



An inspection of asylum casework

June – October 2023

David Neal

Independent Chief Inspector of
Borders and Immigration

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To help improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the Home Office's border and immigration functions through unfettered, impartial and evidence-based inspection.

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Foreword

This is the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's fourth inspection of asylum casework in the last seven years. The most recent, in 2021, identified issues with workflow processes, interview and decision quality, and pressure on staff to meet targets, which affected morale and attrition rates. In the absence of a service standard, decision-making times were increasing, and claims were not being effectively prioritised.

Since then, a service standard has still not been introduced, despite the Home Office accepting a recommendation to do so, and delays in the asylum system led to a record number of claimants (over 139,000) awaiting an initial decision in February 2023. This is part of a pattern seen by the ICIBI in which its recommendations are accepted by the Home Office but not delivered. The record number of claimants placed acute pressure on the asylum accommodation system, with the cost of housing asylum claimants in hotels exceeding £6 million per day. As a result, it is clear that the Home Office did not implement the recommendations from the previous inspection with sufficient rigour. The efficient processing of asylum claims was hampered by the absence of a service standard and the resulting lack of accountability.

The Home Office had allowed the asylum system to become a burning platform that required radical action and attracted significant ministerial and public scrutiny. The Prime Minister's statement on illegal migration in December 2022 included commitments to clear the legacy backlog in twelve months, double the number of decision makers, and triple decision makers' productivity. The statement unlocked resources and acted as a catalyst to increase the pace of change, raising questions as to why the Home Office had not implemented these changes itself.

Asylum Operations has undoubtedly made significant strides in increasing productivity. As of 30 November 2023, the legacy work in progress (WIP) queue stood at 18,366 claims, a reduction of 82% since 28 June 2022. Streamlined asylum processing enabled over 13,000 adults and nearly 500 children to be granted asylum by using staff from other government departments to process straightforward claims, freeing up Home Office decision makers to focus on those that were more complex.

However, I am concerned that the focus on clearing the legacy backlog 'at all costs' has led to perverse outcomes for claimants and staff. The number of claims that have been withdrawn and counted as 'outcomes' has soared – 22% of all decisions made since June 2022 were withdrawals, and, incredibly, only one underwent formal quality assurance. This is not acceptable. Routine quality assurance on interviews and decisions has also been sacrificed for increased productivity. This has the potential to add to the appeals queue as a result of poor-quality refusals, and to further prolong the length of time a claimant's life is put on hold.

I am absolutely clear from the evidence of this inspection that there have been extraordinary levels of commitment shown by the staff. Staff, managers, and senior leaders in all areas of Asylum Operations have worked tirelessly to clear the backlog under exceptionally challenging circumstances. The politically charged environment in which they work has meant the journey to clear the backlog has involved frequent and significant changes to processes with a focus on productivity and outputs. This has taken a toll on staff, and my inspectors found extremely low morale among many of those they

encountered. Efforts have also been hampered by a lack of progress in digitising processes and by clunky IT systems. Rather than assisting decision making, the main system in use, Atlas, has served to slow things down. I have previously highlighted the inexcusably awful quality of Home Office data, which was evident again in this inspection.

The focus on the legacy WIP has also meant that the flow WIP has continued to grow, and by November 2023 it stood at 91,000. During the inspection, my inspectors and I were told by senior officials that the deadline to clear the flow backlog was Spring 2024, but I note that the new Home Secretary has not committed to this target. As Asylum Operations turns its attention to this work, I urge it to learn from the experience of processing the legacy backlog and to invest time and resources to expedite transformation work and digitise processes to make them more efficient. It also needs to improve its quality assurance processes to ensure decisions are robust and 'right first time'. In addition, the Home Office should develop a strategy to address the end-to-end impact of issues with the service of decisions and concerns about the move-on period, to avoid a homelessness crisis among newly recognised refugees and creating significant pressures for local authorities.

I am encouraged that the new senior management team in Asylum Operations developed effective working relationships with ministers, and I hope that they will continue to 'speak truth to power' given recent ministerial changes. Strong relationships will hopefully avoid a repeat of initiatives such as Operation BRIDORA (during which resources were diverted to processing Albanian claims, causing a drop in productivity at the expense of clearing the rest of the legacy WIP), and will allow decision-making units to focus on developing their staff and producing high-quality decisions.

This report makes six recommendations and was sent to the Home Secretary on 11 January 2024. This is the first inspection report that I have submitted to the new Home Secretary. There is an opportunity for him to publish it within the eight-week ministerial commitment. The last time I reported on this area in 2021, the report took 17 weeks to be laid in Parliament. There is considerable public and parliamentary interest in its contents, and I hope it will be published prior to the expiry of my term of office on 21 March 2024.



David Neal
Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

1. Key findings

- 1.1** This inspection examined asylum decision making since the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 was introduced. It looked at how the Act was implemented, whether the Home Office had adequate resources and staff were sufficiently trained to make effective decisions, and the impact of new workflow and case progression processes that were introduced to address delays and clear the initial decision backlog.

Recruitment and workforce

- 1.2** In December 2022, the Prime Minister committed to doubling the number of decision makers (DMs) in Asylum Operations to 2,500 to speed up the processing of asylum claims. Due to the volume of new staff required, the Home Office was unable to recruit this number of new DMs through its own recruitment processes and used a Cabinet Office contract with Shared Services Connected Ltd (SSCL).^{1,2}
- 1.3** Meeting the target of 2,500 DMs by September 2023 was a significant achievement, but the focus on DM recruitment meant that the recruitment of support and technical staff that provided leadership, management, and technical and administrative capability to DMs did not keep up. This was a particular issue where new decision-making units (DMUs) were established during 2023. In one DMU, there was initially only one member of administrative staff to support the 69 DMs in post. No technical specialists (tech specs) were based there, inhibiting the ability of DMs to refer cases to them at short notice, develop expertise, and build close working relationships with them.
- 1.4** Brigaded recruitment campaigns, which recruited staff for a generic grade rather than a specific role, were used for administrative and management roles. Inspectors heard that, while these campaigns reduced subjectivity in the recruitment process, new staff had limited knowledge of the roles they were assigned to or were given incomplete information about their role. The approach also led to a mismatch of staff to roles, creating additional line management requirements.
- 1.5** In a practical response to the resourcing challenges, Asylum Operations used a tactical surge team from the Home Office, staff from other government departments, and agency staff to fill some decision-making and administrative roles. The varying skill levels and experience of these cohorts impacted the quality of work produced and led to a greater line management requirement than was foreseen. Staff turnover was rapid, and staff were required to return to their home departments at short notice. This created staffing gaps and a lack of continuity and expertise in the teams.

1 SSCL is “the largest provider of critical business support services for Government, Ministry of Defence, Metropolitan Police Service and the Construction and Training Board (CITB)”. See: <https://sscl.com/>

2 The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “Shared Services Connected LTD (SSCL) was used in preference to Government Recruitment Service (GRS) as the SSCL process allows for quicker onboarding of large numbers of candidates, as well as providing greater responsiveness in managing the respective locations to meet overall requirements.”

- 1.6** The training model for DMs was revised following the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration in December 2022. To cope with the influx of new DMs, the existing nine-week Foundation Training Programme was split to create ‘just in time’ training. This approach saw new DMs trained initially in either interview-only work (to be followed at a later stage by decision-making training), or in decision-only work (to be followed at a later stage by interview training). Senior managers saw this as a practical response to the challenge of upskilling the large intake of new DMs, but inspectors heard that it created problems when work was allocated to DMUs who were working on decision-only or interview-only cohorts and DMs not trained in that cohort did not have enough work to do. There was also a disconnect between what was covered on the training course and what DMUs expected new DMs to have been trained in, highlighting the need for regular interactions between the training team and operational areas.
- 1.7** The provision of formal training for other roles in Asylum Operations was limited. There was no specific training for team leaders, despite the crucial role they performed in managing and coaching DMs and monitoring their productivity. Administrative staff told inspectors that they learned ‘on the job’ and from other colleagues.
- 1.8** The relentless focus on clearing the legacy backlog put significant pressure on Asylum Operations staff to achieve their individual targets and affected morale at all grades. Despite this, almost all staff spoken to by inspectors praised their line manager and the support they received from them. It was also clear that in many areas there was a strong team ethic, with staff helping and supporting one another. Conversely, 60% of DMs who responded to the inspection survey said they wanted to leave their role as soon as possible or within the next year, stating that the pressure to meet targets affected their mental health. In response to this, a dedicated wellbeing hub had been created on the Asylum Operations intranet.
- 1.9** Senior managers also felt the pressure of delivering the Prime Minister’s commitments. They highlighted the unprecedented nature of the challenge, including the introduction of new working processes at short notice and the focus on providing daily progress reports to ministers.
- 1.10** The Independent Chief Inspectorate of Borders and Immigration’s (ICIBI’s) 2021 inspection of asylum casework highlighted that the retention of DMs was a challenge for Asylum Operations. Asylum Operations subsequently introduced a recruitment and retention allowance (RRA) payment to improve retention, but the attrition rate remained high throughout 2023. Home Office data showed that, in November 2023, the average rate of monthly attrition for DM staff for 2023-24 for the months of April to October was 32.8%, compared to 45.41% for the year 2021-2022 and 27.57% for 2022-2023.
- 1.11** Managers told inspectors that the expansion of Asylum Operations following the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration in December 2022 had created opportunities for progression and that DMs had been promoted and moved on to other roles. Analysis of data provided by the Home Office showed, however, that 32% of DMs who left the role between January 2021 and October 2023 had been promoted within the Home Office, with 24% moving to another government department, and 29% leaving the Civil Service entirely. An additional 5% had downgraded from the DM role to an administrative grade, to an administrative grade, which they had done because of the pressure of DM work, inspectors were told.
- 1.12** Use of the RRA caused resentment among other grades in Asylum Operations as only DMs were eligible for the payment, despite the efforts of staff at all grades to clear the asylum

backlog. Senior managers had recognised this, and a number of new reward and recognition initiatives were introduced for other roles during 2023. While this was broadly welcomed, performance bonuses were only applicable to staff who had a specific number of tasks to complete included in their objectives, with their achievement being dependent on the productivity of other teams, or the complexity of the cases being worked on.

- 1.13** Inspectors heard that exit interviews were conducted when staff left Asylum Operations but only at a local level. No analysis of the reasons for staff leaving was undertaken at a national level. Senior managers planned to relaunch a compulsory exit survey with the intention of identifying patterns and enabling Asylum Operations to make targeted improvements to enhance DM retention.

Backlog clearance operations

- 1.14** The deadline set by the Prime Minister to clear the legacy backlog by the end of 2023 necessitated the introduction of new ways of working and new approaches to processing asylum claims. The legacy backlog was split into a number of cohorts that made up individually named operations to enable Asylum Operations to effectively manage the work.
- 1.15** Operation AMESA (Op AMESA) had already been introduced in October 2022 to process claims from the five nationalities with a grant rate of 95% or higher. Following the Prime Minister's statement on illegal migration in December 2022, the Streamlined asylum processing (SAP) model was introduced in February 2023. This new model was intended to process manifestly well-founded claims awaiting an initial asylum decision without an interview, where possible. To facilitate this, an asylum claim questionnaire was sent to eligible applicants in the Op AMESA cohort who had not been substantively interviewed.
- 1.16** A triage process identified claims eligible for the questionnaire, but inspectors heard that claimants who had already had a substantive interview, been granted refugee status, or were in the inadmissibility queue were sent questionnaires in error. Stakeholders also provided examples of claimants whose claims were withdrawn in error, having been told that they had not returned the questionnaire, despite not having received one.
- 1.17** There were also shortcomings with the questionnaire, which was only provided in English and hard-copy format and was overly complicated. The questionnaire was sent out in bulk, providing a challenge to legal representatives to resource the work required to complete it, as claimants only had 20 days to return it. Senior managers were directed by more senior officials not to consult with legal representatives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) prior to the questionnaire's introduction, meaning that issues that could have been foreseen before its introduction were not designed out of the process.
- 1.18** Despite the issues with the questionnaire when it was first introduced, Asylum Operations demonstrated subsequently that it had learned lessons from that experience. When SAP was rolled out for Operation MAKHU (the internal name for the processing of all remaining nationalities in the legacy WIP and the consideration of flow cases), the questionnaire was provided in digital format with a longer deadline of 30 days to return it.
- 1.19** The process for asylum-seeking children was different, with a preliminary information meeting (PIM) used instead of a questionnaire to obtain sufficient information to be able to grant an application. Legal representatives reported the impact of the bulk booking of PIMs and the need to resource and prepare for them. But, following a slow start, significant engagement

with stakeholders demonstrated the benefits of shorter interviews to the wellbeing of child applicants, and the cohort of workable children's claims was significantly reduced by August 2023.

- 1.20** Operation BRIDORA was established in December 2022 to process asylum claims from Albanian nationals. The decision to concentrate the majority of DMU resources on this work was taken at ministerial level, given the political imperative to clear this cohort of more than 12,000 claims. This decision was widely seen by staff and consultants working with Asylum Operations to have delayed the processing of asylum claims from other nationalities to help clear the legacy backlog. Many of the issues encountered, such as the requirements for additional training, second pair of eyes checks, and the large number of claims that were withdrawn (which raised separate concerns) were foreseen by staff, but their concerns were not listened to. The relatively small number of Albanian nationals who were removed from the UK on charter flights (245 by 13 November 2023), led inspectors to question whether the concentration of resources on this cohort, at the expense of working on the rest of the legacy backlog, had delivered the expected benefits.³

Workflow and case progression

- 1.21** An effective workflow and allocation process is key to an efficient asylum system. Inspectors were told that the supply chain of getting cases to where they needed to be was complicated. Although the streamlined and cohorting approaches had clearly facilitated more efficient processing of claims in the short term, Asylum Operations risked being left with more complex claims to process as it approached the deadline to clear the legacy backlog.
- 1.22** The introduction of the interim case allocation tool (ICAT) was broadly seen as positive, and an improvement on the use of multiple spreadsheets, a practice that was noted in the ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework. ICAT's effectiveness and the information it could provide were limited by variations in compliance across the DMUs, and inspectors saw examples of data errors and use of a generic 'Other' classification for barriers, which hampered effective case progression.
- 1.23** The case progression function was inconsistent across DMUs and, although the introduction of the Case Progression and Interview Logistics (CPIL) team was positive, the team had been established so close to the deadline to interview all claimants that it raised questions as to whether it would achieve its aims. CPIL was further hampered by the limited availability of interview rooms and issues with interpreters. Interview cancellation rates, not including claimant 'no-shows', were around 19%, meaning that nearly one out of every five interviews booked was not complete, negatively impacting efforts to clear the WIP.
- 1.24** As part of efforts to streamline the asylum process, a concise interview project (CIP) was introduced to enable more decisions to be made on paper or reduce the length of a subsequent substantive interview if that was not possible. Inspectors heard that the effectiveness of the CIP was limited by poor communications with DMs and stakeholders and by a lack of transparency from the team that introduced it. Stakeholders also reported a lack of engagement prior to the introduction of the CIP, with a lack of clarity as to how it linked to the SAP or which claimants it applied to, making it difficult for them to prepare their clients for interview. They said that applicants frequently had to repeat information they had already provided to the Home Office, negating the purpose of the interview. Legal representatives

³ Home Office, 'Statistics relating to the Illegal Migration Act' (updated 15 November 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-relating-to-the-illegal-migration-bill>

were also concerned about the quality of the shortened interviews, which they were unable to differentiate from the 'concise' interviews, and which they said delivered poor decisions.

- 1.25** Officials told inspectors that they intended to use the CIP to process the backlog of flow cases. Inspectors considered that, if communication about the project was improved and the triage process was conducted effectively, it was a sensible solution to streamlining the processing of claims going forward. The success of the project was dependent on an effective triage process that ensured claimants did not have to repeat information they had already provided earlier in the asylum process.
- 1.26** The ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework found little evidence of prioritisation based on anything other than being in receipt of asylum support. Inspectors noted in this inspection that, although the Home Office had published guidance on prioritising asylum claims, it was only two and a half months before the deadline to clear the legacy backlog. The Home Office stated that it prioritised the processing of claims from those in receipt of asylum support, yet, at the end of October 2023, 27% of claimants in the remaining legacy WIP were still receiving that support. There was no evidence of prioritisation on the basis of vulnerability and, as the Home Office did not collect data on vulnerabilities, there was no mechanism for it to be able to prioritise on this basis in adult casework. Children's casework focused on the oldest cases and vulnerability and welfare concerns.
- 1.27** While inspectors noted efforts to increase productivity such as 'barrier buster' guides and decision templates, there was still a need to address the culture of barriers to case progression that some senior managers felt existed among decision makers. Senior managers told inspectors that work had been done to address the issue, adding that there was a need for DMs to feel empowered and confident in the decisions they were making. Empowering DMs in this way required a change in the culture of Asylum Operations. With 50% of DMs being newly recruited, senior managers needed to concentrate on embedding this approach with the more experienced DMs.

Inadmissibility

- 1.28** The UK's exit from the European Union on 31 December 2020 changed the Home Office's approach to processing claims from those who had travelled to the UK to claim asylum via a safe third country. Claimants' cases were considered 'inadmissible' under new provisions that permitted the removal of a claimant to any safe 'third country' that would accept them.
- 1.29** Home Office data showed that 72% of the 28,560 claimants referred for consideration under the inadmissibility process in the year to June 2023 were later admitted to the asylum process.⁴ Claims referred for inadmissibility consideration were taken out of the asylum queue while the inadmissibility aspect was considered. These claimants waited an average of five months before being readmitted to the asylum queue, but a significant number waited for more than six months and some for more than a year.
- 1.30** A separate cohort of up to 7,500 cases was considered under the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) as eligible for removal to Rwanda. Claimants in this cohort were likely to spend longer than six months in the inadmissibility queue. Inspectors were told that no action would be taken on these cases until the Supreme Court ruled on the legality of the Rwanda process. This meant that some claimants in this cohort had been waiting for almost two years with no action taken to progress their claim. Furthermore, the Home Office did not

⁴ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office's Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

proactively inform claimants that they were being considered under this cohort and claimants only became aware that they were if they requested a progress update on their claim from the Home Office.⁵ Following the Supreme Court's ruling on 15 November 2023 that the plan to remove claimants to Rwanda was unlawful, it was not clear how the Home Office would treat this cohort, which had effectively been left in indefinite limbo.

- 1.31** As of October 2023, only two individuals had been removed from the UK under the inadmissibility process since the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act in June 2022. This figure was far below the predicted return rate of 300 claimants per year set out in the Home Office's impact assessment of the Act. Staff told inspectors that the inadmissibility process was "pointless" and that no action was taken on a claim unless the claimant had travelled through one of the four 'safe' countries that had a returns agreement with the UK.
- 1.32** No analysis of the efficiency and effectiveness of the inadmissibility process and the impact it had on the asylum backlog had been carried out, despite it being introduced more than two and a half years previously. The low number of returns and unnecessary delays to cases considered under the process added to the length of time a claimant received asylum support, thereby increasing costs to the taxpayer. Inspectors considered that the inadmissibility process needed a radical overhaul to improve its efficiency and to ensure claims were not taken out of the asylum queue when there was no prospect of them being returned to a 'safe' third country.

Performance management

- 1.33** The Prime Minister's statement on illegal migration in December 2022 set a target to triple DM productivity by the end of 2023. In December 2022, productivity stood at four stages (which was either a completed asylum decision or asylum interview) per month. As of October 2023, the figure had increased to ten stages per month. This was achieved through a combination of initiatives introduced under the SAP, such as the CIP and a limit of two hours for substantive asylum interviews. The move back to individual targets for staff in March 2023, from the previous team-based approach to measuring productivity, was said to have driven greater individual accountability.
- 1.34** Individual contributions varied by DM due to factors such as experience in the role, the complexity of the cohort being worked on, and whether a DM was trained to work on decisions, interviews, or both. Staff at all grades told inspectors that expectations of DMs' individual contributions were too high. Feedback from the inspection survey responses cited factors outside a DM's control that prevented them completing their individual contributions, such as the cancellation of an interview that a DM had spent time preparing for and issues with the Home Office's caseworking system. DMs were also dependent on other teams delivering a regular flow of cases for them to work on, and inspectors heard that issues with workflow processes sometimes meant that there were no claims ready for them to progress.
- 1.35** Individual DMUs had targets for the number of decisions or interviews they had to complete each month. The targets depended on the number of 'fully effective' DMs working in the DMU and the complexity of the cohort on which they were working. Inspectors were told that it could take up to seven months for a new DM to be considered 'fully effective', thereby hampering the productivity of DMUs that were newly established and staffed by inexperienced DMs. DMU target calculations were complicated by the lack of up-to-date data on the

⁵ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024 stated: "Claimants in the current MEDP cohort have all been informed that their asylum claim is being considered for inadmissibility and they are potentially in scope for removal to Rwanda under MEDP."

number of DMs in post, and the targets changed if a DMU moved on to processing a different cohort of cases.

- 1.36** Inspectors found that there was a disconnect between senior managers' views of the achievability of individual contributions and those of staff working to meet them, as was identified in the ICIBI's previous inspection of asylum casework. The communication of targets to the operational teams in DMUs was poor. Key messages that there was flexibility in the targets, and that they could be amended when a DMU moved on to a new cohort, did not get through. The drive to clear the backlog meant that operational managers focused on the importance of meeting individual contributions without acknowledging the factors that could impact their achievement.
- 1.37** To support its 'prioritising asylum customers' experience' (PACE) programme, which had the aim of increasing productivity in Asylum Operations, the Home Office had engaged a consultancy company, Newton.⁶ Newton consultants told inspectors that the approach to clearing the backlog should have been that DMs needed to work "smarter not harder", but the overriding message that DMs heard was that they needed to achieve their individual contributions.
- 1.38** In March 2023, staff were instructed that 'straightforward' substantive interviews should be completed within two hours to increase the efficiency and focus of interviews. As with DMs' individual contributions, inspectors heard that a number of factors affected whether this was achievable, such as the late arrival of an applicant or interpreter. The booking of sequential interviews and the demand for interview rooms meant that delayed interviews had to be completed in whatever time remained of the two-hour slot.
- 1.39** DMs could seek permission to book a continuation interview if the necessary information was not obtained during the initial interview. They could also write to the claimant asking them to submit answers to additional questions in writing, although DMs said this frequently produced unsatisfactory responses, especially when the claimant did not have a legal representative.
- 1.40** DMU staff and legal representatives were critical of the two-hour interview time limit. Staff felt under significant pressure to complete interviews within this time, which impacted on the quality of decisions being made. Legal representatives said they were seeing more appeals being lodged against refusals where poor-quality interviews had been conducted. While some staff thought completing interviews in two hours was achievable, most feedback was overwhelmingly negative. Staff reported that a rigid two-hour interview time limit did not work in practice due to individual case circumstances, variations in the degree of the complexity of claims, and operational issues that were outside the DMs' control.
- 1.41** The enhanced case management (ECM) tool was introduced to provide team leaders (TLs) with an up-to-date view of their teams' live cases and performance, ensuring that DMs had a sustainable flow of cases to work on. TLs welcomed the tool's introduction, as it provided all the performance information they needed in one place. But, as the tool was effectively a spreadsheet, it crashed frequently and was easily corrupted.
- 1.42** DMs viewed the tool differently as they had to record their productivity on it, in addition to providing separate productivity updates twice a day. They viewed this as extra work and micromanagement. Inspectors noted that the tool was a welcome innovation for TLs, but its

⁶ For information on Newton see: <https://www.newtoneurope.com/>

reputation would be enhanced with improved reliability, and more effective collection and utilisation of performance data.

Quality assurance and safeguarding

- 1.43** Inspectors found that the quality assurance guidance for DMs in Asylum Operations was clear. The requirement to quality assure a random 3.5% of decisions made by all DMs and for 100% second pair of eyes (SPoE) checks on specific claims had been embedded in quality assurance processes for a number of years. During 2023, some types of claim were removed from the SPoE process, a verbal SPoE process was introduced (but the outcomes were not formally recorded), and Asylum Operations failed to meet the 3.5% quality assurance target for any month.⁷ Despite a large increase in the number of withdrawn claims, Asylum Operations only quality assured one such claim between January and October 2023, despite concerns raised during an internal review of these outcomes earlier in the year. This reduction in quality assurance added credibility to staff's and stakeholders' concerns that the quality of decisions was suffering from the pressure to increase the volume of decisions made.
- 1.44** The inspection survey responses showed that DMs were confident in their ability to identify safeguarding issues, but staff in the safeguarding hub did not share this assessment. They said they continued to receive unnecessary safeguarding referrals, despite the introduction of a traffic light system that was designed to reduce the number submitted. In the children's hub, the introduction of help sheets to reduce unnecessary referrals and an additional mandatory training course on keeping children safe for DMs demonstrated how safeguarding was central to its work. Inspectors considered that DMUs working on adult claims would benefit from this approach.
- 1.45** Stakeholders also raised concerns about the Home Office's ability to identify safeguarding indicators, which was reflected in the lack of a trauma-informed approach to interviewing. They said that children were not given adequate breaks after speaking about traumatic events.⁸ The introduction of the two-hour interview target for adult interviews meant that interviews were rushed, leading to a perceived lack of empathy from DMs, who themselves did not get breaks between interviews and felt under pressure to complete them on time. In contrast, a senior manager highlighted the benefits of the two-hour interview target, as it meant claimants would not have to endure a longer interview that recounted traumatic experiences.
- 1.46** Staff and managers told inspectors of the difficulties in maintaining a 'face behind the case' approach to processing asylum claims given the pressure to clear the legacy backlog. In June 2023, the 'face behind the case' e-learning package was replaced by lived experience events, but at that time, only 12% of DMs who responded to the inspection survey had attended an event. Senior managers told inspectors that the 'face behind the case' approach was still a priority in Asylum Operations but acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining it given the focus on productivity. This was reflected in the views of stakeholders and those with lived experience of the asylum process, who highlighted the impact of the lack of communication from the Home Office on claimants' lives while awaiting the outcome of their claims.

⁷ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: "While Asylum Operations did not meet the target in this period, the target for Children's casework was met in January and September 2023, while Secondary Casework met the target in April, July, and August."

⁸ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: "A responsible adult is required to be present in all children's interviews and they are required to intervene if they consider that the child is becoming distressed or tired and a break is required."

Leadership and communication

- 1.47** The first half of 2023 saw considerable churn in Asylum Operations senior management grades. A number of senior and experienced staff transferred to work on Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) and Illegal Migration Act (IMA) projects, creating a vacuum in DMU leadership, just as work to clear the legacy backlog was gaining momentum. At one stage there were very few Grade 6 staff in post across the operation, leading to a loss of corporate memory, as seen in the absence of a blueprint for the establishment of new DMUs.⁹ This was not the case in the children’s hub, where inspectors found that stability in the senior grades had been maintained, creating an effective corporate memory and better staff morale.
- 1.48** The recruitment of a new director and restructuring of the senior leadership team (SLT) over the summer of 2023 brought stability, with senior managers taking accountability for decisions and setting the direction of travel for staff. The team built strong working relationships with ministers and was prepared to challenge when necessary. Workflow processes were refined and new initiatives to assist the processing of cohorts were introduced. It was clear to inspectors that staff benefitted from stability in the senior team.
- 1.49** Communicating change to staff and external stakeholders was one of the biggest challenges for managers in Asylum Operations. The inspection survey responses demonstrated that staff did not believe that change was managed well in Asylum Operations given the pace and scale of change, and senior managers were aware of the need to improve in this area. This was seen in the Belfast and Glasgow DMUs, which were due to move from processing legacy cases to working on IMA cases. The commencement date for the move was delayed a number of times due to legal challenges to the Rwanda plan, meaning that staff were confused about their new roles and when they would start them. Following the Supreme Court’s ruling on the government’s Rwanda plan on 15 November 2023, staff in these DMUs were moved back on to processing asylum claims on 21 November 2023.
- 1.50** A dedicated team was created to support staff through the changes required to deliver the Prime Minister’s commitments. Messages were delivered to staff via different communication methods. Inspectors heard that some were too long and technical, meaning that messages were lost, as managers did not have the time to disseminate them to staff. There were also concerns that some communications were diluted by DMU managers who were seeking to shield their staff from difficult messages. This had been recognised as an issue, and a shorter and more concise product was due to be introduced in October 2023 to improve communications.
- 1.51** Asylum Operations also used consultants to communicate messages to staff and upwards from the SLT to ministers. The consultants told inspectors that the number of management layers in Asylum Operations hindered the dissemination of messages to lower grades, but that senior managers were providing clear and consistent messaging. Senior managers said the consultants had helped to ‘sell’ initiatives to ministers, raising questions about ministers’ trust in their civil servants. Overall, working with the consultants meant that the SLT was able to influence the direction of work in Asylum Operations to make changes when needed.
- 1.52** A dedicated customer communications hub (the Asylum Central Communications Hub) was created in April 2022 to amalgamate national asylum correspondence into one place, but a telephony function had still not been implemented by September 2023. The volume of

⁹ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “although the new adult unit in Solihull did not use the template for a new DMU, it was successfully used in Liverpool Adults, Stoke and Manchester”.

correspondence received by the hub was huge, but inspectors found that staff were positive and sought to treat claimants as individuals, despite the pressure of their work. However, they were frustrated by their inability to provide bespoke case progression updates to legal representatives and claimants. Instead, they had to reply using generic responses and refer the progress request back to the responsible DMU. The lack of progress updates was a cause of significant stress for claimants. Stakeholders were also frustrated by this but told inspectors that the creation of the hub was positive, even though awareness of it among claimants was limited.

- 1.53** Managers in the training team spoke positively about working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to design training modules for staff. The Home Office also had a number of strategic engagement groups and panels with stakeholders, NGOs and those with lived experience of the asylum process to communicate and discuss changes to the asylum system. Submissions to the inspection's call for evidence raised stakeholders' frustrations at changes being introduced by the Home Office without any consultation. They felt that engagement had fallen away, and that the groups had become a forum for the Home Office to deliver updates to, rather than an opportunity for genuine engagement. A senior Home Office manager told inspectors that, whereas engagement had previously been very useful, the changing landscape in asylum meant it had become less so, given the directive to introduce new processes without any stakeholder engagement.
- 1.54** Asylum Operations staff told inspectors in September 2023 that lived experience panel meetings were previously held every four months but had increased to monthly, given the volume of changes to the asylum system. However, the only evidence of such meetings that the Home Office could provide consisted of minutes for two meetings held in June and September 2023.
- 1.55** Stakeholders' experience of engagement with the children's asylum teams was more positive, and work that had been undertaken with local authorities on age dispute cases had improved relationships. This engagement had prompted the development of a specific stakeholder pack, and one local authority told inspectors that communications had improved dramatically over the previous year.
- 1.56** Inspectors acknowledged the difficult position of senior managers in Asylum Operations as they had to deliver government policy and engage with stakeholders in a meaningful way. Inspectors noted some positive examples of stakeholder engagement and successful outcomes as a result. However, engagement had been hampered by the pace and volume of change. The Home Office should ensure that it maintains meaningful engagement with stakeholders to learn from their experience. This will provide insights into how to further streamline processes for the benefit of both the Home Office and claimants.

2. Recommendations

1 Previous inspection recommendations¹⁰

- a) Introduce, as a matter of urgency, a published service standard for deciding asylum claims.

2 Vulnerability and safeguarding

- a) Identify vulnerable claimants in the asylum work in progress (WIP) queue and prioritise their claims.

3 Inadmissibility

- a) Review the inadmissibility WIP (including the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) cohort) to ensure that only claimants who have a realistic prospect of removal from the UK are considered under the process.
- b) Ensure claimants are informed in writing when their claim is referred for consideration under the inadmissibility or MEDP process.

4 Training

- a) Confirm and implement the delineation of decision maker training and consolidation responsibilities between the training team and decision-making units.
- b) Use feedback from decision-making units and stakeholders to continually review and update the training provided to Asylum Operations staff.

5 Management information and data

- a) Implement the routine collection of data on vulnerability and protected characteristics to inform equality impact assessments and the Home Office's understanding of how policies impact protected groups.
- b) Streamline the collation of management information to provide a single source of accurate and real-time data.

6 Quality assurance

- a) Ensure that routine quality assurance assessments are carried out on all asylum interviews and decisions, including withdrawn claims since December 2022, to ensure the 3.5% target is met.

¹⁰ Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 'An inspection of asylum casework (August 2020 – May 2021)' (published 18 November 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

3. Background

Previous inspections

- 3.1** The Independent Chief Inspectorate of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) previously inspected asylum casework in 2016, 2017 and 2021.^{11,12,13} It has also inspected related areas, such as how the Home Office considers the ‘best interests’ of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and the Home Office’s use of language services in the asylum process.^{14,15}
- 3.2** The last inspection of asylum casework, which was conducted between August 2020 and May 2021, examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the Home Office’s asylum casework system, from the point when an application was raised, and the screening interview conducted to the service of an initial decision. It focused on:
- resourcing, training, workflow, and the prioritisation of claims in the absence of a formal service standard
 - the quality of substantive interviews, including the use of video conferencing
 - the quality of decision making
 - quality assurance and feedback to decision makers
 - progress on implementing recommendations from the 2017 ICIBI inspection of asylum intake and casework
- 3.3** The inspection found significant issues with workflow and case progression processes, which had contributed to an increasing backlog of claims awaiting an initial decision. A service standard to decide 98% of ‘straightforward’ cases within six months was removed in January 2019, and inspectors found no evidence of claims being prioritised based on vulnerability or the length of time they had been awaiting a decision.
- 3.4** The inspection also found low morale among staff in Asylum Operations, the area responsible for assessing asylum claims, not helped by the pressure to meet targets and a lack of available career progression, which led to a high level of staff attrition. The quality of substantive interviews and decisions was inconsistent, and inspectors found that Asylum Operations was not achieving its quality assurance target. There were particular issues with claims based on sexual orientation.

11 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI), ‘Inspection report on asylum casework, February 2016’ (published 4 February 2016). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspection-report-on-asylum-casework-february-2016>

12 ICIBI, ‘Inspection report on asylum intake and casework’ (published 28 November 2017). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspection-report-on-asylum-intake-and-casework>

13 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework (August 2020 – May 2021)’ (published 18 November 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

14 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of how the Home Office considers the ‘best interests’ of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (August – December 2017)’ (published 28 March 2018). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-how-the-home-office-considers-the-best-interests-of-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children>

15 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of the Home Office’s use of language services in the asylum process (May – November 2019)’ (published 11 November 2020). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-the-home-offices-use-of-language-services-in-the-asylum-process>

- 3.5** The ICIBI made nine recommendations relating to the introduction of a published service standard for deciding asylum claims, case progression and prioritisation, training, workplace culture, and quality assurance. The Home Office accepted all the recommendations except one, which was partially accepted.¹⁶
- 3.6** By the end of October 2023, the Home Office had closed six recommendations and three were still open. Notably, the recommendation regarding the introduction of a published service standard for deciding asylum claims remained open. The Home Office stated that a pilot was conducted during 2021-22 to test potential standards but publication of a new service standard could not be progressed “due to changing priorities across the business”, with initial alignment to the Nationality and Borders Bill, then the Prime Minister’s priorities (a reference to the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration in December 2022), and then the Illegal Migration Bill.
- 3.7** Inspectors noted that, until November 2023, the information provided to claimants about what to expect from the asylum process stated that the Home Office would aim to decide an asylum claim “within 6 months, but this is not always possible and there may sometimes be delays.” On 13 November 2023, this wording was amended to read: “We will aim to make a decision on your claim as soon as possible, however, there may sometimes be delays.”¹⁷ At the time of drafting this report, there had not been a published service standard for deciding asylum claims in place for almost five years.
- 3.8** The recommendation to expedite ‘Transformation’ plans to create a new digital case prioritisation and allocation tool and a substantive interview appointment booking tool also remained open in October 2023. The Manage Appointment Booking (MAB) tool was rolled out during the course of the inspection, and inspectors heard positive feedback about its functionality. The Home Office stated that an Interim Case Allocation Tool (ICAT) had been rolled out nationally. The strategic solution to replace it, Case Allocation and Prioritisation (CAP), was being tested during 2023 but required parts of Atlas, the Home Office’s caseworking system, to be delivered in order to function. These improvements were reported as being due in the third quarter of 2023, but, as the inspection progressed, inspectors were told that the delivery of CAP had been delayed further. In October 2023, the progress report on this recommendation was updated to say that the initial delivery date of CAP was now expected in April 2024.

Asylum Operations

- 3.9** Responsibility for assessing asylum claims lies with Asylum Operations, which is part of Asylum and Protection in the Customer Services Capability directorate in the Home Office. Asylum and Protection is responsible for running the asylum system and for the delivery of refugee resettlement programmes.¹⁸ In 2022, Asylum Operations was split into three separate commands following a restructure, as described in figure 1 below.

¹⁶ The recommendation that the Home Office partially accepted was to ensure that all first line quality assurance takes place before asylum decisions are served. In its response, the Home Office stated: “Recent quality assurance data has shown an uplift in the number of cases assessed by a second pair of eyes before asylum decisions are served. However, it is felt there may be a limit to the consistency we can achieve in striving for 100%. We need to retain the flexibility to conduct retrospective checks if a particular issue had not arisen previously and to accommodate operational timing issues when working to a specific deadline.”

¹⁷ UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Information booklet for asylum applications (published 25 February 2014, updated 13 November 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/information-leaflet-for-asylum-applications>

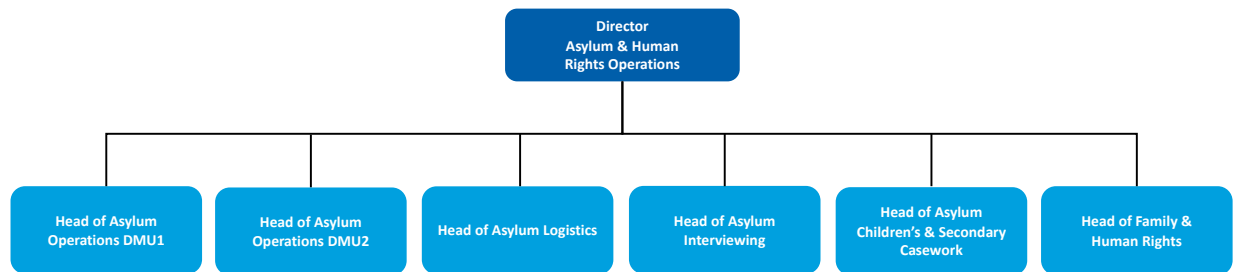
¹⁸ National Audit Office, ‘Overview – Departmental overview Home Office 2022-23’ (published 31 October 2023). https://www.nao.org.uk/overviews/departmental-overview-2022-23-home-office/?utm_source=e-shot&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=HomeOfficeDO2023

Figure 1: Asylum Operations structure, 2022

| Area | Responsibilities |
|--|---|
| Asylum flow casework | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the claims of all those who are adults at the point of claim (and their dependants) who seek asylum in the UK following the implementation date of the Nationality and Borders Act |
| Asylum legacy casework | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the claims of all those who are adults at the point of claim (and their dependants) who seek asylum in the UK prior to the implementation date of the Nationality and Borders Act |
| Asylum children’s and secondary casework | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> casework involving unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and accompanied asylum-seeking children who claim in their own right further leave applications and further submissions from failed asylum seekers¹⁹ |

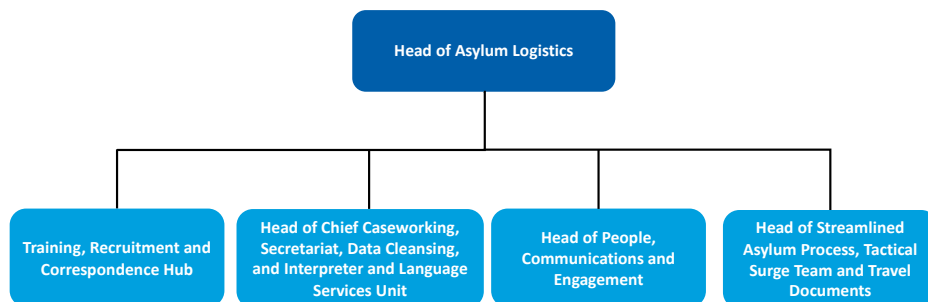
3.10 In July 2023, a new director of Asylum and Human Rights Operations was appointed. The new director restructured the operation under six commands, each led by a senior civil servant (SCS), as shown in figure 2 below. Children’s and secondary casework remained as a separate command, while oversight of the 16 decision-making units (DMUs) in 14 locations was split between two new SCS commands. Another new command was created to oversee asylum interviewing. Family and human rights remained a separate command and was out of scope for this inspection.

Figure 2: Asylum and Human Rights Operations structure, August 2023



3.11 A new logistics command oversaw work in areas such as training, recruitment, correspondence, communications, and engagement, as shown in figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Asylum Logistics structure, August 2023



19 In its factual accuracy response of January 2024, the Home Office stated: “It should also be noted that Secondary Casework deals with a wide range of cases, including: cases that have been considered for substantive consideration in the UK prior to initial third country action; cases previously withdrawn as an absconder or due to non-compliance to be reconsidered due to new evidence; reconsiderations remitted back from the Immigration and Asylum Chamber; reconsiderations via Appeals, Litigation and Administrative Review (ALAR) following a pre-appeal hearing review; and reconsiderations following Judicial Review/Pre-Action Protocol.”

Legislative and policy changes

3.12 Since the ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework, there have been several legislative and policy changes in this area.

Migration and Economic Development Partnership

3.13 In April 2022, the UK government signed a memorandum of understanding with the Republic of Rwanda for the provision of an asylum partnership arrangement.²⁰ The objective of the arrangement was to “create a mechanism for the relocation of asylum seekers whose claims are not being considered by the United Kingdom, to Rwanda, which will process their claims and settle or remove (as appropriate) individuals after their claim is decided, in accordance with Rwanda domestic law, the Refugee Convention, current international standards, including in accordance with international human rights law and including the assurances given under this Arrangement”.

