



House of Commons
Public Accounts Committee

Digital Services at the Border

**Forty-Eighth Report of Session
2019–21**

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

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 4 March 2021*

The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

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Summary

The Home Office (the Department) has presided over a litany of failure in nearly 20 years of non-delivery of digital border programmes, with significant delays introducing additional costs to taxpayers, continued dependency on contractors to maintain legacy programmes, and delayed delivery of benefits to Border Force officers, other users and passengers. The Digital Services at the Border (DSAB) programme is crucial to delivering the Department's overall objectives for national security at the border to protect the public from terrorism, crime, illegal immigration and trafficking, and is vital for facilitating the legitimate movement of people across the border. Following the 2011 abandonment of the e-borders programme which it began in 2003 and despite assurances from numerous senior Departmental officials over the years, the Department has now delayed delivery of its original objective of improved information at the border by a further three years, with little demonstrable lesson learning. The Department failed to respond to or address risks and problems flagged to the programme board earlier in the DSAB programme and false assurances about progress left the Department unable to act on accurate information.

The Department failed to deliver the DSAB programme by the March 2019 target it originally planned, with delays so far costing £173 million. It has since reset with a reduced scope and a plan to deliver three years later, pushing delivery back to the end of March 2022. It started its latest roll out of the Border Crossing part of the programme in December 2020, but Border Crossing is so far being used by only 300 staff, well short of the 7,000 who should be using the system by June 2021 and previous attempts to roll out Border Crossing experienced technical difficulties. The Department has yet to deliver another core part of the reset DSAB programme—modernising rather than replacing Semaphore—and must also manage interdependencies with other programmes (Data Futures, e-gates) if it is to deliver the practical benefits for frontline Border Force officers, other users and passengers. The Department is planning for more than 140 million passengers a year to pass through its the new DSAB systems; but it has not yet shown that the new systems will be able to cope with existing volumes, let alone a 6% annual increase to this scale of activity.

Introduction

The Home Office (the Department) is responsible for protecting the border at over 270 crossing points and 56 major entry points. Border Force, a law enforcement command within the Department, has the lead operational responsibility for securing the United Kingdom border by carrying out immigration and customs controls on people and goods entering the UK. Upgrading or replacing legacy systems and improving information at the border through digital transformation programmes has been an ambition of the Department since the launch of its e-borders programme in 2003. In 2014, the Department started its Digital Services at the Border programme (the programme) with a budget of £199 million, as a new attempt to achieve its objectives by March 2019 through replacing the legacy systems Warnings Index and Semaphore. In 2019 the Department 'reset' the programme due to changed priorities to support its broader ambition for a digitised immigration system and to provide the border controls required following the UK's decision to leave the EU, as well as scope creep and poor programme performance. The reset refocused the programme on rolling out Border Crossing and improving rather than replacing the Semaphore system as well as removing goods from the programme scope. This decision extended the programme's delivery timescales by three years and increased costs by £173 million. The Department now expects to deliver the programme by the end of March 2022.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Department continues to struggle with delivery of technology programmes at staggering cost to the taxpayer.** In 2011 the Department abandoned its 2003 initiated e-borders programme having spent at least £340 million on it, as well as £185 million spent on a legal case for cancelling the contract. The delayed delivery of the successor Digital Services at the Border programme has already cost the taxpayer £173 million. Issues with delayed technology delivery in the Department run wider than the DSAB programme. Delays to another of its technology programmes, the Emergency Services Network, are costing taxpayers £650 million a year, and the Department does not plan to end the current system that the Emergency Services Network is meant to replace until 2025, which will be 6 years late. In March 2020 the Department's entire major project portfolio was rated Red (meaning that it was impossible for it to deliver all its programmes on time and to budget), with Digital Services at the Border and Emergency Services Network being the biggest risks. The Department considers that cultural change is required, along with increasing continuity of leadership for major programmes, having people with the right combination of skills in each role and incentivising all staff to raise problems early to address these issues.

Recommendation: *The Permanent Secretary should review the major technology programmes within the Department's portfolio and write to the Committee within three months with his updated assessment of each programme's progress and of what impact he expects each programme to have.*

2. **The Department has failed to identify, acknowledge and be transparent about problems within the Digital Services at the Border programme.** Optimism bias about delivery and a failure to be open and transparent about delays left the Department unable to act on accurate information and exposed it to increased costs due to delays in identifying the need to reset the programme. In 2016 the Department made commitments to Parliament that the Digital Services at the Border programme was on track to deliver in 2017. Only in 2019 did the Department accept that it needed to reduce and narrow the scope of the programme to make it more deliverable. The Department put delays and subsequent reduction in scope of the Digital Services at the Border programme down to EU Exit and changes to classification of security data, but it had failed to make any contingency plans for the UK leaving the EU and the changes to classification were in place before the programme started.

