supply of Personal Protective Equipment | HC 928 |
| 43rd | COVID-19: Planning for a vaccine Part 1 | HC 930 |
| 44th | Excess Votes 2019–20 | HC 1205 |

| Number | Title | Reference |
|---------------|---|------------------|
| 45th | Managing flood risk | HC 931 |
| 46th | Achieving Net Zero | HC 935 |
| 47th | COVID-19: Test, track and trace (part 1) | HC 932 |
| 48th | Digital Services at the Border | HC 936 |
| 49th | COVID-19: housing people sleeping rough | HC 934 |
| 50th | Defence Equipment Plan 2020–2030 | HC 693 |
| 51st | Managing the expiry of PFI contracts | HC 1114 |
| 52nd | Key challenges facing the Ministry of Justice | HC 1190 |
| 53rd | Covid 19: supporting the vulnerable during lockdown | HC 938 |
| 54th | Improving single living accommodation for service personnel | HC 940 |
| 55th | Environmental tax measures | HC 937 |
| 56th | Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund | HC 941 |