3.14 The Home Office described the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) with Rwanda that was established by the memorandum of understanding as “part of a suite of measures in the New Plan for Immigration to break the business model of people smugglers while maintaining a fair and robust immigration and borders system”.²¹ The operation of the MEDP is intended to act as a deterrent to migrants considering a dangerous journey to the UK. As a mechanism for the relocation of asylum seekers to a country to which they have no prior connection, the MEDP is also central to plans to enable the Home Secretary to fulfil his legal duty under the Illegal Migration Act 2023 to remove illegal entrants to their home country or to a safe third country.

3.15 On 15 November 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that the government's plan to remove claimants to Rwanda was unlawful. At the time of drafting this report, it was not clear how the Home Office would process this cohort of claimants. The MEDP itself was out of scope for this inspection but formed an important part of the context for asylum caseworking over the period of this inspection.

Nationality and Borders Act 2022

3.16 The Home Office described the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA) as “the cornerstone of the government's New Plan for Immigration, delivering the most comprehensive reform in decades to fix the broken asylum system”.²² The Act and the wider plan had three objectives:

- “to make the system fairer and more effective so that we can better protect and support those in genuine need of asylum
- to deter illegal entry into the UK breaking the business model of criminal trafficking networks and saving lives
- to remove from the UK those with no right to be here”

²⁰ Home Office, ‘Memorandum of Understanding between the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic of Rwanda for the provision of an asylum partnership arrangement’ (published 6 April 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-mou-between-the-uk-and-rwanda/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-government-of-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-and-the-government-of-the-republic-of-rwanda>

²¹ Home Office, ‘Migration and economic development partnership: ministerial direction. Letter from Matthew Rycroft to Rt Hon Priti Patel’ (published 16 April 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-economic-development-partnership-ministerial-direction>

²² Home Office, ‘Nationality and Borders Bill: factsheet’ (published 6 July 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nationality-and-borders-bill-factsheet/nationality-and-borders-bill-factsheet>

- 3.17** The NABA received Royal Assent on 28 June 2022 and introduced a wider scope for asylum claims to be treated as inadmissible. It strengthened the law so that those who travelled through safe countries to reach the UK or had a connection to a safe country where they could have claimed asylum could be considered inadmissible to the UK's asylum system. The aim was to "more easily and rapidly remove individuals to safe countries known to be compliant with their obligations under the ECHR [European Convention on Human Rights] and the Refugee Convention, unless the individual can demonstrate otherwise".²³ The effectiveness of the inadmissibility process is examined in chapter 8.
- 3.18** The NABA also introduced powers for the differential treatment of refugees, with those granted refugee status having come to the UK directly from a country or territory where their life or freedom was threatened and who presented themselves to the authorities without delay being considered Group 1 refugees.²⁴ Those granted refugee status who had previously travelled through a safe third country where they could have reasonably been expected to claim asylum, or who did not claim asylum without delay, were considered Group 2 refugees. The primary way in which the groups were differentiated was through the grant of permission to stay. Group 1 refugees were normally granted refugee permission to stay for five years, after which they were able to apply for settlement, whereas Group 2 refugees were normally granted temporary refugee permission to stay for 30 months on a ten-year route to settlement. Differentiation would also affect eligibility for family reunion and recourse to public funds.
- 3.19** The differentiation policy was paused on 17 July 2023. The reason given by the Home Office was that, since the introduction of the policy, the scale of the challenge facing the UK from the use of smugglers to facilitate journeys to the UK had grown, prompting the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act (IMA). The IMA was described as a "considerably stronger means of tackling the same issue", as it imposed a duty on the Home Secretary to remove those who arrived in the UK illegally via safe third countries. Differential treatment of claims ended, and all those who were successful in their asylum claim, including those granted humanitarian protection, received the same conditions and were granted permission to stay for a minimum period of five years. During this inspection, inspectors sought to understand the experience of decision makers (DMs) in applying the differentiation policy and the impact of its suspension.
- 3.20** The NABA also introduced a two-stage determination process to help DMs determine whether a claimant had a well-founded fear of persecution. In Stage One, the DM had to determine whether it was more likely than not that:
- "the claimant has a characteristic which would cause them to fear persecution for one or more of the convention reasons, and
 - that they do in fact fear persecution"²⁵
- 3.21** DMs were instructed to only accept those elements that met the standard of the balance of the probabilities, after the benefit of the doubt was applied, and to no longer accept the material elements that were only reasonably likely to be true.
- 3.22** In the second stage, the DM had to assess whether there was a real risk that the claimant would face the harm they feared if they returned to their country of nationality.

²³ Home Office, 'Nationality and Borders Bill: inadmissibility for those travelling through or with a connection to safe third countries' (published 25 February 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nationality-and-borders-bill-inadmissibility-third-country-connections>

²⁴ Home Office, 'Nationality and Borders Bill: A differentiated approach factsheet' (published 4 December 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nationality-and-borders-bill-differentiation-factsheet>

²⁵ UK Visas and Immigration, 'Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged on or after 28 June 2022' (published 30 July 2012). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/considering-asylum-claims-and-assessing-credibility-instruction>

This assessment had to be made to the lower standard of a ‘reasonable likelihood’ in the same way as in claims made before the NABA came into force. The guidance for staff stated that “working through a clear and structured process will generate clearer and more consistent decision-making”, and, as with differentiation, inspectors sought to understand the experience of DMs in applying this policy.

3.23 All asylum claims made on or after 28 June 2022 would be considered and processed under the NABA legislation, while claims made before 28 June 2022 would be considered under previous legislation and asylum policies.²⁶

Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration

3.24 On 13 December 2022, the Prime Minister made a statement to the House of Commons, setting out five steps to tackle illegal migration.²⁷ The fourth step set out a plan to reduce the time taken to process asylum claims to “days or weeks, not months or years”. To achieve this, the number of asylum DMs would be doubled and the end-to-end process “re-engineered”. This would triple the productivity of DMs, enabling clearance of the backlog of initial asylum decisions by the end of 2023.

3.25 What constituted ‘the backlog of initial asylum decisions’ was subsequently clarified in a letter from the Home Secretary to the Home Affairs Committee on 29 January 2023.²⁸ It set out how the Home Office had established a ‘legacy and flow’ model on 28 June 2022, when NABA received Royal Assent. Any asylum cases opened before that date were referred to as ‘legacy’ cases, and any cases opened after that date were referred to as ‘flow’ cases that would be processed in line with NABA. The letter stated that the commitment made by the Prime Minister was therefore “to clear the backlog of the 92,601 asylum claims made before 28 June 2022 by the end of 2023”.

3.26 To deliver the Prime Minister’s plan, Asylum Operations established Operation SOGALLA, which had the following objectives:

- to double the number of asylum DMs to 2,500 by September 2023
- to recruit around 700 management and support roles
- to increase desk capacity across DMUs to accommodate new staff
- to increase the number of interview rooms to enable decision making at the rate required to meet backlog clearance targets

3.27 Government statistics show that, at the time of the Prime Minister’s statement in December 2022, the number of DMs stood at 1,277.²⁹ By 4 September 2023, the internal Asylum Operations asylum backlog clearance progress update reported “the commitment to achieve a total of 2,500 decision makers in the business has been achieved”. Inspectors noted, however, that 155 technical and operational posts remained unfilled.

3.28 Government statistics measure the productivity of asylum DMs by dividing the number of ‘principal stages’ completed in a given month by the number of asylum caseworking staff

²⁶ UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Asylum decision making prioritisation: caseworker guidance’ (published 2 October 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-decision-making-prioritisation-caseworker-guidance>

²⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM statement on illegal migration: 13 December 2022’ (published 13 December 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-illegal-migration-13-december-2022>

²⁸ UK Parliament, ‘Letter from the Home Secretary on asylum backlog and channel crossings, dated 29 January 2023’ (published 1 February 2023). <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33804/documents/184602/default/>

²⁹ Home Office, ‘Statistics relating to the Illegal Migration Act: data tables to August 2023’ (published 24 April 2023). <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65047913dec5be0014c35f86/statistics-relating-to-the-illegal-migration-act-data-tables-to-aug-2023.ods>

(principal stages include initial decisions and substantive interviews).³⁰ In December 2022, the asylum caseworker productivity figure stood at 4.2. If productivity had to be trebled, this figure had to increase to 12 by the end of 2023. By June 2023, the productivity figure stood at seven, and by October 2023 it stood at ten.

Illegal Migration Act

3.29 The Illegal Migration Act (IMA), which received Royal Assent on 20 July 2023, aimed to:

- “put a stop to illegal migration into the UK by removing the incentive to make dangerous small boat crossings
- speed up the removal of those with no right to be here – in turn this will free up capacity so that the UK can better support those in genuine need of asylum through safe and legal routes
- prevent people who come to the UK through illegal and dangerous journeys from misusing modern slavery safeguards to block their removal
- ensure that the UK continues to support those in genuine need by committing to resettle a specific number of the most vulnerable refugees in the UK every year”³¹

3.30 As highlighted above, the IMA placed a legal duty on the Home Secretary to make arrangements for the removal of illegal entrants falling within the scheme, either to their home country or a safe third country such as Rwanda. The Act also ensured that human rights claims are made non-suspensive, or out of country, with the sole exception of people facing a real risk of serious and irreversible harm in the country of removal.³² It introduced a new ability for the Home Office to detain people for up to 28 days without access to immigration bail or judicial review, and it provided that all legal claims would be exhausted “within weeks”.³³

3.31 The Home Office said that it needed to legislate again so soon after passing the NABA as the number of people arriving by small boats had risen to 45,000 a year. It said that the “lesson from previous immigration legislation, including the NABA, is that incremental reforms do not work at the pace required” and that this was “a problem that requires novel and ambitious solutions”. As the IMA had not been operationalised, with many of its provisions still not in force, this new legislation fell outside the scope of this inspection. Nonetheless, inspectors sought to understand how preparatory work for the implementation of the IMA was affecting Asylum Operations at the time of this inspection.

Asylum WIP data

3.32 The introduction of the legacy and flow model under the NABA in June 2022 meant that Asylum Operations had to track two cohorts of asylum applications awaiting an initial decision. At the end of June 2022, the number of asylum claims awaiting an initial decision in the legacy backlog stood at 100,549.³⁴ By 28 February 2023, the number had increased to a peak of

30 UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Immigration and protection data: Q2 2023’ (published 24 August 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-and-protection-data-q2-2023>

31 Home Office, ‘Illegal Migration Act 2023’ (published 8 March 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/illegal-migration-bill>

32 “If a claim is certified under section 94B [of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (as amended)], the effect is that any appeal can only be lodged or continued while the claimant is outside the UK. This means the right of appeal against the decision to refuse the human rights claim is non-suspensive, so the appeal is not a barrier to removal.” UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Immigration Act 2014 – appeals: caseworker guidance. Certification under section 94B of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002’ (published 20 October 2014). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/appeals>

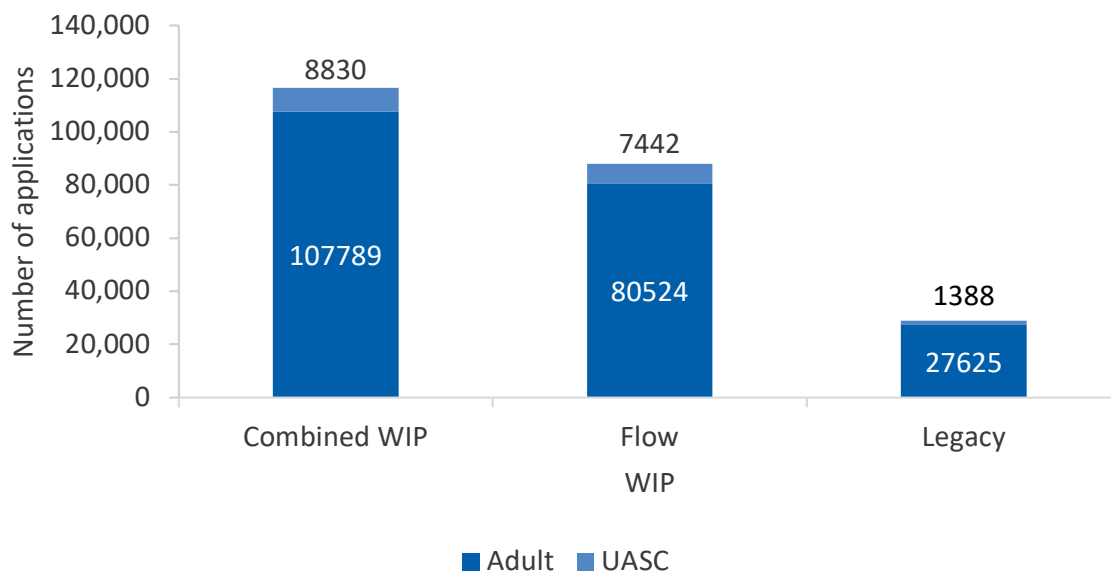
33 Home Office, ‘Nationality and Borders Act compared to Illegal Migration Bill: factsheet’ (updated 20 July 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-factsheets/nationality-and-borders-act-compared-to-illegal-migration-bill-factsheet>

34 Home Office, ‘Statistics relating to the Illegal Migration Act: data tables to August 2023’.

138,782 claims.³⁵ As resources were concentrated on clearing this backlog following the Prime Minister’s statement in December 2022, and with no new legacy claims entering the system, that figure began to decline during 2023, but at the same time the pool of flow cases grew as new claims were made. In June 2023, there was a total of 138,700 claims in the overall work in progress (WIP). At this point, 79% of applicants had been waiting more than six months for an initial decision on their asylum claim.³⁶

3.33 By 27 October 2023, the total initial decision backlog was 116,619 claims, as shown in figure 4 below. The oldest claim still awaiting an initial decision was registered in 2007.³⁷

Figure 4: Combined, legacy and flow WIPs, 27 October 2023



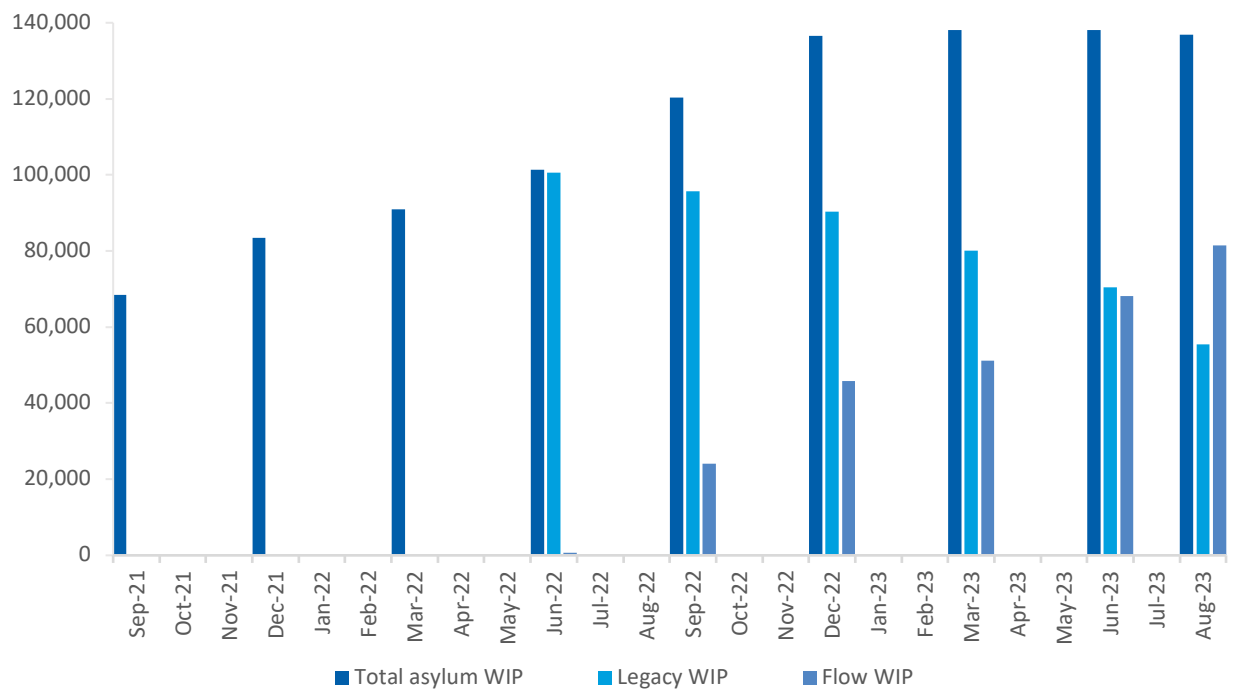
3.34 Figure 5 demonstrates the growth of the total asylum WIP over the previous two years. It shows that the legacy WIP decreased during 2023, at the expense of the flow WIP, which increased as resources were concentrated on clearing the legacy backlog.

³⁵ Home Office, ‘Statistics relating to the Illegal Migration Act: data tables to August 2023’.

³⁶ UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Immigration and protection data: Q2 2023’.

³⁷ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

Figure 5: Legacy, flow and total asylum WIPs, September 2021 to August 2023



Streamlined asylum processing

- 3.35** The size of the overall asylum backlog and the Prime Minister’s commitment to clear the legacy WIP by the end of 2023 placed the Home Office and all staff working in this area under significant pressure. The politicised nature of the asylum debate meant that the Home Office’s response and progress on clearing the backlog was under constant scrutiny. Inspectors heard from senior managers about the priority that was placed on this work at the top of government and the frequent meetings and reporting required at the highest levels. New ways of working and approaches to processing claims were introduced at short notice, often directed at a senior level and with little consultation. It was clear to inspectors how hard staff at all grades in Asylum Operations had worked to reduce the backlog.
- 3.36** The streamlined asylum processing (SAP) model for adults was introduced on 23 February 2023.³⁸ Home Office guidance for DMs stated that the model “is intended to be used for the processing of manifestly well-founded claims awaiting an initial asylum decision”. SAP gave DMs “increased flexibility over the process of making asylum decisions, in the interest of making accurate and high-quality decisions as quickly as possible, for example without a personal interview where a positive decision can be taken based on the evidence available”.
- 3.37** The guidance also stated that, where possible, a decision in the SAP process “will be taken without an interview and protection status will be granted”, but “where the returned questionnaire does not provide sufficient evidence to grant protection status then an interview will be required”. Where an interview was required, “targeted and shorter interviews may be undertaken to ensure that decisions are being taken as efficiently as possible”, and “no negative protection decisions will be reached without a substantive interview”, in line with the normal process.

38 UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Asylum decision making prioritisation: caseworker guidance’.

- 3.38** To enhance the SAP process, the Asylum Operations PACE (Prioritising Asylum Customers' Experience) Programme developed the "cohort-by-cohort plan to tackle the backlog". It "developed delivery approaches for each cohort within the legacy backlog, maximising the use of decisions on papers, targeted nationality interviews and other approaches, including questionnaires and shortened, targeted interviews". It also developed productivity expectations "and optimal resource allocation for each of these cohorts" to align to overall delivery in line with the Prime Minister's commitments. In addition, it designed and tested the enhanced case management tool to help team leaders with case allocation, accountability to targets and supporting DMs to clear barriers.
- 3.39** To enable Asylum Operations to manage the work to reduce the backlog, legacy WIP cases were subdivided into a number of cohorts, each of which was to be worked through in individually named operations. This meant that claims were grouped together by nationality or multiple nationalities with similarities based on volume of claims (intake), grant rate, compliance rate, and proportion of those in receipt of asylum support.³⁹ These cohorts are described in figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Legacy backlog cohorts

| Operation name/ criteria | Overall legacy WIP | Operation AMESA | Operation BRIDORA | Operation MAKHU |
|--|-----------------------|---|-------------------------|---|
| Starting figure | 98,307 ⁴⁰ | 14,563 | 12,543 | 58,252 |
| Figure as at 13 November 2023 | 26,862 | 1,135 | 2,585 | 23,142 |
| Operation start date | 28 June 2022 | October 2022 | December 2022 | December 2022 |
| Eligibility | | High-grant nationalities (Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria, Yemen) | Albanian claimants | All nationalities not covered by AMESA and BRIDORA |
| Considerations | | The severity of any criminal conviction Credibility of claimed nationality | Albanian nationality | All nationalities not covered by AMESA and BRIDORA |

³⁹ UK Visas and Immigration, 'Asylum decision making prioritisation: caseworker guidance'.

⁴⁰ This figure represents all claims (adults and children) made before 28 June 2022. The Home Office told inspectors that the totals for Op AMESA, Op BRIDORA and Op MAKHU do not equal 98,307 as that figure was the total on 28 June 2022, whereas the starting figures for each operation are those from the starting date of the individual operations (Op AMESA in October 2022 and Op BRIDORA and Op MAKHU in December 2022). The additional cases will have been decided in the interim period.

| Operation name/ criteria | Overall legacy WIP | Operation AMESA | Operation BRIDORA | Operation MAKHU |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Applicability | | Single applicants Applicants who form part of a family group Flow and legacy cases | Albanian nationals | All nationalities not covered by AMESA and BRIDORA |
| Exclusions | | Unaccompanied asylum seeking children | Unaccompanied asylum seeking children | Unaccompanied asylum seeking children |

3.40 Asylum Operations introduced several methods to track the progress of work to clear the legacy backlog. Inspectors saw fortnightly asylum backlog clearance progress updates that reported on overall progress to clear the WIP. These updates used a theme of 39 steps, which were arrived at by dividing the starting backlog figure of 98,307 by 40 milestones to represent 5% of the backlog cleared after every two milestones. This was turned into a visual representation for the performance pack, as shown in figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Example of the ‘39 steps’ progress update, as of 13 November 2023



4. Scope

4.1 This inspection examined asylum decision making since the implementation of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA), including:

- a) how the NABA was operationalised
- b) whether the Home Office is adequately resourced (with staff sufficiently trained) to make decisions efficiently and effectively
- c) the effectiveness of measures taken by the Home Office to address delays and clear the initial decision backlog, such as new workflow and case progression processes

4.2 It also considered:

- a) the implementation of the NABA, staff awareness of the amendments made and whether staff were provided with adequate training and upskilling
- b) the impact the NABA had on the asylum backlog and inadmissibility process
- c) any additional complexity added to asylum casework as a result of amendments to the NABA
- d) how the NABA affected staff morale
- e) retention and recruitment of decision makers
- f) the effectiveness of training given to those involved in asylum casework
- g) workplace culture and performance management
- h) barriers to case progression and decisions being made efficiently
- i) the prioritisation of asylum casework
- j) initiatives and operations to increase efficiency, such as Prioritising Asylum Customer Experience (PACE),⁴¹ the streamlined asylum process, and Op BRIDORA⁴²

4.3 The inspection scope did not include:

- a) asylum accommodation – this was a separate inspection on the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration inspection plan for 2023-24⁴³
- b) the Home Office’s use of age assessments – this was a separate inspection on the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration inspection plan for 2023-24
- c) appeals – although the inspection considered whether Asylum Operations learnt from appeal determinations to improve the quality of asylum decisions
- d) legal aid – legal aid is overseen by the Legal Aid Agency, an executive agency sponsored by the Ministry of Justice

⁴¹ The PACE programme was a project within the Asylum Transformation Programme and aimed to increase productivity in Asylum Operations.

⁴² Operation BRIDORA was established in December 2022 to process asylum claims from Albanian nationals.

⁴³ Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, ‘ICIBI Inspection Plan 2023-24’ (published 3 April 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/icibi-inspection-plan-2023-24>

- e) the operation of the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) between the UK and Rwanda⁴⁴ – at the time of drafting this report the MEDP was subject to legal challenge and flights to Rwanda had not commenced
- f) the impact of the Illegal Migration Act (IMA)⁴⁵ – the Act received Royal Assent on 20 July 2023, (after this inspection had commenced), but inspectors sought to understand the impact of preparations for the implementation of the IMA on asylum caseworking
- g) fresh asylum claims – this area could merit future inspection to understand the impact of the NABA and the IMA

44 Home Office, 'Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda' (published 29 November 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/migration-and-economic-development-partnership-with-rwanda>

45 Home Office, 'Illegal Migration Act 2023' (published 8 March 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/illegal-migration-bill>

5. Methodology

5.1 Inspectors:

- a) conducted research using open-source material, including published reports and Home Office guidance available to staff
- b) published a 'call for evidence' on the Independent Chief Inspectorate of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) website on 12 May 2023, inviting contributions from anyone with knowledge or experience of asylum casework, and analysed the 30 responses received from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), those with lived experience of the asylum process, local authorities, independent advocates, regulators, and legal representatives
- c) undertook familiarisation calls with NGOs and legal stakeholders in April and May 2023
- d) undertook familiarisation visits to the Mersey decision-making unit and National Absconder Team in Bootle and to Asylum Children's and Secondary Casework teams in Liverpool between 7 and 8 June 2023
- e) analysed the documentary evidence and data provided by the Home Office in response to inspectors' preliminary, formal, and further evidence requests, assessing the extent to which the department's performance, as documented in these materials, met ICIBI's 'expectations' (Annex A)
- f) between June and July 2023, conducted a survey of decision makers, team leaders and technical specialists in Asylum Operations and analysed the responses
- g) in August 2023, conducted a claim sampling exercise of 120 randomly selected asylum applications from a dataset provided by the Home Office
- h) in August and September 2023, conducted focus groups with individuals who had 'lived experience' of the asylum process
- i) interviewed and held focus groups (in person and via Microsoft Teams) with Home Office managers and staff from grades Administrative Officer to Senior Civil Servant between 11 September and 10 October 2023
- j) in October 2023, conducted a focus group with legal stakeholders to understand the impact of the streamlined asylum process on decision quality
- k) presented the emerging findings to Home Office senior management on 7 November 2023

6. Inspection findings: Recruitment and workforce

- 6.1** The Independent Chief Inspectorate of Borders and Immigration's (ICIBI's) 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that the Home Office had persistently high levels of attrition among decision makers (DMs). Focus groups, interviews, and staff surveys revealed low morale among DMs, attributed to pressure to meet targets and limited career progression. The training provided to DMs was also found to be outdated and insufficient to equip them with the necessary skills to undertake interviews and make decisions.⁴⁶ This inspection examined whether the Home Office was adequately resourced, with staff sufficiently trained to make decisions efficiently and effectively.

Overview of staff structure

- 6.2** As of November 2023, there were 16 decision-making units (DMUs) located in Belfast, Cardiff, Durham, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool (2), Manchester, Mersey [Bootle], Newcastle, Sheffield, Solihull (2), and Stoke, with two specialised teams, based in London, responsible for Detained Asylum Casework (DAC), and Non-Suspensive Appeals (NSA). Each DMU was managed by a Grade 7 civil servant.
- 6.3** All DMUs comprised staff responsible for interviewing and decision making, quality assurance, technical advice, and DM management, as well as administrative and workflow support. These functions were carried out by Administrative Officer (AO) and Executive Officer (EO) grade administrative staff (admin staff), AO interviewing officers, EO DMs, Higher Executive Officer (HEO) team leaders (TLs), HEO technical specialists (tech specs), Senior Executive Officer (SEO) operations managers, and SEO senior caseworkers (SCWs). A summary of key responsibilities is set out in Annex B.

Recruitment

Operation SOGALLA

- 6.4** In response to the Prime Minister's statement on illegal migration in December 2022, in which he committed to doubling the number of asylum DMs, Asylum Operations undertook a significant recruitment effort to expand its workforce to 2,500 DMs by September 2023.⁴⁷ Operation SOGALLA (Op SOGALLA) oversaw this work. It also had an objective to increase desk capacity across DMUs to accommodate the new staff and increase the number of interview rooms to enable decision making at the rate required to meet the backlog clearance targets.
- 6.5** By 4 September 2023, the 'asylum backlog clearance progress update' reported that the commitment to achieve a total of 2,500 DMs in Asylum Operations had been achieved.

⁴⁶ Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 'An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021' (published 18 November 2021), p. 8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

⁴⁷ Prime Minister's Office, 'PM statement on illegal migration' (published 13 December 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-illegal-migration-13-december-2022#:~:text=It%20is%20unfair%20that%20people,countries%20that%20are%20perfectly%20safe.>

Decision maker recruitment process

- 6.6** To deliver the required number of DMs, the Home Office used a Cabinet Office contract with Shared Services Connected Ltd (SSCL), as the Home Office recruitment process was unable to cope with the volume of new staff required.⁴⁸ SSCL was responsible for advertising job openings, conducting interviews, and presenting a shortlist of potential candidates to the workforce planning team in Asylum Operations. SSCL and the Home Office Resourcing Centre (HORC) were responsible for conducting the necessary security checks, with the workforce planning team taking responsibility for arranging face-to-face ID checks for candidates who could not use the online ID verification system.
- 6.7** The workforce planning team told inspectors that the scenario-based assessment in the recruitment process did not relate to the DM role.⁴⁹ This change was said to have taken place a number of years previously. The team acknowledged that the process needed to be changed but it had not had the time to do it because of the pressure to recruit new DMs. The team had observed some of the recruitment interviews conducted by SSCL and told inspectors that in some cases, because SSCL had no knowledge of asylum work, they did not know what to look for in candidates, but the team agreed with SSCL's recommendations in around 98% of cases. There were concerns that, although the candidates ticked some of the right boxes through SSCL's templated approach, it did not mean they were right for the DM role.
- 6.8** Senior managers told inspectors they did not think mass recruitment was a distraction from meeting the Prime Minister's target to clear the legacy backlog and that the additional recruitment should have been done a long time ago. One said: "You would not be able to do what we are doing [clearing the backlog] without that recruitment." They also did not believe that the mass recruitment drive had affected the quality of new DMs joining Asylum Operations.
- 6.9** DMU managers told inspectors they were concerned that the quality of DMs being recruited had declined through recent recruitment campaigns. They said that many new DMs were not suitable for the role, describing some as "frightening", as they did not have the skills or expertise to do the role effectively. One tech spec said: "There are so many DMs that have come in that probably would not usually."

Recruitment of wraparound staff

- 6.10** Op SOGALLA was also responsible for the recruitment of around 700 management and support roles, including Grade 7 management roles, SEO operational leads, SEO SCWs, HEO tech specs, HEO, EO TLs and AO support, also referred to within the Home Office as 'wraparound roles'. Wraparound staff were required to support leadership, management, as well as technical and administrative capacity and capability for the 2,500 asylum DMs.
- 6.11** Inspectors found there was a lack of wraparound staff in post when Asylum Operations met the target to have 2,500 DMs in post by September 2023. In the Asylum backlog clearance progress update dated 21 August 2023, 11 SEO operational, 33 SEO SCW, 19 HEO TL, and 92 HEO tech specs were still vacant. There was no record of how many AO support staff were still required.

⁴⁸ SSCL is "the largest provider of critical business support services for Government, Ministry of Defence, Metropolitan Police Service and the Construction and Training Board (CITB)". See: <https://sscl.com/>

⁴⁹ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: "The recent campaigns were carried out using written tests and role play exercises, as well as some interview questions."

- 6.12** The shortage of wraparound staff was a particular challenge for the Solihull 2 (adult), Stoke, and Liverpool (adult) DMUs, all of which were newly established. As of 13 August 2023, the Solihull 2 DMU only had one member of administrative and workflow staff, with no tech specs based in Solihull to support the 69 DMs in post. By 23 November 2023, administrative and workflow staff had increased to 17 to support the 88 DMs in post. DMs and managers in Solihull 2 told inspectors they had to rely on tech specs based all over the UK, who provided support remotely. Tech specs told inspectors that none of those assigned to Solihull 2 DMU had ever attended the DMU in person. DMs told inspectors that it would have been helpful to have a tech spec based at the DMU to share ideas with.
- 6.13** A senior manager in another location said they had “failed the DMs, as [they] did not have the tech specs and the team leaders that were needed” to support the influx of new DMs.
- 6.14** Each DMU had its own administrative and workflow staff, which included case progression officers. CPOs Case progression officers were responsible for progressing cases to an interview-ready stage. As of August 2023, each DMU had on average around 23 administrative and support staff to support an average of 113 DMs. The Home Office provided updated staffing figures in November 2023 and, despite the increase in the number of DMs, the number of support staff had decreased to an average of 22 administrative and support staff to support an average of 147 DMs per DMU.
- 6.15** Consequently, existing staff were having to take on additional work. One workflow team member told inspectors that, despite having been in the role for months, they were still unsure what the role entailed as they found themselves having to handle various tasks without knowing whether they related to case progression, workflow or admin. Managers in the workflow team acknowledged that staffing levels were their primary challenge, with recruitment proving to be an “enormous problem”, and said that the extensive recruitment drive had resulted in a lack of knowledge across the DMU. Another manager told inspectors that, if they had a better structure in place, they would have had the wraparound support in place earlier. Instead, TMs started at the same time as DMs, and administrative staff were due to start afterwards. A team leader told inspectors: “It is clear that the unit was set up in haste to get the decisions out, and it does not have the structures [in place].”

Tactical surge staff

- 6.16** The Home Office had a pool of ‘tactical surge’ team (TST) staff that could be deployed to different areas of the department when required. Asylum Operations used the TST across different areas of the operation. To request them, a team had to submit details of the number of fixed-term appointment staff it required, and the security clearance required for the roles. TST staff were either agency staff or employed on a fixed-term appointment.
- 6.17** The majority of the agency staff used were at AO grade in the administration and workflow teams. As of November 2023, of the 388 staff at AO grade, 74 were agency workers and 36 were on fixed-term appointments. Senior managers told inspectors that there were some challenges in using TST staff, as they were not able to make decisions on asylum applications and could move on to other roles quickly. A manager in one workflow team raised concerns about the quality of some of these temporary staff, describing it as “questionable” due to their lack of understanding of general IT and spreadsheets, which left them “struggling” when they commenced employment. Another member of staff said there had been a “definite decline” in the quality of staff received, citing similar issues of new staff members not being IT literate and not knowing how to access emails.

- 6.18** During Op AMESA (as discussed in chapter 7), the Home Office also used staff loaned from other government departments, such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), HM Passport Office (HMPO), and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Staff were used as EO interviewers or AO DMs.
- 6.19** EO interviewers conducted interviews for those claimants identified as requiring either a ‘targeted’ or ‘shorter’ interview. They then made a decision on whether that claim should be granted or refused. If they decided that the claim should be refused, it was handed to a tech spec to review, and then routed back via the normal asylum process. If the decision was to grant the claim, it was passed to the AO DMs to produce and issue the grant letters. Inspectors found there was a lack of connection between the work of the EO interviewers and AO DMs, with both lacking a clear understanding of how their individual tasks contributed to the overall process.
- 6.20** A senior manager told inspectors that due to the temporary nature of the staff on loan, turnover was rapid, necessitating frequent replacement. When staff from other government departments were required to address pressures in their home departments, a staffing gap emerged. With staff members being moved around or leaving, there was a lack of continuity and expertise within the team.
- 6.21** Another manager told inspectors they were using presenting officers from the Appeals, Litigation, and Administrative Review team. Presenting officers were used to support the checking of refusal decisions to ensure quality decision making. Inspectors found this approach to be a good use of experienced resource, which relieved the pressure on tech specs who could then focus on supporting the newer DMs.

Use of brigaded campaigns

- 6.22** In Asylum Operations, brigaded campaigns were used to recruit HEO team leaders and EO team leaders specifically, not just HEO and EO grades. Brigaded campaigns were also used to recruit AO Administrative Officers, which is a generic role but could have slight variations depending on the team the AOs were recruited to.
- 6.23** Inspectors heard differing views about the use of these campaigns. The senior leadership team expressed positive views, stating that brigaded campaigns “provide refreshment for departments” and that they took the “subjectivity out” of the hiring process. A member of the workforce planning team also praised the campaigns, describing them as excellent for filling posts with experienced candidates.
- 6.24** However, many staff reported issues with individuals recruited through brigaded campaigns, as they lacked knowledge of the role to which they were assigned. The safeguarding hub received several staff members ranging from AO to G7 through this recruitment method, and many of them were unaware of the responsibilities associated with their roles. A senior manager recalled an instance when a staff member had asked about the responsibilities of their safeguarding role, with the recruitment team responding that they would be dealing with asylum seekers “who had a broken leg”. This lack of clarity had a negative impact on the wellbeing of staff who were unprepared for the demands of their role.
- 6.25** Another manager told inspectors that they would not have supported the brigaded recruitment campaign as it “probably did not get the right staff in”. This sentiment was shared by managers across all three sites visited by inspectors, who highlighted personnel issues arising from the mismatch between staff and job requirements.

Training

- 6.26** The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework recommended that Asylum Operations revisit recommendation 4 from the 2017 inspection of asylum intake and casework, with specific reference to: substantive interviews and decisions to design, in consultation with stakeholders, deliver and provide regular refresher training for all decision makers (DMs) and technical specialists (tech specs).⁵⁰ The Home Office told inspectors that it had closed this recommendation in April 2023 and provided the following account of actions it had taken:

“The Foundation Training Programme (FTP) – Decision Making Course was fully redesigned and successfully piloted in July 2021. As well as observing the pilot course, the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] was consulted during the design and development of the 2021 course materials. The 2021 course has subsequently been reviewed in light of the 2022 Act and was updated accordingly in December 2022. Furthermore, following an internal review on the 2021 course and feedback provided by UNHCR, the FTP Decision Making Course has been revised and further changes were introduced in April 2023.

The FTP Interview course was revised in 2020 to provide DMs with interview skills to reflect that asylum interviews were taking place in a remote/virtual environment. The FTP Interview course is currently in the process of being redesigned, with the new course scheduled to be piloted in May 2023.

The Asylum Operations Training Team (AOTT) has adopted several strategies towards providing refresher training either through virtual classroom delivery (Topic of the Month Sessions, NPI Training) as well as providing bite-size learning videos for self-directed and flexible learning. Furthermore, AOTT has designed specialist training on assessing medical evidence in asylum claims and religion or belief claims in consultation with UNHCR and other stakeholders such as Helen Bamber Foundation, Freedom from Torture and the APPG for freedom of religion or belief which has been rolled out to decision making staff following the ICIBI 2017 report.”

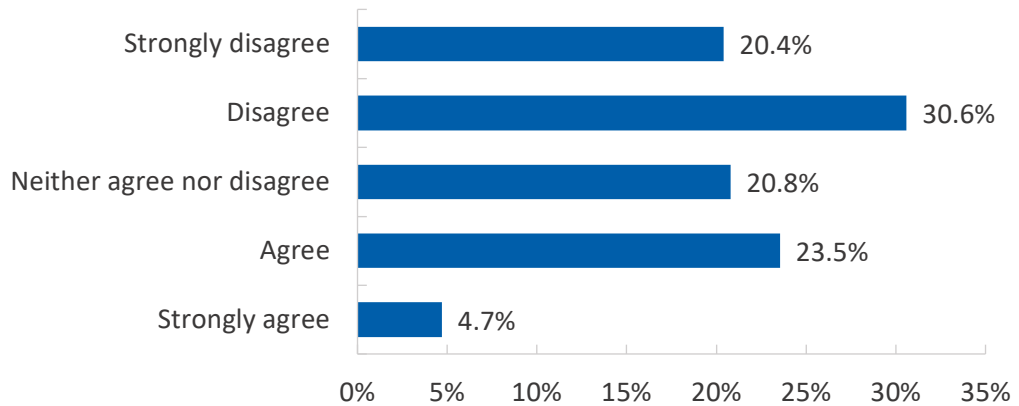
- 6.27** Inspectors reviewed the training material and noted specific training modules had been added in relation to religion or belief claims. The AOTT staff told inspectors that they included the information provided by the UNHCR when they reviewed the training course. The UNHCR provided videos to be included in the training materials, specifically addressing gender-based harm, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) claims. These videos advised the DMs on the type of evidence to anticipate in such claims. Stakeholders told inspectors that, where the Home Office had engaged, they appreciated this opportunity and hoped it would continue.

⁵⁰ ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’.

Decision maker training

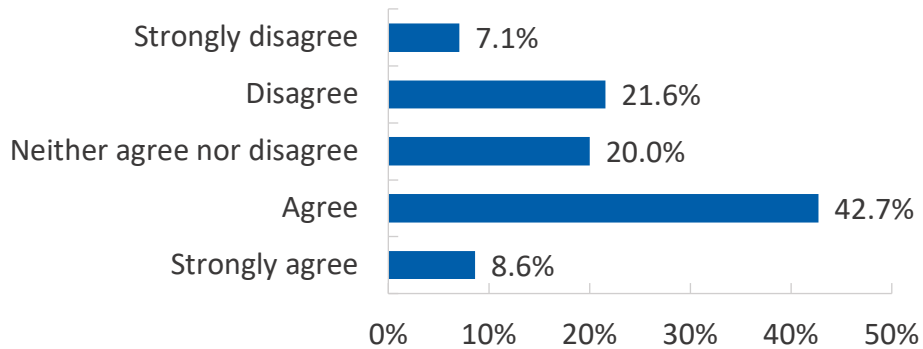
- 6.28** When starting in the role, new DMs must complete a period of training and consolidation. Between December 2020 and March 2022, this training was delivered by the Asylum Training Academy and ran for 22 weeks. Home Office documents show that it consisted of:
- “7-day induction which incorporates the 2-day UKVI corporate induction. The Academy induction includes mandatory e-learning, presentations from specialist teams and wellbeing sessions. The Asylum and Protection story is also embedded
 - 3 days of the Foundation Training Programme (FTP) pre-read
 - 3 weeks of virtual classroom teaching – the recently redeveloped decision-making FTP, delivered by the Asylum Operations Training Team (AOTT)
 - 10-week period of consolidation of decision-making skills (including a week of upskilling workshops)
 - 2 weeks of virtual classroom training in interviewing skills (interview FTP), delivered by AOTT
 - 3 weeks interview consolidation period
 - A further 5-week period consolidating this learning and working to the Interview – Decide model”
- 6.29** In March 2022, the training programme underwent modifications to reduce the course to nine weeks. This was followed by a two-week consolidation period in the DMUs. The training programme was subsequently revised further, following the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration in December 2022.
- 6.30** During focus groups with inspectors, DMs expressed dissatisfaction with the training. They said that it was inadequate and did not provide them with the necessary information to perform their job effectively because it failed to cover the information required for the role. When describing the experience, one DM said: “We drowned before we learned to swim.” Others characterised it as “chaotic”.
- 6.31** In response to a survey sent to Asylum Operations staff during this inspection, DMs said they were least confident in making and drafting refusal decisions, with only 28.2% (72 of the 255 who responded to this question) saying they agreed or strongly agreed that the FTP had equipped them for this part of the role, and 51% (130 of 255) saying they disagreed or strongly disagreed, as shown in figure 8.

