



Home Office

**The Home Office response to the
Independent Chief Inspector's report:
Country of Origin Information
September 2020**

Introduction

The Home Office thanks the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) for this report, as well as the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI).

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1

1. The Home Office should:

Review the resources (staffing and budgets) currently allocated to the production and maintenance of Country of Origin Information products (CPINs and COIRs), with a view to building the capacity of the Country Policy and Information Team to a point where it is able to:

- a. review, and where necessary update, all extant CPINs at least every two years*
- b. publish an updated version of any extant CPIN within three months where the Home Office agrees that the CPIN requires urgent or significant amendment*
- c. carry out (or sponsor and assimilate) sufficient research, including of information that is not available in English, to ensure that references in COI products to the absence of evidence in relation to information that may be material to an asylum decision are not, in reality, knowledge gaps*

1.1 Not accepted.

- 1.2 We are continually reviewing whether we have resources in the right place across all of the decision-making parts of asylum and immigration system more generally, to ensure we maintain the acknowledged high quality of COI produced by the Home Office. However, we must do so in a way that is affordable and responsible.
- 1.3 In accepting the recommendation of the Independent Chief Inspector's *Report on Country of Origin Information, June 2019*¹ to "carry out a thorough and open needs analysis for Country of Origin Information (COI), involving both Home Office 'customers' and external stakeholders, and use the results to 'right-size' CPIT and resource it appropriately" the Home Office has already conducted a review to understand this supply and demand challenge and how we resource the team within the confines of money available.
- 1.4 CPIT's capacity has been built up since the formation of the team in 2014. At that time, we merged two teams and cut the number of posts from 24 to 15. Since then, the team has grown to 20 (one of which is a vacancy that will be filled in December). Once complete, we estimate that CPIT can maintain the volume of its current portfolio of COI products.
- 1.5 We acknowledge this means that we cannot give this undertaking in respect of any potential growth in the number of products required. However, as we explained in response² to the Independent Chief Inspector's *Report on Country of Origin Information, June 2019* – repeating a point we made in response to the Independent Chief Inspector's *Report on the production and use of Country of Origin Information, January 2018*³ – the demand for COI is potentially limitless, whereas we must operate within tight financial constraints and prioritise accordingly. We therefore cannot commit to increasing the capacity of the team further.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspection-of-country-of-origin-information-report-june-2019>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-an-inspection-report-on-the-home-offices-production-and-use-of-country-of-origin-information>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-country-of-origin-information>

- 1.6 As to the issue of pace of delivery, the Home Office already considers it has the capacity to update priority COI products within a three-month window where we acknowledge it requires urgent or significant amendment. In the example cited as part of this review, the issue was that – according to the reviewer – 9 CPINs needed this in parallel. This was on top of existing priorities the team was already dealing with and at a time when half of the team were temporarily re-deployed to deal with the unprecedented situation we found ourselves following the early days of the covid-19 pandemic.
- 1.7 CPIT has also been successful in making, now, three applications to finance projects under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. This has allowed for fact-finding missions, the purchasing of books, commissioning of experts and translation of relevant non-English language material. As to the example cited in this report, we do not accept it was a knowledge gap. However, we do acknowledge that silence on a particular point risks being interpreted as evidence of absence and will look to be clearer on this.

Recommendation 2

2. The Home Office should:

Ensure that the management structure above the Country Policy and Information Team (CPIT) has the “bandwidth” to engage with the detail of CPIT’s work and output, and the “clout” to resist the deprioritising of Country of Origin work in favour of other areas of business.

2.1 **Not accepted.**

- 2.2 The Home Office considers that the management structure above CPIT can and does take the necessary interest and involvement in the work of the team. However, CPIT is already a well-led team; is highly appreciated by the operational end users who rely on its products and services; is respected internationally; and the ICIBI recognises the quality of work produced.
- 2.3 All Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) produced by the team that contain a new or updated position are reviewed and cleared by a deputy director prior to publication. Likewise, recommendations made by the ICIBI are subject to review and approval. As above, reviews by the IAGCI are often technical and country-specific in nature.
- 2.4 The Home Office is unable to give an undertaking to prevent future short-term re-deployment of staff from Country of Origin work. We recognise the importance of the work and the quality of the work produced by the team. We do not take these decisions lightly. The two examples cited – Brexit preparations and covid-19 response – both involved short-term moves to respond to truly exceptional circumstances. These were also not limited to staff involved in Country of Origin Information work.

Recommendation 3

3. The Home Office should:

With input from asylum decision makers and other regular users of COI, look again at whether information in Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) about cross-cutting issues might be better presented using a template or standard format.

3.1 **Accepted.**

3.2 The Home Office already provides COI products on cross-cutting issues using standard format. The Terms of Reference supplied as part of this review provide the scope of the relevant products. What has not been drawn out in the report is that these have evolved over time, and therefore some of the different approaches represent that evolution, bearing in mind the timeframe of the products reviewed. Both internal and external stakeholders have provided valued input into those. We have also since supplemented that with revised internal guidelines on how to draft COI products and have some standard paragraphs we use to provide structure.

3.3 We will continue to discuss how well our products serve our end users to determine whether or not this is desirable and the extent to which they consider we already do this.

Summary

Recommendation	HO Response
<p>1. <i>Review the resources (staffing and budgets) currently allocated to the production and maintenance of Country of Origin Information products (CPINs and COIRs), with a view to building the capacity of the Country Policy and Information Team to a point where it is able to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>review, and where necessary update, all extant CPINs at least every two years</i> b. <i>publish an updated version of any extant CPIN within three months where the Home Office agrees that the CPIN requires urgent or significant amendment</i> c. <i>carry out (or sponsor and assimilate) sufficient research, including of information that is not available in English, to ensure that references in COI products to the absence of evidence in relation to information that may be material to an asylum decision are not, in reality, knowledge gaps</i> 	Not accepted
<p>2. <i>Ensure that the management structure above the Country Policy and Information Team (CPIT) has the “bandwidth” to engage with the detail of CPIT’s work and output, and the “clout” to resist the deprioritising of Country of Origin work in favour of other areas of business.</i></p>	Not accepted
<p>3. <i>With input from asylum decision makers and other regular users of COI, look again at whether information in Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) about cross-cutting issues might be better presented using a template or standard format.</i></p>	Accepted