



# A re-inspection of ePassport gates

May 2023

**David Neal**

Independent Chief Inspector of  
Borders and Immigration



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# Foreword

The UK Border Strategy 2025 sets out the government's ambition to have the most effective border in the world. Increased automation is a central tenet of this strategy and ePassport gates are the most visible and widely encountered example of this improved technology.

This inspection focused on the people aspects supporting the system rather than the technology. It takes a snapshot view of three ports and looks at the effectiveness of Border Force's response in mitigating some of the risks caused by increased automation.

Inspectors met dedicated Border Force staff at all three of the ports but found that an effective operation was hampered by distractions, ineffective and inconsistent deployment of resources, lack of communications equipment, poorly configured arrival halls, and poor data.

The ePassport gates system is staffed by Border Force officers in three distinct roles, designed to mitigate the automation of the process by having trained officers supervising passage through the border. The roving officer oversees the queue for the gates, for safeguarding and border security detection. The monitoring officer supervises the gates via a computer screen and has some capability to intervene in their operation. The referrals officer deals face-to-face with passengers referred from the gates when they have not been accepted.

Border Force officers are often distracted from their core operational activity by the environments in which they operate. The inspection team witnessed roving officers distracted by having to manage queues and deal with passenger queries. Inspectors also observed how poor infrastructure in the arrival hall places additional stresses on officers.

The inspection found that deployment of resources was inconsistent. In the key safeguarding role of a roving officer, there was not always an officer deployed. In 2021, I recommended that at least two roving officers should be in place when more than ten gates are in operation. The Home Office did not accept this recommendation, stating that, although the guidance recommends this, they deferred to managers on the ground. On the evidence of this inspection at all three ports, this guidance is not being delivered. I suspect that this is the case at every port in the UK. In other positions, inspectors observed officers performing key monitoring roles for three times the recommended duration of a shift. This was also identified in my 2021 report and accepted by the Home Office, but shift durations are not being enforced.

The inspection found a lack of basic communication equipment. Inspectors saw border posts left unmanned while officers signalled for attention from their managers. This is unacceptable and needs to be addressed urgently. At a fundamental level, officers manning the gates need to be able to work interdependently, especially when they need to react and address time-critical matters.

The inspection found failings in Home Office data. At a tactical level, management data was not made available to managers, therefore inhibiting their ability to run an effective operation. This appears to be a step backwards since the latest IT system, 'Border Crossing', was introduced. At an operational level, poor management of Home Office records results in more passengers referred from the ePassport



gates than ought to be, clogging up the system. This would appear to be due to inaccurate historical data not being cleansed from records.

The evidence provides a snapshot of a system nowhere near that envisaged by the UK Border Strategy 2025. It is clear to me there are enthusiastic and well-motivated staff whose effectiveness can be improved by better training, improved rostering, improved equipment, and better data. This all needs to be underpinned by more effective supervision.

These are the basic building blocks of a service that is fundamental to the protection of our border. On the basis of this inspection, I believe the protection of the border is neither effective nor efficient.

The report details four key findings from the inspection and makes six recommendations, many of which should be picked up routinely by first and second-line assurance rather than a statutory independent inspection body. Furthermore, this inspection reveals that recommendations from my 2021 inspection report have not been delivered, even when they have been accepted by the Home Office. It is apparent that, even when the Home Office has closed recommendations, monitoring progress through routine assurance activity is inadequate.

This is basic stuff that is not being done well. The Home Secretary should address these issues urgently, alongside the observations made by Alexander Downer in his 2022 report into Border Force.

This report was sent to the Home Secretary on 16 June 2023.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neal', followed by a period and a horizontal line underneath.