Figure 8: Inspection survey responses to the statement: “The training I have received has equipped me to make and draft refusal decisions effectively.”



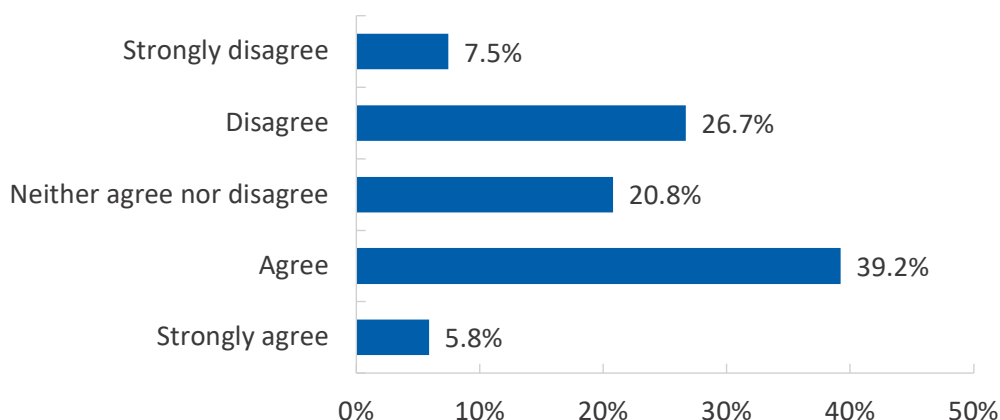
6.32 DMs were more confident in conducting substantive interviews, with 51.3% (131 of 255) saying they agreed or strongly agreed that the FTP had equipped them for this part of the role, and 28.7% (73 of 255) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, as shown in figure 9 below.

Figure 9: Inspection survey responses to the statement: “The training I have received has equipped me to conduct substantive interviews effectively.”



6.33 On making and drafting grant decisions, 45% (115 of 255) said they agreed or strongly agreed the FTP had equipped them for this part of the role, and 34.2% (87 of 255) disagreed or strongly disagreed, as shown in figure 10. This shows that less than half of the DMs who responded to the survey felt confident the training equipped them to effectively make and draft grant letters.

Figure 10: Inspection survey responses to the statement: “The training I have received has equipped me to make and draft grant letters effectively.”



6.34 In comments provided at the end of the inspection survey, there were further negative views about the training DMs had received, in particular on the use of the different IT systems used by Asylum Operations. DMs also said that some FTP trainers had not worked as DMs, which limited their ability to respond to questions effectively.⁵¹

‘Just in time’ training

6.35 Following the Prime Minister’s statement, changes were made to the FTP training, and ‘just in time’ training was introduced. This training involved either a two-week initial interview training course, later followed by a two-week supplementary decision-making course, or a three-week initial decision course, later followed by one-week’s supplementary interview training. Senior managers told inspectors that:

“We take brand new people and expect them to learn about interviewing and decisions at the same time. It’s too much. We split it to get people to focus on one of those things, become great at that, and then come back for the other training.”

6.36 A senior manager told inspectors that, as a practical response to the high intake of DMs, Asylum Operations had refocused the previous nine-week FTP training to give DMs technical knowledge on the basics to fulfil particular aspects of the role. AOTT staff told inspectors that the ‘just in time’ model was more concise and eliminated parts of the training AOTT deemed to be unnecessary.

6.37 While this was seen as a practical response to the department’s challenges, some managers said the shorter training had the potential to negatively affect productivity, because it limited DMs to working on either decisions or refusals. Some DMs said this enabled them to become confident in one element of the role before moving on to the next, making it manageable, but others described it as a “steep learning curve”. DMs from two DMUs told inspectors that they were only trained to write refusals. However, when they started in their roles, they were expected to write grant decisions despite not having received that training. DMs who were solely trained in conducting interviews said they struggled with interview preparation due to their lack of decision-making knowledge. They were unsure of the necessary information needed to make a decision.

⁵¹ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “The Asylum Operations Training Team (AOTT) have clarified that this will relate only to commercial trainers as all AOTT trainers have experience.”

Training expectations

- 6.38** Inspectors found that there was a disconnect between the expectations of the DMUs and the AOTT on the objectives of the FTP. AOTT staff told inspectors that the FTP was a 70:20:10 model. The FTP delivered by the training team was only 10% of the overall training and was therefore designed to provide DMs with the core skills, 20% of the model was the ‘consolidation’ period while the DMs were in their units, which would normally be led by a tech spec, and 70% of the model was ‘learning on the job’.
- 6.39** DMs and tech specs believed that the training should include guidance on completing Operating Mandate (Op Mandate) checks and familiarising new staff with the caseworking systems used, such as CID (Case Information Database) and Atlas, which they said were absent from the training. Op Mandate checks are minimum mandatory identity and security checks that should be carried out on all claimants. The given identity and aliases (declared or revealed from the biometric checks) must be checked against relevant Home Office systems and police databases. DMs across all three sites expressed their initial experiences of feeling “completely blind” on starting their role, due to the lack of information provided on the Op Mandate and use of the relevant systems during the training. They told inspectors that they did not know what Op Mandate checks were, despite them being a key part of the role.
- 6.40** In inspection survey responses, DMs said they lacked confidence in conducting Op Mandate checks, with 38% (96 of the 256 who responded to this question) saying they agreed or strongly agreed that the FTP had equipped them for this part of the role, and 48% (122 of 256) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. These results echo the concerns raised by staff around the lack of information provided to them on Op Mandate checks. In response to this, trainers told inspectors that systems and Op Mandate checks should be covered during the consolidation period in the DMUs.
- 6.41** Inspectors identified positive feedback loops between the AOTT and DMs. DMs were provided with a feedback form at the end of the course and any issues that arose were fed back to the training design team. AOTT staff told inspectors they intended to undertake further outreach work in DMUs in order to strengthen the feedback loops by obtaining feedback one or two months after the course to understand whether staff found it useful for their role. This feedback mechanism would play a vital role in facilitating continuous improvement of the training materials, as well as ensuring that the specific needs of the DMs were addressed.

Ernst & Young trainers

- 6.42** In response to the high volumes of DMs being onboarded at the same time, Asylum Operations used contractors from Ernst & Young (EY) to support the delivery of training.⁵² A senior manager told inspectors that Asylum Operations had used EY as an external training solution. They provided professional trainers and were expected to deliver high-quality training on asylum casework like any other trainers in the Civil Service, as they had all the training material required, provided by AOTT.

52 For information on EY see: https://www.ey.com/en_gl

6.43 However, DMs said that because the EY trainers lacked any asylum experience, they were unable to answer technical questions, which meant the training was less useful. One DM told inspectors the training was online and “not fit for purpose”. A senior manager told inspectors:

“they [EY] have been enthusiastic and useful, but they don’t have the background knowledge; they essentially parrot that information to the delegates, but they don’t have the required background knowledge in asylum... We probably wouldn’t use EY again unless there was another big surge, but we would still probably try to not use them.”

6.44 Despite the concerns raised by the senior manager and DMs, the team working on the Illegal Migration Act (IMA) planned to utilise EY trainers to deliver training for the IMA work.

Technical specialist training

6.45 Tech specs provide technical advice and feedback to DMs on their interviews and decisions. Inspectors sought an update on progress made against recommendation 4 of the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework, which said that the Home Office should:

“Revisit recommendation four from the 2017 ICIBI inspection of asylum intake and casework, with specific reference to...

Quality assurance – Urgently finalise and implement training for Tech Specs and others who conduct quality assurance. The Home Office advised inspectors that they had finalised a training programme, in 2022, to equip TS with the key skills they needed with a focus on coaching and mentoring, and that this had been successfully rolled out.”⁵³

6.46 Although a tech spec training programme existed, the AOTT told inspectors it needed a “serious overhaul” and that it had only been rolled out to some tech specs. In the inspection survey sent to staff, tech specs were asked whether they had received any role-specific training and 60% (30 out of 50) said they had not. Of the 40% (20 out of 50) who did receive training, just over half (55%) agreed that it equipped them to carry out their role as a tech spec, with none reporting that they strongly agreed.

Team leader training

6.47 Team leaders (TLs) are responsible for leading and managing an operational team of DMs and supporting DMs to meet their targets, as well as supporting their staff to develop. TLs told inspectors that there was no formal training when they started in the role. Although some TLs undertook a ‘foundation leadership course’, they reported it was not helpful, as they were unable to implement the learning. For example, in the course, they were advised against micromanaging people, but they told inspectors that their own managers encouraged them to do exactly that.

6.48 In response to the inspection survey, 67% (37 of 55) of the TLs who responded said they had received no management training when they started in the role. Of the 33% who had (18 of 55), 56% (10) strongly agreed or agreed that the training equipped them for the TL role, with 22% (4) saying they disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results showed that there is a need for improved management training for TLs. Providing comprehensive training that aligns with the expectations of the role would help TLs develop the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively lead and manage their teams.

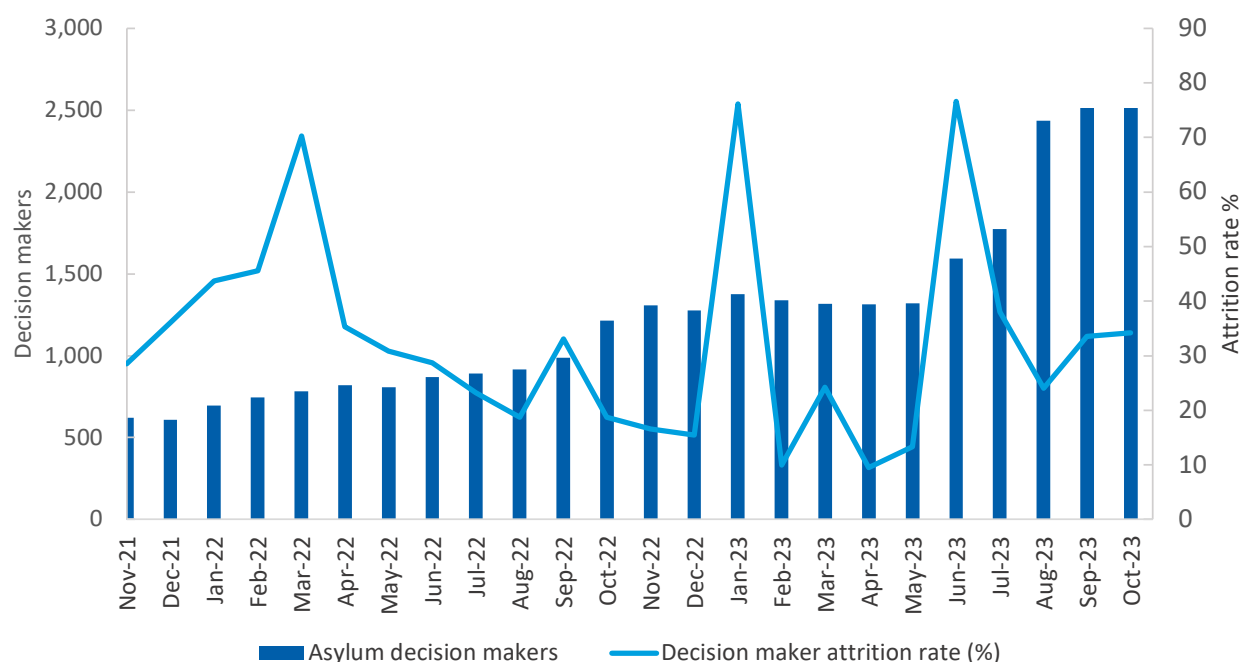
53 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 12.

Staff retention

DM attrition

- 6.49** Asylum Operations has had an issue with retaining DMs for a number of years. The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that unachievable targets and limited opportunities for career progression contributed to the high levels of attrition among DMs.⁵⁴
- 6.50** By November 2023, the average rate of monthly attrition for DM staff for 2023-2024, between the months of April to October, was 32.8%.⁵⁵ As illustrated in figure 11, the rate of attrition has fluctuated since November 2021, with the lowest monthly figure being in August 2023. The average rate of attrition for 2021-2022 was 45.41% and for 2022-2023 it was 27.57%.

Figure 11: Asylum decision maker numbers and attrition rate, November 2021 to September 2023

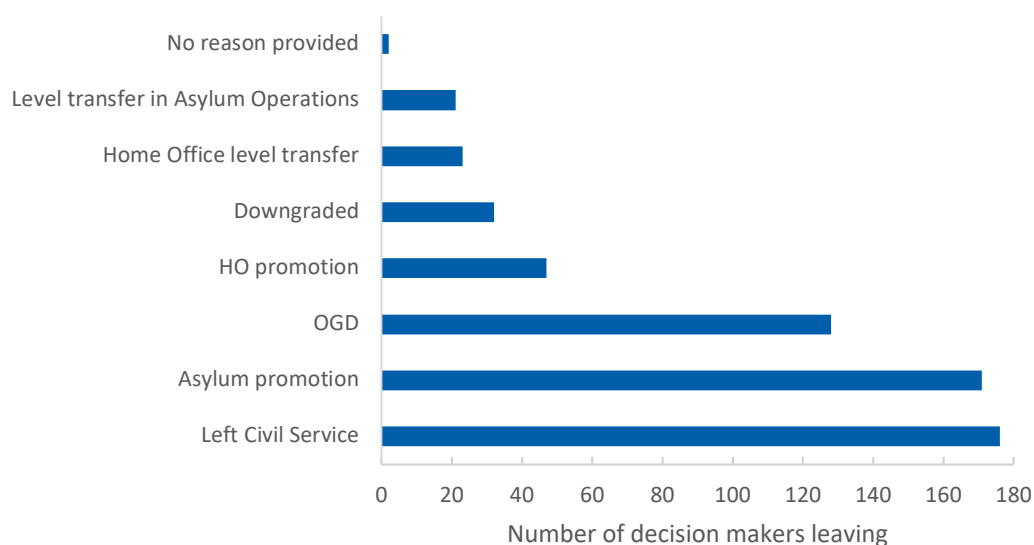


- 6.51** Managers told inspectors that much of the attrition could be attributed to DMs being promoted. The expansion of Asylum Operations had led to opportunities for staff progression, and, although this contributed to attrition rates, managers told inspectors that this was positive in terms of career progression and development opportunities.
- 6.52** The Home Office provided data on DMs who left their role between January 2021 and October 2023. Of the 600 DMs who left during this period, 176 (29.3%) had left the Civil Service, 171 (28.5%) had been promoted within Asylum Operations, and 128 (21.33%) had moved to another government department (OGD), as shown in figure 12.

⁵⁴ ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 45.

⁵⁵ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “The workforce planning team have confirmed that attrition for this period is 21%.” The figure of 32.8% was calculated from figures provided by the Home Office to inspectors.

Figure 12: Reasons for decision makers leaving Asylum Operations between June 2022 and October 2023



6.53 DMs told inspectors that the main drivers behind staff leaving the role were the pressure from targets and the challenging nature of the DM role. As a result, they sought roles elsewhere in the Home Office or OGDs where, at the same EO grade, they could earn the same salary in a less pressurised and demanding role. A senior manager told inspectors that “being a DM is one of the toughest EO jobs in the government”.

6.54 In response to the inspection survey, DMs suggested that a greater focus on training and retention of staff would be a better use of resource than frequent recruitment campaigns and an emphasis on productivity. One DM said:

“I think asylum casework would be in a much better position if there was less emphasis on stats/targets and DM campaigns and more emphasis on how to retain the staff we already have and how we can support them in their role.”

6.55 Positively, 17 DMs provided comments about seeing the value of the DM role and finding it rewarding. However, almost all of these points were caveated with comments relating to the pressure they were under and low pay detracting from the rewarding nature of the role and the support they received from their immediate team.

6.56 The inspection survey asked DMs how long they wished to remain in the role and 28% (72 of 255) said they wanted to leave “as soon as possible”. A further 35% (88 of 255) wanted to leave within the next 12 months. Another 28% (72 of 255) wanted to stay for at least a year and the remaining 9% (23 of 255) wanted to stay for at least three years.

Workplace culture

6.57 The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that many DMs described a culture that was focused on targets, and that senior staff were only interested in the quantity of interviews and decisions rather than their quality.⁵⁶ Feedback from staff during the current inspection found that this had not changed, and inspectors heard about the impact this had on staff morale.

⁵⁶ ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 59.

- 6.58** DMs said that the pressure of achieving their statistics and hitting targets affected their mental health, with pressure coming from “higher above”. They described a disconnect between those in senior positions and the staff making decisions. There was similar feedback from the tech specs, which showed that staff felt the push to achieve targets had an adverse effect on morale.
- 6.59** Some administrative staff told inspectors that they had chosen to downgrade from a DM role to an administrative workflow role because of the pressure they experienced as a DM. One explained:
- “I was in the DM role for 18 months, and I had fulfilled all parts of the role like interviews, writing refusals, and I was signed off. It comes back to the pressure of the role which was not sustainable.”
- 6.60** A senior manager told inspectors that they were aware of similar scenarios where staff had downgraded from a DM role in their DMU. Inspectors saw Home Office data that showed that 54 DMs downgraded to an AO role between January 2021 and October 2023, which equated to 5% of staff leaving the DM role over that period.
- 6.61** Where DMUs had not met their targets, staff had been put on twice daily reporting, which required them to report completed decision expectations in the morning and again later in the day. Staff told inspectors of the negative impact this had on morale, as they felt they were being micromanaged. Staff and senior managers recognised that people may have been burnt out by the drive to hit targets. DMs told inspectors how the “relentless pressure” was impacting morale to the point that they had seen staff visibly upset in the office.
- 6.62** Staff said that the amount of change in Asylum Operations was another contributor to low staff morale, with one senior manager explaining:
- “It was very manic and highly pressurised. I had never worked somewhere like that. The amount of change in such a short time is enormous; it was a lot of pressure. It was not easy for me to do what I wanted to do as the changes were made way above my level. All I could do is communicate the changes and deliver them as softly as possible.”
- 6.63** Administrative staff explained to inspectors that part of their role was to complete the final steps in issuing asylum decisions for DMs. On Fridays, there was a drive to get decisions completed, which gave DMs statistics that went towards their weekly individual contribution target and potentially a performance bonus. However, inspectors heard that it was administrative staff who stayed late on a Friday to outcome these decisions. Administrative staff said there was a lack of recognition for this work, which created resentment, as they did not feel appreciated by managers for the work they did and the contributions they made.
- 6.64** Despite morale issues, most staff whom inspectors spoke to were positive about the support they received from their line managers and mentioned a good team ethic, with colleagues helping and supporting each other. Over 80% of DMs who responded to the inspection survey said they were supported by their manager. Inspectors noted that this was reported in most roles and at most grades.

Recruitment and retention allowance

- 6.65** The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework made a recommendation to “help improve retention, ensure there is clarity among DMs on opportunities for progression and, in

consultation with DMs, conduct a review of InSight weekly targets”.⁵⁷ The Home Office closed this recommendation in April 2023 and provided inspectors with this account of actions in this area in October 2023:

“We have relaunched the Home Office Performance Management System in the asylum decision-making units. This has seen every decision maker (DM) having a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound (SMART) Goal. This will be linked to an individual numeric contribution with [sic] will be agreed with their line manager. We have introduced a Recruitment and Retention Allowance (RRA). This has reduced turnover in the DM role from 40%> down to around 20%. We are working on asylum case studies as part of the Operational Deliver Profession in Customer Service Group to show how people can progress through asylum and the skills/behaviours needed to do this.”

- 6.66** Asylum Operations introduced the recruitment and retention allowance (RRA) in July 2021 for the DM role only. Inspectors heard that, when a similar payment had been introduced previously, it had been paid in a lump sum. However, this had led to some DMs leaving the role shortly after receiving the payment. The Home Office provided inspectors with the eligibility criteria for the RRA, which stated that the allowance payable was £1,500 after 12 months’ service and £2,500 after 24 months’ service. The RRA was pensionable and paid monthly with salary.
- 6.67** The inspection survey asked DMs whether a retention bonus would influence how long they were willing to remain in the role. Almost 60% said it would make them want to stay longer, as shown in figure 13 below.

Figure 13: Inspection survey responses to the question: “Would a retention bonus influence how long you were willing to stay in your current role?”

| Answer choice | Response percent | Response total |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| Yes – it would make me want to stay longer | 57.9% | 147 |
| No – it would not make a difference to how long I wanted to stay | 35.4% | 90 |
| I haven’t heard about a retention bonus | 6.7% | 17 |
| | Answered | 254 |
| | Skipped | 12 |

- 6.68** Several DMs were critical of the way the RRA was paid, as it was paid monthly instead of in a lump sum, and said it did not make up for the relatively low pay of EO DMs compared to other EO roles in the Civil Service.
- 6.69** One DM who received the RRA said: “We deserve more than a one-off payment for cost of living and retention payment – which we have been told we will lose if we switch to the currently optional annualised hours, making it less likely for DMs to want to stay in this high stress environment.”
- 6.70** As of July 2023, 544 RRA payments had been issued to asylum DMs. Of these, 500 were payments of £1,500 each to eligible DMs as they had completed 12 months in the role, while an additional 67 were payments of £2,500 each to DMs who had completed 24 months in the role.

⁵⁷ ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 12.

Subsequently, 138 DMs chose to leave the role. The reasons for this varied, but a significant factor was the availability of promotion opportunities, both within Asylum Operations and externally.

- 6.71** Inspectors found that one limitation of the RRA was that it was only available to DM roles in Asylum Operations. Staff in other roles said they felt undervalued and believed that the RRA should be extended to all employees, as they contributed equally to clearing the backlog. One TL said: “I would not discourage rewarding them [DMs], but others should also be rewarded.” Similarly, a senior manager expressed dissatisfaction with the RRA scheme, perceiving it as biased towards DMs, and said that it allowed them to potentially earn more than those at higher grades. They believed that the RRA served as a reward for staying but that it was not necessarily a reflection of good performance by those who received it.

Reward and recognition schemes

- 6.72** Asylum Operations introduced a number of additional reward and recognition (R&R) schemes during 2023. The purpose of the schemes was to acknowledge and show appreciation for the efforts of all employees within the department. In one scheme, any member of staff who exceeded their target by 10% became eligible for a £100 bonus. However, the scheme only applied to staff members who had numerical targets in their objectives, and TLs told inspectors that they could only benefit from the bonus payment if their entire team met its targets, which was challenging. Managers recognised that it was difficult for DMs to meet their targets when handling more complex cases or cases with higher refusal rates, while other DMs working on less complex cases were able to exceed their targets and receive the bonus payments.
- 6.73** Additionally, Asylum Operations implemented monthly awards for staff members. Each month, four awards were given, with winners receiving a trophy. The categories for these awards included the most effective DMU, the most engaged team (determined through pulse surveys), the most improved team compared to the previous month, and the DM who either over-achieved or came closest to their targets that month. The winners of these awards were given the opportunity to meet with the Director of Asylum and Human Rights Operations and the Minister of State for Immigration.

Retention in public services comparison

- 6.74** A report on retention in public services published by the Institute for Government in October 2023 highlighted challenges in the retention of staff within public services and made recommendations for improvement.⁵⁸ Key issues that led to poor retention rates included high turnover, workload and limited career progression, and the need for flexible working arrangements and employee benefits. The report suggested prioritising learning and development, improving management capabilities, and enhancing performance management processes. It stated that collaboration between government departments, including sharing best practice, was crucial. Overall, the report emphasised strategies focusing on employee wellbeing, career development, and effective management to address retention issues in the public sector.
- 6.75** The report’s findings aligned with observations made by DMs during the inspection, highlighting workload as a contributing factor to high attrition rates. Inspectors concluded

⁵⁸ Institute for Government, ‘Retention in public services’ (published October 2023). <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/staff-retention-public-services>

that the strategies identified for improvement in the report could potentially benefit the Home Office.

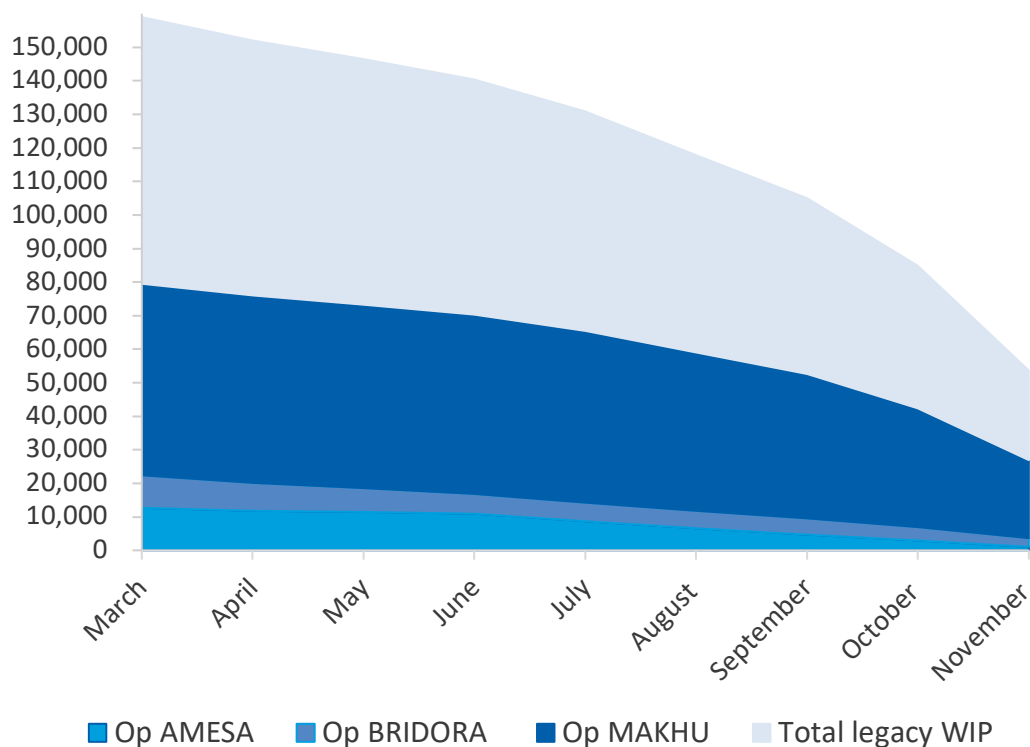
Exit interviews

- 6.76** Exit interviews are intended to provide employees with an opportunity to provide honest feedback when leaving a department, enabling organisations to gain valuable insights into their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.
- 6.77** Senior managers told inspectors that they planned to relaunch the exit survey, as the current one was optional. Exit interviews were conducted by line managers locally, but the data collected during these was not stored or analysed centrally. A senior manager told inspectors that they were conducting exit interviews but needed to get better at ensuring they were consistent. Inspectors heard that the majority of staff who had left a DMU had done so as “the role was not for them,” highlighting the importance of learning lessons from recruitment and managing staff expectations.
- 6.78** A senior manager told inspectors that, when exit interviews were conducted, the data obtained was used to analyse the reasons for employee departures. However, inspectors did not have sight of any overarching analysis undertaken on the reasons for staff leaving the department.
- 6.79** Inspectors concluded that, by identifying patterns and trends from feedback, Asylum Operations could make targeted improvements to enhance DM retention. Conducting exit interviews would demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and could help to identify training and development needs.

7. Inspection findings: Backlog clearance operations

- 7.1** To achieve the commitment to clear the legacy backlog before the end of 2023 made in the Prime Minister’s December 2022 statement on illegal migration, the Home Office introduced several operations to process particular claims more efficiently. Streamlined asylum processing (SAP), or Operation AMESA (Op AMESA) as it was known internally, was introduced in October 2022 to process high-grant rate legacy claims and accelerated as a result of this announcement. Operation BRIDORA (Op BRIDORA) focused on Albanian claims. Operation MAKHU (Op MAKHU) was the internal name for the processing of all remaining nationalities in the legacy work in progress (WIP), which is discussed in chapter 8.
- 7.2** The Home Office provided inspectors with copies of its internal asylum legacy backlog clearance progress updates. These contained data on how many decisions had been made each week in each cohort. As of 13 November 2023, the legacy backlog comprised 26,826 claims, with 1,135 remaining in the Op AMESA WIP, 2,585 in Op BRIDORA, and 23,142 in Op MAKHU, as shown in figure 14.

Figure 14: Legacy backlog clearance between March and November 2023

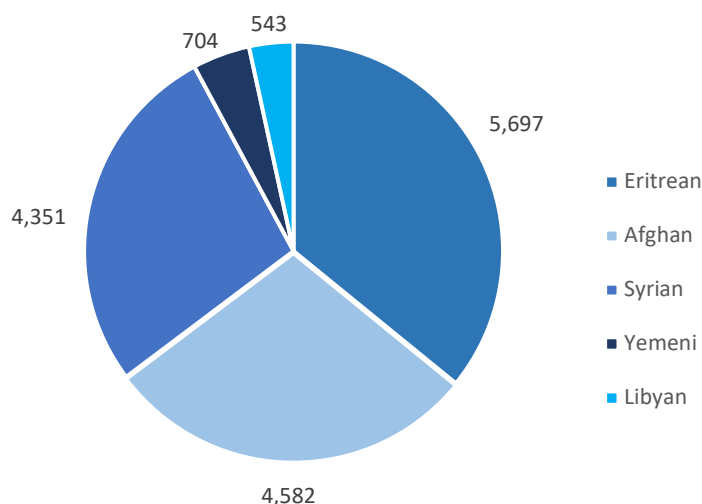


- 7.3** The update stated that the Op AMESA WIP included 526 unworkable cases and 166 SAP ‘drop-outs’, which would be processed by asylum decision-making units (DMUs).

Streamlined asylum processing: Operation AMESA

- 7.4** Streamlined asylum processing (SAP), or Operation AMESA as it is known internally in the Home Office, is one of the ways the Home Office sought to achieve the Prime Minister’s ambition to clear the backlog of legacy asylum claims by the end of 2023.⁵⁹ SAP was intended to process “manifestly well-founded claims quicker and make decisions where possible without a substantive asylum interview”. Initially, SAP for adults applied to five specific, high-grant rate nationalities: Afghan, Eritrean, Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni. These nationalities all had a grant rate of over 95% in 2022.
- 7.5** In December 2022, the Home Office identified that there were 14,653 legacy claimants within scope for Op AMESA, but data provided to inspectors in November 2023 showed that 15,877 legacy adult claimants had subsequently been identified as eligible.
- 7.6** The data showed that, of these claims, 5,697 (35.88%) were Eritrean, 4,582 (28.86%) were Afghan, 4,351 (27.4%) were Syrian, 704 (4.43%) were Yemeni, and 543 (3.42%) were Libyan, as shown in figure 15.⁶⁰

Figure 15: Claims identified as eligible for Op AMESA by nationality



- 7.7** The Home Office intended to send an asylum claim questionnaire (ACQ) to every eligible claimant, which asked questions relating to their asylum claim and nationality. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information that would negate the need for a substantive interview, and therefore streamline the process and lead to a decision on paper. Only in certain cases would a ‘targeted’ or ‘shorter’ interview be required.
- 7.8** Of the 15,877 legacy adult claims in the SAP data, 227 were ‘void’, leaving a total of 15,650.⁶¹ As of 27 October 2023, out of 15,650 claimants, 13,211 (84%) had been granted asylum or humanitarian protection, 1,099 (7%) had been withdrawn, and 128 had been refused, as shown in figure 16.⁶²

⁵⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM statement on illegal migration’ (published 13 December 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-illegal-migration-13-december-2022#:~:text=It%20is%20unfair%20that%20people,countries%20that%20are%20perfectly%20safe>

⁶⁰ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

⁶¹ A claim could be ‘void’ if, for example, it was initially recorded incorrectly on the Home Office database and had to be reinputted, leading to a duplicate entry.

⁶² This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

Figure 16: Decisions and outcomes for Op AMESA legacy claims as of 27 October 2023

| Decision or outcome | Total number of decisions | % of total eligible claimants | % with legal representative |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Grant asylum or humanitarian protection | 13,211 | 84.42% | 1.45% |
| Grant (other) ⁶³ | 6 | 0.04% | 0% |
| Refusal or return | 128 | 0.82% | 2.34% |
| Claim withdrawn | 809 | 5.17% | 0.36% |
| Other outcome (deceased, duplicate or rejection) | 15 | 0.10% | 13.33% |
| Outcome withdrawn ⁶⁴ | 290 | 1.85% | 0% |
| Total decision/outcome | 14,459 | 92.39% | |
| No decision | 1,191 | 7.61% | 81.28% |

- 7.9** While the majority of decisions made had been to grant protection, which was the purpose of Op AMESA, 1,191 (7.61%) SAP claimants were still awaiting an initial decision as of 27 October 2023, with two months remaining until the Prime Minister’s deadline to clear the legacy backlog. Of these, 535 (44%) were recorded as having had a substantive interview, 63 of which had taken place prior to 2023.
- 7.10** Significant progress had been made on making decisions on these legacy claims, but challenges were encountered throughout the delivery of Op AMESA. These challenges are discussed in this chapter and should provide learning for the roll-out of the operation to flow claims.

Triage

- 7.11** On 22 February 2023, the Director of Asylum and Human Rights Operations and the Director of Asylum, Protection and Enforcement Directorate sent a letter to stakeholders that provided information on the introduction of SAP. The letter stated: “For adult and family claims we will be issuing an asylum claim questionnaire to claimants who have not yet been substantively interviewed and are one of the aforementioned nationalities from 23 Feb 2023.”⁶⁵
- 7.12** To establish which claimants were eligible, a senior manager in Op AMESA told inspectors, a lot of “due diligence” was required to triage claims in the legacy WIP to determine whether the Home Office had the correct address and legal representative recorded. A dedicated administration team had been taken on to conduct this triage and “cleanse address data”.
- 7.13** In April 2023, legal representatives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) told inspectors that people they worked with had received an ACQ despite having already had a substantive interview or having submitted a comprehensive preliminary information questionnaire

63 Including grants of discretionary leave.

64 ‘Outcome withdrawn’ is where the initial decision contained an error (administrative or casework) and had to be withdrawn to be corrected. From the data provided, it was not evident what the ultimate decision on these claims would be or whether a decision on them had been made.

65 The nationalities initially identified were Afghan, Eritrean, Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni, but the letter stated that the Home Office “may extend the use of the questionnaire as a means to gather additional information from other claimants awaiting an asylum decision in due course”.

(PIQ), or who had “even got refugee status in some cases”, which raised concerns about the effectiveness of the triage process.

7.14 The most recent version of the Home Office’s ‘Streamlined asylum processing’ guidance, published on 16 August 2023, stated:

“It would not usually be appropriate to serve an asylum questionnaire to claimants who have already taken part in a personal interview but there may be occasions where you deem this to be worthwhile, for example, you need to check whether there has been a change in circumstances between the personal interview and the decision.”⁶⁶

7.15 Staff in the Asylum Central Communications Hub (ACCH) and the Third Country Unit (TCU), a team within the National Removals Command of Immigration Enforcement, told inspectors that ACQs had been incorrectly sent to claimants who were in the inadmissibility WIP, and whose claims could not be worked on. A senior manager involved in the Op AMESA roll-out said: “It was a case of mentioning [an ACQ] had been sent in error and apologising; the TCU cases were not considered workable for us, so it was an error to have sent that out.”

7.16 In evidence provided to inspectors, the Home Office stated that ‘drop-outs’ were claims which, following this initial triage or subsequent investigation, could not be decided within Op AMESA as they did not “fit into the AO [Administrative Officer] DM [decision maker] model” and would require consideration by an asylum DM. The Home Office provided the following examples of where claims might be ‘dropped out’:

- nationality dispute
- outright refusal
- established convention reason (Libya and some Yemen cases only)
- minors case⁶⁷

7.17 In such cases, the claims would be moved into the overall legacy WIP. The Home Office provided data on claims that had ‘dropped out’ of the SAP process by November 2023, and there were a total of 169 claimants: 51 Libyans (30%), 40 Yemenis (24%), 38 Afghans (22%), 23 Eritreans (14%), and 16 Syrians (9%). The most common reason was ‘convention reason’ for Libyans and Yemenis and ‘disputed nationality’ for Eritreans.

Asylum claim questionnaire

7.18 Concerns about Op AMESA and the ACQ were raised by stakeholders in 48% of responses to the ICIBI’s call for evidence. The main issues related to the questionnaire being too long, overly complicated, only available in English with no foreign language versions, and having a short deadline (20 working days) to return it. There was a warning contained in the questionnaire that failure to return it within 20 days could lead to the asylum claim being withdrawn. The initial questionnaire was also only available in hard copy, with limited space to record answers.

7.19 Summarising these concerns, a submission from a local authority stated:

⁶⁶ Home Office, ‘Streamlined asylum processing’, version 3.0 (published 16 August 2023), p.11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/streamlined-asylum-processing>

⁶⁷ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “There is a separate children’s SAP, so drop-outs in the adult space would only be those who were incorrectly routed or subsequently assessed as minors.”

“Without legal advice, many asylum seekers are unable to comprehend or complete the range of questions to the standard required by the Home Office. It is inconceivable that a failure to fill out a form within the Home Office’s tight deadline of 20 days will not only result in legitimate asylum claims being rejected but also sparking street homelessness and unnecessary hardship for already vulnerable and displaced people seeking sanctuary.”

7.20 Stakeholders were also disappointed that the ACQ had been introduced without consultation.⁶⁸ Legal representatives and representatives from NGOs working with asylum seekers told inspectors in April 2023 this was compounded by the fact that significant consultation had already taken place on a ‘guided statement’, which was supposed to replace the preliminary information questionnaire (PIQ). Had the feedback they had taken time to provide at that stage been taken on board in the design of the ACQ, many of the issues that were encountered could have been prevented. Explaining how this feedback could have been ignored, an NGO representative said that it was down to a lack of joined-up thinking within the Home Office, which led to work being easily lost. However, senior managers in Asylum Operations told inspectors that they had received a clear ministerial direction not to consult externally on Op AMESA, nor to share details about it.

7.21 Home Office guidance for DMs stated: “Where the claimant’s nationality is unconfirmed based on the evidence available, then you must refer the case to the relevant team to seek further evidence or interview the claimant.” It also stated:

“Targeted interviews will predominantly be used to establish a claimant’s nationality, for example where insufficient evidence has been provided to confirm that the claimant is the nationality they claim to be. These interviews will typically last 30 to 45 minutes in length as they focus on the specific area of nationality to obtain the information required to make an asylum decision.”⁶⁹

7.22 Inspectors asked the Home Office to provide data on the number of claimants who had undergone a targeted or nationality interview, but it was unable to do so.

7.23 In July 2023, Asylum Operations began to roll out SAP for the consideration of flow claims, using DMs from the Visa, Status and Information (VSI) command in Customer Services to process straightforward grants. Where claims were complex or likely to be refused, they were referred to a DMU to make a decision as the VSI staff working on them were not asylum DMs. A senior manager involved in delivering SAP for flow cases told inspectors that “constant lessons” had been learned during Op AMESA and, on the issue of nationality, work had taken place in collaboration with the Special Cases Unit to incorporate additional questions that would better establish a claimant’s nationality.⁷⁰ The updated questionnaire was in a digital format, which streamlined the process further, and had a longer deadline of 30 rather than 20 days in which to return it.

⁶⁸ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “While we were unable to consult before the questionnaire was rolled out, feedback was taken into account to make improvements to the ACQ for flow, for example simplifying the questionnaire, making it available online and providing more guidance on the required information.”

⁶⁹ Home Office, ‘Streamlined asylum processing’.

⁷⁰ The Home Office’s Special Cases Unit is responsible for preventing high-harm individuals linked to serious crimes or terrorism entering or remaining in the UK.

Withdrawals from streamlined asylum processing cohort

7.24 Home Office data provided to inspectors showed that, as of 27 October 2023, 809 claims (5.17%) from the Op AMESA cohort had been withdrawn.⁷¹

7.25 The ACQ stated that, if a questionnaire was not returned within 20 or 30 days, the claimant's asylum claim could be withdrawn. Home Office guidance for caseworkers on 'streamlined asylum processing', published 16 August 2023, stated:

"You must provide claimants with a total of 30 working days from the date of service of the questionnaire to return the asylum questionnaire.... Should the claimant not respond within 20 working days, you must issue a reminder....

"Where a claimant requests an extension of the deadline to respond to the questionnaire, you must consider the request on a case-by-case basis. It will normally be appropriate to accept such requests provided that the requested extension is proportionate for the task of completing the asylum questionnaire.... If the Asylum Questionnaire is not returned after 30 working days you must issue a final intervention letter to the claimant and any legal representative....

"If the claimant does not respond within 10 working days – either with a questionnaire or confirmation they wish to continue with their asylum claim – you must undertake final checks, including but not limited to ensuring that all correspondence has been sent to the correct and most up-to-date address and contacting any legal representative to seek an update.

"After this, if all attempts have been unsuccessful in engaging the claimant, you must treat the claim as withdrawn under Paragraph 333C of the Immigration Rules. See the withdrawing asylum claims guidance for further guidance."⁷²

7.26 A Home Office weekly progress update on the asylum backlog clearance from week commencing 7 August 2023 stated that "all SAP final reminder letters [had] been issued to claimants who [had] clearly disengaged from the asylum process" and that "those remaining non-compliant will fall into SAP withdrawal process".

