Home Office

The Home Office response to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's report:

An Inspection of ePassport Gates

June 2020 to January 2021

The Home Office thanks the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) for this comprehensive report.

This inspection examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the Home Office ePassport gate operation prior to the national roll out of Border Crossing and the upgrade of the ePassport gates in the UK and Europe. The United Kingdom is a world leader in the use of ePassport Gates and facial recognition automated verification technology. The self-service automated gates allow eligible e-Passport holders who are over the age of 12 to clear our border controls efficiently whilst maintaining border security and allowing our highly trained Border Force officers to focus on areas of risk.

The Home Office is pleased the ICIBI reported that airport operators, airlines and trade bodies representing these groups highlighted the general positive effect the ePassport Gates have had at ports. The Home Office is also pleased the report recognises that the extension of use of ePassport Gates to B5JSSK nationals[1] in May 2019 was a success in facilitating the flow of legitimate travellers through the UK border.

The Government's 2025 Border Strategy, published in December 2020, set out the vision to make our border more resilient through greater automation, further technology and innovation, including work with wider industry. Use of ePassport Gates is therefore a key part of the strategy to make our border as efficient, smart and responsive as possible and we are upgrading the Gates as part of a planned programme. Since ICIBI completed this inspection, we have implemented changes to border systems to automate some Health Measure border checks at the ePassport Gates to assist the flow of passengers at ports where they are installed.

The ICIBI identified several areas for improvement and has made a total of 15 recommendations in several thematic areas. The Home Office has fully accepted seven recommendations, partially accepted seven, and not accepted one. Work is already underway to tackle the issues raised and several recommendations have now been implemented already.

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[1] B5JSSK nationals are United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore and South Korea

The Home Office response to the recommendations

The Home Office should:

1. **Recommendation 1 - Deliver the Protecting the Vulnerable (PTV) training to all public-facing Border Force staff during 2021.**

1.1 Partially Accepted

1.2 The Home Office recognises the importance of ongoing professional upskilling of frontline officers, including in relation to the identification of potential victims of modern slavery and other vulnerable individuals. Border Force has a training plan in place, once Coronavirus restrictions impacting some face-to-face training are lifted, to provide further specialist training to both operational managers and our cohort of Safeguarding and Modern Slavery (SAMS) specialists during the remainder of FY 2021/22. Further safeguarding training is in development for all frontline officers with delivery due to commence in 2022.

2. **Recommendation 2 - Deliver the classroom-based Behavioural Detection (BD) training to all roving officers. 2.1 Partially Accepted**

2.2. Roving Officers play a key role in preventing trafficking but also identifying other border risks by providing a heightened security presence at ePassport Gates. However, classroom-based training is not always an appropriate mechanism, nor a best use of resources. Behavioural Detection awareness e-Learning for Roving Officers is also now available and will be rolled out over the coming months. This will be followed up by more specialist BD training courses to relevant front-line staff in 2022.

3. **Recommendation 3 - Review how guidance is shared with staff working at the gates, including the format and timeliness of the guidance and the time provided for staff to read it.**

3.1 Partially Accepted

3.2 A new IT platform, 'Ocelot' is being rolled out as the central platform for Border Force guidance accessed via desktop, laptop and mobile, meaning officers can quickly access up-to-date guidance wherever they are. All guidance on Ocelot is regularly reviewed and can be updated quickly in response to policy or process changes or user feedback.

3.3 The migration of guidance to Ocelot will be complete by the end of March 2022 and to enhance its use we are developing a technological solution to allow us to tailor the content individual officers see, based on their location and area of work, so the system will highlight what is most relevant to them. These technology improvements will mean staff will have more time and flexibility as to when and how they read new instructions and end reliance on needing to be at a fixed office site.

3.4 As this system will not be available until after the roll out of the upgraded ePassport Gates, the project teams are providing tailored support to staff to ensure they understand how the new border systems and ePassport Gates operate.

4. **Recommendation 4 - Review communications with staff on the level of risk that B5JSSK nationals present to the immigration control.**

4.1 Accepted

4.2 The expansion of ePassport Gates to B5JSSK nationals has improved the flow of those coming to visit, work or do business in the UK, whilst improving security by giving Border Force officers more time to focus on higher risk passengers. However, the Home Office agrees there is more we can do to fully communicate the planning behind, and the benefits of, the extension of the use of ePassport Gates to B5JSSK nationals. There is no current evidence B5JSSK nationals present an increased risk to effective immigration control. Border Force will use the opportunities presented by wider Home Office transformation plans, plus the creation of a 'Borders and Enforcement Capability', to share information with staff to explain there are wider controls in place, including duties on employers, to safeguard against immigration rules abuse.

5. Recommendation 5 - Ensure that staff performing the monitoring officer role do so for a maximum of one hour at a time, in line with guidance.

5.1 Accepted

5.2 Since this inspection the Home Office has reissued the instructions relating to the Monitoring Officer role to operational managers and compliance will be monitored through assurance activity.

6. Recommendation 6 - Agree new commercial arrangements for the provision of hosts with port operators.

6.1 Partially accepted

6.2 Border Force works with industry on a regular basis. In line with the Government's 2025 Border Strategy, Border Force is working with industry to drive forward a programme of modernisation and innovation to improve the end-to-end passage through all the UK's ports and points of entry for goods and people. Provision of hosts is the responsibility of port operators and we are working on a long-term model to increase industry's contribution to the border, underpinned by requirements and standards.