Recommendation: *The Department should report back to the Committee on:*

- *its mechanisms for oversight and assurance of delivery and how it knows whether they are working;*
 - *any costs incurred from deviating from the Department's delivery plans.*
3. **The Department's failure to deliver the Digital Services at the Border programme by March 2019 was caused by a lack of effective leadership, management and oversight.** The Department accepts that the Digital Services at the Border programme did not achieve value for money up to 2019, with none of the three

systems being delivered as planned. It failed to respond to or address risks that were flagged to the programme board. There have been three Accounting Officers and four Senior Responsible Owners (SROs) since the Digital Services at the Border programme began. The Department now expects the Digital Services at the Border programme SRO to focus full-time on seeing the programme through to delivery. The Department claims to have streamlined its oversight and reporting and says that in future it will hold its programme leaders more closely to account for programme delivery.

Recommendation: *The Department should set out specifically what it is doing differently in its approach to the DSAB programme to ensure that it is delivered on time to its revised end March 2022 timetable.*

4. **The Department has struggled to deliver the core technical components of the Digital Services at the Border programme.** The Department has faced repeated problems with the technical aspects of delivery which means it has continued to depend on existing suppliers and extending contracts, with further cost implications. It struggled for several years to find a workable technical solution for storing secret data following the change of data security classification. The Department was also slow to respond to the consequences of EU exit and changes to intelligence requirements. The Department had to suspend its Border Crossing pilot system in March 2020 because it was not stable enough and was only available to frontline staff included in the pilot for 54% of the days it was in operation. The Department has struggled to retain people with the technical skills it requires but tells us it now has a balance between technical and frontline skills with relevant people better able to manage different aspects of the programme.

Recommendation: *The Department should set out what it has done to resolve the problems it has had with the technical components of the programme and what it will do if these components are not working as intended to the timescales it has planned.*

5. **We see a clear risk that the Department will not be able to deliver the programme by the end of March 2022.** The Department started its latest rollout of the Border Crossing system on time, but it has so far reached only 300 frontline users at 7 locations out of an intended 7,000 at 56 locations by June 2021. It still has no proof that systems can cope with passenger volumes that existed prior to COVID-19, let alone the 6% annual growth in the volume of passengers it is allowing for above the 140 million people that arrived in the UK annually prior to COVID-19. The Department also plans to include new mobile technology so that Border Force staff covering small ports and airports not included in the Border Crossing rollout will still benefit from the delivery of the Digital Services at the Border programme. Despite recent modest improvements to its risk ratings and achievement against milestones, the Department's own rating of scope risk was Red as recently as August 2020.

Recommendation: *The Department should set out and explain its exact milestones up to overall programme delivery by the end of March 2022 for the main elements of the Digital Services at the Border programme, including Border Crossing, Semaphore, connecting to e-gates and holding secret level data.*

6. **The Department's ambitions for the border and its delivery of practical improvements for users depend upon it coordinating the implementation of the Digital Services at the Border programme with the delivery of several related projects.** The Department's aim to provide UK Border Force staff with better information to make decisions about people crossing the border and to track goods entering and exiting the UK depends on it delivering all elements of the new systems on time. It is also reliant on the delivery of other interdependent projects such as e-gates and port infrastructure upgrades to meet this aim. The Department has significant interdependencies to manage with the Data Futures programme to realise the original Digital Services at the Border programme's objective of better tracking goods entering and exiting the UK.

Recommendation: The Department should set out progress against planned milestones for related programmes, any impacts on frontline Border Force staff and people using border services, and what it is doing to mitigate these impacts.