7.27 The update from 21 August 2023 stated that there was an 89% response rate to questionnaires, and AO had seen an increase in ACQ returns as a "direct impact of the SAP final reminder letters". The same update stated that the "SAP withdrawal process has commenced for asylum claim where claimants have remained non-compliant to ACQ process".

7.28 On the issue of the Home Office treating claims as 'implicitly withdrawn', a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on 'The Asylum Transformation Programme', published on 27 October 2023, stated: "The poor design, and the requirement to complete the questionnaire in English, may mean that some people are less likely to return the questionnaire, leading the Home Office to decide that an asylum claim has been implicitly withdrawn."⁷³ The report also expressed the PAC's concern that the focus on streamlining decision making could inadvertently lead to more flawed decisions, or the withdrawal of genuine asylum claims, and questioned how the Home Office would assure itself it was not incorrectly withdrawing genuine asylum claims.

⁷¹ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office's Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

⁷² Home Office, 'Streamlined asylum processing'.

⁷³ Public Accounts Committee, 'The Asylum Transformation Programme' (published 27 October 2023). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmpubacc/1334/report.html>

- 7.29** In October 2023, inspectors held a focus group with legal representatives and support organisations, during which concerns were raised about the number of claims that had been withdrawn when the claimant, who was eligible for SAP, had not received an ACQ. Participants said this was a “common issue”, and an example was provided of a Libyan national who had not received an ACQ but was made aware that their claim had been withdrawn at the beginning of October 2023. This was when they received a letter from the Asylum Support team to say their support was due to be discontinued. Despite repeated attempts by the legal representative to contact the Home Office to rectify the issue, there had been “silence”. As this individual was in Home Office-provided accommodation, the legal representative pointed out that “there [was] no reason why they could have not been communicated with”.
- 7.30** Home Office data shows an increase in the number of asylum claims from other nationalities, outside the SAP cohort, which were withdrawn in 2023. This is discussed in chapter 10.

Decision service and move-on support

- 7.31** In May 2023, inspectors asked the Home Office for details of its strategy to address the end-to-end impact of an increase in asylum decisions on local authorities as a result of SAP. In its response, it stated:
- “Central to our plans to collaborate and work with local authorities across SAP is sharing regular, timely and relevant data in the form of heat maps to allow effective planning.... The sequencing of decisions to ensure no one local authority is overwhelmed by granted cases is limited as decisions are reliant on the return of questionnaires. But where we can, we will influence the sequencing of decisions to allow for proportionate decision making.
- “We are working with our partners, including local authorities, to provide timely notification of key events that impact them.”
- 7.32** The Home Office was unable to provide any further evidence of work to sequence decisions. Rather, inspectors heard about significant challenges in the service of decisions. Although these issues did not appear to be limited to the SAP cohort, they were most evident in this area.
- 7.33** Once a decision has been made to grant an individual asylum, the claimant should receive a decision letter from the Home Office, followed by a biometric residence permit (BRP). The claimant should then receive notice that their asylum support will be discontinued from a date specified and the Home Office should inform the accommodation provider of this. The final document that the claimant should receive is a ‘notice to quit’, which is sent by the accommodation provider.
- 7.34** If a claimant is in receipt of asylum support (and accommodation), they have 28 days in which to find alternative accommodation after being granted asylum. This is set out in the Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2002.⁷⁴ Published guidance on ‘claiming Universal Credit and other benefits if you are a refugee’ states: “If you are receiving asylum support from the Home Office (money and/or accommodation), this will end 28 days after getting your Biometric Residence Permit (BRP).”⁷⁵ However, stakeholders told inspectors that, as of August 2023, the Home Office counted the 28 days from the date of receipt of the decision letter, rather than receipt of the BRP.

⁷⁴ The Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2002 (that came into force 8 April 2002). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2002/472/made>

⁷⁵ Department for Work and Pensions, ‘Claiming Universal Credit and other benefits if you are a refugee’ (updated 1 July 2020). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/claiming-universal-credit-and-other-benefits-if-you-are-a-refugee/refugee-guide-urgent-things-you-need-to-do>

- 7.35** Charities have previously called on the Home Office to extend the 28-day period in which refugees must find alternative accommodation after they are granted asylum, due to the time it takes to start receiving Universal Credit and for local authorities to support them in finding new accommodation.⁷⁶ The charities argued that the move-on period was challenging even before the increase in the volume of asylum decisions being made and the change to the date on which the 28-day period commenced.
- 7.36** This issue has received increasing coverage across several media outlets. An article published in the Big Issue magazine on 23 November 2023 presented data from 52 local authorities and provided comments from charities that demonstrated an “alarming spike in homeless refugees”, with almost 1,500 refugees assessed as being homeless between August and October 2023.⁷⁷ The issue was also examined in the PAC’s report on the Asylum Transformation Programme in October 2023, which highlighted the Home Office’s acknowledgement that it had not looked in sufficient detail at the costs and benefits of an increasing number of asylum decisions.⁷⁸
- 7.37** Staff from the Op AMESA workflow and administrative team told inspectors there had been significant delays in the production of BRP cards for newly recognised refugees from the SAP cohort. They attributed this to the large volume of questionnaires that were distributed at the same time, meaning the cohort was “like a lump moving through the process”. In September 2023, staff told inspectors that these delays had resulted in a backlog of around 1,400 emails regarding BRPs that had not been received by claimants, but the figure was “down from 3,000 at the start of the month”. Although staff from other areas had been brought in to support the work to clear the email backlog, some of the emails had been received a month previously and were described as “the trickier ones to investigate”.
- 7.38** Administrative staff told inspectors that, if an individual did not receive their BRP, a request to issue a replacement had to go back to the DM to generate a decision letter again, as a BRP card could only be produced with an updated letter on Atlas. This increased delays further and the impact on the claimant was that they might not receive the BRP until after the 28-day move-on period.
- 7.39** Charities sent a joint letter to the Home Office on 5 September 2023 asking it to reverse the changes to the move-on period and to ensure that all refugees received all their documentation at the same time. They also asked the Home Office to commit to “working towards extending the move-on period to at least 56 days, in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act and the application for Universal Credit”.⁷⁹
- 7.40** During a focus group with inspectors in October 2023, stakeholders raised several related issues. They said that they had “recently experienced an influx of decisions being made but not served”. They provided examples of claimants receiving BRPs without a decision letter, and vice versa. Many of their clients had received a ‘notice to quit’ from their hotel or accommodation provider without receiving a decision from the Home Office and had then been “thrown out” of their accommodation and made homeless. Stakeholders said that, in many cases, their

⁷⁶ British Red Cross, ‘Increase the move-on period for refugees’. <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/improving-the-lives-of-refugees/refugee-move-on-period#:~:text=In%20December%202018%2C%20we%20published,to%20at%20least%2056%20days>

⁷⁷ Big Issue, ‘Number of refugees evicted into homelessness triples in wake of Home Office asylum change’ (published 23 November 2023). <https://www.bigissue.com/news/social-justice/homeless-refugees-rise-home-office-asylum-accommodation/>

⁷⁸ Public Accounts Committee, ‘The Asylum Transformation Programme’.

⁷⁹ Refugee Council, letter to Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on ‘Changes to the move-on period for newly recognised refugees’ (5 September 2023). <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Letter-to-Home-Secretary-and-SOS-DLUHC-on-move-on-changes.pdf>

clients were not aware of whether their claim had been granted or refused. In cases where stakeholders later found that their clients' claims had been refused, they had submitted out-of-time appeals.

- 7.41** To access benefits following the withdrawal of asylum support, an individual would need to demonstrate that they had been granted refugee status or humanitarian protection, but, without a letter or BRP, this was not possible. Stakeholders said they received limited, if any, response from the Home Office when they tried to clarify or rectify these issues.

Streamlined asylum process for flow

- 7.42** Operation AMESA was rolled out to flow claims (claims submitted after 28 June 2022) from July 2023, and Home Office data showed that there were 21,241 claimants that were deemed eligible. Discounting 688 that were 'void', leaves a total of 20,553. Of these, 5,208 (25.34%) were granted asylum or HP, 236 (1.15%) were withdrawn and 14,768 (71.85%) were still awaiting a decision, as shown in figure 17. A further 299 (1.45%) had an outcome that was subsequently withdrawn.⁸⁰

Figure 17: Decisions and outcomes for Op AMESA flow claims as of 27 October 2023

| Decision or outcome | Total number of decisions | % of total eligible claimants |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Grant asylum or humanitarian protection | 5,208 | 25.34% |
| Grant (other) | 25 | 0.12% |
| Refusal or return | 16 | 0.08% |
| Withdrawn | 236 | 1.15% |
| Other outcome (deceased, not classified) | 1 | 0% |
| Outcome withdrawn | 299 | 1.45% |
| Total decision/outcome | 5,785 | 28.15% |
| No decision | 14,768 | 71.85% |

- 7.43** Although the Home Office was not able to provide an exact date for the deadline to clear the flow backlog, inspectors heard from DMs and managers that it was April 2024. Legacy backlog clearance updates from the Home Office showed that, between 6 March 2023 and 13 November 2023, 11,480 decisions were made on Op AMESA claims. It therefore seemed ambitious that it would be able to make 14,768 decisions between 13 November 2023 and 1 April 2024.

Streamlined asylum process for children

- 7.44** For children's claims, the five nationalities in the streamlined asylum process were: Afghan, Eritrean, Sudanese, Syrian, and Vietnamese. Rather than being asked to fill in a questionnaire, children were invited for a preliminary information meeting (PIM), which was held between the child and a Home Office decision maker (DM) in the presence of a responsible adult. Home

⁸⁰ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office's Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

Office guidance states that the purpose of the PIM is to “gather information proactively from a meeting with the child specifically for the purpose of progressing their claim”.⁸¹ As with the ACQ used for adults, the PIM was designed to negate the need for a substantive interview.

- 7.45** Senior managers in Asylum Children and Secondary Casework (ACSC) told inspectors that SAP for children had been a “massive success”, and a large proportion of the legacy SAP WIP had been cleared by October 2023.
- 7.46** In usual circumstances, a child not going through the SAP would be required to submit a statement of evidence form (SEF), which collects information to assist the Home Office to understand the basis of the child’s asylum claim, before the substantive interview takes place and the claim is progressed. For SAP claimants, the PIM would negate the requirement for a SEF to be completed. However, many legacy claimants had already submitted one. Where a SEF had already been received by the Home Office, a claimant would be discounted from the SAP, as the PIM would repeat the information already held.
- 7.47** Data provided to inspectors in July 2023 showed that there was a total of 3,496 legacy claimants and seven flow claimants eligible for SAP.⁸² However, data provided in November 2023 showed that, following a triage process, which discounted any legacy claim for which a SEF had already been received, there was a total of 38 eligible legacy claimants.⁸³
- 7.48** From this data, it appeared that, as of 27 October 2023, there were 294 SAP claims awaiting a decision: 14 legacy and 280 flow.⁸⁴ This data did not tally with the original number that had been identified as eligible for SAP, as it showed just 797 children. From this dataset, of the 503 decisions that had been made on SAP claims, 495 had been granted asylum or humanitarian protection (98%), three had been refused, and four withdrawn.

Preliminary information meeting

- 7.49** The preliminary information meeting (PIM) was designed and developed collaboratively between the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) policy team, the senior leadership team in ACSC, and the children’s Chief Caseworker Team. A manager from ACSC told inspectors they had been “adamant” that they did not want to use a questionnaire and wanted to use short interviews “to get enough information to grant a case”. Inspectors heard that SAP had created extra capacity for more complex work because straightforward claims that could be granted were removed from the WIP, and the PIMs were so focused they could be completed in less than 90 minutes.
- 7.50** A manager from the Children and Secondary Casework Case Progression Unit (CSCPU) told inspectors that setting up a PIM triage process had been a “wild ride” because of the pace at which it needed to be stood up, but it had enabled 70% of child claimants from the top five nationalities to have a PIM, and 94% of those to be granted asylum. Managers said there was “a robust enough drop out process for information that needs to be looked at in more depth”. “Subjecting” a child to a full SEF and asylum interview was not in the child’s best interest when the Home Office “[knew] the outcome” for one of the SAP nationalities and would not remove the child from the UK.

81 Home Office, ‘Streamlined asylum processing for children’s casework’, version 2.0 (published 25 July 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/streamlined-asylum-processing-for-children-caseworker-guidance>

82 The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “Children’s SAP was extended to flow cases in July 2023.”

83 This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

84 One claim was ‘void’ so has not been used in calculating the total decisions and outcomes.

- 7.51** Senior ACSC managers told inspectors that early engagement with stakeholders had been poor, but that through “a lot of stakeholder communications in-flight” they had built trust and stakeholders could see that “the intention was to speed things up and do the right thing for the child”. The Home Office had received positive feedback from local authorities on the SAP because shorter interviews were better for the child from a wellbeing perspective and took less of the local authorities’ time to facilitate. A senior manager told inspectors that local authorities had also commented on the benefit of bypassing the SEF, for which they frequently struggled to identify a legal representative to support the child to complete it.
- 7.52** Legal representatives told inspectors that “it was very hectic when the PIM came in; there was a flood of interviews to prepare for, but it did lead to positive decisions”. However, they also said it had been “harder to get PIMs cancelled on medical grounds than general interviews”, and they were of the view that vulnerable unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should have a legal representative present for an interview, which did not align with the Home Office’s position. They were also concerned that the Home Office was choosing to send correspondence to children’s services staff in local authorities, rather than to their legal representative.
- 7.53** Inspectors requested data on all SAP claims broken down by several criteria, including when the PIM had taken place. In the dataset provided by the Home Office, there were 149 cases where this date was recorded as having taken place before 2023, which was not logical as it pre-dated the introduction of the PIM. Inspectors were therefore unable to calculate the average time that elapsed from a PIM taking place to a decision being made.

Monitoring and equality

- 7.54** As of November 2023, an equality impact assessment (EIA) for SAP had not been published, but inspectors were provided with an internal EIA, which had been amended in May 2023. The EIA recognised that there were potential impacts for claimants with particular protected characteristics. For example, it stated that “claimants with a disability may find it more difficult to complete questionnaires in comparison to claimants without a disability”. However, it did not assess that the SAP policy amounted to discrimination for any protected characteristic other than ‘race’, where it acknowledged that SAP could “be perceived as differentiating on the basis of race”. The EIA considered this differentiation “justified by the policy and operational aim of speeding up asylum decision-making; reducing asylum delays and backlog; in turn leading to a more efficient asylum system for all applicants”.
- 7.55** At several points within the EIA, the document stated: “We will continue to monitor the impact on the guidance and review any effects and put in place mitigation if it is necessary.” It also stated: “We have not identified any direct or indirect discrimination with respect to the protected characteristic of gender reassignment, but we will monitor the impact of the policy on those who undergo gender reassignment and keep this under review.”
- 7.56** However, in response to data requests made by the inspection team, the Home Office said that it was unable to provide data on protected characteristics, so it was unclear how it intended to keep this under review.

7.57 Inspectors asked the Home Office for evidence of any impact assessments or formal monitoring of Op AMESA and SAP, and in response it provided the following:

“Reporting on Return of ACQ – worked with PACE [Prioritising Asylum Customer Experience] on a better process to identify and report cases where ACQs had been fully completed which took away the manual counting by staff each day

“DOP Checklist to Assist DMs – the Tech Team created DOP Checklists to assist DMs with deciding the cases and limited the number of cases which had to be interviewed

“Identifying Unworkable Cases – worked with PACE to identify unworkable cases such as TCU [Third Country Unit] cases with Rwanda Outcomes on – these meant that staff were not working on cases that would end up being barriered”

7.58 It therefore appeared that no formal assessment or monitoring had taken place.

Operation BRIDORA

7.59 Operation BRIDORA (Op BRIDORA) was a project introduced in response to the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration in December 2022. In this statement, he said that a third of small boats arrivals in 2022 had been Albanian and yet Albania was a “safe, prosperous European country”.⁸⁵ He announced stricter measures that would allow the Home Office to “detain and return people to Albania with confidence and in line with ECAT [the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings]”.⁸⁶ He said that, as a result of these changes, the vast majority of claims from Albanians could “simply be declared clearly unfounded”. Op BRIDORA focused on processing asylum claims from Albanians.

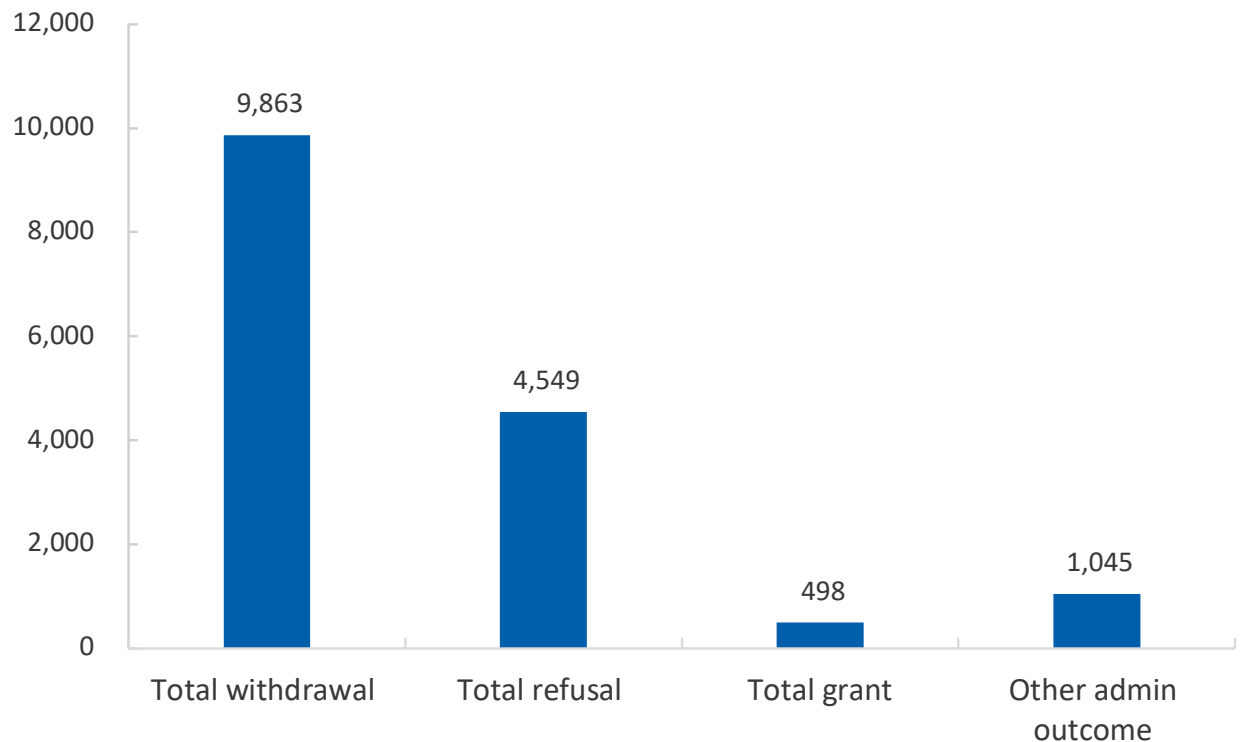
7.60 Between February and May 2023, all but two DMUs were allocated to Op BRIDORA work. Senior managers within Asylum Operations said Op BRIDORA sat “very clearly at the top of the tree” in terms of ministerial priorities, which meant that “the political imperative to deliver was absolute”. However, most managers said that the operation was “a very bad decision” and demonstrated a lack of understanding of how Asylum Operations functioned, leading to a loss of quality assurance, productivity, and morale among teams.

7.61 The progress update on the asylum backlog clearance for the week commencing 13 November 2023 stated that, between 9 January and 12 November 2023, a total of 15,955 outcomes had been made on claims from Albanians, 9,863 (61.82%) of which were withdrawals, 4,549 (28.51%) were refusals and 498 (3.12%) were grants of asylum or another type of leave, as shown in figure 18.

⁸⁵ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM statement on illegal migration: 13 December 2022’, (published 13 December 2022).

⁸⁶ The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT) is an international treaty which provides a framework for combating human trafficking, in force since 1 February 2008. See: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a75ae20e5274a545822d636/8414.pdf>

Figure 18: Decisions on Op BRIDORA claims between 9 January and 12 November 2023



- 7.62** The total number of ‘withdrawals’ included 8,828 ‘implicit withdrawals’ (90% of all withdrawals) which, according to the Home Office is where a claimant is non-compliant or absconds because they “fail to maintain contact” or “fail to attend a reporting event”, for example. The remaining 1,035 (10%) were recorded as ‘other’ withdrawals. Among the total refusals, 3,124 (69%) were certified and 1,425 (31%) had a right of appeal.
- 7.63** The update also stated that, since January 2023, 609 claimants from this cohort had been detained and 245 had been removed from the UK.

Loss of quality assurance

- 7.64** Section 94(1) of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 states that the Secretary of State may certify a protection or human rights claim as “clearly unfounded” and Section 94(4) contains a list of designated states to which it applies.
- 7.65** Prior to the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) 2022, there was an out-of-country right of appeal for any decisions certified, which meant that the claimant had to leave the UK to submit an appeal. However, the NABA removed that right and so any decision made after 27 June 2022 to certify a claim does not attract any right of appeal, even from outside the country.
- 7.66** Albania is on the list of designated states from which asylum claims may be certified. Until April 2023, because of the serious implications of a certified refusal for a claimant, there was a legal requirement set out in Section 94 that stipulated that all certified decisions “must be authorised by an accredited caseworker” and, as reported in the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of

asylum casework, technical specialists (tech specs) had to undergo specialist non-substantive appeals (NSA) training to gain this accreditation.⁸⁷

- 7.67** Inspectors heard that the success of Op BRIDORA was initially limited by delays in second pair of eyes (SPoE) checks being completed on decisions to certify claims, because too few tech specs were accredited to undertake them. To address the lack of accredited tech specs, the Home Office made changes to the SPoE process in February 2023 by creating a centralised team of NSA-accredited tech specs to “provide feedback on the legality of the certification and not the robustness of the decision itself, which will have been checked by local checking within each [decision-making unit]”. Decision makers (DMs) who had been ‘signed off’ on refusals were instructed to continue to submit their NSA decision drafts as usual, requesting a check via the centralised SPoE spreadsheet.⁸⁸ DMs who were still on ‘100% checks’ continued to submit their decision drafts to their local DMU for initial feedback on the quality and sustainability of the decision, before they were added to the central tracker for a check on the legality of the certification.⁸⁹
- 7.68** Many DMs who had worked on Op BRIDORA told inspectors that they felt they had been “dropped in at the deep end”, as they received limited training for the work, and said that working exclusively on Albanian claims was a “big learning curve”, as those outside NSA and Detained Asylum Casework had no previous experience of writing certified refusals. Responses to the inspection survey indicated that working exclusively on high-refusal rate nationalities had a negative impact on DMs’ morale, as well as their ability to remain impartial. One DM described Op BRIDORA work as “demotivating” and said that they became “case hardened very quickly”. This affected their interview style as they “came across stronger and more disbelieving of the claimant as they tell you the same claim as the last claimant”.
- 7.69** On 17 April 2023, the Minister of State for Immigration, in a written statement to Parliament, confirmed that “protection and human rights claims which are certified under section 94 as clearly unfounded will no longer have to be checked by a second specially trained official” to “help ensure that the Home Office can certify unfounded cases more efficiently under section 94, so that those who have no basis to be in the UK can be swiftly removed”.⁹⁰ The Home Office published updated guidance to reflect this change the following day.⁹¹
- 7.70** The Home Office provided inspectors with copies of three risk registers in use by Asylum Operations as of May 2023, for ‘legacy’, ‘flow’ and children’s casework. An update in the legacy risk register stated that “new NSA guidance had been issued in April 2023 which may reduce the amount of cases requiring SPoE checks”. Removing this measure was intended to speed up decision making, but risked decisions being made and served that had not undergone formal quality assurance. The potential impact of a certified refusal, which had no right of appeal, carried greater risk to the claimant.

87 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’ (published 18 November 2021), p. 66. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

88 New asylum decision makers have to go through a ‘sign off’ process whereby a set number of their interviews and decisions have to be checked by a technical specialist until they are satisfied they have reached a satisfactory level. Once they are ‘signed off’, their interviews and decisions no longer have to all be checked but will be subject to routine quality assurance (random dip sampling).

89 New decision makers require all decisions they make to be checked by a technical specialist, which is referred to as ‘100% checks’.

90 UK Parliament, ‘Reforms to the Process of Certifying Claims as Clearly Unfounded’ (17 April 2023). <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-04-17/hcws716>

91 Home Office, ‘Certification under section 94B of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002’, version 9.0 (published 20 June 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/appeals/certification-under-section-94b-of-the-nationality-immigration-and-asylum-act-2002-accessible>

Changes to guidance

- 7.71** An updated version of the Home Office’s country policy and information note (CPIN) on blood feuds in Albania was published in January 2023.⁹² An updated version of the CPIN on human trafficking in Albania was then published in February 2023.⁹³ Reflecting on this change and commencing work on Op BRIDORA, one DM said:
- “There was a brand new CPIN written when I was on holiday and massive changes brought in; suddenly it looked like trafficked women can go back after all and there is sufficiency of protection; suddenly we are sending trafficked women back.”
- 7.72** Managers from the Home Office’s Country Policy and Information Team (CPIT) told inspectors that, although they had not been “directly told” to amend the CPIN, it had been “hard to avoid the indirect pressure when the focus is to remove [from the country].” They said that there had previously been “a misguided view that the grant rate was high because CPINs were saying to grant, but they were not”, and that Albanian trafficked women should not be granted in every case.
- 7.73** A Home Affairs Committee report, ‘Asylum and migration: Albania’, published on 12 June 2023, observed that while “Albania is a safe country and [committee members had] seen little evidence that its citizens should need to seek political asylum in the UK or elsewhere ... there are unquestionably cases of Albanian citizens being trafficked to the UK, from within Albania or from within other European countries, where appropriate safeguards must be in place before they are returned to Albania” and “it is not the case that no asylum claim made by a person from Albania can succeed”.⁹⁴
- 7.74** DMs told inspectors that “one thing the Home Office did well” when they commenced work on Op BRIDORA was delivering training on Albanian CPINs. However, they said that “the information they gave was wrong on what the claims coming in were” because the training focused on blood feuds, which was not the basis of most claims they saw.

Loss of productivity

- 7.75** Inspectors heard that moving DMUs to work exclusively on Op BRIDORA following the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration was at the expense of making progress on other legacy claims in the WIP. A Newton⁹⁵ consultant said that Op BRIDORA brought “productivity right down” and “cost a few months on the timeline to clear the [legacy] backlog”. Because of the high volumes of ‘no shows’ for interviews, the stream of ‘workable’ claims (for which a DM could conduct an interview or decision) did not match the large number of DMs deployed to the project. The knock-on effect of fewer interviews taking place was that there were fewer substantive decisions for DMs to make, as many of the claims would be referred for absconder action, which was an administrative function. One of the consultants taken on to deliver the Prioritising Asylum Customers’ Experience (PACE) programme and increase efficiency in the asylum process had been appointed to support Op BRIDORA. They told inspectors that “it looked like poor management as there were people [DMs] sitting there making no decisions

92 Home Office, ‘Country Policy and Information Note, Albania: blood feuds’, version 6.0 (published January 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/albania-country-policy-and-information-notes>

93 Home Office, ‘Country Policy and Information Note, Albania: human trafficking’, version 14.0 (published February 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/albania-country-policy-and-information-notes>

94 Home Affairs Committee, ‘Asylum and migration: Albania, Second Report of Session 2022–23’, (published 12 June 2023), p.4. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40291/documents/204657/default/>

95 For information on Newton see: <https://www.newtoneurope.com/>

... even at its peak of 1,000 [outcomes, including withdrawals] a week there were only 100 substantive decisions a week, so the productivity was poor”.

- 7.76** Inspectors heard that one reason for this was the high volume of ‘no shows’ for substantive interviews. DMs told inspectors that only one in four Albanian claimants attended their interview and that, after two chances, the admin team would initiate absconder action. Inspectors asked the Home Office to provide its ‘interview failure’ report, but the data in the report was not broken down by nationality, so inspectors could not verify this point. A senior manager said that the level of no shows had been “factored in at the beginning” but was “higher than what was originally estimated”. This meant that DMs had spent time preparing for interviews that did not take place.
- 7.77** With the understanding that the Albanian cohort was known for a high level of non-compliance, some senior managers were supportive of the idea of “testing compliance” by introducing reporting requirements before setting up interviews. However, this was reliant on Immigration Enforcement’s capacity, and they had provided feedback that they could not facilitate it in all areas of the country.
- 7.78** Another reason for many Albanian claims being ‘unworkable’ was that they had either been referred to the National Referral Mechanism, which meant a decision could not be progressed on their asylum claim if it was likely to be refused, or there was an impending prosecution, which also acted as a barrier to a decision being made. DMs told inspectors that, had they been consulted at the start of Op BRIDORA, they could have pre-empted these barriers as they were frequently associated with this cohort. They also suggested that, had claims been “triaged properly”, “it would have saved a lot of time”.
- 7.79** DMs told inspectors that, once Op BRIDORA was under way, they received an instruction that they were no longer authorised to implement any grants for Albanians, even where the decision had already been written. DMs in one location said they thought they had been instructed to “keep them away from workflow to implement because [the Home Office] did not want a freedom of information request to pick up that [it] was granting Albanian women”. They described this as “creating an arbitrary barrier” to decisions being served in case it was “picked up by the media”. When inspectors asked managers about this, they said that a decision had been taken at ministerial level that no more than 2% of Albanian claims should be successful.
- 7.80** The Home Office’s progress update on the asylum backlog clearance for the week commencing 13 November 2023 stated: “The NSA Hub is taking the lead on Operation BRIDORA, with other sites assisting. We have very low levels of the pre-interview WIP left to complete, and decision outputs are increasing as new Decision Makers are gaining experience.”⁹⁶
- 7.81** A further issue raised was the fact that upwards of 3,000 Albanian claims were “stuck” in the inadmissibility WIP queue, which meant they “could not be touched” until six months had elapsed.⁹⁷ One manager told inspectors that a submission had been sent to ministers to suggest transferring these Albanian claims to the ‘substantive’ WIP so they could be worked on, but ministers initially maintained their position that they should remain in the inadmissible pool.⁹⁸

96 The Non-Suspensive Appeal (NSA) Unit is responsible for processing claims from a designated NSA state.

97 Home Office guidance on inadmissibility states that six months is a “general guideline” for the expected length of time from a claim being recorded, to a safe third country agreeing to admit a person before their removal, and “if, taking into account all the circumstances, it is not possible to make an inadmissibility decision or effect removal following an inadmissibility decision within a reasonable period, inadmissibility action must be discontinued, and the person’s claim must be admitted to the asylum process for substantive consideration”. Home Office, ‘Inadmissibility: safe third country cases’, version 7.0 (published 28 June 2022), p. 28. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inadmissibility-third-country-cases>

98 The ‘substantive’ WIP refers to the initial decision asylum WIP. While a claim has inadmissible action pending, it does not enter the substantive asylum WIP.

Eventually, it was agreed that Albanian claims could be transferred to the substantive legacy WIP, although one manager expressed their concern that this could be discriminatory to other nationalities in the inadmissibility WIP.

- 7.82** The equality impact assessment (EIA) on streamlined asylum processing from May 2023 contained, unusually, a proposal to “introduce a focused operational model for handling third country inadmissibility cases by allowing for cases who do not engage the inadmissibility policy to be transferred to the asylum casework system before the six months deadline”. It also proposed that “nationals currently eligible for the Streamlined Asylum Process should drop out of the inadmissibility WIP for both legacy and flow cases”. Inspectors asked senior managers whether they were aware of this having taken place, but none could clarify whether it had for nationalities other than Albanians.
- 7.83** Managers told inspectors that the Newton consultants had been instrumental in producing “metrics and data which indicated that continuing with high levels of BRIDORA in DMUs was not going to deliver what it needed to” and had helped communicate this to ministers. Senior managers said that Newton were “liked by ministers and the top officers”, which meant that they could present information “in a nice modelling way ... and they get believed in a way that [Home Office officials] might not be believed”.

8. Inspection findings: Workflow and case progression

- 8.1** The Independent Chief Inspectorate of Borders and Immigration’s (ICIBI’s) 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that Asylum Operations had a disjointed and inefficient workflow process that was reliant on the National Workflow Team manually inputting information into local workflow trackers based on Excel spreadsheets. The lack of an efficient workflow process contributed to backlogs and delays in clearing the work in progress (WIP). As of 18 May 2021, the WIP contained 55,047 claims awaiting an initial decision. The inspection reported that the Asylum Transformation programme sought to digitise workflow process to enable claims to be processed more efficiently. Asylum Operations recognised that inefficiencies in the asylum process had been compounded by “poor IT and manual, paper-based processes and workflow”, which did not meet the demands or scale of the system.⁹⁹
- 8.2** The 2021 inspection recommended that Asylum Operations “expedite ‘Transformation’ plans specifically relating to the creation of a new digital case prioritisation and allocation tool, and the substantive interview appointment booking tool”.¹⁰⁰ The Streamlined Digital Business (SDB) project, which was part of Asylum Transformation, encompassed four key workstreams: case prioritisation and allocation, appointment booking improvements, efficiency, and delivering value for money for taxpayers.
- 8.3** In the absence of a published service standard for processing asylum claims, which Asylum Operations had removed in 2019, inspectors previously found there was no evidence of claims being prioritised based on vulnerability. They were only being prioritised where claimants were in receipt of asylum support. The 2021 inspection also found that barriers preventing a claimant from being interviewed or a claim being decided had been applied erroneously, which stopped them from being progressed and caused unnecessary delays. Efforts by Asylum Operations to review and remove barriers were found to be “sluggish”.¹⁰¹
- 8.4** The current inspection examined the effectiveness of measures taken by the Home Office to address delays and clear the initial decision backlog, such as the introduction of cohorts, new workflow tools, and case progression processes.

Work in progress

- 8.5** According to Home Office data provided to inspectors in November 2023, as of 27 October 2023, there were 116,619 claims in the initial decision WIP, which was an 111.9% increase in the WIP since the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework. The WIP had, however, reduced from its peak of 139,552 claims on 28 February 2023.¹⁰²

99 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI), ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’ (published 18 November 2021), p. 133. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

100 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 12.

101 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 7.

102 This figure came from the Home Office’s ‘Additional statistics relating to illegal migration’ (updated 5 December 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-relating-to-the-illegal-migration-bill>

- 8.6** Of the total of 116,619 claims, 107,789 were adult claimants (27,265 legacy and 80,524 flow). Of the legacy claims, 12,799 claimants (46.94%) were recorded as being in receipt of asylum support and 18,331 (67.23%) were recorded as having a legal representative. On 27 October 2023, the average length of time a legacy claimant had been awaiting an initial decision was 648 days, but there were 7,607 claims that were submitted prior to 2021, as shown in figure 19. Of the legacy claims, 14,381 (52.75%) had not yet completed a substantive interview.¹⁰³

Figure 19: Legacy adult claims in WIP as of 27 October 2023 broken down by year in which claim was submitted

| Year claim submitted | Number of main claimants |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2007 – 2014 | 35 |
| 2015 | 24 |
| 2016 | 59 |
| 2017 | 237 |
| 2018 | 753 |
| 2019 | 2,620 |
| 2020 | 3,879 |
| 2021 | 11,158 |
| 2022 (up to 28 June 2022) | 8,500 |

- 8.7** Of the flow claims, 18,297 (22.72%) were recorded as being in receipt of asylum support, and 22,820 (28.34%) as having a legal representative. On 27 October 2023, the average length of time a claimant had been awaiting an initial decision was 162 days.
- 8.8** Also in the WIP were 8,830 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (1,388 legacy and 7,442 flow). On 27 October 2023, the average length of time a legacy child claimant had been awaiting an initial decision was 671 days. There were 370 claims that had been submitted prior to 2021, as shown in figure 20.

¹⁰³ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office's Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

Figure 20: Legacy children’s claims in WIP broken down by year in which claim was submitted

| Year claim submitted | Number of main claimants |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2014 | 1 |
| 2015 | 6 |
| 2016 | 13 |
| 2017 | 28 |
| 2018 | 48 |
| 2019 | 120 |
| 2020 | 154 |
| 2021 | 643 |
| 2022 (up to 28 June 2022) | 375 |

8.9 Of the legacy children’s claims, 816 (58.79%) had not completed a substantive interview as of 27 October 2023. The average length of time a flow claimant had been awaiting an initial decision was 251 days. A total of 6,532 (87.77%) flow claimants had not completed a substantive interview.

8.10 On 5 December 2023, after inspectors began drafting this report, the Home Office published ‘statistics relating to illegal migration’ to the end of November 2023. The data showed that there were 18,366 claims remaining in the legacy backlog as of 30 November 2023, with one month remaining until the deadline to decide all legacy claims.¹⁰⁴

National Workflow and allocations

8.11 As of November 2023, the Asylum Workflow Planning and Analysis team, also referred to as ‘National Workflow’ (NWF), was responsible for allocating asylum claims to decision-making units (DMUs). A senior manager told inspectors that the team also “moves cases round when it needs to, to allow everyone to have enough work, and provides regular reports on workflow and status of cases, barriers, and PRAG status”.¹⁰⁵

8.12 Streamlined asylum processing (SAP) and Operation BRIDORA, discussed in chapter 7, were some ways in which the Home Office sought to make decision making more efficient. Operation MAKHU (Op MAKHU) was the internal name for the processing of all remaining nationalities in the legacy work in progress (WIP). Asylum Operations worked alongside Newton¹⁰⁶ consultants to produce a ‘plan’ to work through the backlog, which included splitting up the remaining WIP into cohorts.

8.13 When allocating claims to DMUs, NWF considered several factors: which cohorts were being prioritised at that time according to Asylum Operations’ ‘plan’; the number and level of experience of decision makers (DMs) within the DMU; and whether the DMs had been trained to conduct interviews, write decisions, or both.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Home Office, ‘Additional statistics relating to Illegal Migration’.

¹⁰⁵ PRAG rating is the system used by the Home Office to rate how close to being interview or decision ready a case is. It runs from purple (long term barriers), to red, amber, and green (barrier free).

¹⁰⁶ For information on Newton see: <https://www.newtoneurope.com/>

¹⁰⁷ Asylum and Human Rights Operations’ ‘plan’ is the priorities and sequencing of work throughout the year.

8.14 In July 2023, the Home Office provided inspectors with an overview of its plan for tasking priorities, which had “changed at various points in the year”. The document set out Asylum Operations’ plan, which started with DMUs working on Albanian claims at the start of 2023 (examined in chapter 7) and then focused on nationalities with a high grant rate or where a high proportion of claimants were in receipt of asylum support.

Prioritising and expediting claims

8.15 The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework found no evidence of asylum claims being prioritised based on the vulnerability of the claimant or the length of time a claim had been in the work in progress (WIP). Prioritisation had been based only on whether a claimant was receiving asylum support.

8.16 During the current inspection, claims were being prioritised by cohort, but there was no evidence of prioritisation based on vulnerability taking place within the cohorts. A senior manager told inspectors that they questioned why, “if [they were] trying to give claimants fair decisions as quickly as possible ... are we not prioritising cases by vulnerability or date of claim?” They believed Asylum Operations could have worked through the backlog more quickly had they considered claims in date order, adding: “We raced through all the easy cases and are now dealing with those that are refusal-heavy or have difficult things to deal with.”

8.17 Inspectors asked the Home Office to provide details of what constituted a demand-led case and a list of all demand-led categories. Its response included the following tasking priorities, with accompanying rationale, as shown in figure 21.

Figure 21: Asylum Operations’ tasking priorities, July 2023

| Tasking priority | Rationale |
|--|---|
| Detained cases | Those deprived of their liberty and held in immigration detention for consideration of their claim. For detention to be lawful, removal post consideration must be considered realistic within a reasonable timeframe and detention must be for the shortest time possible. |
| Vulnerable and high harm claimants | Cases where there are concerns for a vulnerable claimant and prioritisation is necessary for their wellbeing. Includes those where a safeguarding referral has been raised and potential victims of trafficking. |
| Demand led | Cases where we are obliged to or have committed to making a decision by a certain date e.g. Judicial Review, Pre-Action Protocol, MP cases. |
| Supported cases irrespective of claim date | Claimants in receipt of asylum support. |
| Flow KPIs (key performance indicators) | Asylum claims made on or after 28 June 2022 – these are not subject to a published service standard but currently have an internal KPI. |
| Legacy | Asylum claims made before 28 June 2022 – these are not subject to a published service standard or internal KPI. |

- 8.18** As of 27 October 2023, Home Office data showed that 27% of the claimants in the legacy WIP were in receipt of asylum support.¹⁰⁸ The Home Office was unable to provide data on those with protected characteristics (other than nationality or sex) or a known vulnerability as this data was not recorded.
- 8.19** Stakeholders expressed frustration at the perceived lack of transparency regarding the triaging and prioritisation of claims during engagement with the Home Office. They said they had asked the Home Office to provide details of any internal criteria for prioritisation to enable them to “helpfully make representations to enable claims to be triaged and prioritised” but it had been unable to do so. When legal representatives or organisations providing support had requested their clients’ claims be prioritised because they were particularly vulnerable, they had not been successful. They said that greater clarity on which claims would be prioritised would assist them to advise clients in an informed way, but with the increase in “different pilots going on” they could not even know whether the claimant would have an interview. They said this was “professionally embarrassing”.
- 8.20** The Home Office published guidance on ‘Asylum decision-making prioritisation’ on 6 October 2023.¹⁰⁹ The guidance stated: “The Home Office recognises there are exceptional cases outside of the above operational programmes [legacy, SAP, Albania, flow, children] which may require prioritisation due to the specific circumstances of the claimant.” It then provided examples of case types that could be prioritised, at the request of the claimant or their legal representative, which included “cases of severe vulnerability – examples include but are not limited to severe safeguarding concerns such as previous incidences of suicidal ideation or victims of torture as evidenced by relevant medical evidence”.