7. Recommendation 7 - Ensure that hosts are always present when the gates are in operation and that they prioritise the identification of minors to ensure that only those children aged 12-17, who are accompanied by a responsible adult, use the gates.

7.1 Partially Accepted

7.2 The Home Office recognises the benefits hosts can bring to assist the efficiency of ePassport gate operations, including identifying non-eligible users. The provision of hosts is the responsibility of port operators, and we are consulting further with industry in ports where their host provision was withdrawn due to Covid-19 impacts.

7.3 Where hosts are provided, they assist with the work of Border Force in keeping children and vulnerable adults safe. However, Border Force has other mechanisms in place to discharge its duty under Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children aged 12- 17 using ePassport Gates.

- At larger sites one of the roles of the Roving Officer is to prevent child trafficking and strengthen safeguarding.

- At smaller sites a system alert control on the ePassport Gates allows the Monitoring Officer to take appropriate action as necessary.

8. Recommendation 8 - Ensure that where more than ten gates are in operation, there are sufficient resources available to allow at least two roving officers to be deployed.

8.1 Not accepted

8.2 Existing guidance **recommends** that where more than 10 gates are in operation, a minimum of two roving officers are deployed, and this will continue to be the approach. However, there may be operational situations which arise where this is not possible and other mitigations are appropriate. Decisions about the deployment of staff and technology will always be subject to tactical assessments by managers on the ground.

9. Recommendation 9 - Implement standardised methods for recording complaints at the gates, ensuring that trends can be identified, categorised, and analysed.

9.1 Accepted

9.2 Complaints about ePassport Gate operations are low, but we accept that current systems did not provide the level and detail of reporting asked for in this inspection. The Home Office is developing a new IT system to replace the current complaints management system and due for implementation over the course of 2022. The new system will allow for improved methods of recording complaints and better analysis of trends. In the meantime, Border Force is developing existing management information to make best use of available data and customer feedback.

10. Recommendation 10 - Complete, and implement the findings from, the evaluation of approaches to queue management, including standardisation and publication of revised Service Level Agreements.

10.1 Partially Accepted

10.2 The Home Office will build on previous work to address recommendations made by the ICIBI in relation to queue management. An initial review of current queue measurement methodology and reporting processes will be completed early in 2022 to inform next steps with operational and industry partners.

11. Recommendation 11 - Implement a system to record details when passengers are stopped due to safeguarding concerns, including the circumstances in which vulnerable passengers are identified, the role of the officer who identified the passenger and whether the passenger was eligible to use, or was trying to use, the gates.

11.1 Accepted

11.2 A new IT system is already in development to capture a range of Border Force front-line information. As part of this wider work, safeguarding recording requirements and technical solutions are currently being scoped. Implementation is expected over the course of 2022.

12. Recommendation 12 - Ensure that the reasons for the consequences of the B5JSSK expansion are evaluated and acted upon where necessary.

12.1 Accepted

12.2 In the period after the expansion there was a specific issue in relation to short term students. This has been dealt with through changes to the Immigration Rules, so that these students are now able to use the ePassport Gates. Other impacts mentioned in the report were anticipated and will continue to be monitored and acted on as part of business as usual activity.

12.3 Access to the use of ePassport Gates is just one element in the overall architecture of processes and controls designed to minimise operational risks, and which includes (for example) visa requirements for some nationalities and restrictions on who may, and may not, transit the UK without a visa. In addition, future plans for ePassport Gate usage will be aligned with the new person-centric points-based system, and the introduction of Electronic Travel Authorisations.

13 Recommendation 13 - Implement standardised methods for reporting faults and incidents at the gates, including details of fault and incident outcomes and ensuring that trends can be identified, categorised, and analysed.

13.1 Accepted

13.2 In March 2021, the Home Office introduced a single method for reporting all faults and incidents about ePassport Gates which addressed this recommendation fully.

14 Recommendation 14 - Regularly review and publish the Public Sector Equality Duty responsibilities and the Equality Impact Assessments relating to the operation of the gates, in accordance with best practice.

14.1 Partially Accepted

14.2 A review of the existing Equality Impact Assessment of ePassport Gate usage has been completed to update it in line with EEA nationals ongoing access to ePassport Gates following the UK's departure from the EU and the end of the grace period in June 2021. It will continue to be reviewed in line with the requirements of the PSED if subsequent changes to policy are made, or new information or evidence becomes available.

15 Recommendation 15 - Develop plans to measure the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on illegal working by, and modern enslavement of, EU nationals, including the use of the gates by EU nationals and a means of identifying those gate users at increased risk of exploitation.

15.1 Accepted

15.2 The Home Office is also committed to ongoing engagement with the modern slavery sector to understand current and upcoming risks created by the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Although we have not seen any evidence to suggest that the use of ePassport Gates has reduced our ability to identify potential victims of modern slavery, as part of wider transformation plans, Border Force will continue to work closely with Immigration Enforcement (who have operational responsibility to monitor in-country compliance with the immigration rules and illegal working) to ensure any relevant IE findings inform future ePassport Gate policy plans where appropriate.

15.3 The Home Office's Modern Slavery Unit has also worked with Border Force to develop the modern slavery training all officers are required to complete so that they understand how

to effectively identify and refer, where appropriate, potential victims of modern slavery to the National Referral Mechanism.