David Neal

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

# 1. Background

- 1.1** Home Office ePassport gates ('eGates' or 'the gates') are described by the Border Force Operating Mandate as "Automated gate(s) which uses facial recognition technology to compare the user's live photo image to the image held in the biometric chip contained in their passport". The ePassport gates 'system' is described on the Home Office intranet as "a tool to help Border Force maintain effective control over increasing numbers of travellers".
- 1.2** The gates have been in use since 2008. In 2023, Border Force operates 293 gates at 21 ports of entry in the UK, and five each at juxtaposed controls in Brussels and Paris. The physical gates now in operation have been upgraded twice – the first upgrade being completed in July 2011 and the second in 2016 – and are now referred to as 'third generation'.
- 1.3** At the time of this inspection, the gates can be used by holders of an ePassport who are of UK, EU, EEA, or Swiss nationality. Since April 2019, passengers from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States of America have been able to use the gates. These are referred to as the 'B5JSSK' group of nationalities by the Home Office. Users must be aged 12 or above, with those aged 12 to 17 years needing to be accompanied on their journey by an adult. Border Force recently launched a trial where some ports allowed children between the ages of 10 and 12 to use the gates. This has been judged a success by the Home Office and is likely to be rolled out more widely.
- 1.4** ICIBI's report 'An inspection of e-Passport gates (June 2020 – January 2021)' examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the gates, focusing specifically on the identification of vulnerable passengers, the resources, the training of Border Force staff, and the data required and delivered to manage the gates' operation, stakeholder engagement with user groups and port operators, and plans for the future of the UK border.
- 1.5** Several recommendations in ICIBI's 2021 report, which were accepted by the Home Office, focused on how increased automation at the border is balanced with mitigations to ensure the detection of vulnerable passengers and to maintain effective border security. This short reinspection aimed to examine the progress made against these recommendations through observation of the ePassport gates in operation.
- 1.6** ePassport gates are a crucial part of government plans to bring automation to the UK border. The UK Border Strategy 2025, published in December 2020, places an emphasis on pre-clearance and digital arrival checks via ePassport gates.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.7** The inspection was delayed in the summer of 2022 to accommodate requests from Border Force due to industrial action and Home Office work on the response to the crisis in Ukraine, and further delayed in October 2022 due to other ICIBI priorities. During this inspection, the ICIBI inspectors agreed to delay their visit to Stansted Airport by one week due to Sudanese evacuation flights arriving there.

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<sup>1</sup> [2025 UK Border Strategy – HM Government, December 2020 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

## Key roles around the ePassport gates

- 1.8** The gates are staffed by Border Force officers in three distinct roles, described in the ePassport gates Standard Operating Procedures.
- 1.9** The roving officer is a safeguarding function, supervising the queue for the gates, discharging Border Force's obligations under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. The roving officer identifies passengers of any age approaching the gates who may merit further examination.
- 1.10** The monitoring officer supervises all stages of operation of the gates using monitoring screens.
- 1.11** The referrals officer manually processes passengers who have been referred from the gates. They detect imposters using passenger questioning, behavioural detection, Imposter Detection Equipment and other technology tools, and take into consideration section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 requires the Home Office to carry out functions in a way that considers the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the UK.

## 2. Recommendations

### The Home Office should:

#### Recommendation 1

Implement effective training programmes across Border Force so that all officers deployed to the three roles associated with the ePassport gates are trained in vulnerability and behavioural detection.

#### Recommendation 2

Implement effective oversight and assurance mechanisms to ensure that roving officers are:

- focused on border security and safeguarding
- appropriately positioned to enable them to carry out their duties effectively with a minimum of distraction

#### Recommendation 3

Ensure Border Force local rostering is robust, so officers carry out their roles in accordance with Border Force guidance and Standard Operating Procedures so that:

- monitoring officers perform the role for a maximum of one hour
- two or more roving officers are in place when ten or more ePassport gates are in operation

#### Recommendation 4

Work with port operators to ensure port infrastructures are optimised as far as possible, to maximise the effectiveness of ePassport gates operations and the effectiveness of the three people roles associated with the system.

#### Recommendation 5

Review communication requirements at ports in order that all Border Force officers in the roles of roving, monitoring, and referrals are individually issued with radios connected to duty operational managers whenever they are deployed.