Operation MAKHU cohorts and allocations

- 8.21** Op MAKHU was the internal name for the processing of all remaining nationalities in the legacy WIP. In January 2023, Asylum Operations established a dedicated Op MAKHU team to plan delivery of the operation, with staff drawn from workflow and admin teams and from casework operations. Senior managers in the team were responsible for defining and prioritising the cohorts to be processed by different caseworking teams and for allocating them to specific DMUs.
- 8.22** Claims in the Op MAKHU cohort were allocated to DMUs based on Asylum Operations’ tasking priorities and plan. Newton consultants told inspectors that they worked with Op MAKHU leads to “work out a sensible sequence” for allocating cohorts to DMUs. Learning from Op BRIDORA, which had been a “sudden switch” that DMs reported feeling unprepared for, they had “made a concerted effort” to ensure DMUs knew that change was coming in advance. The Chief Caseworker Team delivered awareness sessions and provided cohort support packs, to “manage the switch”. Senior managers said that Op MAKHU had been successful. However, the closer it came to the deadline to clear the legacy backlog, the “scrappier” delivery had become, as inevitably they had moved away from the largest cohorts and were “just picking up cases to work what they could”. One of the consultants told inspectors that they anticipated Asylum Operations being less efficient in the two months before the deadline to clear the legacy backlog by the end of December 2023.

¹⁰⁸ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

¹⁰⁹ UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Asylum decision making prioritisation: caseworker guidance’ (published 2 October 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-decision-making-prioritisation-caseworker-guidance>

- 8.23** As priorities and capacity changed throughout the year, cohorts had been reallocated to different DMUs. Staff told inspectors they were “at the mercy of National Workflow, as they have got the best idea of where the work can efficiently be worked, but it makes it difficult”. Local DMU workflow teams told inspectors that sometimes changes had happened to their allocations as often as weekly, which had been “confusing” for them, and for claimants. This had led to them sending requests for information to claimants’ legal representatives, and then, by the time the evidence had been returned, responsibility for the claim had transferred to another DMU, which risked evidence being lost.
- 8.24** During their examination of a random sample of asylum claims, inspectors saw evidence of the receipt of correspondence not being accurately recorded on Home Office databases and claims being transferred between DMUs. In several cases, inspectors were unable to locate specific documents on the systems, such as missing interview records. They also observed inconsistent record keeping, including a lack of notes on some cases, record duplications, and discrepancies between the caseworking systems used, CID (Case Information Database) and Atlas.

Operation MAKHU questionnaire: Iran and Iraq

- 8.25** One of the cohorts within Op MAKHU was legacy claimants from Iran or Iraq, as the Home Office had determined that they were the nationalities with the most individuals in receipt of asylum support and should therefore be prioritised. Part of the Op MAKHU delivery team’s role was to identify eligible claimants for the questionnaire process, send questionnaires to claimants, and manage enquiries.
- 8.26** The questionnaire was similar to the Op AMESA questionnaire, but was a digital version and claimants had 30 days instead of 20 in which to return it. According to the Home Office’s ‘Asylum decision making prioritisation’ guidance, claimants in the Op MAKHU cohort would be invited for an asylum interview where a decision could not be made on “the available evidence already provided”.¹¹⁰ Asylum Operations referred to a decision without a substantive interview as a ‘decision on paper’.
- 8.27** Home Office data provided to inspectors showed that as of 27 October 2023, 21,003 legacy claimants had been identified as eligible to receive an Op MAKHU questionnaire. Of these, 201 were void, so they have been excluded from the decision breakdown shown in figure 22.^{111,112}

¹¹⁰ Home Office, ‘Asylum decision making prioritisation’, version 2.0 (published 6 October 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-decision-making-prioritisation-caseworker-guidance>

¹¹¹ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

¹¹² A claim could be ‘void’ if, for example, it was initially recorded incorrectly on the Home Office database and had to be re-inputted, leading to a duplicate entry.

Figure 22: Decisions made on Iran/Iraq legacy claims as of 27 October 2023

| Decision | Number | % of total | % in receipt of asylum support |
|--|---------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Grant asylum/humanitarian protection | 9,147 | 43.97% | 65.37% |
| Grant (other) ¹¹³ | 51 | 0.25% | 35.29% |
| Refusal/return | 2,866 | 13.78% | 84.47% |
| Claim withdrawn (implicit or explicit) | 662 | 3.18% | 16.62% |
| Other (deceased, duplicate or rejection) | 12 | 0.06% | 33.33% |
| Outcome withdrawn ¹¹⁴ | 798 | 3.84% | 20.43% |
| No decision | 7,266 | 34.93% | 86.64% |
| Total | 20,802 | 100% | |

- 8.28** Of the 20,802 legacy (Iran/Iraq) claimants that had received a decision, 8,695 (64%) had been in receipt of asylum support. Of those still awaiting a decision, 6,295 (87%) were in receipt of asylum support, which suggested the prioritisation was not effective.
- 8.29** Of the legacy claimants that had received a decision, 1,153 (8.52%) had a legal representative and of those awaiting a decision, 5,684 (78%) had a legal representative. It was unclear to inspectors why those who had legal representatives, who would be more likely to be able to complete a questionnaire with a sufficient level of detail, would not have progressed. However, without data on the return of the questionnaire, it was not possible to measure this.
- 8.30** The Home Office was unable to provide a breakdown of the dates on which it had received the questionnaire from a claimant as it was “not recorded in CID or Atlas”. This meant that inspectors were unable to calculate the length of time that had elapsed since the receipt of a questionnaire to a decision being made, which would have been a useful measure of the success of the operation.
- 8.31** Of the 9,147 decisions made to grant asylum or humanitarian protection, 3,487 (38.12%) did not require a substantive interview, which was the intended purpose for the questionnaires.

Case progression: Ownership

- 8.32** To address the high volume of claims that remained in the WIP for longer than necessary due to a barrier having been incorrectly applied, the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework contained a recommendation to:

“Conduct a detailed and rapid analysis of every asylum claim awaiting an initial decision in the WIP by reviewing each decision-making unit’s ‘Workflow Tracker’, focusing on identifying and removing erroneous casework barriers and identifying cases where a grant would be possible without an interview.”¹¹⁵

113 Including discretionary leave to remain, permanent status, other leave to remain.

114 ‘Outcome withdrawn’ is where the initial decision contained an error (administrative or casework) and had to be withdrawn to be corrected. From the data provided, it was not evident what the ultimate decision on these claims would be or whether it had been made.

115 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’ p. 12.

- 8.33** The Home Office accepted this recommendation, stating in its response in November 2021 that work was already under way to address this, and that it intended to “create a single centralised case progression function as part of the National Workflow Team”.¹¹⁶ Between November 2021 and November 2023, there had been several changes of ownership of case progression work.
- 8.34** On 8 June 2023, the Home Office provided an update on its progress against the ICIBI’s recommendation, which stated:
- “A national case progression function was established whose primary function was to keep under review all cases in the [initial decision WIP] providing an assessment of status and barriers. The team actively cleared the barriers to enable cases to be progressed to interview or decision and make a full assessment as to whether a case may be decided on papers or a substantive decision. Following the restructure of Asylum Operations, the centralised national case progression team was disbanded in 2022 with each of the three new asylum casework units having their own case progression teams. Each team respectively review cases with barriers relating to Legacy, Flow or Children and Secondary Casework.”
- 8.35** Inspectors asked the Home Office on two occasions to provide a high-level process map detailing the current workflow processes and steps taken from the point when an asylum claim was lodged to an initial decision being made, but it was unable to do so. As legacy was a priority stream, DMUs focused on those that claims had a dedicated case progression team until August 2023, provided by the Mersey workflow and administrative team. Commenting on the value this team added, a senior manager told inspectors: “They were producing consistency and reducing the waste you get when it is all done locally.”
- 8.36** Other DMUs managed their case progression (and barrier removal) ‘in house’ and had responsibility for different administrative tasks, such as logging evidence, conducting Operating Mandate checks, booking substantive interviews, and serving decisions. Inspectors heard that case progression for flow claims was “absorbed” into DMUs, but, as of October 2023, all DMUs were focused on legacy cases. Managers and staff told inspectors that the “case progression picture was really complicated” and inconsistent across Asylum Operations, with disagreements as to whether there could be a “one size fits all approach” for this work.

Interim case allocation tool

- 8.37** The interim case allocation tool (ICAT) was implemented in asylum teams nationwide to replace Excel spreadsheets that were being used for ‘workflow trackers’ during the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework. The aim of ICAT was to improve data quality and streamline workflow. As its name suggests, it was an interim system until the Case Allocation and Prioritisation (CAP) system was implemented.
- 8.38** Staff told inspectors that ICAT was not a real-time system and could take up to 48 hours to update. They expressed concerns about potentially duplicating work as a result. A claim could remain marked ‘pre-decision’ in ICAT, indicating that it had not yet been allocated to a DM, for a period of time after it had been assigned but before ICAT had updated, with the result that another DM might start work on the same claim. There had been instances when multiple

¹¹⁶ Home Office, ‘The Home Office response to the ICIBI’s report: An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 to May 2021’ (published 18 November 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-an-inspection-of-asylum-casework/the-home-office-response-to-the-independent-chief-inspector-of-borders-and-immigrations-report-an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-to-may>

DMs were working on the same claim simultaneously, or when one DM had started writing a decision even though another had already completed it.

- 8.39** According to the Newton consultants, the reason for the delay in updating ICAT was that data was pulled from multiple sources and required manual processing. A senior manager acknowledged that ICAT posed a risk due to the delay to updating but said that efforts were being made to improve the situation through transformation initiatives. The National Workflow Team had introduced 'ICAT open cases', which was a report pulled from ICAT that teams could use to look at their cases as a whole and refreshed daily to address the update delays. Staff in the children's hub said that the additional spreadsheet created by national workflow was essential for them to work efficiently and provided management with real-time access to the WIP. They had set up a workaround by which they filtered the information from the master spreadsheet based on the type of workstream, and then shared this filtered data with staff. As a result, they were able to allocate the upcoming workload accurately around the ICAT updates.
- 8.40** Staff told inspectors about their concerns at the lack of a unified system in Asylum Operations that could track all casework from start to finish. One senior caseworker said that had they had confidence in the data; it would save a significant amount of time in their day-to-day role. A senior manager said that previous systems gave them full access to the WIP and allowed them to filter the information they needed, but ICAT made it difficult to find the required information, comparing it to "wading through mud".
- 8.41** Another manager acknowledged that ICAT did not fulfil all their requirements and that they needed additional data for case progression beyond what ICAT offered. They mentioned the need for features like the ability to record follow-up actions or notes on the claim. A staff member said that with a "decent caseworking system", they could potentially double the number of cases they could progress, which indicated ICAT was limiting productivity and efficiency.
- 8.42** There was a level of acceptance of ICAT's functionality among staff, particularly in the new Solihull 2 DMU, where they stated that it was effective as long as accurate data was entered into it. The ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework identified similar issues regarding the reliance on time-consuming manual inputting of data.¹¹⁷ Inspectors observed that relying on manual data entry increased the risk of data loss due to human error and incomplete or inaccurate information being entered on to claims.
- 8.43** At the time of this inspection, the Case Allocation and Prioritisation (CAP) tool was in its testing phase. The system relied on certain elements of Atlas, such as Vantage and Atlas MI (management information), in order to function properly. Vantage and Atlas MI were part of the transition from CID to Atlas and were new management information (MI) platforms that were under development. The Home Office stated that the ongoing testing was to ensure that the intended benefits of the system would be achieved and that cases were appropriately prioritised or allocated to the correct DMs.
- 8.44** A senior manager told inspectors that, due to a lack of confidence in ICAT, staff frequently resorted to using spreadsheets instead. CAP, which would draw information from Atlas, was expected to address the issues identified with ICAT. Additionally, CAP would operate in real time, unlike ICAT. They said that the rollout of CAP had been paused in order to focus on addressing the legacy backlog, but there was no specific communication regarding when it

117 ICIBI, 'An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021', p 23.

would be fully implemented. However, a manager in the children's hub said they were due to participate in a forthcoming CAP pilot, which they viewed as a positive step forward.

- 8.45** In October 2023, the Home Office provided an update on the action taken to address recommendations made in the ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework. It stated that the rollout of CAP had been pushed back and was scheduled for April 2024.

Concise interview project

- 8.46** Internal Home Office documents stated that the concise interview project (CIP) had a "focus on triaging a WIP of approximately 4,500 asylum cases and scheduling short, scripted interviews across ten cohorts of differing nationalities". Another document stated:

"It is important to point out that the application of the CIP process is not based on nationality but rather on case type and/or grant rates.

"The suitability for CIP criteria is based on grant rate (medium (50%) to high (80%) and/or case type). For example, it is identified that the average grant rate of asylum claims between January and July 2023 from nationals from El Salvador is 96%, or the grant rate for female nationals from Pakistan is 70%, like female Vietnamese claimants (71%). This means it is more likely than not that claims from these nationalities, and where relevant specific case types, would be able to provide the required information under the concise interview process for a decision to be made on their claim."

- 8.47** As of November 2023, claims being processed through the CIP were from:

- Cameroon
- El Salvador
- Ethiopia
- Pakistan (female only)
- Somalia (female only)
- Sudan
- Turkey
- Ukraine
- Vietnam (female only)

- 8.48** The Home Office confirmed that "negative decisions will not be made based on a lack of sufficient information obtained at the concise interview", but that claimants would "be given the opportunity to provide further information about their claim either by a brief direct contact, or a supplementary asylum interview". A Newton consultant described the CIP as "a supervised filling in of a questionnaire but with no credibility challenge in the interview or follow up like you have in an EO [Executive Officer] interview". The consultant said that the main aim was to make more decisions on paper, but, failing that, this approach would reduce the length of a subsequent interview because the basis of claim would already have been established.

- 8.49** The project brought in 250 staff at Administrative Officer grade from HM Passport Office to undertake the work, 110 of whom would conduct the interviews. It also centralised the triage and interview booking functions for Asylum Operations.

- 8.50** Consultants and Home Office staff told inspectors that the purpose of the CIP had not been communicated clearly to DMs or stakeholders, and several senior managers said the planning team had lacked transparency and was resistant to input from operational teams.
- 8.51** Stakeholders also raised this perceived lack of transparency, some of them telling inspectors that they had heard about the pilot through their engagement with the Home Office but lacked “understanding on how it interacts with SAP [streamlined asylum processing]”, or which claimants it applied to. This made it difficult for legal representatives to prepare their clients, which they argued would be in the Home Office’s best interests as it would ensure they were prepared with relevant information and could cut down on the need for follow-up by the Home Office. They told inspectors that their clients were not asked relevant follow-up questions during “shortened” interviews, which were “resulting in decisions that were objectively poor”, but they could not tell whether the interviews were part of the CIP or whether they were substantive interviews.
- 8.52** A senior manager in the Asylum Logistics command accepted that something had been “lost” in the way the CIP was communicated to DMUs. They explained: “Things are changing so quickly and dynamically that there are failures in getting everything communicated because of the pace we are running at.”
- 8.53** The lack of clarity about the CIP led to resentment within decision-making teams, and staff told inspectors that claims that were “ready to go out the door” had been reallocated to the CIP despite the DMU having done the work. This negatively impacted their ability to achieve their target outputs. Inspectors heard that the CIP had also ‘block booked’ slots in interview rooms, which were already in high demand, further increasing frustration among DMUs.¹¹⁸
- 8.54** A senior manager told inspectors that the tension that arose from cases being “taken” from DMUs after work had been completed on them was exacerbated by the fact that the project had been introduced “at the same time [they] had already given parcels of work out”. The manager accepted its delivery had been “messy”, as they had been introducing new projects while work was already ongoing to clear the legacy backlog but were confident that the establishment of a centralised case progression team would improve how the CIP was delivered in flow. This would enable work to be better sequenced and “cases will not be sat in DMU WIPs, they will be in a central WIP” until allocated to DMUs.
- 8.55** DMU managers also had concerns about the quality of CIP interviews, with one saying that the idea of a scripted interview went against “what you have spent all your time telling DMs not to do”, as it limited their ability to be responsive and to probe relevant information as it arose. Other managers in Asylum Operations were concerned that the CIP had led to decisions to grant cases that should have “objectively” been refused, with one saying it was “important not to blame the people making decisions on CIP”. They were “just asking the questions and ticking the boxes”.
- 8.56** In October 2023, work was under way in the Communications and Customer team, which sits in the Asylum Logistics workstream, to improve the messaging and communication of changes to DMUs. These improvements sought to include messaging about the CIP, with the recognition that “sending staff emails was not working”. One example of this was the introduction of line management briefing packs, which included key changes and priorities to cascade to DMs, “bringing it back to what the impact is on the specific job role”.

118 The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “The maximum capacity for interviews was 3,400 interview slots per week across all sites. CIP took 830 slots per week.”

Streamlined Atlas

- 8.57** The concise interview project (CIP) saw the implementation of ‘streamlined Atlas’. This new functionality to the Home Office’s database allowed for automated decision making through Atlas, specifically for grant decisions, which could be generated through the system.
- 8.58** A technical specialist (tech spec) described ‘streamlined Atlas’ as an embedded checklist in Atlas. The process was that a DM should discuss the material facts and considerations of an application with a tech spec who provided a second pair of eyes (SPoE) check. Together, they agreed the decision and whether it could be granted based on the information available. If it could not, a further interview might be required.
- 8.59** Another tech spec expressed concerns about a potential decrease in the quality of decision making as a result of ‘streamlined Atlas’. However, they also believed that streamlined Atlas could have positive effects and were reassured that there still needed to be a touchpoint with a tech spec during the process, even if it was just the verbal SPoE check.
- 8.60** A senior caseworker expressed dissatisfaction that ‘streamlined Atlas’ was rolled out without the necessary training or preparation, describing it as rushed and lacking proper consideration.¹¹⁹ Senior managers told inspectors that ‘streamlined Atlas’ had “improved efficiency” and believed it would be “really helpful”. However, another expressed a desire for the focus to be on fixing existing issues in Atlas rather than introducing new features.

Future of the CIP

- 8.61** Despite the concerns and issues with the initial planning and roll out of the CIP, in October 2023, most senior managers felt confident that, with better communication and understanding, it was “the way to be going” to increase efficiency in decision making, and it was already “beginning to pay dividends”.
- 8.62** An asylum backlog clearance progress update on the CIP for the week commencing 13 November 2023 stated that, in total, 10,500 cases had been triaged, over 9,000 interviews scheduled, and over 4,700 decisions issued. The update said that interviews were averaging 48 minutes.
- 8.63** Inspectors asked the Home Office to provide data on all asylum claims that had been identified as eligible for the CIP, broken down by several criteria, including which stage of the asylum process each claim was at. The Home Office was unable to provide details of claims on which a decision had not yet been made. The data was therefore limited to claims where a decision had been made, of which there were 5,139 (7 of which were flow). Iranian nationals made up 40% of these decisions, Sudanese 14% and El Salvadorans 9%, as shown in figure 23.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “The Asylum Chief Casework Team produced a workshop and held train the trainer sessions for SCWs or their nominated representatives. SCWs were responsible for overseeing local delivery to staff in their units.”

¹²⁰ This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

Figure 23: Concise interview project decisions by nationality

| Rank | Nationality | Grant asylum | Grant humanitarian protection | Withdrawn – explicit | Withdrawn – implicit | Grand total |
|------|----------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| 1 | Iran (Islamic Republic of) | 2,073 | | | | 2,073 |
| 2 | Sudan | 714 | 2 | | | 716 |
| 3 | El Salvador | 439 | | 3 | | 442 |
| 4 | Turkey | 365 | | 3 | 1 | 369 |
| 5 | Pakistan | 360 | | 4 | | 364 |
| 6 | Ethiopia | 308 | | | | 308 |
| 7 | Vietnam | 172 | | 6 | 2 | 180 |
| 8 | Cameroon | 176 | | 1 | | 177 |
| 9 | Nigeria | 131 | | | | 131 |
| 10 | Uganda | 98 | | | | 98 |
| 11 | Other | 187 | 92 ¹²¹ | 1 | | |
| | Grand total | 5,023 | 94 | 18 | 4 | 5,139 |

- 8.64** Of the 5,139 decisions that had been made, 930 (18%) did not require a substantive interview. However, in 4,209 cases (82%), the claimant had a substantive interview before a decision was made. Of these, 233 substantive interviews had taken place before 2023.
- 8.65** The update also confirmed that planning for flow clearance had begun, and an initial cohort had been assessed to bring into the CIP. Data provided to inspectors showed that, as of 16 November 2023, seven decisions had been made on flow claims that had gone through the CIP. The Home Office was unable to provide data on those that had been identified as eligible but had not yet had a decision made.

Case progression: Pre-interview

- 8.66** During the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework, the National Workflow Team was responsible for booking substantive asylum interviews. The inspection found that an interview could take between 20 to 40 minutes to book.¹²² The process required frequent cross referencing between different Excel spreadsheets, liaison with legal advisers, DMs, the claimant, and interpreters, with data being inputted multiple times into different spreadsheets. It also included booking transport to the interview for the claimant and childcare for their child(ren), if required.
- 8.67** To achieve the Prime Minister’s commitment to clear the legacy backlog before the end of 2023, claims which could not be decided on paper would still require a substantive interview before the claim could be progressed to a decision. As of 27 October 2023, Home Office data showed that there were 15,197 legacy claimants in the total WIP who had not yet had a substantive interview.

121 All 92 grants of Humanitarian Protection were to Ukrainians.

122 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 25.

- 8.68** During this inspection, staff from workflow and administrative teams in DMUs raised similar issues to those raised during the last inspection. They told inspectors that, with all the associated tasks, booking an interview could take upwards of 30 minutes. They said that using the interview booking tool was “a bit of a nightmare” because it was used by all DMUs for interview rooms across the country and they had to find the nearest interview point for the claimant. They also had to find a workaround to book two interview slots if the interview was likely to take longer than usual, for example, if it was a known complex nationality, as well as arrange an interpreter. They said that their inbox was receiving a much higher volume of enquiries due to the increase in interviews being booked, which meant that emails requesting an interview postponement, and sometimes containing medical evidence, could easily be missed. A potential consequence of non-attendance at an interview could be the initiation of absconder action and withdrawal of a claim.
- 8.69** In September 2023, inspectors heard that all remaining claimants in the legacy WIP had to be interviewed by 17 November 2023. This would enable an initial decision to be made by the deadline to clear the legacy backlog by the end of the year. To address the issues that arose from individual DMUs booking interviews and streamline interview logistics, Asylum Operations had established a dedicated national Case Progression and Interview Logistics (CPIL) command. This command centralised administrative functions for all pre-interview work for “legacy focused DMUs”.¹²³ A senior manager in this team told inspectors that this centralisation had been a gradual change, to limit disruption to the operation. The benefit of the centralised model was that it allowed one team (CPIL) to “be more sensible about how the work is split and retain oversight of what is and is not being used and why”.
- 8.70** The purpose and role of CPIL was “evolving”, and managers said its remit would change and grow in the long term to encompass some post-interview work, but it was initially focused on pre-interview work. As of September 2023, CPIL would receive claims from the National Workflow (NWF) team, conduct a triage to determine whether the claimant required an interview, then schedule an interview and allocate it to a DMU.
- 8.71** A senior manager in CPIL told inspectors in September 2023, that to process the whole legacy cohort, 2,664 interviews would need to be conducted each week, not including interviews conducted as part of CIP. They said that this left them with little “wiggle room”, the availability of interview rooms being limited, as they were also being booked by the CIP. There were plans to open more interview suites in Manchester to increase capacity, and they were also exploring whether they could open more rooms in other “high-pressure locations”. It remained a “complex jigsaw puzzle to match an application to a location and time with an interpreter..., with a DM who is doing that cohort.... It’s just another dynamic that is challenging.”
- 8.72** The senior manager also said that the idea of introducing a “manifest approach” was being considered, as there was on average a 10% ‘no show’ rate for interviews, as of October 2023. This approach would test inviting 6 to 7% more people to a location than there were interviews booked for. Those people would act as reserves and could replace anyone who did not attend their scheduled interview. A senior manager acknowledged that there was “more jeopardy” in this approach as it risked “dragging someone out who might not get an interview”.

123 As of October 2023, this included all DMUs except Asylum Children and Secondary Casework (ACSC), the Non-Suspensive Appeals (NSA) team, Detained Asylum Casework (DAC), Glasgow and Belfast.

- 8.73** In 2019 the ICIBI inspected the Home Office’s use of language services in the asylum process.¹²⁴ The inspection found that, between 2018 and 2019, 15% (5,387) of requests to book interpreters were cancelled.
- 8.74** Between February and November 2023, the number of interview-booking requests made to the Interpreter and Language Services Unit (ILSU), the team responsible for booking interpreters, increased by 200%. Over the same period, ILSU achieved an average fulfilment rate of 99.03% for interpreter-booking requests.
- 8.75** Although ILSU fulfilled nearly all the interview-booking requests made of them, DMs and managers told inspectors that “interpreter issues” were a common problem. These issues led to interviews being cancelled, which slowed down case progression. Staff told inspectors that 40% of asylum interviews that had been cancelled were due to interpreter issues. Due to the lack of detail in the Home Office’s response to inspectors’ requests for more information on this, inspectors were unable to assess whether 40% of cancelled interviews were the result of interpreter issues. Inspectors were also unable to assess the length of the delay a cancelled or incomplete interview added to a claimant’s case.
- 8.76** Inspectors requested copies of interview failure reports from January 2023 to October 2023 broken down by the reason for failure, the date of the original interview, and the date of the rebooked interview. The Home Office told inspectors that it was unable to provide the dates on which interviews were rebooked as obtaining this information would require looking at each individual claim. Figure 24 shows that, of the 70,013 interviews booked between 1 January 2023 and 31 October 2023, 62.75% (43,936) were completed, 15.63% (10,940) were cancelled, and there was an 18.50% (12,952) ‘no show’ rate.

Figure 24: Interview cancellation rates and reasons, 1 January 2023 to 31 October 2023

| Interview status | Number of interviews | Percentage of total |
|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Completed | 43,936 | 62.75% |
| Cancelled | 10,940 | 15.63% |
| No show | 12,952 | 18.50% |
| Suspended | 1,980 | 2.83% |
| Other | 175 | 0.25% |
| Withdrawn | 27 | 0.04% |
| Total | 70,010 | |

- 8.77** Data provided to inspectors did not give a specific reason for why an interview had been cancelled. Staff told inspectors that, as the interpreters were being used much more than they had historically, this put pressure on them, increasing burn-out and cancellation rates. A senior manager told inspectors that they were trying to establish the reasons for interview cancellations and that work was ongoing to try and address this issue. Despite these efforts, it remained the case that nearly 19% of interviews booked were not completed.¹²⁵

124 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of the Home Office’s use of language services in the asylum process’ (published 11 November 2020). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-the-home-offices-use-of-language-services-in-the-asylum-process>

125 This figure includes interview status marked as cancelled, suspended, other, and withdrawn.

Manage appointment booking

- 8.78** In October 2023, the manage appointment booking (MAB) tool, which was used to schedule interviews based on DMs' availability, was implemented across all DMUs. This had been accelerated by the introduction of the CIP.
- 8.79** Prior to the introduction of MAB, staff in Asylum Operations had been using an interim booking tool. However, the rollout of MAB was expedited because the interim tool could not handle the increased number of interviews being booked as a result of the need to clear the backlog. Staff had to enter information into both the interim tool and MAB simultaneously, which managers said was a "waste of time and resources".¹²⁶ Although MAB had only recently been implemented, most staff were positive about the value it would add. They believed it had the potential to reduce the time it took to book an interview and streamline the overall process. They also found it "simple to use".
- 8.80** The idea behind MAB was to centralise the process of booking interviews, but it relied on DMs inputting their availability. DMs had the autonomy to decide the number and type of interviews they could conduct based on their availability. Some managers expressed concern that this could give DMs too much control, but they were advised by senior leaders that DMs should be able to manage their own time.
- 8.81** Managers across Asylum Operations reported that the MAB system ran slowly and frequently crashed when it was initially rolled out, but they were confident that these issues would be resolved. Senior managers also emphasised that, despite its fast rollout, the system was functional and had made a difference.

Case progression: Barriers

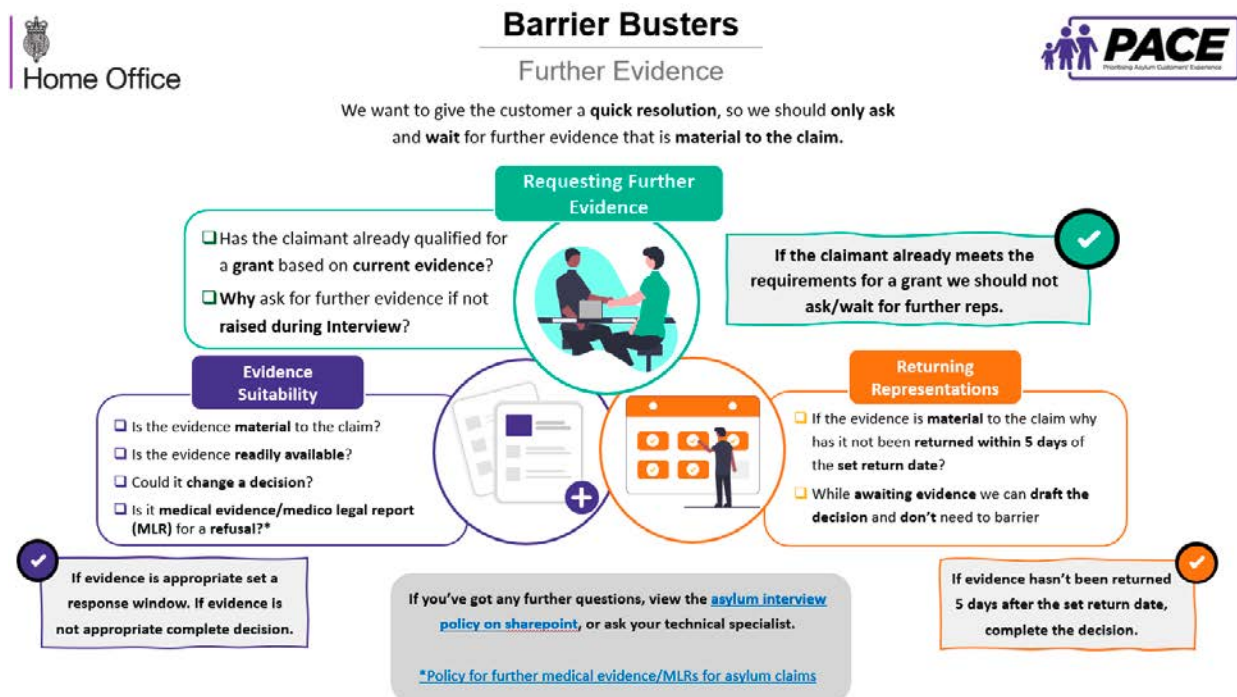
- 8.82** The Home Office refers to a 'barrier' to case progression as anything that prevents an interview taking place or a decision being made. In the ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework, inspectors found barriers were incorrectly added to claims, which unnecessarily prevented these claims from progressing. DMs would see that a barrier had been applied to a claim and consider it unworkable. This, alongside efforts to clear barriers taking time to progress, added to the length of time a claim spent in the WIP.
- 8.83** Senior managers told inspectors that a 'barrier culture' remained in Asylum Operations, which prevented decisions being made efficiently. They were trying to address this issue and wanted to empower DMs to be able to make decisions even when a barrier had been applied, because "the vast majority of cases are workable even if they have a barrier". However, there remained inconsistencies in the approach, including around what was considered a barrier, how the staffing resource was ring-fenced to clear them, and how frequently reviews of barriers were undertaken.
- 8.84** Evidence provided to inspectors for the current inspection listed 32 different barriers, including waiting for further representations from a claimant or a legal representative, a DM waiting for a tech spec to conduct a SPoE check, or an impending prosecution. Each barrier was 'PRAG' rated, a system used by Asylum Operations to rate how close a claim was to being interview or decision ready. The barriers that created the longest delays to case progression were rated purple, with green indicating that a claim was barrier free and could be progressed.

¹²⁶ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: "Due to the way MAB was rolled out not all sites were using it, so the double entry system was necessary to alleviate the risk of double booking of interviews."

Understanding of what constitutes a barrier

- 8.85** To upskill staff on what constitutes a barrier, senior leaders had introduced all-staff calls during which ‘technical experts’ spoke to staff about barriers, including highlighting that, where a claim had a long-term barrier, it would not prevent a DM from working on it.
- 8.86** Efforts to change the barrier culture and improve case progression also included a series of quick reference posters colloquially known as ‘barrier busters’. These were one-page documents created by Newton consultants as part of the Prioritising Asylum Customers’ Experience (PACE) programme. The aim of the barrier busters was to provide clarity to DMs on barriers around safeguarding, case progression, and impending prosecutions. An example is provided in figure 25.

Figure 25: The further evidence ‘barrier buster’



- 8.87** A senior manager told inspectors that, to further improve the ‘barrier culture’, there was a need for leadership, a clear narrative, and vision, in order to give DMs the confidence to make a decision even where some barriers remained. A DM demonstrated this attitude when they told inspectors: “I face the same work and barriers as everyone else. It is whether you see a barrier and think OK, or do everything to knock it down... It is about initiative and wanting to achieve it, and I don’t think people have that.” Managers highlighted that DMs did not need to make “numerous checks and go down every rabbit hole” when they had enough evidence in front of them to make the decision.
- 8.88** However, DMs in one DMU told inspectors that some of the triage work carried out by administrative staff could be problematic, as some barriers could be missed, leading to cases needing to be retriaged. They said that this was not the fault of the administrative officers as they had not been asylum trained. DMs in this unit had been told that it was their responsibility to ensure a claim had been triaged correctly, and they had been instructed not to rely on the triage previously carried out by others.

8.89 DMs and workflow staff told inspectors that, while not an official barrier, the biggest impediment to the progression of a claim was when it became “stuck” in the Atlas caseworking system. This is described in more detail later in this chapter.

Ring-fencing resource

- 8.90** A workflow manager in one DMU told inspectors that they managed a small team that had responsibility for triaging and barrier clearance for both pre- and post-interview cases. They said they were “lucky” to have a triage team, as not many other units had this function. When asked if they were having to remove barriers on cases, DMs told inspectors that the administration team was “good at doing what DMs needed them to do”, meaning that it had fewer barriers to clear.
- 8.91** The triage and case progression process was different for DMs working on cohorts with fewer than 200 claims and for claimants over the age of 70 in the Low Intake Cohort Team (LICT). DMs working on this cohort retained ownership of a claim from the pre-interview triage through to decision service, clearing barriers as the claim progressed. A senior manager told inspectors they had “banned the word ‘barrier’ in LICT and now encouraged a lot more progression work”.
- 8.92** Inspectors visited Solihull 2 DMU on 25 September 2023. At that time the DMU was in its infancy, having ‘gone live’ on 4 September 2023, and it had limited numbers of administrative officers. Managers were in the process of recruiting and ‘onboarding’ more staff to those roles. Part of the onboarding process involved workflow managers training administrative officers on how to assess the readiness of a claim to be interviewed or decided, and some of the administrative officers had started to triage pre-interview cases.
- 8.93** In more established DMUs, the triaging of cases to identify barriers was a role usually carried out by administrative officers or DMs. However, in Solihull 2, a lack of administrative staff and experienced DMs meant that technical specialists (tech specs) had to triage cases to clear barriers and provide DMs with decision-ready claims. The use of tech spec resource for triage work reduced the time they could spend carrying out second pair of eyes (SPoE) checks and added an additional delay to a DM’s ability to complete a decision.

Reviewing barriers

- 8.94** In the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework, inspectors found that anyone from the workflow teams could input a barrier and add a review date without sign-off from a manager, which in some instances led to erroneous barriers being added and caused unnecessary delays.¹²⁷
- 8.95** During this inspection, inspectors reviewed the standard operating procedure (SOP) for case progression, triage, and adding barriers to legacy or flow cases. The SOPs stated that, if a DM believed that a claim could not proceed and wanted to add a barrier before sending it to the Case Progression Team (CPT), they needed the prior agreement of a tech spec or a senior caseworker. Without this agreement, CPT would reject a claim. Workflow managers told inspectors that they would only send a claim back to CPT if they considered the issue to be a barrier rather than a DM being “overly cautious” and something they could clear themselves. These managers were assisted in making this decision by a guide produced by the CPT.

- 8.96** In May 2023, the Home Office provided inspectors with data on the most common barriers that prevented an initial asylum decision being made. Barriers were ‘PRAG rated’ depending on the length of delay the barrier would add to a claim progressing. The data showed that 13,204 adult claims had one or more of the 32 barrier types and were rated as either purple, red, amber, or green.
- 8.97** Inspectors analysed the data and noted that the ‘PRAG next review date’ was recorded as being before the current PRAG review date on numerous occasions. On 253 occasions, the next PRAG review date was set as “00/01/1900”. In addition, and as shown in figure 26, the most common barrier listed was “Other (See notes)”, so it was not clear what the specific nature of the barrier was without accessing individual claims. Without accurate and easy-to-access data it would be difficult for managers to identify and track barriers and the actions required to clear them.

Figure 26: Top ten primary barriers in adult claims as of 22 May 2023 (pre- and post-interview)

| Barrier type | PRAG rating | | | | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| | Purple | Red | Amber | Green | |
| Other (see notes) | 1,094 | 419 | 3,082 | 118 | 4,713 |
| Further reps | 41 | 59 | 1,686 | 122 | 1,908 |
| National Referral Mechanism | 220 | 591 | 285 | 31 | 1,127 |
| Awaiting second pair of eyes | 13 | 42 | 875 | 6 | 936 |
| Absconder | 404 | 131 | 179 | 3 | 717 |
| Awaiting biometrics | 24 | 61 | 558 | 39 | 682 |
| Potential withdrawal | 18 | 37 | 316 | 8 | 379 |
| Third country case | 2 | 290 | 64 | 4 | 360 |
| Supplemental interview required | 3 | 23 | 257 | 13 | 296 |
| Criminal casework | 72 | 45 | 104 | 2 | 223 |
| Total | 1,891 | 1,698 | 7,406 | 346 | 11,341 |

- 8.98** Efforts to clear barriers in some DMUs were hampered by staffing levels. Due to the size of the technical staff resource or a lack of administrative support, DMs spent time trying to clear case barriers that would normally be the responsibility of other staff.

Barriers caused by Atlas

- 8.99** Despite Atlas being a tool that was designed to allow a caseworker to follow a claim logically from when it was raised on the system to when it had an outcome, managers in Asylum Operations described it as “not fit for purpose”. In the inspection survey, DMs identified it as the most frequently encountered barrier to efficiently progressing asylum claims.
- 8.100** During onsite interviews, inspectors heard about two main system errors in Atlas that caused delays to case progression. One error led to claims becoming stuck at the screening stage,

which prevented a substantive interview being booked. A senior manager said that trying to fix this error was “resource intensive”.

- 8.101** The other error prevented case progression and decision service when the claim appeared as ‘system user’ in Atlas. A member of the workflow team said that ‘system user’ appeared when Atlas placed a claim on hold to process the most recent action, to avoid anything else on the case being processed at the same time. This error added around five to ten days to the process. A member of the workflow team told inspectors that this error happened to every claim when it came to booking an interview and therefore it was something they had “come to expect”. As a result, they had incorporated the five-day delay into booking an interview to ensure cases were ready by the day of the interview.
- 8.102** There were also instances of claims being stuck in the system for longer periods of time. One DM told inspectors they had a claim showing as ‘system error’ for two months that could not be progressed. They had to tell the claimant’s legal representative that the delay in serving the decision was due to a system error, and said it made them look “incompetent”.
- 8.103** A senior manager told inspectors that, as of September 2023, there were around 139 decisions in their DMU that were stuck in Atlas and could not be served, despite the decision having been made and written. A manager in another DMU told inspectors they had 65 cases that had decisions ready to be served, but 90% were stuck in Atlas with the ‘system user’ error. Managers were concerned that this could impact on the DMs’ targets, and they would not get recognition for the work they had completed.
- 8.104** The lack of a resolution to this issue was a source of great frustration for staff. If the system error did not resolve itself, they had to contact the Home Office IT helpdesk, which frequently resulted in further delay. Team leaders (TLs) told inspectors that contacting the helpdesk “effectively stops the decision-making process”. It was described as a convoluted process, with no clear responsibility for fixing the issues. In some cases, staff were told to work on cases in the legacy caseworking system (CID) to move them along, leading to cases being spread across Atlas and CID, and the duplication of entries.
- 8.105** Team leaders and DMs told inspectors that the reason for the introduction of Atlas “was to stop repetition, but it creates more”, as staff had to duplicate entries or notes across different systems, known as ‘double keying’. Technical specialists (tech specs) expressed concerns about newly hired DMs who were solely trained on Atlas. This created challenges when they had to work on older cases and navigate their way around CID.
- 8.106** Another DM said that they were actively trying to transition from CID to Atlas and were receiving training on Atlas from a Business Embedded Trainer Business Embedded Trainers were responsible for providing training workshops on specific topics to staff members. Managers told inspectors that the Atlas Business Embedded Trainers assisted DMs to resolve minor issues but expressed uncertainty regarding the progress made in addressing any major issues. One manager stated that, although they had competent Business Embedded Trainers who strived to improve Atlas through training, the system itself still did not function properly, regardless of the user’s expertise. On a positive note, another manager said that the Solihull 2 DMU had a dedicated tech spec who focused solely on resolving Atlas issues. This addition to the team was described as highly effective in making processes smoother.
- 8.107** Staff expressed concerns about the absence of a notes function on Atlas, as CID was set to be decommissioned in 2024. This posed a risk of loss of information, as some staff had reverted to using CID as it enabled them to record case notes. The safeguarding hub was particularly

concerned about the lack of a notes function on Atlas, as it was important for them to be able to accurately record information relating to safeguarding concerns and any actions taken. They told inspectors that they had to find a workaround to accurately record information. Each data entry box on Atlas had a character limit of 999, and the template minute that they typically completed almost reached this limit alone. Consequently, they had been instructed to summarise the information, which they said could be “very dangerous”, as it could potentially omit important information that a DM could require at a later stage. A member of the team emphasised the risk that arose when the “technology dictates the process, rather than the process guiding the technology”.

