

By Email Only

21 October 2021

Dear Chair,

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss with the Committee on 22 September a range of Home Office issues. During the session, the Second Permanent Secretary and I committed to follow up on several points. Please see below our responses on each of these.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

You asked about unaccompanied asylum-seeking children staying in bridging hotels.

We are currently using two hotel sites to accommodate UASC, in Hythe and Brighton & Hove. We have, on occasion, used a hotel near Heathrow for UASCs with COVID-19.

As of 11.00hrs on 30 September 2021, there were 62 UASC in these hotels, of which 7 are from Afghanistan. They are from a broad range of nationalities, and none were brought to the UK as part of our evacuation of Afghanistan nationals.

You will understand that this is an operational matter and that the numbers are frequently changing.

The Committee also asked further details about the dedicated care workers looking after UASC.

As noted during the session, those UASC who are staying in hotels are cared for by dedicated care workers 24/7 during their stay. Social Workers and Nurses attend at least three days a week. Children staying in the hotel are on a rolling rota with local GP practices to ensure they are seen by medical professionals, which includes dental services. NGOs also provide support.

Care workers, social workers and nurses are trained and/or qualified in line with the requirements of their professionally registered bodies. They are also regulated by their respective regulatory bodies in the UK.

Some of the dedicated care workers speak appropriate languages and there is access to interpreters 24/7 through Big Word and internal Home Office interpreters.

Staff have been provided via agencies who specialise in providing social workers, support workers and nurses. Social workers are interviewed by Home Office officials.

All the care workers have been provided by an agency which also provides care staff for Kent County Council and the Refugee Council. All care staff are DBS cleared and their CVs are provided by the agency for approval. In summary, the care workers are provided by an agency experienced in providing similar safeguarding skills to local authorities and charities.

Bridging Hotels

You asked for detail on the timetable for those in bridging hotels to be moved to longer-term accommodation.

As I set out in the evidence session, we are taking steps to match families in the bridging hotels to their permanent local authority accommodation. We will match families according to size of property, status in the UK, vulnerabilities and specific needs. This can take time, but further to what we said at the session, we have already transferred over 1,500 people from bridging accommodation into permanent local authority accommodation.

The speed with which families are moved to permanent housing is dependent on the volume of local authority housing offers received. As of 30 September, we have received pledges to accommodate over 5,800 individuals in over 725 properties.

We are encouraging local authorities to submit more pledges which will increase the speed with which we are able to support families to move into permanent housing and on with their lives.

You asked for details on which local authorities have offered support.

This information has not previously been released and the list of local authorities is changing rapidly as the situation develops. However, I can say that over 230 local authorities who have pledged their support for the Afghan schemes. There are pledges of support from all nations and regions of the UK.

You asked for more detail on Afghan citizens waiting for passports or related papers.

As of 29 September, there are 360 outstanding passport applications from people who stated in their passport application form that they were residing in Afghanistan at the time of application. We have instituted a process to prioritise passport applications from those who are in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. Over 200 of the outstanding applications are complex in nature, for example involving potential fraud, and many were made before the evacuation began.

You asked for the number of people still in Afghanistan waiting with outstanding family reunion cases.

Family Reunion applications only become workable once applicants have attended a Visa Application Centre (VAC) and register their biometric details. Afghanistan does not have a VAC, so all applicants are required to travel to a neighbouring country to do so.

There are currently 101 Family Reunion applications under Part 11 of the rules, from Afghan nationals awaiting decisions, 72 of which applied after the evacuation concluded. There is no indication that any of these family units are in Afghanistan.

There is a 60-day service level agreement (SLA) from point of biometrics being registered. During this period, there are no requirements/stipulations on the movements of applicants, nor are any records kept of their whereabouts. Whilst families may have historically returned to Afghanistan during this period, that is unlikely now. Whilst the SLA for non-complex Family Reunion decisions is 60 days, the Family Reunion casework unit are currently awaiting Country Policy Information which forms part of leave outside the rules consideration, therefore, of the 101 outstanding cases, 17 have been deferred until that information is published.

Ongoing communication with the British Red Cross and Legal Representatives has been maintained throughout, both of whom provided information about their customers' whereabouts throughout the Taliban takeover. A total of 9 family units were referred to the Home Office as being located in Afghanistan (with positive Family Reunion decisions), all of which were referred to FCDO for evacuation. Of these, the Home Office are aware of 2 family units confirmed as leaving Afghanistan and 3 family units still in Afghanistan. The whereabouts of the remaining 4 referred family units is unknown.