1 Multiple failures to deliver a digital border

1. Based on a report by the Comptroller & Auditor General we took evidence from the Home Office (the Department), including from Border Force, on progress with the Digital Services at the Border (DSAB) programme.¹

2. The Home Office (the Department) is responsible for protecting the border at over 270 crossing points and 56 major entry points. Border Force, a law enforcement command within the Department, has the lead operational responsibility for securing the United Kingdom border by carrying out immigration and customs controls on people and goods entering the UK. At present Border Force officers rely on legacy systems that are at least 15 years old to provide information on people crossing the border and the Department considers these legacy systems expensive, difficult to maintain and unfit for its future needs. Upgrading or replacing legacy systems and improving information at the border through digital transformation programmes has been an ambition of the Department since the launch of its e-borders programme in 2003.²

3. In 2014, the Department started its Digital Services at the Border programme (the programme) with a budget of £199 million, as a new attempt to achieve its objectives by March 2019 through replacing the legacy systems Warnings Index and Semaphore. In 2019 the Department ‘reset’ the programme due to changed priorities to support its broader ambition for a digitised immigration system and to provide the border controls required following the UK’s decision to leave the EU, as well as scope creep and poor programme performance. The reset refocused the programme on rolling out Border Crossing and improving rather than replacing the Semaphore system as well as removing goods from the programme scope. This decision extended the programme’s delivery timescales by three years and increased costs by £173 million. The Department now expects to deliver the programme by the end of March 2022.³

The Department’s struggles with technology programmes

4. The Department began its attempts to digitise the UK Border to better identify persons of interest in 2003 with the e-borders programme. It abandoned e-borders in 2011 following the termination of its contract with the main supplier, Raytheon, the previous year.⁴ The Department spent at least £340 million on e-borders and also spent a total of £185 million in a protracted legal dispute with Raytheon.⁵ The Department began the Digital Services at the Border (DSAB) programme in 2014 as the intended replacement for e-borders with a budget of £199 million and a delivery date of March 2019. Following a reset of the programme in 2019, the Department now expects that the programme will not deliver until 2022, and that this delay will cost £173 million.⁶

1 C&AG’s Report, *Digital Services at the Border*, Session 2019–21, HC 1069, 9 December 2020

2 C&AG’s Report para 3

3 C&AG’s Report para 5

4 C&AG’s Report para 3

5 C&AG’s Report, *E-Borders and Successor Systems* Para 8, Session 2015–16, HC 608, 7 December 2015; and C&AG’s Report, *Digital Services at the Border* Para 1.8

6 C&AG’s Report paras 3, 9

5. The Department's inability to deliver any of the three DSAB systems as planned follows a pattern of expensive failure in its technology programmes. Notably, the Emergency Services Network programme is currently costing taxpayers £650 million for each year delivery is delayed and the Department does not plan to end the current system until 2025, which would be six years after it was originally meant to deliver.⁷ The Department noted that it had some successes with digital programmes, including the EU Settlement Scheme and the Future Border and Immigration System, albeit on a different scale to DSAB.⁸ However, the Department also told us that its entire major projects portfolio was rated red in March 2020, meaning that it was impossible for it to deliver all its programmes on time and to budget.⁹ The Permanent Secretary described DSAB and ESN as being among the Department's biggest programme risks.¹⁰

6. The Department identified three major problems which impede its delivery of technology projects: scope, governance and deliverability. The Department explained that it reset the DSAB programme in 2019 to narrow the scope with the intention of making it more deliverable.¹¹ The Department is also seeking to create a culture that incentivises staff to raise issues as early as possible, as part of its attempts to improve governance. The challenge of creating an effective delivery culture within the DSAB programme has been exacerbated by a lack of leadership continuity, with frequent changes of Senior Responsible Owner. The Department also acknowledged the importance of ensuring the correct skills are in place.¹²

Failure to acknowledge and be transparent about problems

7. In a May 2016 Treasury Minute response to this Committee, the Department provided Parliament with assurance over several aspects of DSAB. It committed to delivering Advanced Freight Targeting Capability in 2017 and to rolling out Border Crossing nationally by 2017. It did not meet these commitments and had still not delivered these systems when the programme was eventually reset in 2019.¹³

8. The Department noted that this was part of a wider pattern whereby those involved with the programme wanted to present a positive direction for the programme to senior management at a time when the programme was struggling in 2017 and 2018.¹⁴ This resulted in a failure to be open and transparent about delays.¹⁵ As a result, information about the progress of the programme was not passed up the line as required. This led to the Department not deciding to reset the programme until 2019, which in turn has resulted in additional costs.¹⁶

9. The Department suggested that external factors had hindered the programme, noting that new requirements emerged following the EU Exit referendum results in

7 Q 45; C&AG's report *Progress delivering the Emergency Services Network*, Session 2017–19, HC 2140, 10 May 2019, Para 5