- 8.108** A senior manager told inspectors: “Atlas has been a long journey. I think, because of some of the issues with Atlas, there has probably been too much of a tendency for some DMs to drop back into completing cases in CID. The option has been there, so they have not had to actually engage with Atlas issues and fix them.”
- 8.109** Staff told inspectors that managers had become more attentive to the issues raised regarding Atlas. A manager told inspectors that “Atlas was built with certain commands in mind ... and has lost its way, but they are now starting to listen to all of the end users and are starting to rectify the issues”. According to another manager, the Director of Asylum and Human Rights Operations recognised the severity of the Atlas issues and had recently appointed a Grade 6 manager specifically to address these concerns.
- 8.110** Inspectors found that newer staff members in Asylum Operations had a more positive view of Atlas, especially in the recently established Solihull 2 DMU. While they acknowledged the challenges, such as delays to case progression, they found Atlas to be more user-friendly compared to CID, once they became familiar with the user interface. This preference may have been due to the fact they had never used CID, which was an outdated system with a complex interface containing numerous tabs on which information could be stored. Staff who had worked in Asylum Operations longer were more accustomed to using CID than Atlas.

The use of decision templates

- 8.111** Other efforts to make the decision-making process more efficient and reduce delays included the development and introduction of grant minutes and reason for refusal (RFRL) templates. The Home Office provided copies of these templates to inspectors. The nationality-specific grant minutes consisted of a series of tick box questions accompanied by guidance text and prompts for the DM. The DM had to complete Operating Mandate security checks, the claimant’s immigration history, and a brief summary of the basis of their claim. In addition, the DM was prompted to consider the nationality of the claimant, the material facts, whether the claimant should be given the benefit of the doubt, and the risk on return, concluding with which status the claimant should be granted. Each template contained information and caselaw links specific to the claimant’s nationality.
- 8.112** Inspectors also reviewed the RFRL template and the accompanying guidance document. The purpose of the guidance was to tell DMs “how to utilise the Reasons for Refusal Letter when deciding asylum claims” and to support them “by providing standard wording for specific areas of a decision letter” and by outlining “the circumstances in which to use this wording”. There were different RFRL templates depending on the date the claim was made and the proposed outcome of the claim. In contrast to the grant templates, the RFRL template did not follow a tick box process. The template contained some standard wording, advice on how to utilise the standard wording, and links to additional caseworking guidance.

8.113 Staff told inspectors that the templates were an example of a positive change, helpful, and easy to understand, with DMs confirming that they saved time. Senior managers said that the templates had made the decision-making process more straightforward and that, when using the RFRL template, it should take a DM no more than six hours to write a refusal decision.

Children’s case progression, workflow, and administration

8.114 Data provided for the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework showed that there were 7,361 unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children awaiting an initial decision in May 2021. The report contained a recommendation: “Prioritise claims for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), as per the Immigration Rules.”¹²⁸

8.115 The Home Office accepted this recommendation and stated:

“In May 2021 – and since the ICIBI inspection – the department established two dedicated case working Hubs for deciding children’s asylum claims. One in Solihull (with responsibility for Local Authorities in the Midlands, East of England and the South West of England), and one in Liverpool (with responsibility for Local Authorities in the North of England, Croydon and Kent). Both sites share responsibility for London and South East England Local Authorities.”¹²⁹

8.116 In 2022, Asylum Casework was split into three separate commands, of which Asylum Children’s and Secondary Casework (ACSC) was one. Within ACSC, the two hubs referenced above processed children’s asylum claims.

8.117 As of 27 October 2023, Home Office data showed that there were 8,830 UAS children in the total initial decision WIP, of which 1,388 were legacy claims and 7,442 flow claims.¹³⁰ A manager in ACSC told inspectors that there were around 1,000 claims in an Illegal Migration Act (IMA) WIP, in addition to the flow WIP, where the claim had been submitted after 20 July 2023. These claims had been “left in a separate pot” as they did “not know what [they were] doing with those yet”. This meant that another backlog was being created, while the casework team awaited a policy steer following the outcome of the Supreme Court ruling on the legality of the Rwanda process.

Children’s and Secondary Case Progression Unit

8.118 The function of the Children’s and Secondary Case Progression Unit (CSCPU) was to prepare claims and remove barriers to enable them to progress to interview or decision stage and be allocated to a DMU in ACSC. Once a claim was barrier free, it was PRAG-rated green, and considered ‘workable’. Inspectors heard that the original intention was for this team to provide a central case progression function for all asylum claimants, including adults, but this changed when Asylum Operations was restructured in July 2023.

8.119 The CSCPU therefore remained a “bespoke function” for ACSC. It was also responsible for conducting Operating Mandate (Op Mandate) checks and sending chaser requests for UAS children who had not submitted a statement of evidence form (SEF), which was required to progress claims that were not eligible for streamlined asylum processing (SAP).¹³¹

128 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 12.

129 Home Office, ‘The Home Office response to the ICIBI’s report: An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 to May 2021’.

130 This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

131 Operating Mandate checks are minimum mandatory identity and security checks that should be carried out on all claimants. The given identity and aliases (declared or revealed from the biometric checks) must be checked against relevant Home Office systems and police criminality databases.

8.120 Once an asylum claim for a UAS child was received by the National Asylum Intake Unit, there was a dedicated ‘workgroup’ within Atlas that all children’s claims were routed to for CSCPU to progress. Managers in ACSC and CSCPU highlighted the value of having this dedicated case progression function. One manager said: “Having case progression means all those chewy cases can be taken out and keeps decision making streamlined.”

Barriers in children’s casework

8.121 Staff in CSCPU told inspectors that the biggest barriers to progressing claims were a SEF not being provided, and disputed age assessments. Inspectors asked the Home Office for a breakdown of the most common barriers preventing initial asylum decisions being made. On 22 May 2023, it provided a spreadsheet that contained 15,592 records. Of these, 1,919 were children’s cases, and 232 were ‘post-interview’, broken down by barrier and PRAG rating. The most common barriers, according to this spreadsheet, are shown in figure 27.

Figure 27: Top ten primary barriers in children’s claims as of 22 May 2023

| Barrier type | PRAG rating | | | | Total |
|---------------------------|-------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| | Purple | Red | Amber | Green | |
| Further representations | 11 | 109 | 718 | 4 | 842 |
| Minors | 16 | 52 | 325 | 3 | 396 |
| Missing child | 239 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 246 |
| Other (see notes) | 21 | 29 | 88 | 1 | 139 |
| Impending prosecution | 9 | 86 | 8 | 1 | 104 |
| Op Mandate checks | 9 | 18 | 6 | 2 | 35 |
| Criminal casework | 11 | 16 | 3 | | 30 |
| Absconder | 20 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 24 |
| Referral – age assessment | | 14 | 4 | | 18 |
| Linked case | | 5 | 7 | | 12 |
| Total | 336 | 333 | 1,164 | 13 | 1,846 |

8.122 The spreadsheet contained a column to record the review date of the PRAG rating and in 19 cases this had been recorded as ‘00/01/1900’, giving rise to a risk that these cases would not be returned to in a timely fashion. The data also contained 991 cases in which the ‘next review date’ was recorded as being before the current PRAG review date.

Statement of evidence form

8.123 When a statement of evidence form (SEF) was sent to a claimant, they had a deadline of 60 days in which to return it. If it had not been returned within this time, a Case Progression Officer sent a ‘chaser’ to prompt the claimant or legal representative to provide it. Case Progression Officers told inspectors that there were often delays in legal representatives returning SEFs, which added delays to the claim being progressed.

8.124 Inspectors requested data on all claims in the ACSC WIP to include the date on which SEFs were received by the Home Office from claimants. The Home Office was unable to provide this data,

saying “data was not available” in this field, so it was not possible to calculate the time taken to make a decision following receipt of the SEF.

- 8.125** In September 2023, managers in ACSC told inspectors that work was under way in the ACSC transformation team to redesign and simplify the SEF, after feedback from DMs that it was often returned unsigned, did not include a letter of authority, or was difficult to read because it had been handwritten. These issues added delays, as the DM had to go back to the legal representative to request the missing information.
- 8.126** On 2 November 2023, the ACSC Secretariat wrote to stakeholders via the Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association (ILPA) to advise that the work on the SEF, which had been “undertaken to address the lack of sufficiently completed SEFs being returned to the Home Office and the quality of information gathered”, was complete. The letter said that the Home Office would host an information session on the “Streamlined SEF” to “talk through the SEF and answer any questions [ILPA] members/providers might have”.

Impact of delays on claimants

- 8.127** Inspectors held focus groups with those who had lived experience of the asylum process. The impact of delays on claimants is well documented and has been reported in the media and by other organisations.¹³² Those with lived experience told inspectors of the negative impact delays to the processing of their asylum claims had on their mental health. They said they were unable to move on with their lives and described how unsettling it was to be “left in limbo”.
- 8.128** Some claimants told inspectors that the length of time they had to wait to receive a decision was inconsistent for claimants with similar circumstances. Inspectors heard that processes like streamlined asylum processing (SAP), where cases were cohorted by nationality, made claimants feel that they were not individuals. This was summed up by a claimant who told inspectors:
- “A friend who had the same case as me was decided in six months and I am still waiting. I’m not sure what the delay is. I think that they look at 1,000 to 2,000 Afghan people, and I don’t feel like an individual.”
- 8.129** The detrimental impact on a claimant’s health from delays and being left in limbo was summarised by a claimant who said:
- “The backlog shouldn’t exist; it’s ridiculous that it takes so long because it messes with your mental wellbeing; it’s not right, it messes you up. I want my kids around me, and I can’t do that because I don’t know my status.... Sometimes I want to think about even hurting myself and question why I’m even here.”
- 8.130** A senior manager in Asylum Operations told inspectors that they were aware of the negative impacts of lengthy delays to a claimant’s case. They said that ‘face behind the case’ training was mandatory, and that making the right decision quickly and clearly was a way of demonstrating that the face behind the case ethos was followed. More information on ‘face behind the case’ can be found in chapter 10.

132 Refugee Council, ‘Living in Limbo- A decade of delays in the UK Asylum system – July 2021’ (published July 2021). <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/living-in-limbo-a-decade-of-delays-in-the-uk-asylum-system-july-2021/>

Inadmissibility

- 8.131** Although the inadmissibility process did not fall within the remit of Asylum Operations, it had a direct impact on how and when a claimant’s case entered Asylum Operations’ work in progress (WIP). The Third Country Unit (TCU), a team within the National Removals Command of Immigration Enforcement, had responsibility for making all inadmissibility decisions on safe third country grounds.
- 8.132** On 31 December 2020, new Immigration Rules came into effect at the end of the transition period following the UK’s exit from the European Union. This meant that the Home Office was no longer able to request the transfer of claimants to EU member states under the Dublin III Regulations.^{133,134} The Immigration Rules and processes meant that Home Office staff had to consider whether a claimant’s case could be considered as ‘inadmissible’. The new provisions permitted the removal of a claimant to “any safe third country that will take them (not just the specific country or countries through which they travelled or have a connection)”, providing they met the requirements of Immigration Rules 345A and 345B.¹³⁵
- 8.133** During the ICIBI’s inspection of asylum casework in 2021, a senior manager told inspectors that the only formal returns agreement in place was with Ireland and, while “discussions with several EU countries ... particularly with France, Switzerland, and Ireland” were ongoing, as of January 2021 no claimants had been returned under the inadmissibility provisions.¹³⁶
- 8.134** The effectiveness of the inadmissibility process in place during the 2021 inspection was summarised in the report:
- “None of those whose cases have been referred to TCU for inadmissible consideration have been removed as at June 2021. In the absence of return agreements, the process as is will likely add a further six months’ delay to all asylum claims and is simply acting as a barrier to case progression.”¹³⁷
- 8.135** Part 2 of Schedule 3 of the 2004 Act contains a list of 31 European countries considered as ‘listed safe countries’ to which the Home Office considers there is a lawful basis on which to return a non-EU national asylum claimant in the absence of the Dublin Regulations. At the time of this inspection there were returns and readmission agreements in place with four of these 31 countries.^{138,139}
- 8.136** Inspectors analysed data for all claims referred for assessment under the inadmissibility rules between 28 June 2022 and 28 June 2023.^{140,141,142} Figure 28 shows that, over this period, 28,560 main applicant claimants were referred to the TCU for consideration of inadmissibility action.¹⁴³

133 Home Office, ‘Guidance: Inadmissibility: third country cases’ (published 31 December 2020). <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20210105220451/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inadmissibility-third-country-cases>

134 GOV.UK, ‘Dublin III Regulation: caseworker guidance’ (published 2 November 2017, last updated 14 August 2020). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dublin-iii-regulation>

135 GOV.UK, ‘Immigration Rules archive: 31 December 2020 to 30 January 2021’ (published 1 February 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-rules-archive-31-december-2020-to-30-january-2021>

136 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework (August 2020 – May 2021).

137 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework (August 2020 – May 2021).

138 Returns agreements were in place with Bulgaria, Ireland, Romania, and Switzerland.

139 Legislation.gov.uk, ‘Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004, Schedule 3

Removal of Asylum Seeker to Safe Country’ (accessed 9 November 2023). <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/19/schedule/3>

140 This data was provided to inspectors by the Home Office’s Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit.

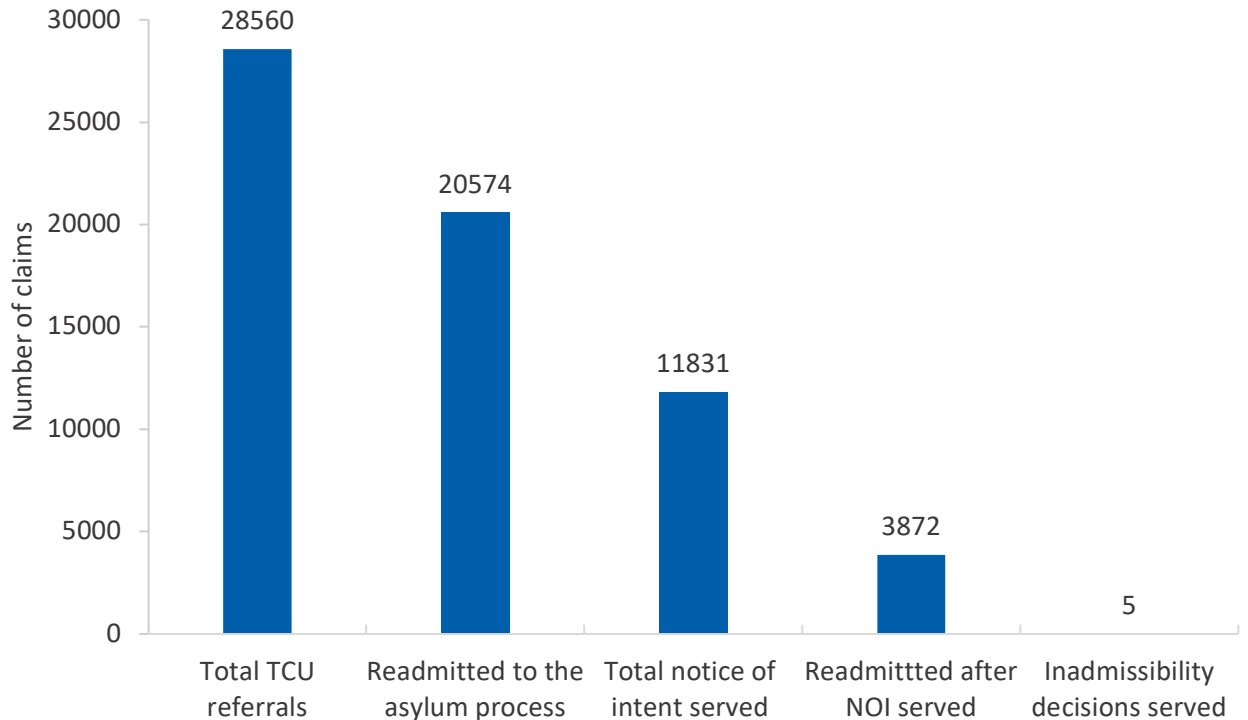
141 The Home Office was unable to comply with the inspectors’ request to break this data down by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, vulnerability markers, protected characteristics, legal representation, size of family, and date of removal if effected.

142 Inspectors requested an update of this data to cover 28 June 2022 to 27 October 2023; however, the Home Office provided inspectors with data for asylum applications raised between 28 June 2022 and 2 July 2022.

143 When ‘other dependants’, ‘dependant under 18’, and ‘spouse’ are included, this figure rises to 32,495.

Of that number, 11,831 had been issued with a notice of intent, and five cases had received an inadmissibility decision.¹⁴⁴

Figure 28: Outcomes of claims considered under the inadmissibility rules between 28 June 2022 and 28 June 2023¹⁴⁵



8.137 Home Office guidance on inadmissibility for caseworkers states:

“There are no rigid timescales within which third countries must agree to admit a person before removal. However, the inadmissibility process must not create a lengthy ‘limbo’ position, where a pending decision or delays in removal after a decision mean that a claimant cannot advance their protection claim either in the UK or in a safe third country.

“If, taking into account all the circumstances, it is not possible to make an inadmissibility decision or effect removal following an inadmissibility decision within a reasonable period, inadmissibility action must be discontinued, and the person’s claim must be admitted to the asylum process for substantive consideration.”

8.138 The guidance stated that there was a “general guideline” that in most cases a safe third country would agree to admit a person within six months of an asylum claim. The guidance also stated that the “reasonable timescale” would be shorter than six months in some cases where there were no “realistic prospects of effecting removal within a reasonable timescale”, including where there was a very low prospect of removal as the country of removal refused to engage in readmission discussions.

8.139 Although the general reasonable timescale was six months, the guidelines stated that there could be occasions when the reasonable timescale was more than six months. These included when there had been a delay in a claimant disclosing a connection to “a safe third country”,

¹⁴⁴ The notice is not a formal decision. It is an information letter to inform a claimant of how their protection claim is being managed, inviting representations regarding inadmissibility and the country or countries of possible return.

¹⁴⁵ These figures are for main applicants only and do not include dependants.

when third countries had actively engaged with the Home Office in readmitting a person, but “where through no fault of the Home Office, progress towards agreement has been delayed”, or when a claimant was referred to the National Referral Mechanism.¹⁴⁶

- 8.140** Of the 28,560 main applicants referred to TCU for consideration under the inadmissibility process, 72.04% (20,574) were subsequently readmitted to the asylum process. This included 16,702 claimants who had not been served with a notice of intent and were readmitted to the asylum process. On average, these claimants had to wait 154 days before readmission to the asylum process, including 4,711 (28.20%) claimants who waited over six months and 23 who waited over a year. The time spent in the inadmissibility process simply added to the length of time a claimant had to wait to be interviewed and to receive a decision on their application, with no apparent benefit to either the claimant or Asylum Operations. It also prolonged the period for which they were in receipt of asylum support.
- 8.141** Inspectors assessed Home Office data that showed there were 7,959 cases where a notice of intent had been served on a claimant and an inadmissibility decision had not been made. Inspectors were told by TCU managers that there were between 6,000 and 7,500 cases in the inadmissibility WIP that had been considered under the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) with Rwanda. Inspectors were told that claims being considered under the MEDP were on hold until the outcome of the Supreme Court ruling on the legality of the Rwanda process. This meant that a notice of intent was not sent to these claimants, meaning that they were unlikely to know that their claim was in the inadmissibility assessment WIP rather than in the Asylum Operations WIP.¹⁴⁷ It was not clear what would happen to these cases as a result of the Supreme Court’s decision of 15 November 2023 that found the Secretary of State’s policy unlawful.¹⁴⁸
- 8.142** The Home Office told inspectors that it was unable to provide the date of removal for claimants whose removal had been effected following consideration under the inadmissibility rules between 28 June 2022 and 27 October 2023. Home Office data on immigration system statistics was published on 23 November 2023.¹⁴⁹ This did not contain any raw or detailed data sets for claims considered under the inadmissibility rules. The data provided figures that amalgamated both main applicants and dependants. It showed that, between 1 January 2021 and 30 September 2023, 23 claimants, or 0.03% of the 69,645 people considered under inadmissibility grounds, had been removed under the process. Since the introduction of the NABA in June 2022, only two claimants (0.002%) had been removed.¹⁵⁰
- 8.143** A senior manager in TCU told inspectors that, in the 18 months prior to September 2023, removals numbered in the “very low double digits”, adding that it was not a productive route in terms of removals. They also told inspectors that the focus on the MEDP with Rwanda had meant that TCU was unable to dedicate resources to more removable cases.

146 GOV.UK, ‘Inadmissibility – third country cases: caseworker guidance’ (published 8 October 2018, last updated 28 June 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inadmissibility-third-country-cases>

147 The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “All those currently in scope for MEDP have been served with a Notice of Intent explaining that their claim is to be considered for inadmissibility.”

148 British and Irish Legal Information Institute, [2023] UKSC 42 (published 15 November 2023). <http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKSC/2023/42.html>

149 GOV.UK, ‘Asylum and resettlement summary tables, year ending September 2023’, tab 9a and 9b (published 23 November 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#asylum-and-resettlement>

150 The Home Office data on immigration system statistics included a note which stated: “‘Removals’ includes all enforced removals of those entering the inadmissibility process. Where an enforced removal is linked to criminality, these have been excluded as the removal is not on the grounds of inadmissibility. However, there may still be a small number of enforced removals included in the figures which are for reasons other than inadmissibility.”

- 8.144** On 2 November 2023 the Home Office published its impact assessment of the Nationality and Borders Act, which was dated 22 July 2021.¹⁵¹ The assessment used a baseline estimate that 11,200 claimants would enter the third country returns, or ‘inadmissible’, system each year, and that 300 claimants per year would be returned – an anticipated return rate of 2.67%. These estimates proved to be inaccurate. Home Office data on immigration system statistics for 2022 showed that 35,161 claimants were identified for consideration on inadmissibility grounds and 12 claimants were removed, an actual return rate of 0.03%.¹⁵²
- 8.145** A senior manager in Asylum Operations told inspectors that the inadmissibility ‘pot’ was not absolute, and claims could be removed from the inadmissibility WIP to go through an expedited grant or removal process if required. The manager cited an example of when, following the joint communiqué between the British and Albanian governments, some Albanian nationals were removed from the inadmissibility WIP, and their claims were expedited so that they could be removed to Albania.¹⁵³
- 8.146** In response to the ICIBI’s call for evidence for this inspection, stakeholders raised concerns about the inadmissibility process. They told inspectors that the Home Office had effectively added two additional steps to the asylum process – first by assessing a claimant for inadmissibility, and then trying to find a safe country to send an inadmissible claimant to. Some stakeholders wanted the government to end the inadmissibility process completely.
- 8.147** Stakeholders highlighted the additional burden on legal representatives and non-governmental organisations of having to respond to a notice of intent, saying that the process “uses up the limited resources of advisers and the Home Office alike, for no practical benefit to anyone”.

151 GOV.UK, ‘Nationality and Borders Bill : economic impact assessment’ (published 2 November 2023). https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nationality-and-borders-bill-economic-impact-assessment?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-topic&utm_source=efcdeb6e-9f45-498d-801d-45ad686767e7&utm_content=immediately

152 Home Office data on immigration system statistics includes dependants.

153 GOV.UK, ‘UK-Albania Joint Communiqué: Enhancing bilateral Cooperation in areas of common interest’ (published 13 December 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-albania-joint-communique-enhancing-bilateral-cooperation-in-areas-of-common-interest/uk-albania-joint-communique-enhancing-bilateral-cooperation-in-areas-of-common-interest>

9. Inspection findings: Performance management

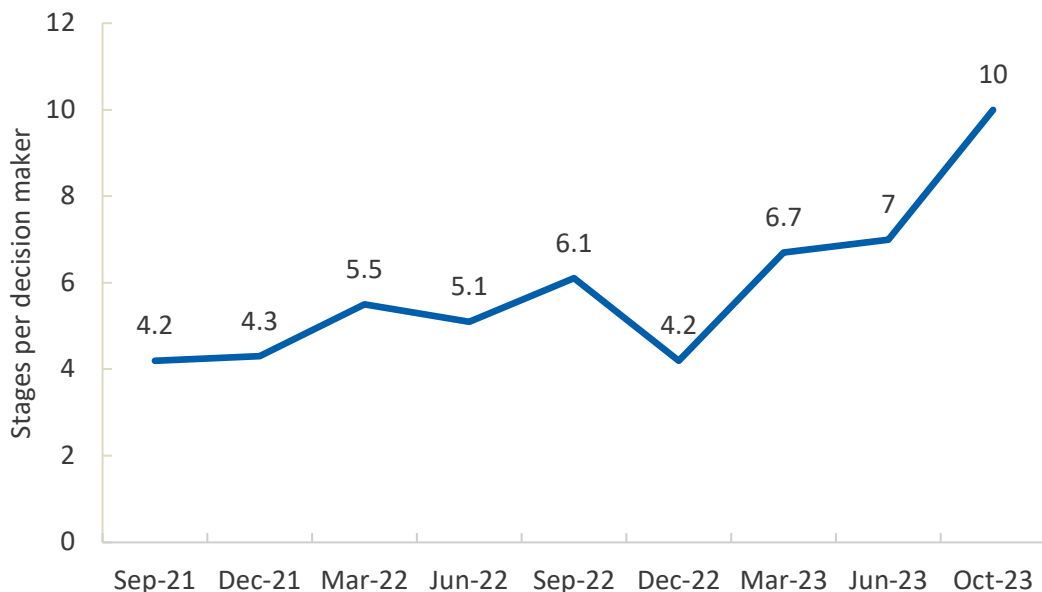
9.1 The Independent Chief Inspectorate of Borders and Immigration’s (ICIBI’s) 2021 inspection of asylum casework reported that asylum decision makers (DMs) believed that their performance targets were unachievable.¹⁵⁴ Inspectors sought to understand whether this was still the case during the current inspection through the use of a staff survey, interviews, and focus groups.

Targets

Productivity

9.2 One of the commitments made by the Prime Minister in his statement on illegal migration in December 2022 was to triple the productivity of DMs by the end of 2023.¹⁵⁵ DMs’ productivity since September 2021 is shown in figure 29.¹⁵⁶

Figure 29: Productivity (stages completed per caseworker per month) September 2021 to October 2023



9.3 The Prime Minister’s commitment meant productivity needed to increase to 12 stages per DM per month by the end of 2023. A stage, also known as an event or an individual contribution, can be either a completed asylum decision or an asylum interview. As seen in figure 29, productivity was at 4.2 in September 2021 and had increased to 6.1 by September 2022, before

154 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI), ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’ (published 18 November 2021), p. 53. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

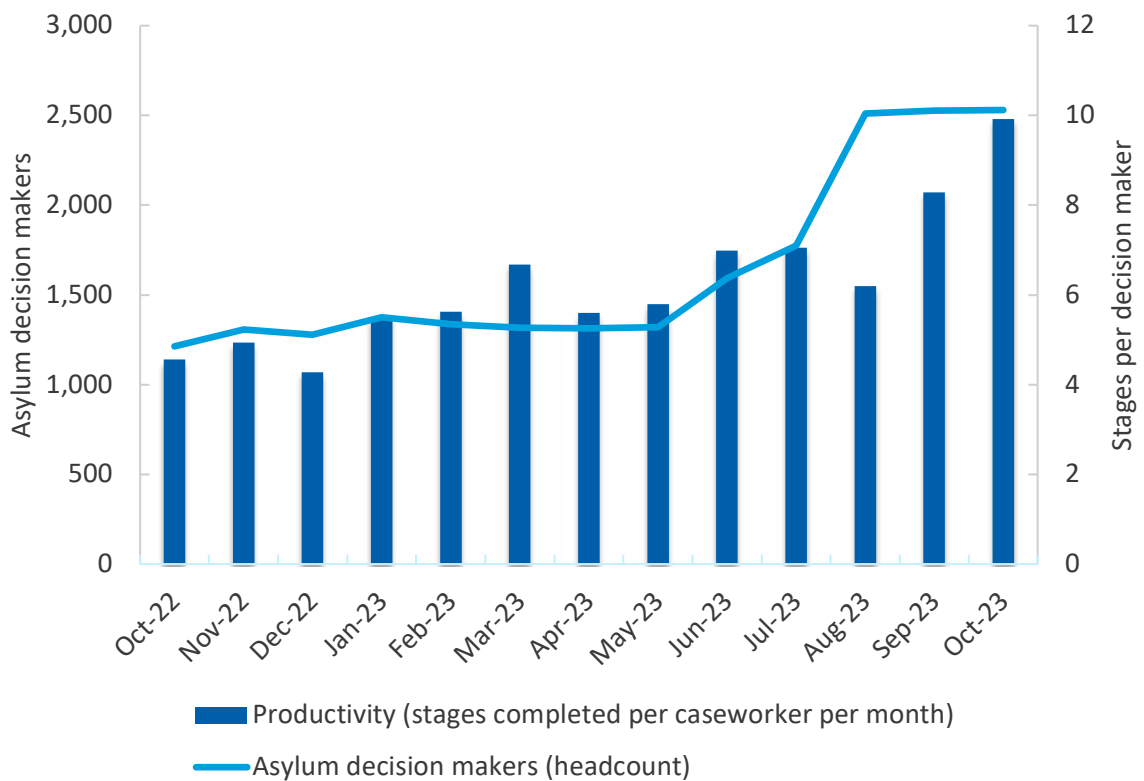
155 Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM statement on illegal migration: 13 December 2022’ (published 13 December 2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-illegal-migration-13-december-2022>

156 Data taken from the Home Office’s ‘Immigration and protection data: Q2 2023’ (published 24 August 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-and-protection-data-q2-2023>

dropping back down to 4.2 in December 2022. As of October 2023, the productivity figure had reached ten stages per DM per month.¹⁵⁷

9.4 Figure 30 compares asylum DM numbers with productivity over the year to October 2023. The two measures broadly tracked each other until September 2023. Significant numbers of new DMs were not in place until June 2023. Productivity barely increased in July and fell in August, likely due to the number of new DMs in post who needed assistance and guidance from more experienced DMs. The target of recruiting 2,500 DMs by September 2023 was achieved, after which productivity levels were at their highest since the Prime Minister’s statement in December 2022.

Figure 30: Asylum decision maker headcount and productivity, October 2022 to October 2023



9.5 As explained in chapter 7, Asylum Operations introduced new initiatives to process decisions more quickly, such as the streamlined asylum process (SAP) in October 2022 and the concise refusal template in June 2023. Asylum Operations also introduced the concise interview project (CIP), as well as a two-hour substantive asylum interview target, and, even though overall productivity had increased, at the time of drafting this report (November 2023), productivity had still not reached the target of 12 stages per DM per month.

Decision makers’ individual contributions

9.6 Prior to March 2023, Asylum Operations used a team-based approach to measure the performance of decision-making units (DMUs), and DMUs were split into teams of DMs. Each team had an event target they needed to achieve in a period, but this meant that there was no expectation on individual DMs to meet a specific target. In turn, this meant that some DMs were contributing more than others. This prompted a change in March 2023, when the

¹⁵⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘PM statement on illegal migration: 13 December 2022’.

decision was made to revert to the previous approach of individual contributions. Home Office documents communicating the change to managers stated that this approach would allow for greater accountability and would enable line managers to identify where individuals needed more support, and act on both good and poor individual performance.

- 9.7** Asylum Operations introduced the new individual contribution framework, which set out how performance would be measured. The framework acknowledged that the administrative officer role targets would vary significantly due to the nature of the different roles within the administrative function. It noted that case progression administrative officers should have a set number of claims to triage in a four-week period, which was to be agreed by their Grade 7.
- 9.8** For the Executive Officer (EO) DM role, the framework noted that their four-week contribution target would “vary with the nature of cases being worked” and amendments to increase or decrease the target could be agreed with line managers and Grade 7s. It also noted that a “straightforward interview” should take no longer than two hours and any interview extending beyond this time would need senior caseworker (SCW) agreement.
- 9.9** The only other role within the framework with a set contribution target was the technical specialist (tech spec) role. Tech specs were expected to complete a specific amount (the number was not disclosed) of second pair of eyes (SPoE) checks each week.
- 9.10** An individual contribution for a DM could be achieved by completing either an asylum decision or a substantive asylum interview. Due to the ‘just in time’ training format, which is explained in chapter 6 of this report, some DMs were trained to only make decisions or to only conduct interviews, meaning they could only contribute by completing one or other of these two activities.
- 9.11** Although individual contributions were recorded over a four-weekly period in the framework, DMs were given a target for the number of individual contributions they were expected to complete each week, which could be amended depending on their experience and whether they had been trained to complete interviews, decisions, or both.
- 9.12** Inspectors analysed the spreadsheet that was used to calculate the number of interviews, decisions, and total contributions each DM was expected to complete. The number of expected decisions or interviews was calculated by dividing the total number of cases allocated to the DMU by the number of DMs. This figure was then divided by the number of weeks the DMU had been given to complete the decisions or interviews. Both figures were then added to provide a total weekly contribution target for each DM.
- 9.13** Newton¹⁵⁸ consultants told inspectors they had suggested an alternative approach for measuring productivity that would have consisted of working to a set number of hours based on cohort complexity rather than individual contributions. One said:

“What I have never understood is why each case did not have, based on its cohort and other info based on that case, a standard time value attached to it. Then a DMU could say on a case-by-case basis, they were easy, and the standard time attached was 400 hours. And another DMU could say we had done 100 cases, but the time value was higher. Then you put everything in terms of DM hours. All the metrics, trajectories get way easier, and you do not need a complicated model.”

158 For information on Newton see: <https://www.newtoneurope.com/>

- 9.14** However, the consultants told inspectors that this advice was not heeded due to the political imperative for productivity to be measured by decision outcomes and individual contributions, rather than the method they had suggested.
- 9.15** The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that DMs did not believe their targets were fair or achievable.¹⁵⁹ In inspection survey responses for the current inspection, 59% of DMs reported that their individual contributions were too high. This was reiterated by DMs, team leaders (TLs), and tech specs during interviews with inspectors. One DM said that only “a couple [of DMs] had met it [their target] once”. DMs’ responses to the survey also stated that the targets did not account for the varying levels of complexity in asylum claims. One DM explained:
- “The sheer complexity of each case – particularly in legacy – makes the whole idea of having individual contributions as a quantifiable metric unworkable. The scale and nature of asylum cases vary massively.”
- 9.16** Other responses highlighted factors outside a DM’s control that affected their ability to achieve their targets, such as the cancellation of an interview that a DM had spent time preparing for. Inspectors heard that barriers could be a factor in a decision not being completed, with one of the main barriers being the Atlas caseworking system. As described in chapter 8, DMs described Atlas as the “biggest barrier” to making decisions, which impacted their ability to achieve their individual contribution target. Other issues such as claimants or interpreters either being late for interviews or not turning up at all, and problems with the availability of interview rooms, were also cited as factors.
- 9.17** Inspectors spoke to staff working on the Operation Amesa (Op AMESA) cohort, in which the five nationalities with the highest grant rates were put through streamlined asylum processing (SAP). They told inspectors that their individual contributions were achievable if they had the “the right cases and enough cases”. Administrative officer grade DMs in the Op AMESA teams explained that there were issues with workflow that had resulted in a lack of cases being allocated to them. This then had an adverse effect on them being able to hit their individual contribution of seven cases per day.
- 9.18** An Administrative Officer (AO) DM also explained that the type of claim they received was a factor in being able to achieve their individual contribution:
- “Some days it is easy as you can do 12 to 13 cases, mainly if they were Eritrean. If you get Yemen cases, it was difficult to do more than three.”
- 9.19** They also said that, unlike other asylum casework cohorts, they did not need to serve a decision to achieve their individual contribution, they only needed to work on a claim. This meant that if an AO DM worked on seven claims that all had a barrier to serving the decision, they counted towards their individual contribution.
- 9.20** Staff in the Asylum Central Communications Hub also said that their individual targets were not consistently achievable. An administrative officer told inspectors that they had a target of dealing with four emails every hour, which sounded achievable, but if they received an email that required six actions to be carried out, it became more difficult. A manager told inspectors

159 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 59.

that some administrative officers were cherry-picking cases and that this had been “driven by unachievable targets”.¹⁶⁰

Decision-making unit targets

- 9.21** DMUs also had specific decision targets that they were required to meet each month. DMs told inspectors that these were factored into the individual contribution targets, in which DMs were told how many of their individual contributions had to be an asylum decision. The number of decisions expected to be completed by a DMU was based on how many fully effective DMs there were, and the experience level of DMs who were not yet fully effective. There would be a lower decision outcome expectation for less experienced DMs.
- 9.22** A Newton consultant told inspectors that they and the Chief Caseworker Team were responsible for the calculation of DMU targets. During interviews, DMs and managers told inspectors that there had been periods during which they had not had enough asylum claims to ‘work’, despite being aware the WIP still contained a high volume of claims. The consultant said this could have been a result of individual trajectories for DMUs (which informed allocations) being calculated based on the ‘adjusted full-time-equivalents (FTE)’ of staff in the DMU. Adjusted FTEs were based on the assumption that a new DM would be 20% effective after four weeks, with their level of effectiveness increasing over time until they were considered ‘fully effective’ after seven months in the role. Using this logic, five DMs at 20% effectiveness equated to one FTE DM. DMUs with more new staff could therefore have been allocated fewer cases to work on, based on their adjusted FTE, when in fact there were more members of staff who all needed work.
- 9.23** After the DMU target was set, it was communicated to individual DMs, who were given a decision target to achieve as part of their individual contribution target. For example, if Mersey DMs had an individual contribution target of 5.81, they could be told they needed to make at least four decisions to ensure that the DMU met its decision target. In September 2023, managers at the three DMUs visited by inspectors said that none of the DMUs was hitting their target. Performance in Mersey and Glasgow in September 2023 had been particularly poor due to issues with decision barriers, refusal-heavy cohorts, and working to the incorrect number of FTE DMs. One senior manager told inspectors:
- “The targets were not dynamic. We were given a spreadsheet with expectations against staff numbers but the operation changes, people go off sick or end up helping out with something else for the day, but still the target was attributed to the planned FTE at that time.”
- 9.24** DMU staff, including senior managers, told inspectors that they did not believe DMU targets were appropriately amended when they changed cohorts. An example was given of when a DMU moved from processing a high grant-rate cohort to a high refusal-rate cohort, but the individual contribution targets were not amended appropriately to reflect the change.
- 9.25** Newton consultants said that targets should have been amended based on cohort complexity, trajectories required to clear the legacy backlog, and staff FTE figures. However, communication of this approach was poor from staff in Asylum Operations and did not reflect the flexibility permitted, which meant that their suggested message for DMs to work smarter and not harder was lost and did not filter down to them.

¹⁶⁰ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: “Actions emanating from any one email are taken into account when measuring performance. Non-standard tasks are also accounted for.”

- 9.26** Some senior managers told inspectors that they did not believe DMU targets were amended appropriately, with one telling inspectors that “theoretically and operationally, they do not really work”. Another told inspectors that they were not happy with the “reasonings” behind the targets and explained that “some of the detailing was not known”.

Two-hour interview slots

- 9.27** An initiative to complete ‘straightforward’ substantive asylum interviews in two hours was introduced in March 2023, with the aim of increasing efficiency and making interviews more focused. The individual contribution framework stated that the two-hour time limit related to ‘straightforward interviews’, yet asylum staff told inspectors in September 2023 that it applied to all substantive interviews. There were mixed views on the two-hour interview time limit, with some senior staff telling inspectors that it should be achievable in most cases, while most other staff said they did not believe the two-hour time limit was consistently achievable.
- 9.28** DMs, TLs, and tech specs were critical of the time limit. They said there were factors outside a DM’s control that could delay an interview, such as the claimant or interpreter arriving late. Due to the lack of flexibility around the two-hour time limit, the time remaining in which to conduct the interview could be reduced.
- 9.29** In their responses to the inspection survey, DMs said that two hours was not enough time to build rapport with the claimant while also trying to explore the details of their claim. One said they felt like they were being rushed, which was “pushing DMs over the edge”. There was similar feedback from onsite interviews, during which most DMs, tech specs, and TLs shared the same opinion. When asked about the two-hour time limit, a senior manager told inspectors that a blanket two-hour interview time limit was not equitable due to the variety of claim types and individual factors in asylum claims. They felt it was only possible in ‘straightforward’ cases, while another member of staff described the two-hour time limit as the tech specs’ “biggest bug bear”.
- 9.30** When a DM did not obtain the relevant information from a claimant within the allotted interview time, a continuation interview could be required, which meant that the claimant would be invited back for a further interview at a later date. This had to be referred to and agreed by a tech spec. Alternatively, the DM could be advised to write to the applicant to ask them to answer any additional questions in writing. Inspectors identified inconsistent approaches to this across different DMUs, with managers in some locations telling DMs that no continuation interviews were allowed under any circumstances, whereas at others they were permitted. Some DMU staff told inspectors that writing out to claimants was not an efficient method of obtaining the information they needed. When a claimant did not have legal representation, it was possible that they would not provide a satisfactory response or any response to a letter from the Home Office, meaning a decision had to be made on limited information. One tech spec told inspectors:

“The interviews have been shocking. They are accepting basic information and they think it is enough, but it is not. The issue is also if you are writing out to the applicant, and if they do not have a legal rep then they might not understand. If they just spent an additional 30 minutes interviewing, it would be done. You had a co-operative applicant in front of you who you could have just asked. It is unfair and unprofessional on the claimant. There is a lot of questions on the write out, they might never reply and then you have to make a decision on the smallest amount of information.”

