

Forty-Eighth Report of Session 2019-21

Home Office - Border Force

Digital Services at the Border

Introduction from the Committee

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.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence, on Monday 1 February 2021 from the Home Office. The Committee published its report on 12 March 2021. This is the government's response to the Committee's report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: [C&AG's Report, Digital Services at the Border](#) – Session 2019-21 (HC 1069)
- PAC report: [Digital services at the Border](#) – Session 2019-21 (HC 936)

Government response to the Committee

1: PAC conclusion: *The Department continues to struggle with delivery of technology programmes at staggering cost to the taxpayer.*

1: PAC 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.*

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation: June 2021

1.2 There is a significant and robust assurance regime in place covering the department's major technology programmes, for which the Permanent Secretary receives regular updates.

1.3 As part of the Home Office's (the department) Project Delivery Improvement agenda, Ministers (supported by senior officials and non-executive directors) led a comprehensive review of the Home Office's Portfolio of Major Programmes during the summer of 2020. This review included specific focus on technology programmes. This comprehensive review involved detailed, Minister-led challenge panels that spanned all major technology programmes. The review was an incredibly thorough exercise of data gathering and deep dives. Since this review has concluded, Ministers, senior officials and the executive committee have continued to monitor progress and receive regular updates on the health of the portfolio and any associated prioritisation decisions that may be required.

1.4 The Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) carry out independent assurance reviews that include the major technology programmes, providing assurance for the department's most complex and high-risk projects. There is a very significant regime of assurance in place at programme and portfolio level including independent assurance activity and challenge from non-executives who support the Permanent Secretary. Furthermore, the Permanent Secretary has personally undertaken specific deep dives where issues are escalated, for example, [Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme](#) (ESMCP) and National Law Enforcement Data Programme (NLEDP).

1.5 The Permanent Secretary will write to the Committee within three months providing an assessment of each programme's progress and anticipated benefits.

2: PAC conclusion: *The Department has failed to identify, acknowledge and be transparent about problems within the Digital Services at the Border programme.*

2: PAC 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.*

2.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented:

2.2 The programme was independently reviewed and reset in 2019 including rescoping and re-planning. The business case was revised and was then approved by the Home Office Portfolio Investment Committee and HM Treasury in July 2020. Since reset, the programme has delivered all key milestones on time and has spent in line with budget forecasts.

2.3 The programme has robust assurance oversight processes including independent reviews and checks by, including: the IPA (most recent review in June 2020 and next review planned for July 2021), the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) and quarterly reporting to the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP). The programme was also included in the Ministerial challenge work through 2020. The department will report back to the Committee to provide the outcome of the July 2021 IPA report.

2.4 There are monthly programme boards chaired by the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) where delivery plans, risks and dependencies are managed, and this ensures appropriate decisions, escalation routes and solutions are provided to ensure delivery to plans is maintained.

2.5 A dedicated programme assurance lead was appointed in November 2020 to coordinate assurance activity and ensure that all recommendations are tracked and reported against. The programme also has representatives of IPA, GIAA and Home Office wide independent internal assurance embedded in the programme as board members.

2.6 Programme finances are reviewed by the programme board, and since the programme rescope and revised business case spend has tracked to profile and is forecast to be within budget tolerances at the 2020-21 financial year end. Since 2019, there has been no deviation from major delivery milestones and no additional costs incurred.

3: PAC conclusion: *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.*

3: PAC 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.*

3.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

3.2 The reset in 2019 provided valuable lessons learned which the department has implemented, including:

- the SRO having responsibility for one major programme and being able to flex their time commitment at varying points of the programme lifecycle, to ensure alignment and commitment to delivery of similar changes across the department;
- new governance including comprehensive risk and governance processes, and mechanisms for managing change and scope requests and scope change are all embedded within the programme;
- setting a manageable scope for the Digital Services at the Border (DSAB) programme and not trying to do too much;
- the appointment of separate Programme and Technical Delivery directors to reinforce the senior leadership team;
- establishing and using frameworks so technical resources can be quickly secured and deployed to support the phases of the programme;
- building upon learning from the Border Crossing pilot into the current national rollout;
- strengthening stakeholder representation at the programme board and in response to GIAA recommendations, the department has improved stakeholder engagement and tracking; and
- increased allocated time for presentation of technical challenges at the programme board.