We have also received correspondence from several families who are in Afghanistan and have applied for Family Reunion Visas online, but their applications are not considered live as they have not had their biometrics taken. There have been 109 applications for Family Reunion from Afghan nationals since 01 Aug 2021. These will, however, also include those who have recently lodged applications in VACs and are awaiting an appointment to register their biometric details.

You asked for more information about the steps taken by the Home Office to address issues of individuals not being able to get documents in time before the evacuation finished.

During the Afghanistan evacuation, the Home Office ensured that any family units located in Afghanistan, who had been issued with Entry Clearance, were referred to the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) for evacuation, whether they had collected their documents from the VAC or not. They were identified through British Red Cross and Legal Representative information and through direct contact with sponsors. For those with outstanding applications, we expedited decisions and security checks, to enable them the best chance of evacuation.

Any additional outstanding applications, even where the family were located outside of Afghanistan, were prioritised for case decision. All those which fell for visa issue within the rules have been decided and dispatched. Those without a positive outcome are paused, awaiting further country guidance, to ensure the most recent country policy information is followed.

For any cases with lost personal documents, the Home Office will pursue other avenues to assess the claimed relationships as genuine. These will include reviews of sponsor asylum case records, such as asylum screening and interviews, to establish if claimed family units are legitimate. The Home Office will also interview sponsors and/or families to assess credibility of a genuine and ongoing relationship. For any family units who may have fled without their passport, the Home Office can issue visas on FAVs (Forms for Affixing a Visa).

All ongoing Afghan cases are now being dealt with in line with established service level agreements. As all new cases required family units to attend VACs outside Afghanistan, their safety and security is not deemed to necessarily be any more at risk than other nationalities applying for Family Reunion worldwide.

You asked for the average waiting time prior to the evacuation for people who were waiting for their UK passports or family reunion cases from Afghanistan.

The average processing time by calendar day for passport applications for those who noted in their application that they were residing in Afghanistan in June 2021 was 257 days, and the equivalent average processing times in July 2021 was 217 days.

For the same periods, in terms of Family Reunion applications from those who put their place of residence as Afghanistan, average processing times were 21 and 17 days respectively.

Napier Barracks

You asked which e-mails and submissions ministers saw in regard to PHE advice that dormitories were not suitable.

In September 2020, the situation in relation to the use of Napier barracks was fast-moving. There were a significant number of meetings, engagements and interactions between Ministers and officials, where there was no shortage of very clear advice and evidence being given to Ministers about the pros and cons of any particular asylum accommodation. The advice, however, changed at different stages between September, November and January.

We believed we were taking reasonable steps to give effect to the PHE advice as to the steps that should be taken to make dormitory accommodation as safe as possible. We have acknowledged the court's findings that the measures taken were not adequate, and we have implemented a number of improvements at Napier.

Throughout the setup and operation of the site, the Home Office has engaged with health officials in various organisations to ensure it is aware of up-to-date advice.

You asked which senior officials had visited Napier barracks.

Ministers Chris Philp and Kevin Foster have visited Napier. The senior officials to have visited are myself, Emma Haddad, Director General for Asylum and Protection, Sean Palmer, Director for Resettlement and Integration of Asylum Seekers, Philomena Creffield, Deputy Director for Alternative Accommodation, Operations and Development, and Sam Ulyat, Chief Commercial Officer.

I visited Napier on 29 April 2021. Other senior civil servants have visited regularly.

You asked about the Covid outbreaks at Napier barracks and asked for further details to be provided.

Covid-19 is monitored and reported on a daily basis. No-one has been hospitalised with Covid-19, and PHE has not declared a new outbreak at Napier. It is a testament to the strength of the site management that there has not been a large-scale outbreak since the early part of the year. This is a result of robust Covid-19 management. The Home Secretary has been kept up to date with site developments.

Those who test positive are placed in accommodation blocks for 10 days to enable them to safely isolate from others while those deemed to be close contacts and who test negative are requested to isolate in their accommodation blocks for the 10-day period.

Since Napier opened, Home Office records indicate that we have accommodated 1086 people. This analysis is based on month start and month end data, so anyone who arrived and left in the same month will not have been counted unless they arrived or left on the first or last day of a month. Of the 1086, we have had 250 COVID positive cases between 21 September 2020 up to 16 September 2021.