- 9.31** This was a concern shared by stakeholders who told inspectors that poor-quality decisions were being made based on shortened interviews with limited information. They said they were already seeing a knock-on impact on the number of appeals they were lodging against refusals of applications and felt that conducting poor-quality interviews and making poor-quality decisions would result in an increase in successful appeals.
- 9.32** It was evident that DMs were struggling to complete all interviews within the timescale, with one senior manager telling inspectors that in one week in September, 50% of interviews had lasted two hours but the other 50% had lasted between three and four hours.
- 9.33** During the inspection’s examination of a random sample of claims, 38 of the 120 cases sampled had an interview completed, and only one of them had lasted two hours or less. Of the 38 interviews, 11 had taken place during the period in which the two-hour interview time limit was in place. None of those 11 interviews had lasted two hours or less. Four interviews took more than four hours to complete, two of which took more than five hours.
- 9.34** Even though inspectors spoke to some staff who thought the two-hour time limit was achievable, the majority of feedback was overwhelmingly negative. The feeling was that a blanket two-hour interview time limit did not work due to individual claim complexity and circumstances, as well operational issues outside the DMs’ control.
- 9.35** A senior manager told inspectors that the ‘blanket’ two-hour time limit was dictated by ministers and that the intention from senior managers in Asylum Operations was to allow flexibility. However, interviews that did require more than two hours could not continue due to the number of consecutive interviews that were booked at DMUs, meaning that building in flexibility became increasingly difficult.

Management information and data

- 9.36** The Asylum Transformation programme consisted of around 21 separate projects. Prioritising Asylum Customers’ Experience (PACE) was one of the projects and started in October 2022. The PACE programme aimed to increase productivity in Asylum Operations, and “set up the asylum system for success in 2024 and beyond”. Newton consultants were brought in to support PACE by working with teams across the country to identify where processes could be improved. A strand of PACE was to design tools, products, and new ways of working to deliver enhanced productivity in DMUs to enable operations to deliver against the Prime Minister’s commitment to clearing the legacy backlog.

Enhanced case management tool

- 9.37** The enhanced case management (ECM) performance tool was introduced in May 2023 through the Prioritising Asylum Customer Experience (PACE) programme, with the aim of providing team leaders (TLs) with accurate and up-to-date visibility of their teams’ live cases and performance. The Home Office described ECM as supporting a new way of working that would allow TLs to have improved visibility of DMs’ caseloads, enabling them to effectively manage performance. It also ensured TLs had a sustainable flow of cases for their teams and was a good way to measure performance all in one place.
- 9.38** The tool received some positive feedback, particularly from TLs, who told inspectors that it allowed them to plan their teams’ week more effectively given the visibility they had over their

caseload. One told inspectors that “it monitors how long cases have been with a DM and if we can move barriers along. Everything is in one place”.

- 9.39** One member of a DMU workflow team told inspectors that they were an ‘ECM champion’, a role that included resolving issues that arose with the performance tool, the creation of which inspectors considered a positive step. However, the ‘champion’ told inspectors that technical issues with the tool took up as much as ten hours of their time per week to resolve. Other staff provided similar feedback, with one TL telling inspectors that they liked the tool when it worked but, because it was effectively a spreadsheet, it was temperamental. They said the tool crashed frequently and could easily become corrupted.
- 9.40** DMs told inspectors that they were asked to collate statistics and feed them back to their line managers, who then fed these up the chain of command. DMs were asked to collate statistics twice a day in some DMUs due to the pressure of clearing the backlog and the need to report progress to senior managers and ministers. This consisted of providing an update in the morning on how many decisions they expected to complete in a day, with another update later in the day on how many decisions they had completed. This frustrated DMs as, they told inspectors, in addition to this, they also had to record their statistics in the ECM tool, describing it as “just another thing to fill in” and “extra work and pointless”. Other DMs described the ECM tool as a form of micromangement.
- 9.41** A Newton consultant said that the introduction of ECM was an important accomplishment, as it provided TLs with a level of clarity that they had not previously had. They acknowledged that, if they had more time to develop the system, it could have been more sustainable than a spreadsheet, but the priority had been to quickly establish a functioning tool.

Visibility of management information

- 9.42** Newton consultants played a key role in enhancing the management information (MI) available in Asylum Operations. They created weekly performance packs for senior managers and a fortnightly performance pack for DMU managers, which contained information regarding the work in progress queue (WIP), performance plans, and decision outcomes.
- 9.43** The performance packs were generated using data from InSight, a system used to monitor the performance and statistics of DMs. This system relied on up-to-date data from the Performance Reporting and Analysis Unit (PRAU) in the Home Office, which was updated daily. The PRAU is responsible for the data that is published and used internally by the Home Office. The reports generated by InSight included details such as the number of decisions made and daily key performance indicators (KPIs). InSight also enabled managers to effectively manage attendance, supervise staff on reduced performance targets, and establish an agreed pathway towards achieving full productivity.
- 9.44** Managers in Asylum Operations expressed dissatisfaction with InSight, describing it as “very slow”, “antiquated”, and “always crashing”. Staff members reported having to log in early or on weekends, when there was less traffic on the system, to avoid system issues. This allowed them to record information without the system crashing or running slowly.
- 9.45** Newton consultants were recruited to, among other things, support the business support unit (BSU) and Home Office Analysis and Insight colleagues to improve data visibility, and create and hand over an improved casework performance forecast. Staff across Asylum Operations had mixed views about Newton’s achievements. Some senior managers said that the PACE programme was a valuable source of support in developing case tracking mechanisms, MI,

and reporting. However, others expressed concern that Newton were brought in to develop spreadsheets that had already been considered.

9.46 Newton consultants told inspectors that they had a good relationship with Asylum Transformation programme staff and the BSU. However, they felt that the Home Office lacked a highly responsive digital capability and saw an opportunity for more ambitious initiatives in this area. One Newton consultant said that, given the limited time and resources available as a result of the need to meet the Prime Minister’s December 2023 deadline to clear the legacy backlog, they did their best by creating Excel dashboards, but acknowledged that, with more time and resources, more intelligent tools could have been built.

Confidence in management information

9.47 Inspectors heard concerns about the reliability and accuracy of MI from staff across Asylum Operations. Staff told inspectors they had resorted to manually counting cases to ensure accurate reporting, describing it as a “daily struggle”.

9.48 Some managers referred to the MI system as a “nightmare” and stated that they did not trust the data at face value. One senior manager suggested the need for streamlining the MI and having a single source of the truth to minimise human errors caused by manually inputting into different systems. Another manager described the process of matching local data with data from the PRAU as “laborious”, and expressed concerns about over-checking and over-counting due to the high level of scrutiny Asylum Operations was under to clear the asylum backlog.

9.49 A senior manager said that the ongoing system migration from the old caseworking system (CID) to Atlas caused issues with the flow of data, and that data provision was as robust as possible for the time being.

9.50 The concerns raised by senior managers and staff regarding the quality of MI in Asylum Operations was echoed by a senior manager, who told inspectors that they were only confident in the data if the BSU had confirmed it. Another senior manager praised the BSU for doing a “fantastic job” despite challenging circumstances. However, in comparison with the BSU, the data received from the PRAU was described as inconsistent and unreliable.

9.51 Senior managers highlighted their frustrations over delays in the delivery of MI. Given the importance of reliable MI, the numerous issues with the PRAU data posed a risk of “reputational damage”. They feared that, as the deadline to clear the legacy backlog by the end of December 2023 approached, they would not have a dependable format of data to rely on. Newton consultants also reported frequent delays in receiving data from the PRAU, with more than 50% of reports being late due to the PRAU’s failure to send them on time. To address these delays, consultants created a workaround called the ‘daily sitrep’ to report to senior managers in a timely manner.

9.52 Inspectors made a number of requests for data to the Home Office during this inspection, and each return was delayed. In one return, inspectors identified that a dataset relating to the streamlined asylum process (SAP) contained 44,170 duplicate entries that had not been identified by the PRAU. The dataset was sent to inspectors four times before it contained the correct information. Duplicate entries were also identified by inspectors in datasets on decisions made since 20 June 2022, and in children’s casework data.

9.53 Inspectors found that there was limited data collected on vulnerability markers and certain protected characteristics. As part of the data requests made to the Home Office, inspectors

asked for specific datasets to be broken down by multiple markers, including vulnerability and protected characteristics. The Home Office was unable to provide this data. Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) provided as part of the evidence return stated that the Home Office did not routinely collect data on all protected characteristics, particularly disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Staff in policy roles told inspectors that this made it difficult to monitor or update the EIAs and the impact of specific policies on certain groups.

- 9.54** The Independent Chief Inspector has previously described Home Office data as “inexcusably awful”, and nothing seen during this inspection contradicts this view.

10. Inspection findings: Quality assurance and safeguarding

10.1 The Independent Chief Inspector of Border and Immigration’s (ICIBI’s) 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that the Home Office had two methods of first-line quality assurance: Second Pair of Eyes (SPoE) checks and a 3.5% random sampling target for all asylum decisions. The Home Office used a quality assurance tool called Calibre to quality assess asylum decisions and interviews. At the time of the previous inspection, Asylum Operations was consistently achieving its target of ensuring a random sampling of 3.5% of all asylum decisions. This inspection examined whether the Home Office was still meeting its 3.5% random sample target, and the effectiveness of its quality assurance processes.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance framework

- 10.2** Customer Operations Support Services (COSS) in the Customer Services directorate published a Customer Services Group Assurance Strategy and accompanying Standard Operating Procedures, which set out the strategy for “assuring decision making and operational delivery in Customer Services is of a consistently high quality”. Adherence to this strategy is monitored by the Performance, Assurance, Improvement and Risk (PAIR) team in COSS.
- 10.3** The guidance document sets out the ‘three lines of defence model’ that is used in HM Treasury’s assurance framework guidance and is shown in figure 31 below.

Figure 31: Three lines of defence model

| First-line assurance | Second-line assurance | Third-line assurance |
|---|---|--|
| Assurance provided directly from those responsible for delivering specific objectives or operations | Assurance from those who are independent from delivery, but still within the management chain | Independent, objective assurance of the department’s governance, risk management and control frameworks by Government Internal Audit Agency and the ICIBI ¹⁶¹ |

10.4 The CSG assurance strategy outlines the principles of first line assurance as:

“Service lines are responsible for managing the quality of their decisions and operational outputs. Senior caseworkers (SCW), or equivalents, undertake random sampling of outputs or processes against agreed marking standards. This sampling should be recorded on an approved quality assurance tool and must include an assessment of whether the outcome was correct. The rationale for the assessment must be adequately documented. The

161 Some assurance models depict the ICIBI as providing fourth line assurance.

marking standards encourage staff to seek support and advice in complex cases and apply the use of discretion where relevant based on the ethical decision-making framework.”

- 10.5** Inspectors examined the team-based quality assurance framework, which was introduced in 2019, and outlined the methods used by Asylum Operations to conduct first-line quality assurance checks. The framework was introduced when the team-based approach to targets was being used, and was retained when individual contribution targets were adopted.
- 10.6** Inspectors reviewed the Quality Performance Management Framework (QPMF) that was devised for decision makers in UK Visas and Immigration. It stated:
- “Before the QPMF was rolled out, quality performance was not being managed consistently across the business, resulting in complaints from colleagues of all grades. DMs [decision makers] believed that performance management was arbitrary, and TLs [team leaders] and tech specs [technical specialists] felt that the lack of guidance made the process incredibly difficult.”
- 10.7** As part of the introduction of QPMF, a system called Calibre was used to assess the quality of interviews and decisions by providing a decision quality (DQ) score. The Calibre scores ranged from DQ1 to DQ5. A decision or interview that received a score between DQ1 and DQ3 was considered “sustainable” by Asylum Operations, and a score of either DQ4 or DQ5 was considered “unsustainable”.
- 10.8** The checks included a random 3.5% sample of decisions, supplemented with at least one check per DM every two months. They also included 100% checks¹⁶² on DMs who were not yet signed off as fully competent, and 100% checks on specific types of claims. These last checks were also known as the second pair of eyes (SPoE) process.

Second pair of eyes process

- 10.9** The SPoE process involved a tech spec or a senior case worker (SCW) reviewing a completed decision or interview, issuing a DQ score and providing feedback to the DM.
- 10.10** In the inspection survey, tech specs were asked whether they had the time to complete routine quality assurance checks. The response was evenly balanced, with 42% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they did, and 44% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.
- 10.11** The Home Office provided inspectors with a spreadsheet that set out the claims that required a SPoE. These included Medico-Legal Report (MLR) refusals and refusals for unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children. Decisions written by staff who were on 100% checks also required a SPoE, as they were new or inexperienced. LGBTQI+ and religious cases were recorded on the spreadsheet as requiring reading over the asylum interview and a “light touch SPOE if necessary on a case by case basis”.
- 10.12** Tech specs had responsibility for ‘signing off’ new and inexperienced DMs, which was the process by which a DM was recognised as ‘fully competent’. After a DM was signed off, they no longer required 100% checks and their interviews and decisions were reviewed in line with the mandatory SPoE process and the 3.5% quality assurance checks. This meant DMs could conduct interviews and write and serve decisions without the requirement for them all to be quality assured. Tech specs told inspectors that the sign-off process was less stringent than it

¹⁶² New decision makers require all decisions they make to be checked by a technical specialist, which is referred to as ‘100% checks’.

had been previously, with three decisions needed at a DQ1 or DQ2 compared to the previous requirement of five decisions at DQ1 or DQ2. An SCW told inspectors:

“I think it has never been easier to be signed off because of the pressure to get things done. DMs have to do fewer things to get signed off.”

- 10.13** Tech specs raised concerns that relaxing the sign-off process would have an adverse effect on the quality of interviews and decisions.
- 10.14** In July 2023, another change was made to the SPoE process, with the introduction of the verbal SPoE process to replace the previous paper-based assessment. The new process only related to grants of asylum and consisted of a DM and a tech spec having a verbal discussion and agreement about the decision. The previous SPoE process remained in place for refusals. It was initially proposed that tech specs would fill in a pro forma as a record of the conversation, but this part of the process was removed. This raised concerns that there was no audit trail for these checks and that it removed accountability for the advice provided by tech specs.
- 10.15** Staff told inspectors that the verbal SPoE process had not been implemented as intended. SCWs said they had not seen a SPoE “in a while”, while DMs told inspectors that they were not aware of the process at all. Staff in the children’s hub were positive about the process and told inspectors that it helped to speed up the overall SPoE process.
- 10.16** In responses to the inspection survey, 75% of DMs provided positive feedback on the SPoE process and said it helped them improve the quality of their interviews and decisions.

Quality assurance performance

- 10.17** The Performance, Assurance, Improvement and Risk (PAIR) team produced quality assurance reports (QARs) annually or biannually, with the most recent report, which was published in June 2023, covering the period April 2022 to March 2023. Inspectors saw separate reports that covered legacy adult, flow adult, children, secondary and stateless, and further leave and further submissions. The reports assessed first-line assurance and provided a rating based on findings, as shown in figure 32 below:

Figure 32: PAIR ratings

| PAIR ratings | |
|--------------|--|
| Substantial | <p>Comprehensive first-line assurance fully implemented and embedded, comprehensive systems and processes in place to support performance management.</p> <p>High-quality first-line assurance including rigorous testing, effective analysis of wide-ranging data, improvements prioritised, monitored, and recorded. Second- and third-line recommendations effectively progressed to closure.</p> |
| Moderate | <p>The service line had identified and planned for appropriate first-line assurance but had not fully implemented or embedded all aspects.</p> <p>First-line assurance records and identifies risks and issues, and directs actions to address these, but not all improvement action was completed or monitored. Response to second- and third-line recommendations are positive, but progress towards closure was slow and/or insufficiently evidenced.</p> |

| PAIR ratings | |
|----------------|---|
| Limited | <p>Significant gaps in first-line assurance, or insufficient activity to identify risks. The service line had not implemented the organisational structures, processes, and practices to consistently secure quality outcomes and provide oversight of second- and third-line recommendations.</p> <p>Some first-line assurance is evidenced, but there was insufficient rigour, and or a lack of appropriate data generated to identify risks. Response to second- and third-line recommendations was ineffective.</p> |
| Unsatisfactory | <p>There was no evidence of first-line quality assurance, or there were major gaps and/or concerns around the assurance being undertaken.</p> <p>No first-line assurance had been undertaken and/or there was no compliance with second and third-line recommendations.</p> |

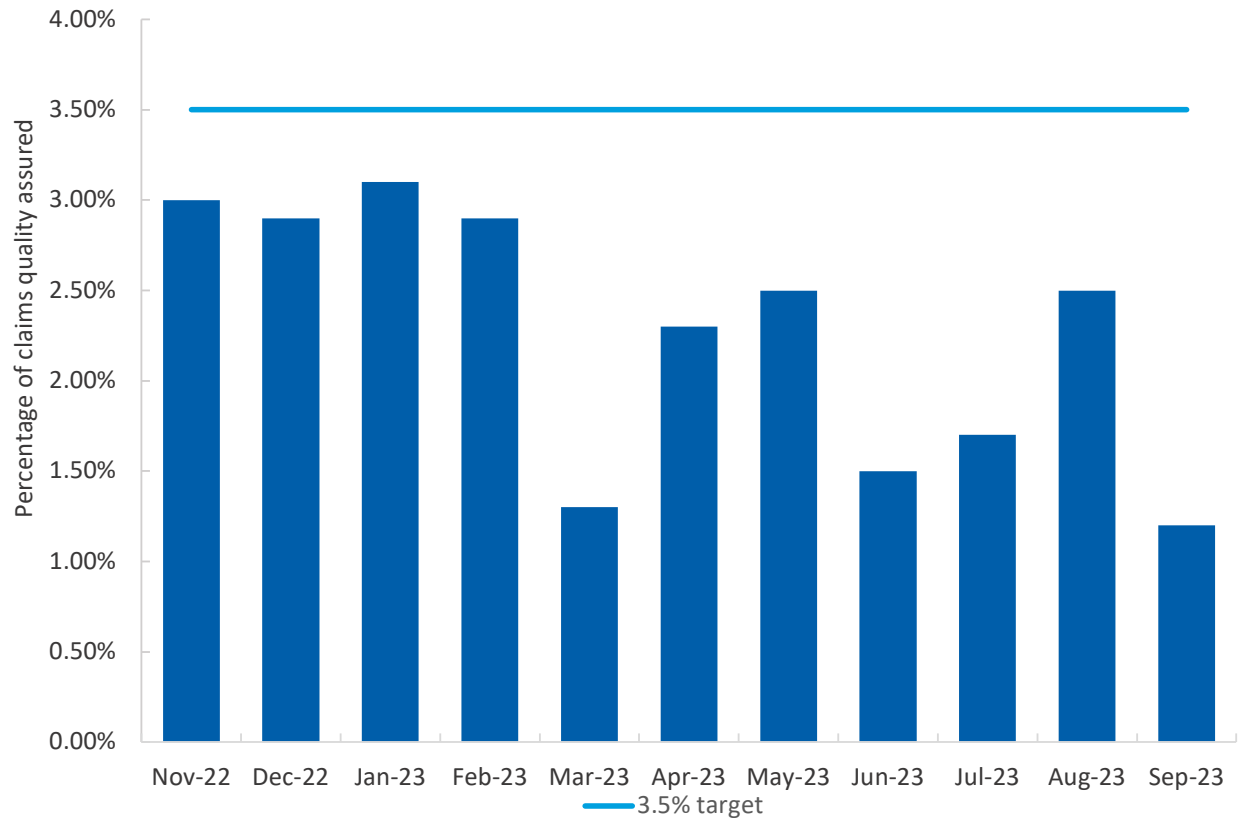
- 10.18** First-line assurance for both legacy and flow adult casework was downgraded from a moderate/substantial rating in the previous PAIR report to a limited rating in the reports produced in June 2023.
- 10.19** The report published in June 2023 detailed two main risks to Asylum Operations, the first of which was the ongoing high levels of attrition of experienced DMs and tech specs. The report stated that this created a risk of incorrect or unsustainable decisions and that first-line assurance would become less reliable. The report also stated that less reliable first-line assurance was likely to undermine the accuracy of the Home Office transparency data that is published quarterly on GOV.UK.¹⁶³ The second risk was the lack of engagement with internal stakeholders such as Appeals, Litigation and Admin Review, and PAIR.
- 10.20** The report cited organisational changes, such as the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) 2022 and the Prime Minister’s statement on illegal migration in December 2022, as having a significant impact and detrimental effect on first-line assurance. The report recognised that senior leadership and operational colleagues had been focused on embedding changes to deliver the commitments made by the Prime Minister. It confirmed that first-line assurance checks were temporarily halted in summer 2022 but did not include the reason or the date they were reinstated. The report also said that monthly sampling rates had continued to be below target and inconsistent across decision-making units (DMUs).
- 10.21** The report went on to state:
- “Delays in establishing new lines of responsibility had resulted in quarterly first line quality assurance reports not being published and local assurance boards not being held. It had also impeded engagement with the PAIR Assurance Team, which had prevented reaching agreement on new sampling targets and discussions on second line requirements for the adults’ SAP process.”
- 10.22** This reflects the turnover of staff in senior roles in Asylum Operations in the first half of 2023 and the impact this had on corporate memory and progress to clear the legacy backlog, as covered in more detail in chapter 11.

163 Home Office, ‘Immigration and protection data: Q2 2023’ (published 24 August 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/migration-transparency-data#uk-visas-and-immigration>

- 10.23** The report also confirmed that 100% checks on new starters had been recorded offline rather than on agreed quality assurance tools, and it was therefore “unclear if or how this data was being collated for the period covered by the report and used to inform improvements”.
- 10.24** The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework made a recommendation to “ensure that trends in SPoE feedback were identified and analysed”.¹⁶⁴ In the most recent update provided by the Home Office regarding progress against this recommendation, it stated:
- “As per the response, each DMU records and analyses SPoE data and we discuss this at monthly quality performance calls. In addition to this, SPoE networks for FGM and MLR cases have been set up to ensure that these case types are being dealt with appropriately and consistently, and that learning can be applied nationally.”
- 10.25** The PAIR report also confirmed that there were 22 outstanding recommendations made by PAIR, the oldest of which was made on 4 February 2016. The report made a further six recommendations, which included maintaining first-line assurance sampling, recommencing local assurance boards, and reviewing assurance policy and guidance.
- 10.26** Despite these recommendations, a senior manager told inspectors in September 2023 that the 3.5% sample check requirement was not being met and that, at that time, the figure stood at 1.67%. Another manager told inspectors that the 3.5% sample checks had been put on hold as they wanted tech specs to concentrate on supporting new DMs to become fully effective. However, tech specs reported feeling uncomfortable with this decision.
- 10.27** Figure 33 shows Asylum Operations monthly performance against the 3.5% quality assurance target since November 2022:

¹⁶⁴ Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’ (published 18 November 2021), p. 12. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

Figure 33: Quality assurance checks on asylum decisions, November 2022 to September 2023



10.28 Asylum Operations failed to meet the 3.5% quality assurance target in any month between November 2022 and September 2023. Inspectors reviewed the ‘UKVI Central Operations Assurance P6 2021 to 2022 Assurance Overview’, dated May 2022, which stated:

“Asylum Operations should consider setting a formal internal target for routine sampling of asylum interviews. This can be considered as part of the roll out of the new sampling methodology to Asylum Operations.”

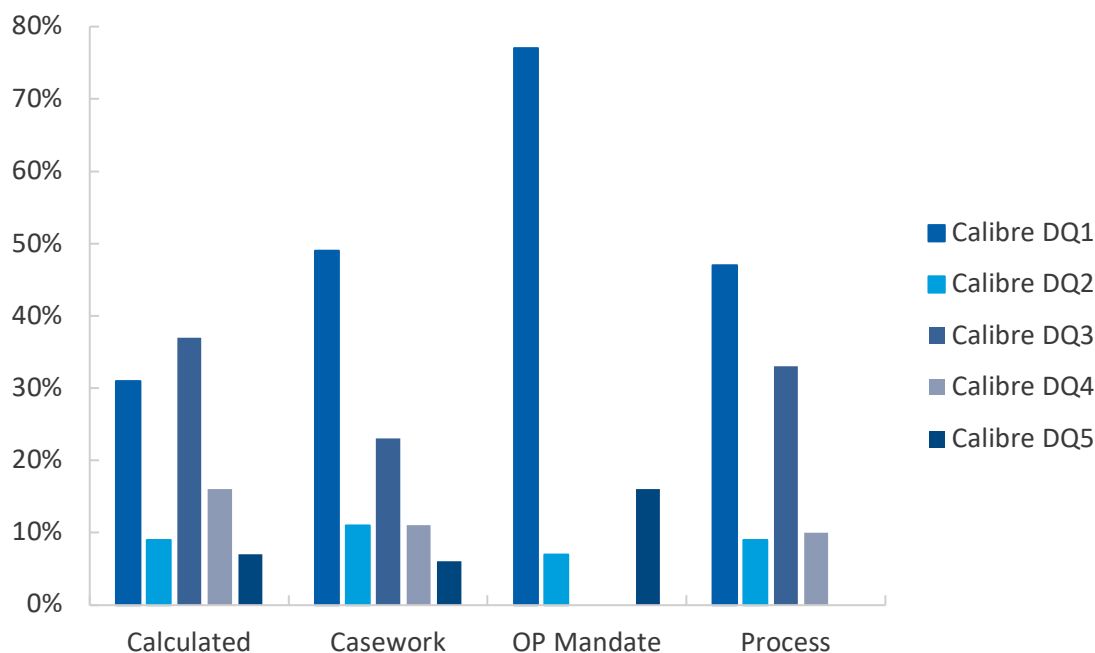
10.29 At the time of this inspection Asylum Operations had still not introduced a routine sampling target of asylum interviews.

10.30 Inspectors examined data for Calibre scores in a number of areas:

- Operating Mandate DQ score: the mandatory checks that must be completed before an asylum decision can be served
- casework DQ score: the quality of the actual decision that is served
- process DQ score: the processes that underpin the decision, such as safeguarding and updating systems
- calculated DQ score: the worst instance of a combination of the casework and process scores, for example, if casework scores a DQ1 but process scores a DQ5, the calculated score would be a DQ5

10.31 Figure 34 shows the Calibre ‘casework’ scores for asylum decisions assessed between November 2022 and October 2023:

Figure 34: Calibre scores between November 2022 and October 2023



- 10.32** Asylum Operations had a target of 75% of decisions scored at a DQ1 or DQ2. The only DQ category that met this target was the Operating Mandate checks. Sixty percent of casework scores were a DQ1 or DQ2, 56% of process scores were a DQ1 or DQ2, and 40% of calculated scores were a DQ1 or DQ2.
- 10.33** A DQ1 score was the most common score in each of the four categories, except for the calculated score, for which DQ3 was the most common. DQ5 was the least common score in three out of the five categories, with no DQ5 scores for the process category.
- 10.34** Data analysed by inspectors also showed that 24% of decisions were quality assured post-service. One of the recommendations from the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework was that the Home Office should “ensure all first line quality assurance takes place before asylum decisions are served.”¹⁶⁵ The Home Office closed this recommendation on 29 March 2022 and said: “We were working towards a figure of 90% of assessments done pre-service, with this figure currently in the high 80s.” Despite this, between November 2022 and October 2023, only 76% of quality-assured decisions received their DQ checks before the asylum decision was served.
- 10.35** Stakeholders raised concerns about the decline in the quality of decisions and interviews. One submission said:¹⁶⁶
- “We have seen a large number of asylum refusals which were very short, contained factual mistakes and had substandard consideration of evidence, including little to no engagement with expert medical and country evidence.”
- 10.36** Stakeholders also said that legacy cases were being rushed to meet the deadline of December 2023. They provided inspectors with examples in which decisions had used incorrect or out-of-date evidence and decision wordings had been copied and pasted from other decisions. Stakeholders also said that interviews lacked essential information that would enable the Home

¹⁶⁵ ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework, August 2020 – May 2021’, p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ ICIBI, ‘Call for evidence: An inspection of asylum casework 2023’ (published 12 May 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/call-for-evidence-an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-2023>

Office to assess a claimant's risk on return. They said that their clients had been asked to keep their answers "short and brief" due to the short interview times.

- 10.37** In the inspection survey, 40% of tech specs who responded to the question raised issues about poor consideration of material facts, and 22% raised concerns about poor credibility assessments in asylum decisions. Tech specs were also concerned about insufficient probing of claimants in interviews, with 80% of responses saying this was their biggest concern. Other issues raised included material facts not being explored (48%) and irrelevant questioning (24%).

Second-line assurance reports

- 10.38** The Home Office provided inspectors with two second-line assurance reports. The first report was dated August 2022 and examined asylum interview quality for Afghanistan cases. A random sample of 40 Afghanistan cases was selected for review, 23 of which had been decided at the time of the report. The Calibre quality assurance tool was used to assess the asylum interview and decision for each claim. The report confirmed that:

"42 interviews were reviewed by assurers. The interviews were satisfactory in 18 cases (42.9%). This is broadly consistent with the finding that of the 23 decisions, ten (43.5%) were satisfactory, as an ineffective interview will generally lead to an ineffective decision."

- 10.39** It also reported that 22 interviews (52.4%) failed to fully investigate and probe the material facts of the claim. Other issues regarding interviews were a failure to conduct appropriate checks, unsatisfactory professionalism and efficiency, and a failure to investigate Special Cases Unit issues where there was a potential security risk to the UK.
- 10.40** The report also identified issues where material facts had not been identified or considered, and a failure to properly consider risk on return.

Quality assurance on withdrawn asylum claims

- 10.41** Inspectors also reviewed a 'Targeted Assurance Review [of] Asylum Withdrawn Cases' in February 2023. The review examined 26 cases that had been 'explicitly withdrawn', meaning that the claimant decided to withdraw their asylum claim themselves. The report also looked at 49 implicit withdrawals, meaning that a claimant was considered to be non-compliant with the asylum process or an absconder by the Home Office.
- 10.42** The report found that 25 of the 26 explicitly withdrawn claims were satisfactory. However, for the implicitly withdrawn asylum claims, 21 (43%) were considered to be satisfactory and 28 (57%) were unsatisfactory. Specific areas of concern included four (8%) 'Withdrawn Implicit' cases where the invitation to interview letter and the failure to attend interview letter had been produced and despatched on the same day. In three of these cases, the letters were sent with the same date and time as the scheduled interview. Issues around guidance not being followed correctly were also identified.
- 10.43** Of the cases that were reviewed, 38 (77%) had taken three months or more to conclude, with one taking four years. Other issues identified included appropriate absconder action not being taken and delays in recording outcomes on the Case Information Database (CID). The withdrawal guidance states:

"To determine whether failure to attend a substantive asylum interview should be treated as an implicit withdrawal, or if the interview should be rebooked, a failure to report to

substantive interview letter must be sent immediately to the claimant and a covering letter with a copy of the failure to attend interview letter must be sent to their representative (if applicable) to establish why the claimant did not attend. The deadlines for a response to the letter is five working days in non-detained cases or 24 hours in all detained cases before the claim is treated as withdrawn.”¹⁶⁷

- 10.44** Between 28 June 2022 and 27 October 2023, 22% of all asylum claims where a decision had been made were treated as withdrawn by the Home Office, a significant increase on the previous year. Inspectors asked the Home Office to provide data on quality assurance checks for withdrawn asylum claims. The data provided showed that only one withdrawn claim had been quality assured between November 2022 and October 2023, despite the concerns raised in the report.
- 10.45** The National Absconders Unit (NAU) had responsibility for dealing with withdrawals. If an asylum claimant was identified as an absconder after exhausting all attempts at re-establishing contact with them, they were normally referred to the NAU to process the withdrawal. A tech spec in NAU told inspectors that they quality assured all withdrawal decisions made within the NAU. However, due to the volume of withdrawal decisions, DMUs also processed withdrawals which the NAU had no responsibility for and no oversight of the quality of those decisions. Inspectors were also told that the standard operating procedures for withdrawals were not adequate and were being constantly amended, which meant teams were having to produce locally held guidance.
- 10.46** Staff from NAU told inspectors in October 2023 that the process they were told to follow for withdrawing claims changed frequently, with “something different every day to the process” during some periods. A manager said that their main focus was to “re-establish contact with the applicant” and that while some “people look at the work as though they could get a decision and look at it as an outcome for [the] decision-making unit ... that was not [their] focus”. Staff also said they had been told by managers to issue the invitation to interview and failure to attend letters on the same day where there was no address on record for a claimant and to ‘file’ the letters electronically as there was nowhere to send them.
- 10.47** Managers across Asylum Operations told inspectors that withdrawing claims was “kicking the can down the road”, as the claimants could re-enter the asylum system at a later stage. A manager from the NAU said that a lot of claims were reinstated because there had been “a failure at the first point of call”, where the Asylum Intake Unit had failed to record sufficient information on the claimant when they were first encountered. This became “an issue six or seven months down the line” when the claimant came back into contact with the Home Office and their claim needed to be reinstated. Another manager said that they believed it was better to “do things correctly the first time”, so that the Home Office was not having to revisit these claims, but that “speed [was] of the essence at the moment ... If we took a beat, some of these cases would not be withdrawals.”

Quality of interpreters

- 10.48** One of the main issues that stakeholders and those with lived experience raised with inspectors was the quality of interpreters used in substantive asylum interviews. In responses to the inspection’s call for evidence, stakeholders reported that claimants were concerned by some interpreters’ grasp of the English language and their ability to interpret properly.

¹⁶⁷ UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Withdrawing asylum applications: caseworker guidance’ (published 14 November 2013). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/withdrawing-asylum-applications>

- 10.49** The issues with interpreters were raised numerous times by different people with lived experience, with one individual telling inspectors that they believed their claim had ended up being refused because they thought the interpreter had made several interpretation errors in their substantive asylum interview. One claimant with lived experience told inspectors:
- “The interpreter was an issue. Sometimes I said something, and he did not tell the officer how I said it. I had to tell him to stop as I had not said it in the way that he had interpreted. I had a little English so could understand but answering was difficult, so I had the interpreter.”
- 10.50** In addition, inspectors heard about the difficulties the Home Office had in obtaining suitable interpreters in terms of the correct language and dialect. A stakeholder also told inspectors:
- “In terms of interpreters, there has been a real issue for people from specific regions such as Arabic speakers, and they [the Home Office] were just using any interpreter. A Moroccan client had significant issues with getting an Arabic Moroccan interpreter. Sometimes there are issues with those too. Lesser spoken languages or specific dialect/regions always had issues.”
- 10.51** The Home Office told inspectors that it was continuing to recruit interpreters for languages where there was demand:
- “We are receiving high volumes of Kurdish (all dialects), Vietnamese, Tagalog, Georgian and Bengali/Sylheti languages compared to our interpreter resource, and we are working closely with asylum colleagues on a co-ordinated approach to try and sequence languages to reduce interpreter request clashes.”
- 10.52** It was clear that significant work was being undertaken to recruit and book interpreters. This task was even more difficult given the number of interviews and interpreter bookings that were needed, with over 3,000 interpreter booking requests made each week between 23 October 2023 and 12 November 2023.

Quality assurance for workflow and the safeguarding hub

- 10.53** Staff in the DMU workflow teams told inspectors that, due to the nature of their work, it was difficult to measure their performance, but they did have a dip sampling process where Executive Officer (EO) team leaders would dip sample work completed by administrative officers.
- 10.54** However, the EOs told inspectors that they were struggling to meet their dip sampling requirements due to time constraints:
- “Dip checks were to be done monthly, or a few a week. But to be honest, we did not have the time to do them. I have had it on my list since Monday and have not done them. It can be useful as I have come across some issues that were not procedural, and they [an administrative officer in workflow] had missed out a part, so I went back and looked, and recognised they had not done it correctly for a while so had to go back with a training issue. It is hard to find the time to do them.”
- 10.55** An administrative officer from another workflow team told inspectors that they had never received any feedback on their performance. This was corroborated by all the other workflow teams who were spoken to by inspectors in the same DMU.

10.56 The safeguarding hub also told inspectors that there were no performance targets and no formal quality assurance processes within the hub. A senior manager told inspectors that quality assurance was something they had discussed, but there was still no process in place. Another senior manager told inspectors that, although there was no formal process, they did random dip sample checks in a similar way to the workflow team, but there was no expectation of them to do so.

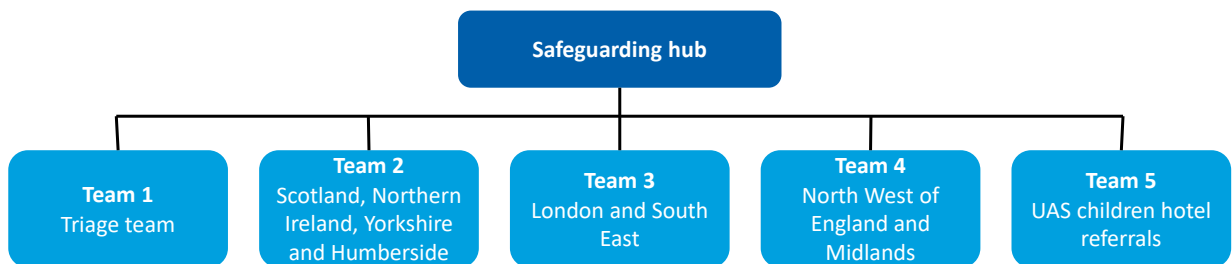
Safeguarding

Proficiency of safeguarding in asylum

10.57 Inspectors sought to assess the quality and robustness of safeguarding processes in Asylum Operations. At the forefront of the safeguarding process was the Asylum Safeguarding Hub, which had responsibility for handling all safeguarding referrals in Asylum Operations and responding appropriately.

10.58 The safeguarding hub was a national hub that was split into five teams, as set out in figure 35.

Figure 35: Safeguarding hub organogram



10.59 Safeguarding referrals were sent to the safeguarding hub from several sources, such as decision makers, social workers, housing providers, police, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). When a safeguarding referral was received in the safeguarding inbox, it was allocated a safeguarding level. The levels are described in figure 36 below.

Figure 36: Safeguarding levels

| Vulnerable | SSHL 1 | SSHL 2 | SSHL 3 |
|---|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Referrals deemed lower than suicide and self-harm levels (SSHL) | Low risk of self-harm or suicide | Repeated threats or instances of self-harm | Tried to kill themselves or at serious risk of doing so |

10.60 A vulnerable safeguarding flag indicated the lowest level of risk, and a level 3 flag was the most severe.¹⁶⁸ The safeguarding hub also made inspectors aware of the traffic light system that was introduced at the end of 2022 to guide DMs when sending safeguarding referrals, and which had helped to reduce unnecessary referrals to the hub. This is described in figure 37.

¹⁶⁸ The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated that figure 36 did not cover all referrals that are received into the Asylum Safeguarding Hub. Referrals are triaged into workstreams rather than each of them being given an individual risk rating. The level 1, level 2 and level 3 cases referred to relate to suicide and self-harm levels (SSHL). Each of them is a separate workstream, as are vulnerable cases. There are also other workstreams, such as domestic abuse, child protection, and female genital mutilation.

Figure 37: Safeguarding traffic light system

| Traffic light system | |
|----------------------|---|
| Green | DM can proceed with writing and serving an asylum decision |
| Amber | The DM will put a note on the system and refer to the safeguarding hub, which will take the appropriate actions, but the DM does not need to wait for advice from the hub before serving the decision |
| Red | Needs to be referred to the safeguarding hub and DM must wait for clearance from the safeguarding hub before serving a decision |

- 10.61** Inspectors sought to understand how proficient Asylum Operations was at dealing with safeguarding concerns. Safeguarding hub staff told inspectors that they were not confident that DMs correctly identified and referred safeguarding issues to them. One manager, when asked whether they were satisfied with DMs’ knowledge of safeguarding said: “No – it comes across as a lack of training. There is a high turnover. They don’t follow the traffic light system, which is really clear.”
- 10.62** Other staff told inspectors that referrals were sent that were unnecessary or did not contain the level of detail required. Sixty per cent of DMs who responded to the inspection survey said they were confident in identifying safeguarding issues, which was reiterated in interviews with inspectors. Based on the feedback received from safeguarding hub staff, this did not automatically mean that they were proficient in doing so.
- 10.63** Tech specs also told inspectors that they did not believe safeguarding issues were identified correctly by DMs. However, DMs told inspectors that they did not believe safeguarding issues were identified early enough and that cases should be referred before reaching them.
- 10.64** In response to the ICIBI call for evidence, stakeholders also raised concerns, with 43% highlighting the absence of adequate safeguarding measures in the asylum process. One said, “the Home Office is not robust enough in picking up safeguarding and risk indicators”,¹⁶⁹ and another reported concerns about the effectiveness of processes to identify specific vulnerabilities.¹⁷⁰
- 10.65** Inspectors received positive feedback from staff in terms of how safeguarding issues were handled in the children’s hub. Staff told inspectors about help sheets that were introduced to prevent inappropriate referrals to the hub, which inspectors did not hear were being used in other DMUs. A senior manager told inspectors that, as safeguarding was central to their work, they were confident in their processes, which included local authorities and social workers working with them to highlight and identify safeguarding issues. Another manager told inspectors that the children’s hub had a mandatory three-day training course for DMs, in addition to the foundation training programme, that focused on keeping children safe. They said that this was not included in the main foundation training programme used by other DMUs.
- 10.66** Another concern raised by stakeholders was the lack of a trauma-informed approach to interviewing. Examples included situations when children were not given adequate breaks after speaking about traumatic events and when the interviewer moved on quickly, which implied a lack of understanding of the claimant’s narrative. This was an issue that had been exacerbated

169 ICIBI, ‘Call for evidence: An inspection of asylum casework 2023’.

170 ICIBI, ‘Call for evidence: An inspection of asylum casework 2023’.

by the two-hour interview target. DMs told inspectors that they no longer had the option to take breaks and they felt forced into moving through interviews as quickly as possible to ensure they did not run over the two-hour limit. One DM provided an example of a claimant who was upset in an interview which they had to end abruptly because they had run out of time. Conversely, a senior manager said that the two-hour interview target prevented those with safeguarding issues having to endure a longer interview that could also have an adverse effect on their trauma and mental health.