8 Q 44

9 Q 66

10 Q 49

11 Q 37

12 Qq 66, 67

13 Qq 37, 38; HM Treasury, *Treasury Minutes – Government responses on the Twenty–Seventh to the Thirty–Third reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2015–16*, Cm 9270, May 2016

14 Q 81

15 Q 67

16 Q 81

2016. However, it did not make contingency plans prior to the referendum and did not clarify these requirements until December 2018. The Department's May 2016 Treasury Minute response to this Committee made no mention of assurances about progress being conditional on the outcome of the EU Exit referendum the following month. Other factors external to the programme quoted by the Department included changes to data security classification practices and intelligence requirements. The latter emphasised integrating intelligence on goods and people rather than developing Advanced Freight Targeting Capability separately for goods.¹⁷ We noted that changes to data security classification were already known when the programme started in 2014 but it still took several years to identify a solution.¹⁸

17 Qq 38, 39, 110

18 Q 40

2 Failures of the DSAB Programme

Leadership, management and oversight

10. The Department acknowledged that by the time of its reset, the programme had not delivered the value for money that had originally been intended. The Department had delivered none of the three systems that it had intended to deliver on time.¹⁹ The programme removed two of these systems from the scope in the reset, moving their capability to other programmes within the Department which will deliver later than the Digital Services at the Border Programme.²⁰

11. Problems with the programme were compounded by instability among its senior leadership. The programme had four different Senior Responsible Owners (SRO) between 2014 and 2020, with the current SRO being the longest serving after just over 2 years in post.²¹ The Department has also had three Permanent Secretaries during the life of the programme. The Department has acknowledged that previous SROs had other roles outside the programme, reducing their time and focus on the programme. The Department stated that it has changed this situation so that being the SRO on programmes of this size is a full-time role and has committed to seeking greater continuity in the position, with the expectation that the current SRO should stay in post until programme delivery.²²

12. The Department failed to act on risks that were being flagged. The Committee noted that ongoing issues existed but that the Department did not address them, in part because information was not being communicated effectively by the programme team to the wider Department.²³ Since the programme reset the Department claims to have streamlined its oversight of the programme, including closer scrutiny by its digital and data programme staff and with monthly reports from the SRO to the Border Force board.²⁴

Difficulties in delivering technical aspects

13. The Department has faced repeated technical difficulties in delivering the programme. These difficulties have caused delays which in turn have forced the Department to extend existing contracts for legacy systems, at a cost of £145 million between 2019 and 2022.²⁵ This also meant that frontline Border Force staff needed to continue using existing systems in their work and delayed the delivery of benefits to them.²⁶

14. Some of the technical difficulties involved responding to the external factors that hindered the programme. For example, the Department created the Future Border and Immigration System (FBIS) programme in response to EU Exit which developed six new interfaces with which the DSAB systems needed to connect. In addition, the Department

19 Qq 36, 90
 20 Qq 36, 104–105
 21 Qq 65, 66
 22 Qq 66, 84
 23 Q 81
 24 Q 70
 25 Q 90
 26 Q 31

explained that it had attempted to collaborate with other departments on storing secret data before eventually accepting the need to build its own data centre.²⁷ These were the main external factors behind the programmes eventual reset.

15. The programme suspended an attempted roll-out of the Border Crossing system in March 2020.²⁸ The system had difficulty operating reliably at scale, with stability problems causing it to be available for only 54% of the days that it was supposed to be available, and roll-out limitations meaning that it was only available to 783 users out of a required 7,000.²⁹ The programme started the latest roll-out of Border Crossing at the beginning of December after attempting to fix these difficulties. The latest roll-out has so far been available 98% of the time. While this is an improvement on previous performance, the Department has set a requirement of 99.93% to be met by April 2021.³⁰

16. The Department acknowledged that it has faced strong competition for people with the scarce technical skills required to deliver the programme, including from other government departments. The Department has now designed framework contracts with outside suppliers so that it is the responsibility of the suppliers to provide the right people with the right skills to support the programme.³¹ To support its skills base the programme has building the working relationship between the Department's Digital, Data and Technology team and Border Force. The Department stated that this has improved the balance between the technical experts who understand the necessary system requirements and frontline staff who understand the user perspective. The Department is also attempting to improve civil service skills for the long-term.³²