The outbreak which started in January 2021 and declared closed in March 2021 saw the PHE Outbreak Report of June 2021 state that *“An outbreak of COVID-19 occurred at Napier Barracks, in January 2021, with between 215 and 241 residents and staff testing positive.”*

Since the start of April to 16 September 2021 there have been 9 cases of Covid-19, on 6, 9, 10, 16 and 30 August and 13, 15 (two cases) and 16 September.

At the time of writing (as of 30 September 2021), there are no known COVID positive cases at Napier.

We have adopted a learning approach to the management of Napier. In relation to Covid-19, we participated in a multi-agency lessons learned exercise following the main outbreak. Subsequently, we have run desk top exercises and regularly

reviewed the providers' response to Covid-19 cases to ensure strict adherence to the outbreak management plan.

We have made a number of improvements since the time covered by the High Court judgment, including stronger oversight and management of the provider, increasing direct Home Office engagement with service users, providing them with interviews onsite where applicable and providing certainty by time limiting their stay at Napier.

Asylum Caseworkers

You asked about our recruitment of asylum caseworkers which I was pleased to confirm is increasing; we also committed to write with more information about the retention rate of case workers. The table below sets out the rate of staff turnover:

Attrition Per Month	Totals	Average FTE	% Turnover
2018-2019	180	488.59	36.84
2019-2020	200	593.17	33.72
2020-2021	157	601.60	26.10
2021-2022 *	117	598.59	39.09

* April 2021 to week commencing 20 September 2021

You asked for more detail on the range of estimates in the increase for asylum seekers requiring accommodation and the likely publication date for the impact assessment of the Nationality and Borders Bill.

We published the equality impact assessment for the Nationality and Borders Bill on 16 September. We will publish the economic impact assessment in due course. We continue to work on system design and estimates for our accommodation requirements.

Resumption of data sharing

You asked for more information regarding the resumption of data sharing in terms of the volume of data shared and the metrics.

The Home Office resumed proactive data sharing with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Driver and Vehicles Licencing Agency (DVLA) and the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), to ensure that only those who are eligible to access work, benefits and public services can do so. This is an important part of our work to deter illegal migration, while protecting

taxpayer-funded services. In September 2021, just over 13,000 cases were shared. Whilst volumes fluctuate month to month, this is similar in scale to previous levels.

We have introduced safeguards and quality checks before any data is shared and carry out manual status checks on all matches before any action is taken. Where a decision is taken to apply a sanction, in addition to existing appeal mechanisms, we have developed a new process to make it easier to contact the Home Office and resolve an issue quickly if, for any reason, someone feels that compliant environment measures have been applied in error. We have introduced an accelerated Service Level Agreement (SLA) of 7 days for this service. However, where there are clear safeguarding or vulnerability concerns, we will, of course, seek to resolve the situation quicker. We will closely monitor the information that we receive to learn quickly from what customers are telling us and track our performance against the SLA.

Face behind the Case

As part of the session, I mentioned that there has been excellent work on our training strategy of the Face behind the Case learning which launched in August 2020 to UKVI staff. I said that as part of the culture change at the Home Office, this training has been key for staff in UKVI to implement the changes recommended by Wendy Williams. I also offered to send more details about the training and the impact on staff.

An impact survey was issued to all those who completed the training, and 900 responses were received.

The results of the survey showed that 62.4% felt the training helped them learn more about Home Office customers, by increasing their awareness of the person behind the case, and that, since completing the training, they now very often or often consider the 'Face Behind the Case' when carrying out their function. 83% of respondents felt they were confident or very confident about the use of 'Plain English' since completing the training.

Whilst it is recognised there is still more to do, the results of the survey demonstrate the positive impact that 'Face Behind the Case' training is having on the culture of staff within the Home Office. One respondent commented:

"I really enjoyed this e-Learning. It helped to change our local office culture from stats based to customer based, remembering the "cases" are people, not just stats on a whiteboard. It also made me take more accountability for my decisions at work and gave me pride in my job - helping some of the most vulnerable people in society".

To complement this work, our next steps are to work with Customer Insight to identify ways we can obtain improved customer feedback showing how 'Face Behind the Case' is impacting the customer's experience when interacting with the immigration system and Home Office staff.

Channel Crossings

During the session, the powers to turn back boats in the Channel were raised and I committed to write with more detail on the legal basis on which these powers are based.

I have since been advised that I must not waive legal professional privilege, so I am unable to say more than that the Government is satisfied that the maritime tactics it has developed are lawful. However, I understand that our officials are in touch with regards to following up on my offer for a private conversation on these matters with the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Rycroft', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Matthew Rycroft CBE