3.3 The technical differences in the department's approach are:

- the programme is delivering incrementally with short feedback loops;
- key design decisions are flowing through the Home Office wide Technical Design Authority (TDA);
- the department has taken an industry standard product-based approach;
- teams work more collaboratively to deliver the roadmap;
- estimating is data driven, using metrics from teams to improve forecasting accuracy. The people doing the work provide the estimates; and
- there is a much stronger grip on dependencies and sequencing to enable the department to achieve its key goals.

4: PAC conclusion: *The Department has struggled to deliver the core technical components of the Digital Services at the Border programme.*

4a: PAC 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.....*

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

4.2 The department has implemented agile working methodologies and has access to a specialist technical resource framework to acquire the right people for the right piece of work. The department has also ensured that:

- the Border Crossing product has been migrated to a new more robust platform and refactored scalability to provide High availability;
- the "secret data" (S*) side of the solution has been refactored and then re-imagined to overcome the technical issues of the first iteration;
- logging and monitoring is deployed as standard on every service, to provide effective feedback;
- Site Reliability Engineering is part of the engineering ethos which has been applied to provide consistent patterns and designs to support a highly available and resilient service;
- all requirements are defined, tracked and monitored; and
- performance testing is a key part of every release cycle.

4b: PAC recommendation: what the department will do if these components are not working as intended to the timescales it has planned.

4.3 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

4.4 The programme has instituted a risk management approach which the GIAA, IPA and National Audit Office (NAO) recognise.

4.5. Acting on the NAO recommendation, the programme team led a Red Team risk analysis in January 2021 to review the risks of failed or late delivery and has updated the contingencies and mitigations. These included:

- adding time contingency to the watch-listing and search plans, whilst maintaining the milestone to move away from legacy systems;
- undertaking a risk survey to sensor check risk handling within the programme; and
- implementing a revised risk strategy to provide resilience until programme closure.

4.6 The SRO, as having an aligned understanding of the similar changes across the department, and with input from both the Technical and Programme Delivery directors can assess and reassign, if necessary, resources to mitigate any impacts on the planned timescale.

5: PAC conclusion: We see a clear risk that the Department will not be able to deliver the programme by the end of March 2022.

5: PAC 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.

5.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

5.2 The detailed programme delivery plan has been further amplified with exact milestones baselined at the DSAB programme board, running through to the end of the programme in March 2022. All the main elements of delivery within the DSAB programme: Border Crossing, Semaphore, eGate connectivity and administration of secret level data are inclusive of the agreed plan. All related or dependent programmes have agreed and signed off on them.

6: PAC conclusion: 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.

6a: PAC recommendation: The Department should set out progress against planned milestones for related programmes, any impacts on frontline Border Force staff, people using border services and what it is doing to mitigate these impacts

6.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

6.2 Progress against planned milestones is set against a managed set of dependencies which have been captured and are tracked and reviewed within the programme and wider portfolio. As part of this

process, any impacts would be mitigated and would form part of feedback process via the business change team to the frontline and back, ensuring all changes are embedded effectively and efficiently for go-live of the system.

6.3 Border Force staff will experience no degradation of frontline capability, and it will add more functionality and improve the operability beyond what was originally envisaged. Passengers using border services will receive an improved journey experience through the UK primary check points, but there will be no physical change.

6.4 The department provides updates to the Border Immigration and Citizenship Systems (BICS) Transformation board as to progress against milestones to align with related programmes.

6.5 Digitising the Border (DtB) (permission to travel systems) within the Future Borders and Immigration System (FBIS), Cerberus (watchlisting and intelligence) and eGates (connection with Border Crossing), all related programmes all attend the department's programme board, have access to published plans and can confidently and openly challenge progress of milestones against delivery plans and track resolution activity. None have reported delays or detrimental impacts to their milestones in relation to delivery activity, and all are progressing against their own milestones.