27 Qq 39, 40

28 Q 89

29 Q 59; C&AG's Report, *Digital Services at the Border* Figure 12

30 Q 59; C&AG's Report, *Digital Services at the Border* para 3.8

31 Q 66

32 Qq 66, 74

3 Delivering the reset programme

The risk of late delivery

17. The latest roll-out of Border Crossing started on time at the beginning of December 2020. So far it has reached 7 locations and 300 users.³³ Although this is on schedule, the programme has some way to go to reach its intended goal of 56 locations and 7,000 users by the end of June 2021, as part of ensuring overall programme delivery by the end of March 2022. Due to low passenger numbers resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic Border Crossing has not been operationally tested at the scale it is expected to require based on passenger number expectations outside of the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 6% increases year on year expected in the long-run over the 140 million passengers per year passing through the UK border prior to COVID-19.³⁴ The low passenger numbers have however allowed the programme to address initial problems.³⁵

18. The Department has outlined plans to ensure Border Crossing systems are available at crossing points other than the 56 major entry points which will have permanent access to the system. The Department stated that this will involve a mobile capability which will allow Border Force officers to access the Border Crossing system temporarily at other entry points when they determine by a risk-based assessment that this is necessary.³⁶ The Department has yet to fully set out its approach to delivering this mobile capability.

19. There has been some improvement in the risk ratings applied to the programme. The most recent IPA review rated it as amber, having previously been amber-red following the reset. This was in response to improved governance and leadership in line with recommendations from the IPA and from an internal Department review.³⁷ Despite these modest improvements the programme still rated its own scope risk as red as recently as August 2020 after one aspect of programme delivery slipped on its timeline, although it has since returned to amber.³⁸

Coordination with related projects

20. For the Department to deliver its planned improvements to border security, it is dependent on the quality of the data input into its information systems. This will include new system inputs from European Union countries after Schengen Information System II (SIS II) uploads and records were removed from UK systems following the end of the transition period.³⁹ These inputs will be replaced by uploads and records from Interpol. With either SIS II or Interpol, the UK is dependent on the speed with which other countries upload information onto these systems.⁴⁰

21. The Department's ambitions for the border as a whole and delivery of practical improvements for users require timely delivery of all elements of the new DSAB systems,

33 Qq 58, 59, 85

34 Qq 85, 88, 106

35 Q 88

36 Qq 62, 64

37 Q 54

38 Q 56

39 Q 25

40 Qq 24, 25

as well as effective interdependencies with systems from other programmes.⁴¹ The Department noted the importance of re-platforming Semaphore to allow that system to continue operating. Some of the technology originally developed for DSAB is also being taken forward by the Data Futures programme. The Department expects the key part of the Data Futures programme associated with the original DSAB scope to deliver in 2022–23.⁴² The Department also needs to integrate the Border Crossing system with e-gates, in order to check passengers using those gates against the new system, as well as upgrade infrastructure including network connections at ports to enable these systems to operate effectively.⁴³

22. The Department stated that, if the programme is not delivered on time, its contingency is to extend existing contracts with Warnings Index and Semaphore, including using extension clauses in the existing contracts. The Department is seeking to avoid this for two reasons. Firstly, running those existing systems instead of delivering the programme would cost £130 million over 10 years and necessitate reliance on systems that would be very difficult to sustain during that period as the Warnings Index would be over 35 years old by the end of it.⁴⁴ Secondly, continuing to use the existing systems delays the benefits of the newer systems, which are more user-friendly for staff operating at the border. For example, Border Crossing shows the age of passengers passing through rather than just their date of birth, removing the need for border staff to calculate the age themselves.⁴⁵

41 Q 111

42 Qq 103, 105, 106

43 Q 92; C&AG's Report, *Digital Services at the Border* Para 3.11

44 Qq 100–102

45 Q 31

Formal minutes

Thursday 4 March 2021

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Olivia Blake

Sir Bernard Jenkin

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown

Nick Smith

Mr Richard Holden

Draft Report (*Digital Services at the Border*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 22 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Forty-eighth 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, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Monday 8 March at 1:45pm]

Witnesses

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

Monday 1 February 2021

Matthew Rycroft CBE, Permanent Secretary, Home Office; **John Gillan**, Senior Director, Border Force Systems and Change, and SRO for digital services at the border, Home Office; **Paul Lincoln**, Director General, Border Force

[Q1-114](#)

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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42nd	COVID-19: Government procurement and supply of Personal Protective Equipment	HC 928
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44th	Excess Votes 2019–20	HC 1205
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