Safeguarding backlog

- 10.67** Inspectors heard about a backlog of cases in the safeguarding hub that were categorised as vulnerable or at suicide and self-harm level 1. Inspectors saw evidence that the safeguarding hub had received 121,059 referrals between July 2022 and October 2023, 14,695 of which were classified as level 1 safeguarding referrals. As of November 2023, 7,710 of these referrals had been reviewed but not yet actioned, meaning that the hub had not referred these claimants to their GP in accordance with its procedures. A member of staff told inspectors that “there was a backlog of a year on self-harm cases, so we had to write to the GP and apologise that we had not let them know that someone threatened to self-harm a year ago”.
- 10.68** Inspectors also requested data on the backlog of cases that had been classified as vulnerable (the level below level 1), but this data was not provided by the Home Office. During interviews with safeguarding hub staff in September 2023, inspectors heard that the backlog of vulnerable cases stood at 13,829. This was in addition to the backlog of level 1 cases. Staff said that this number could have been as high as 28,000, as some cases had already been opened in the inbox but had not been actioned, meaning that important safeguarding actions and referrals could have been missed.
- 10.69** Safeguarding hub staff told inspectors about a lack of resources and staff, with one manager saying: “We did not have the resources to deal with referrals, so there was always a backlog.” This was reiterated by senior managers, who told inspectors that they were not adequately resourced and, as a result, they had to “ignore cases” to prioritise higher-risk safeguarding concerns.

‘Face behind the case’

- 10.70** The ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework found that DMs worked in an environment in which they felt the quantity of decisions made was more important than the quality of the decisions, and they did not have the time to consider the individual claimant, known as ‘face behind the case’. The face behind the case initiative was introduced in August 2020 to bridge the gap between Home Office staff and the individuals who they interact with in response to the Windrush Lessons Learned Review.¹⁷¹ Inspectors spoke to staff, stakeholders, and those with lived experience to understand whether the ‘face behind the case’ ethos was still promoted in Asylum Operations or whether the drive to clear the legacy backlog had negatively impacted on it being maintained.
- 10.71** The ‘face behind the case’ initiative was developed by the Chief Caseworker Unit and consisted of an e-learning course, which launched in August 2020. The e-learning focused on “seeing customers as people, increasing knowledge of customer service principles and making sure

171 HM Government, ‘The Response to the Windrush Lessons Learned Review: A Comprehensive Improvement Plan’ (published September 2020). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f74743a8fa8f5188f48d609/CCS001_CCS0820050750-001_Resp_to_Windrush_Lessons_CP_293_Accessible.pdf

lessons are learnt from the Windrush scandal". It contained real case studies, videos of the Windrush generation recounting their experiences, and direct links to recommendations in the Windrush Lessons Learned Review. The e-learning included an assessment with an 80% pass mark requirement and was mandated for all staff in UK Visas and Immigration.

10.72 The Home Office told inspectors that the 'face behind the case' e-learning had been replaced in June 2023 by lived experience events that included "workshops aimed at promoting a customer-centric approach to asylum casework". In response to the inspection survey in July 2023, only 12% of DMs who responded said they had taken part in one of the new lived experience events. In addition, less than 40% of DMs agreed or strongly agreed that 'face behind the case' was promoted in Asylum Operations. One DM said:

"I believe that they [the Home Office] have ditched the 'face behind the case' policy, as asylum seekers are not given the adequate time they require and deserve. If I remember correctly, the e-learning for that module said that if something did not feel right then you should say something. I can confidently say the lack of consideration [for face behind the case] does not feel right."

10.73 Tech specs and team leaders (TL) gave similar responses to the survey, with one tech spec saying they felt that Asylum Operations had put the focus of meeting targets before staff wellbeing and 'face behind the case'. A TL said that the focus on clearing the backlog meant that 'face behind the case' was no longer a priority, as claimants were being treated as numbers.

10.74 During interviews with staff, DMs, tech specs, and TLs told inspectors that the push for numbers and to clear the backlog had had a detrimental effect on the 'face behind the case' policy. One tech spec summed this up by telling inspectors: "In our unit, it did not exist." Senior managers also admitted the difficulty with promoting 'face behind the case', given the focus on clearing the backlog, with one telling inspectors they could see that the 'face behind the case' ethos was "eroding".

11. Inspection findings: Leadership and communication

Senior leadership structure

- 11.1** The Independent Chief Inspector of Border and Immigration (ICIBI) expects that each immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function has a Home Office ‘owner’.¹⁷² Asylum Operations is part of the Customer Services Capability, which is led by a Director General. At the time of the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework, the Asylum Operations senior leadership team (SLT) consisted of one Senior Civil Servant (SCS), who was the head of Asylum Operations, and five Grade 6 (G6) managers.¹⁷³ Each G6 manager was responsible for one or more decision-making units (DMUs) and other overarching areas of work within Asylum Operations. There were 14 Grade 7 (G7) managers who reported to the G6 managers.
- 11.2** A new SLT structure was implemented in July 2023, which introduced a single SCS Director of Asylum and Human Rights Operations and six SCS operational leads. The changes to the size of the SLT were introduced to increase focus and intensify efforts to clear the legacy backlog.
- 11.3** Each of the six SCS operational leads had ownership of a specific area of the Asylum and Human Rights operation. Oversight of the 14 asylum DMUs dealing with cases raised by adult claimants was split between two SCS managers. One had oversight of a grouping of DMUs designated as ‘DMU1’ and the other was responsible for the remaining DMUs, designated as ‘DMU2’. Another SCS had oversight of Asylum Children’s and Secondary Casework.¹⁷⁴
- 11.4** As shown in figure 38 and figure 39, the 14 DMUs were each managed by an individual Grade 7, under the oversight of seven Grade 6s who each had responsibility for two DMUs.¹⁷⁵

172 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI), ‘ICIBI expectations for inspection’ (published 2 November 2018). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/icibi-expectations-for-inspection>,

173 ICIBI, ‘An inspection of asylum casework August 2020 – May 2021’ (published 18 November 2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-asylum-casework-august-2020-may-2021>

174 Head of Asylum Operations DMU1, Head of Asylum Operations DMU2, Head of Asylum Logistics, Head of Asylum Interviewing, Head of Asylum Children’s and Secondary Casework, Head of Family and Human Rights.

175 In an Asylum Operations senior leader organogram updated in July 2023, the Grade 6 Head of the DAC (Detained Asylum Casework) and NSA (Non-Suspensive Appeals) DMUs was shown as “TBC”. All Grade 7 head of DMUs posts were filled.

Figure 38: DMU1 leadership structure

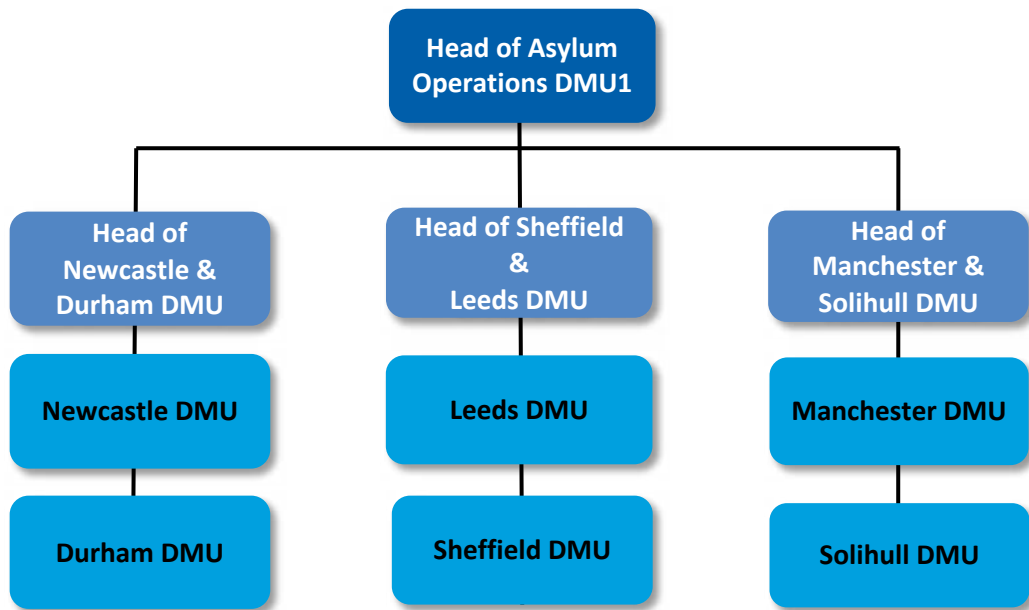
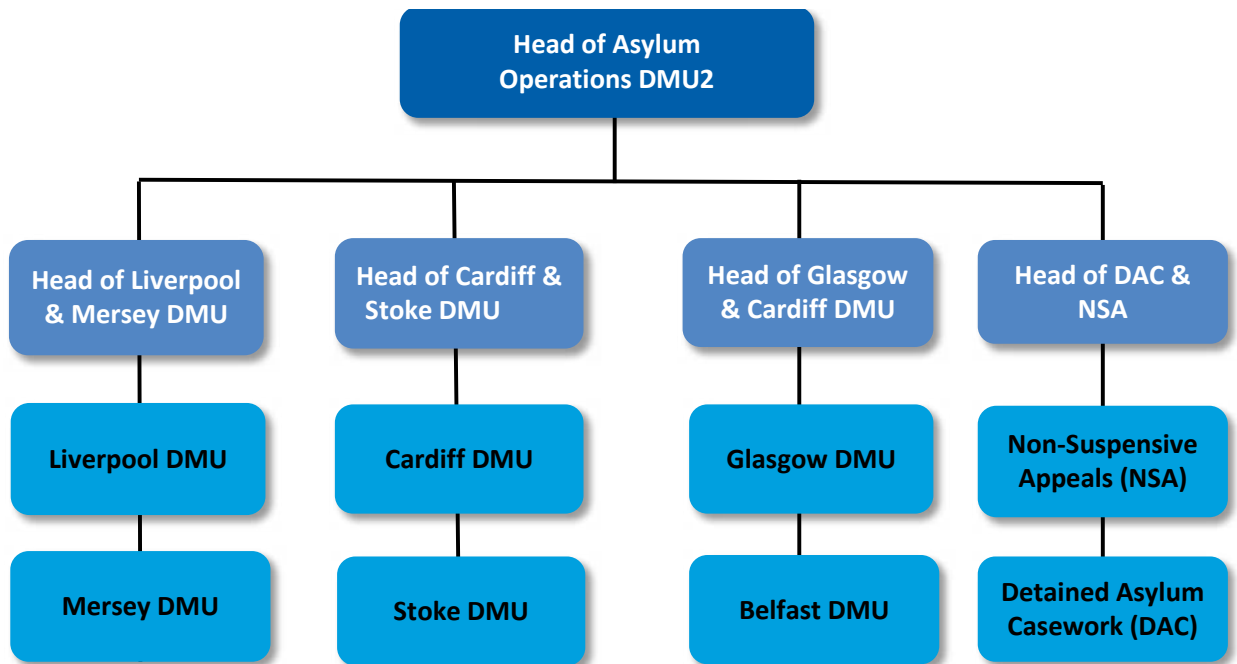


Figure 39: DMU2 leadership structure



Impact of structural changes

11.5 In the ICIBI’s 2021 inspection of asylum casework, inspectors found that the SLT had been affected by frequent personnel moves, which had led to one G7 manager having six line managers in two years. This theme continued during this inspection, as staff again told inspectors that there had been a high rate of attrition in the SLT. One senior manager told inspectors there had been a lack of consistency in their management, having had five Grade 6 managers in the last 12 months. As a result of the frequent managerial changes, this manager did not feel supported as a leader, had not had any ‘check ins’ with their manager, and did not feel listened to, in an example of how a lack of stability could negatively impact staff.

- 11.6** The restructure and the increase in size of the SLT was broadly seen as a positive move by staff, with senior managers telling inspectors that it was the correct thing to do and that it had brought some stability to the management structure. A senior manager described the new director as “a breath of fresh air”. Inspectors observed that frequent changes at managerial level enabled some of those they interviewed to say, “that was before my time”, indicating a lack of corporate memory and accountability.
- 11.7** Although the restructure of the SLT was seen as a positive move, some staff expressed concern that, although there was the right level of SCS and Grade 6 and Grade 7 managers to clear the legacy backlog, there would be too many in the long term as the backlog and staffing requirements reduced. It was felt that the end of the financial year presented the opportunity for another restructure if required.
- 11.8** Senior managers and Newton¹⁷⁶ consultants told inspectors that, since the introduction of the new SLT structure and a new leadership team, there had been an improvement in the management of the relationship the SLT had with ministers. Prior to this, it was considered that a ministerial decision was final and there had been a lack of sufficient ‘push back’. The example given to inspectors was of Operation BRIDORA, which is discussed in chapter 7.
- 11.9** Following the restructure, senior managers told inspectors that the SLT had the opportunity and ability to highlight potential operational issues to ministers and felt that they were listened to. Senior managers told inspectors that there had been “excellent” senior management handling of relationships with ministers, the Cabinet Office, and Number 10, and that the improved relationships had helped the efforts to deliver the measures set out in the Prime Minister’s statement.
- 11.10** The Grade 7 DMU leads occupied a position where they had to meet the demands and aims of the SLT while delivering some difficult messages, such as increased or changing individual targets, to the staff they managed in the DMUs.
- 11.11** Inspectors interviewed the Grade 7s in four different DMUs, 50% of whom were in post in a temporary capacity. Relationships between Grade 7 DMU leads and the SCS were inconsistent. Some Grade 7s felt that decisions were made above them, that their experience was not taken into account, and that the focus was solely on hitting targets. Other Grade 7s told inspectors that they felt supported by and had the ability to have an open conversation with their SCS, and that they felt listened to when they did.
- 11.12** In response to the inspection survey, 81% of decision makers (DMs), technical specialists (tech specs), and team leaders (TLs) who completed the survey either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “I am supported by managers.” The survey results were confirmed during onsite interviews and focus groups, where the majority of DMs, tech specs, and TLs told inspectors that they felt listened to and supported by their direct line managers. Although it was positive that staff involved in front-line decision making felt supported by their line managers, there was a risk that the perceived “micromangement” of staff over productivity and performance targets could erode those relationships.
- 11.13** The new SLT structure and its relationship with ministers was in its infancy. While inspectors noted the early positive impact of these changes, work was still required to develop and improve relationships between the G7 DMU leads and SCS managers.

176 For information on Newton see: <https://www.newtoneurope.com/>

Corporate memory: The establishment of a new DMU

- 11.14** To assist with clearing the backlog, Asylum Operations opened a new DMU in Solihull, known as ‘Solihull 2’, which went ‘live’ on 4 September 2023. Senior managers told inspectors that this unit, when up to full capacity, would have a complement of 105 DMs. Due in part to the lack of a blueprint for setting up a new DMU, staff of all grades told inspectors that there had been numerous issues with how the DMU was established.
- 11.15** Senior managers told inspectors that there was no model or delivery plan for what needed to be in place to set up a new DMU. This included not knowing the ratios of ‘wraparound’ staff required to support new DMs, not arranging for DMs to have access to the systems that they needed, and having to use another DMU’s ‘cost code’ to purchase necessary equipment.¹⁷⁷
- 11.16** A senior manager told inspectors that the way the DMU had been set up was “backwards” and resulted in some DMs starting in their role on the same day as their team leader, which did not give them the best start.
- 11.17** At the time of this inspection, Solihull 2 was in the process of onboarding administrative staff, but a senior manager who had previous experience of setting up a DMU was in post. The aim was for that senior manager to “retrofit” and overlay a work plan that they had previously used to improve and stabilise the overall structure of Solihull 2.
- 11.18** The Solihull 2 DMs interviewed by inspectors said they were all new in post, having started in June or July 2023. None of them had any previous asylum experience; they had only been trained on how to make an asylum decision and did not feel that the training had adequately prepared them for the role. A DM told inspectors that as they were all new, it was “the blind leading the blind”.
- 11.19** At the time of inspection, Solihull 2 had no tech specs based in the DMU. Tech spec support was provided by five remote staff, none of whom had visited Solihull 2, and all of whom were on loan from other DMUs. Four were based in Leeds and one was based in London. Tech specs told inspectors that the number of Solihull 2 tech specs was due to drop to two because of staff leaving and maternity leave. A senior manager told inspectors that there were plans to recruit five tech specs, three through an expression of interest and two remote tech specs who would be based in another location.¹⁷⁸
- 11.20** The tech specs were keen to help the DMs develop, and provided refresher sessions and training to achieve this. This work had created a backlog of cases awaiting a second pair of eyes (SPoE) check as a result of all the DMs being on 100% checks¹⁷⁹ of their work as they were new to the role. Solihull 2 tech specs did not feel adequately resourced to provide the level of support a unit of new DMs required. A manager told inspectors that the pressure on the tech specs had been exacerbated due to the absence of experienced DMs who could help answer new DMs’ questions, as there would be in an established DMU. This meant that DMs were going to tech specs with basic questions that would usually be picked up by more experienced DMs.

177 ‘Wraparound’ staff includes administrative officer support, line managers, and technical specialists.

178 An expression of interest is a way of advertising temporary roles internally within the Home Office that are no more than 12 months in duration.

179 New decision makers require all decisions they make to be checked by a technical specialist, which is referred to as ‘100% checks’.

Communication of change

11.21 Since the ICIBI's 2021 inspection of asylum casework, there had been multiple changes to the way in which Asylum Operations worked, as set out in chapters 7 and 8. The changes had a fundamental impact on how cases were cohorted, allocated, and the processes a DM had to follow when making an asylum decision. Communication of change is vital so that the changes are understood by those they affect, and they are implemented successfully.

Use of Newton consultants

11.22 Ultimate responsibility for the operationalisation and dissemination of these changes sat with the senior leadership team (SLT). The SLT had the support of consultants from Newton who were brought in as part of the Prioritising Asylum Customers' Experience (PACE) programme, as described in chapter 9. Senior managers told inspectors that the consultants were "brilliant to work with" and played an important part when it came to communicating messages upwards from the SLT to ministers.

11.23 Due to the demands placed on Asylum Operations to deliver the measures outlined in the Prime Minister's statement on illegal migration, the role of the consultants changed. Consultants told inspectors that the initial 'ask' of them was to change the ways of working in Asylum Operations by "nudging on the entire system" in order to treble productivity in a gradual, sustainable way. Following the Prime Minister's statement, the focus of the consultants shifted from 'flow' cases to 'legacy' cases, processing Albanian cases (Op BRIDORA), and delivering the Prime Minister's commitments in "any way that we can to the best of our abilities". The change in ask was summarised by one consultant, who told inspectors, "we were designing change in peace time versus change in a time pressured environment".

11.24 Newton consultants had helped to improve real-time responses to ministerial questions and brought in independent assurance. Senior managers told inspectors that, while a lot of the work that Newton had done could have been done by existing teams and staff within Asylum Operations and the Home Office, they were a valuable asset who worked well with the SLT. This raised the question of why senior managers had not tasked Home Office staff to undertake the work that Newton consultants had carried out.

11.25 A senior manager said that, although some of the work Newton produced was rebranded ideas from Asylum Operations staff, they could present it to the ministers and "get believed in a way that we might not be". Newton's perceived credibility with ministers enabled them and the SLT to influence the direction of Asylum Operations' work and to make changes where needed, for example, to move DMs away from Operation BRIDORA to work on other claim types.

The People, Communications, and Engagement Team, and communication of change to staff

11.26 Recognising the need to support staff through the changes that were required to deliver the Prime Minister's commitments, a G6 Head of People, Communications, and Engagement role was created. This role was supported by five G7 managers, each with an individual area of responsibility.¹⁸⁰ A senior manager told inspectors that their priority was to keep people

¹⁸⁰ Operational change lead; leadership; training and development; communications and customer service; people, engagement and performance; and independent inspection.

informed and engaged, regardless of grade or role, against the backdrop of the pace of change caused by the deadlines resulting from the Prime Minister's statement.

- 11.27** Inspectors analysed the strategy document of the People, Communications, and Engagement Team. It set out the aim of the team to “ensure our Asylum Ops colleagues and stakeholders are engaged, effectively trained, supported and informed, and ultimately drive a supportive, high-performance culture”. The strategy also set out the ways in which the team sought to engage and inform Asylum Operations staff about changes, and engagement with external stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and those with lived experience.
- 11.28** To increase engagement, and to keep staff informed of changes within Asylum Operations, the People, Communications, and Engagement Team created a range of products to deliver these messages. These included newsletters, weekly progress updates, ‘Technical Tuesdays’, which may provide information on Country Information Policy Notes and Atlas changes, and line managers’ briefing packs. The team also facilitated ‘all staff calls’ and sent out monthly ‘pulse surveys’ to identify issues faced by staff.
- 11.29** Inspectors received copies of weekly asylum backlog clearance progress updates, which consisted of a PowerPoint slide pack and included indicative timescales for when and what type of cases a DMU would be working on, as well as an update on progress to clear the legacy work in progress (WIP). There were slides on each of the operations that were running at the time of the update, including an operation-specific section on ‘key developments’, providing headline information and future plans for that operation. An additional weekly update was also produced for Asylum Children and Secondary Casework, which consisted of a short email showing progress made to clear the children’s legacy WIP.
- 11.30** Inspectors noted examples of senior managers using the Technical Tuesday bulletin to communicate training, new processes, and new IT systems to staff. Senior managers told inspectors that the line managers’ briefing pack had been introduced since disseminating information via emails to all staff had not been effective.
- 11.31** Inspectors were told the briefing packs were approximately 15 pages long, very detailed, and were designed to help managers engage with staff. The topics covered varied but had previously included wellbeing issues, any developments that had happened in asylum, cohort changes, and the concise interview project. The pack was sent to the Grade 7 DMU leads who were responsible for distributing it to the Higher Executive Officer (HEO) team leaders. A senior manager told inspectors that, although putting information in the line managers’ briefing pack had previously worked well, messages were being lost due to the pressure staff were under.
- 11.32** A senior manager told inspectors that there were plans to introduce an HEO-level management briefing that would include a “short and snappy” verbal and written briefing on key messages and the priorities for the week ahead. As this briefing had not been introduced at the time of the inspection, inspectors were unable to assess its impact.
- 11.33** Senior managers also used monthly all-staff calls to deliver messages to large volumes of staff in an attempt to improve communication and engagement. Inspectors noted that, although it was a useful tool to disseminate information, staff felt that some of the messaging was not helpful. Staff told inspectors that senior managers had, on occasion, when responding to concerns about the pressure they were under, been insensitive. This had given some the impression that senior managers were unaware of the pressure staff were under to achieve

their productivity targets. A senior manager told inspectors about the creation of an online ‘wellbeing hub’ for Asylum Operations.

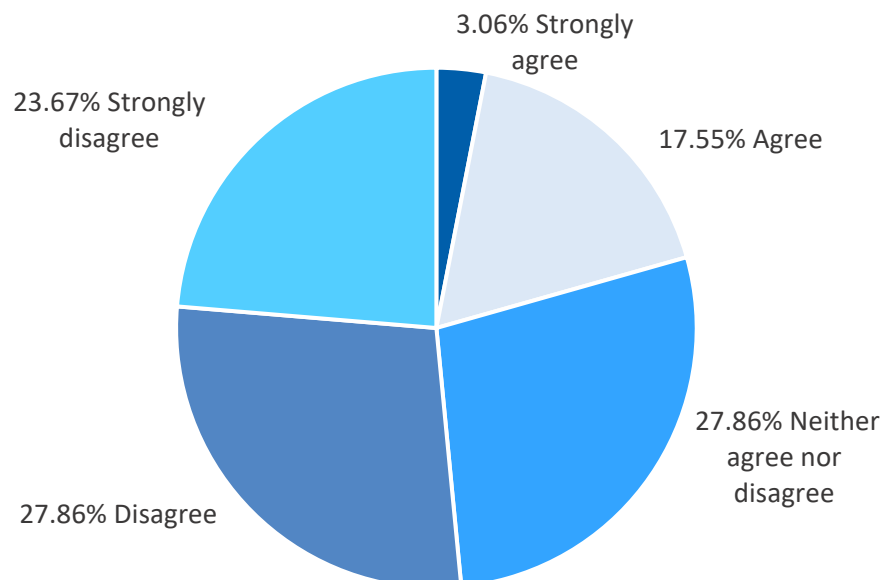
11.34 The inspection survey asked staff whether change was managed well within Asylum Operations, and the responses are shown in figure 40.

Figure 40: Inspection survey responses to the statement: “Change in Asylum Operations is managed well.”

| Answer choice | Decision makers | Team leaders | Technical specialists | Combined total |
|----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Strongly agree | 4.33% | 0.00% | 0.00% | 3.06% |
| Agree | 13.78% | 29.09% | 24.00% | 17.55% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 28.35% | 27.27% | 26.00% | 27.86% |
| Disagree | 30.31% | 20.00% | 24.00% | 27.86% |
| Strongly disagree | 23.23% | 23.64% | 26.00% | 23.67% |

11.35 Figure 41 shows that less than 21% of those who responded to the survey either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that change in Asylum Operations was managed well. Nearly 52% of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed. Change and change management was a recurring theme throughout the inspection, especially the rate and volume of change that Asylum Operations had undergone following the Prime Minister’s statement.

Figure 41: Combined decision maker, technical specialist, and team leader responses to the statement “change in Asylum Operations is managed well”



11.36 The survey provided staff with the opportunity to provide free text comments. The pace and volume of change and how this was communicated were common themes raised. These issues were also raised by all grades of staff during onsite focus groups and interviews conducted by inspectors. Staff told inspectors that they did not feel engaged in the changes and that change “just happened”. The frequency of change had a negative impact on staff, which was summed up by a DM team leader who told inspectors: “We’ve dealt with a change that’s come in overnight only to be told that it’s no longer the case and we look stupid as leaders.”

- 11.37** The negative implications of the pace and volume of change were not limited to DMs or TLs. A senior manager told inspectors, “the amount of change in such a short time is enormous, it’s a lot of pressure ... It’s too much, too soon, too quickly.”
- 11.38** Newton consultants told inspectors that it was difficult to communicate messages when there were more than five layers of management. There had been occasions when messages had not been communicated effectively when changes were made. This was echoed by a member of administrative staff who told inspectors that the messaging appeared to stop at DM level. However, the consultants felt that the messaging had been clear, honest, and consistent, and they were confident that G5 and G6 senior managers were giving strong messages. The consultants told inspectors that the messaging may have been diluted by the G7s and TLs who were trying to shield their staff from difficult messages.

Glasgow and Belfast DMUs and issues specific to the Illegal Migration Act

- 11.39** The Glasgow and Belfast DMUs were scheduled to move onto processing Illegal Migration Act (IMA) cases. From analysis of the progress update documents, the transition to this work was due to start in mid-July 2023. Inspectors noted repeated slippage to start dates. The 30 October 2023 progress update stated that the DMUs would start IMA training in the week commencing 6 November 2023, approximately four and a half months later than originally scheduled. On 15 November, the Supreme Court ruled that the government’s Rwanda plan was unlawful and, in response to the ruling, the Belfast and Glasgow DMUs returned to work on asylum casework on 21 November 2023. Inspectors were told that this would be for “a short period of time”.¹⁸¹
- 11.40** Staff in the Glasgow DMU told inspectors that, although some were looking forward to moving away from the pressures of asylum caseworking, the constant change had been unsettling. Other DMs told inspectors that they had applied for the DM role and were unhappy at being moved to work on IMA cases with no consultation. They felt that TLs and tech specs had no more knowledge of the move and that communication around the change, including why or how it was happening, was lacking. One DM told inspectors that, in terms of moving to IMA work, the only source of information they had was the media.
- 11.41** Insecurity and a lack of information were themes repeated in interviews with staff at the Glasgow DMU. Team leaders and tech specs told inspectors that information was not being cascaded down and that they had “no clue” about what was going on. In response, a senior manager told inspectors that they accepted there had been some “chopping and changing” and the decision to move staff away from asylum to IMA work was not taken lightly. It had to be done to prepare staff in anticipation of the Court of Appeal’s ruling on the Migration and Economic Development Partnership.¹⁸²

Stakeholder engagement

Asylum Central Communications Hub

- 11.42** In April 2022, Asylum Operations set up a new unit based in Stoke-on-Trent called the Asylum Central Communications Hub (ACCH). The aim of this team was to “bring all national asylum correspondence into one place, eliminating inconsistency in outcome of correspondence, and

¹⁸¹ British and Irish Legal Information Institute, [2023] UKSC 42 (published 15 November 2023). <http://www.bailii.org/uk/cases/UKSC/2023/42.html>

¹⁸² British and Irish Legal Information Institute, [2023] EWCA Civ 745 (published 29 June 2023). <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2023/745.html>

creating a streamlined, efficient and cost-effective customer journey". The ACCH had taken charge of 12 workstreams (including incoming post) and is the recipient for all Operation Amesa and Operation Makhu correspondence.

- 11.43** The original scope of the ACCH also included plans to take over responsibility for any telephone queries that DMUs received. A senior manager told inspectors these plans had to be stopped as the use of contractors who could not have access to Home Office caseworking systems would not have been beneficial to the Home Office, claimants, or legal representatives.¹⁸³ The addition of a telephony arm to the ACCH was still planned but was "a couple of years off". Staff in DMUs with responsibility for answering telephone calls expressed frustration that the telephony had not been centralised, telling inspectors that this part of their role was a waste of resource, especially as they were unable to give the claimant answers to the questions they asked.
- 11.44** Staff told inspectors that the ACCH could receive over 1,000 emails per day and while, they had a target of responding to a query within five days with a 94% completion rate, they were usually able to send a response within two days.¹⁸⁴
- 11.45** Inspectors found that ACCH staff were positive, capable, and aware that they were dealing with asylum claimants. They maintained a focus on the 'face behind the case' ethos, something that was reinforced by managers, although some staff were concerned that this had been undermined by the focus on productivity.
- 11.46** Stakeholders told inspectors that the creation of the ACCH was a positive move and had "made things much better", although their enthusiasm was tempered by the fact that most claimants did not know about the hub and required the assistance of a NGO to help them contact it. None of the claimants with 'lived experience' of the asylum process who were interviewed by inspectors had any knowledge of the ACCH.
- 11.47** Knowledge of the ACCH and the work that it did was also an issue in the DMUs. ACCH staff and senior managers told inspectors that there was a need for engagement and advertising in the DMUs so that DMs knew the ACCH's role and the work it did.
- 11.48** Although the ACCH was broadly seen as a positive development, frustration remained among stakeholders, who felt that ACCH responses to queries either partially addressed or did not address the substance of their queries. Those working in the ACCH told inspectors that they were reactive to incoming correspondence and did not actively reach out to claimants. While staff in the ACCH were encouraged to send bespoke email responses, they were unable to do this for case progression update queries, as the standard operating procedure instructions contained the wording to use. They had been directed to use a generic email response for cases in the streamlined asylum process, and any queries the ACCH received for cases that had been allocated to a DMU were sent to that DMU to respond to.
- 11.49** As previously highlighted, those with lived experience of the asylum process told inspectors that delays and the lack of communication about their cases was detrimental to their mental health and prevented them from moving on with their lives. Additional frustrations arose from the lack of a meaningful response to their queries and the fact that claimants had to chase the Home Office for updates instead of the Home Office providing them proactively. This was summarised by a legal representative in their written submission to inspectors:

183 The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: "This plan was not stopped, it was one of the options under consideration, but it was not pursued. Options are still being considered for this service."

184 The Home Office, in its factual accuracy response of January 2024, stated: "This is not an official target, rather an aspiration."

“Whilst we consider the Home Office email reply as a positive step towards communicating an acknowledgement, it is just that it’s only ‘an acknowledgement’ that we sent an email. There is no further information as to the progress of the delay in issuing asylum interviews or in reaching a decision, nor is there ever a time scale given for allocating an interview or for reaching an asylum decision. This in turn means that the asylum clients are left in limbo. What is the point of writing endless letters about the delay when the Home Office do not address those issues and merely acknowledges an email but does not act on its contents?”

Engagement with asylum stakeholders

- 11.50** Strategic Engagement Groups (SEG) and the SEG subgroups are the Home Office’s principal engagement forums with its external stakeholders. The Asylum Strategic Engagement Group (ASEG) is the Home Office’s asylum-specific SEG, and changes relating to the asylum system such as the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the streamlined asylum process, and the IMA were communicated via this forum. ASEG members included senior managers from a wide range of NGOs with knowledge of the UK asylum system. The Home Office was represented by a range of heads of department, including policy leads. There were eight SEG subgroups, including Children and Decision-Making.¹⁸⁵
- 11.51** Senior managers told inspectors about the stakeholder engagement they undertook and said that the People, Communications, and Engagement team held responsibility for stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder engagement included the ASEG, the lived experience panel, working with the UNHCR on the Quality Protection Partnership, and attending stakeholder meetings outside of the SEGs.¹⁸⁶
- 11.52** Senior managers told inspectors that the lived experience panel consisted of around 20 regular attendees and was originally scheduled to meet every four months. However, due to the volume of changes in asylum, a senior manager told inspectors that meetings were being held monthly.
- 11.53** Inspectors requested minutes and actions from the lived experience panel. The Home Office provided two sets of meeting minutes from June and September 2023. In June 2023, two people with lived experience attended the meeting virtually. The minutes from the September meeting did not indicate how many people with lived experience attended. The action log had two closed actions and six open actions and had not been updated since June 2023.
- 11.54** Inspectors noted that these meetings had been used as a forum for the Home Office to ask those with lived experience questions on a range of issues, including their experiences of asylum interviews, interpreters, accommodation and welfare issues, communication with the Home Office, and caseworker standards. Senior managers told inspectors that information from this panel was used in internal communications, sent to policy teams, and to inform process redesign.
- 11.55** In addition to this engagement, managers in the training design team told inspectors that they worked with the UNHCR, a ‘customer panel’, and used lived experience input when designing training. However, senior managers told inspectors that the impact of policy changes was “massive”, that the training team felt dictated to, and communication of change was poor.

¹⁸⁵ As of November 2022, the eight SEG subgroups were: Children, Decision-Making, Detention, Equalities, Family Reunion, Integration, Move-On, and Support.

¹⁸⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), ‘What we do, UK asylum and policy and the Illegal Migration Act, Quality Protection Partnership’ (accessed 21 November 2023). <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-we-do/uk-asylum-and-policy-and-illegal-migration-act/quality-protection-partnership>

Despite this, members of the training team told inspectors of the positives from receiving feedback and input from the UNHCR.

- 11.56** Senior managers in Asylum Children’s and Secondary Casework (ACSC) told inspectors about the external stakeholder engagement work they did, and plans to develop a specific stakeholder pack. They told inspectors about the work that had been undertaken with local authorities on age dispute cases and how this had helped to improve relationships. ACSC’s impression that relationships with local authorities had improved was confirmed in a call for evidence submission from a local authority, which stated that communication had “dramatically improved in the last year”. This submission highlighted ACSC, along with Asylum Operations, as being “particularly helpful and efficient in responding to queries and challenges”.
- 11.57** While there were examples of good stakeholder engagement, ASEG minutes from December 2022 showed that some stakeholders were frustrated when the Home Office made changes to processes prior to consultation with NGOs. This frustration remained, with a member of ASEG telling inspectors in October 2023 that it had been “a very difficult year for the Civil Service and stakeholders”. They said that they had not been consulted on issues when they felt they should have been, and that the ASEG was now more of an update than an engagement session. Where they could provide input, their knowledge and experience were not being used. They added that engagement on the high-level issues around guidance, processes and improvement had fallen away to be “firefighting on the ground”. To balance this, a senior manager told inspectors that, in some cases, they had been instructed by ministers to introduce new processes without any prior engagement with stakeholders.

Annex A: ICIBI ‘expectations’

Background and explanatory documents are easy to understand and use (e.g. statements of intent (both ministerial and managerial), impact assessments, legislation, policies, guidance, instructions, strategies, business plans, intranet and GOV.UK pages, posters, leaflets etc.)

- They are written in plain, unambiguous English (with foreign language versions available, where appropriate)
- They are kept up to date
- They are readily accessible to anyone who needs to rely on them (with online signposting and links, wherever possible)

Processes are simple to follow and transparent

- They are IT-enabled and include input formatting to prevent users from making data entry errors
- Mandatory requirements, including the nature and extent of evidence required to support applications and claims, are clearly defined
- The potential for blockages and delays is designed out, wherever possible
- They are resourced to meet time and quality standards (including legal requirements, Service Level Agreements, published targets)

Anyone exercising an immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function on behalf of the Home Secretary is fully competent

- Individuals understand their role, responsibilities, accountabilities and powers
- Everyone receives the training they need for their current role and for their professional development, plus regular feedback on their performance
- Individuals and teams have the tools, support and leadership they need to perform efficiently, effectively and lawfully
- Everyone is making full use of their powers and capabilities, including to prevent, detect, investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute offences
- The workplace culture ensures that individuals feel able to raise concerns and issues without fear of the consequences

Decisions and actions are ‘right first time’

- They are demonstrably evidence-based or, where appropriate, intelligence-led
- They are made in accordance with relevant legislation and guidance
- They are reasonable (in light of the available evidence) and consistent
- They are recorded and communicated accurately, in the required format and detail, and can be readily retrieved (with due regard to data protection requirements)

Errors are identified, acknowledged and promptly ‘put right’

- Safeguards, management oversight, and quality assurance measures are in place, are tested and are seen to be effective
- Complaints are handled efficiently, effectively and consistently
- Lessons are learned and shared, including from administrative reviews and litigation
- There is a commitment to continuous improvement, including by the prompt implementation of recommendations from reviews, inspections and audits

Each immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function has a Home Office ‘owner’

- The Home Office ‘owner’ is accountable for
 - implementation of relevant policies and processes
 - performance (informed by routine collection and analysis of Management Information (MI) and data, and monitoring of agreed targets/deliverables/budgets)
 - resourcing (including workforce planning and capability development, including knowledge and information management)
 - managing risks (including maintaining a Risk Register)
 - communications, collaborations and deconfliction within the Home Office, with other government departments and agencies, and other affected bodies
 - effective monitoring and management of relevant contracted out services
 - stakeholder engagement (including customers, applicants, claimants and their representatives)

Annex B: Summary of key responsibilities in Asylum Operations

| Role | Grade | Summary of key responsibilities |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Admin and workflow | Administrative Officer (AO) | To support and facilitate casework actions to ensure a smooth and efficient processing of asylum cases within the unit. |
| Decision maker | Executive Officer (EO) | To conduct asylum interviews and perform case working duties to make informed decisions on asylum cases, meeting weekly contribution targets. |
| Team leader | Higher Executive Officer (HEO) | To manage team members and provide performance management to ensure the team meets productivity targets. This includes addressing day-to-day casework issues, HR matters, and actively addressing any under performance. |
| Technical specialist | Higher Executive Officer (HEO) | To act as a technical advisor to DMs, offering guidance and support on interviewing processes, providing coaching, verbal, and written feedback throughout the decision-making process. To conduct quality assurance checks and identify any areas for improvement and further training. |
| Senior caseworker | Senior Executive Officer (SEO) | To oversee tech specs and take overall responsibility for the decision-making units' decision-making quality and efficiency, while ensuring the ongoing support and development of DMs. |
| Operations manager | Senior Executive Officer (SEO) | To assist team leaders in managing their teams by monitoring performance, quality, and productivity. Identify and address reasons for underperformance and ensure teams are adequately trained and supported to fulfil their roles. |

Annex C: Role and remit of the Independent Chief Inspector

The role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (until 2012, the Chief Inspector of the UK Border Agency) was established by the UK Borders Act 2007. Sections 48-56 of the UK Borders Act 2007 (as amended) provide the legislative framework for the inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of functions relating to immigration, asylum, nationality and customs by the Home Secretary and by any person exercising such functions on his behalf. The legislation empowers the Independent Chief Inspector to monitor, report on and make recommendations about all such functions and in particular:

- consistency of approach
- the practice and performance of listed persons compared to other persons doing similar activities
- the procedure in making decisions
- the treatment of claimants and applicants
- certification under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (c. 41) (unfounded claim)
- the law about discrimination in the exercise of functions, including reliance on paragraph 17 of Schedule 3 to the Equality Act 2010” (exception for immigration functions)
- the procedure in relation to the exercise of enforcement powers (including powers of arrest, entry, search and seizure)
- practice and procedure in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of offences
- the procedure in relation to the conduct of criminal proceedings
- whether customs functions have been appropriately exercised by the Secretary of State and the Director of Border Revenue
- the provision of information
- the handling of complaints; and
- the content of information about conditions in countries outside the United Kingdom, which the Secretary of State compiles and makes available, for purposes connected with immigration and asylum, to immigration officers and other officials.

In addition, the legislation enables the Secretary of State to request the Independent Chief Inspector to report to him in writing in relation to specified matters.

The legislation requires the Independent Chief Inspector to report in writing to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State lays all reports before Parliament, which he has committed to do within eight weeks of receipt, subject to both Houses of Parliament being in session.

Reports are published in full except for any material that the Secretary of State determines it is undesirable to publish for reasons of national security or where publication might jeopardise an individual’s safety, in which case the legislation permits the Secretary of State to omit the relevant passages from the published report.

As soon as a report has been laid in Parliament, it is published on the Inspectorate's website, together with the Home Office's response to the report and recommendations.

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