#### Recommendation 6

Improve the quality of management information on ePassport gate performance available to Border Force local teams to enable them to:

- better predict demand for gates
- identify and fix faults with individual gates
- identify trends in document compatibility with the gate
- identify trends in reasons for passengers being referred from the gates

## 3. Scope and methodology

**3.1** This reinspection sought to examine the effectiveness of ePassport gates at three ports of entry through onsite observations, and in that context, assess progress against recommendations made in the ICIBI's report 'An inspection of e-Passport gates (June 2020 – January 2021)'.

**3.2** Inspectors:

- conducted a familiarisation meeting with the Home Office on 4 April 2023
- submitted a limited request for evidence on 24 April 2023
- analysed 12 pieces of evidence submitted by the Home Office
- conducted observations at London Heathrow Airport Terminal 4 on 2 May, London Luton Airport on 3 May, and London Stansted Airport on 11 May 2023
- met with Border Force managers and Border Force staff at each site
- held meetings with all three port operators
- held a debrief session with Border Force senior leaders at each site following observations

This inspection was observational in nature and therefore does not examine plans for the future organisation of ePassport gate systems or planned improvements to the associated technology.

## 4. Key findings

- 4.1** This reinspection took an observational approach to examine the effectiveness of the roles of the monitoring officer, referrals officer, and roving officer as part of the overall ePassport gates system. Inspectors visited three airports, each with a distinct operational environment.
- 4.2** This inspection was not conducted as a comparative study of the three ports; the observations do not refer equally to each of the airports.
- 4.3** The inspection paid regard to the 15 recommendations from ICIBI's 2021 inspection: 'An inspection of ePassport gates (June 2020 – January 2021)'.<sup>3</sup>
- 4.4** The Home Office's response to the 15 recommendations contained in the original inspection report were published with the report on 12 January 2022.<sup>4</sup> This inspection has considered the following recommendations from the previous inspection, including the progress made on them:
- **Recommendation 1 (partially accepted)** – Deliver the Protecting the Vulnerable (PTV) training to all public-facing Border Force staff during 2021
  - **Recommendation 2 (partially accepted)** – Deliver the classroom-based Behavioural Detection (BD) training to all roving officers
  - **Recommendation 5 (accepted)** – Ensure that staff performing the monitoring officer role do so for a maximum of one hour at a time, in line with guidance
  - **Recommendation 11 (accepted)** – Implement a system to record details when passengers are stopped due to safeguarding concerns, including the circumstances in which vulnerable passengers are identified, the role of the officer who identified the passenger and whether the passenger was eligible to use, or was trying to use, the gates
- 4.5** The inspection did not consider progress made on the remaining recommendations except recommendation eight, which was not accepted by the Home Office.

## Distractions

- 4.6** At all three airports, inspectors observed Border Force officers who were distracted from their core operational ePassport gates activity by a lack of focus and poor infrastructure. In some instances, this placed additional and unnecessary stresses on officers, who should be able to focus on their primary responsibilities. Often, this included dedicated and enthusiastic staff deployed as roving officers, who were routinely being distracted from this important responsibility by the demands of managing queues and addressing routine customer service matters. The impact of this meant gaps in the provision of roving officers and Border Force's overall effectiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-epassport-gates-june-2020-january-2021>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-an-inspection-of-epassport-gates/response-to-the-icibis-report-on-epassport-gates-accessible-version>

- 4.7** Inspectors saw referrals officers having to deal with passengers who were not referred from the gates. Referrals desks are well-positioned at Heathrow and Stansted. However, the referrals desks at Luton are poorly positioned, with passengers using special assistance, air crew, airport staff, and others passing through the Primary Control Point, creating a stressful and distracting environment. Referrals officers should be able to focus on dealing with passengers who have been referred from the gates. This important role includes the detection of imposters, safeguarding, and other border security work.

## Deployment of resources

- 4.8** The inspection found that the deployment of Border Force staff to the three roles relevant to the operation of the ePassport gates is inconsistent and not always in line with Home Office guidance and policy. Border Force's Standard Operating Procedures recommend having at least two roving officers operating when ten or more gates are open. This was not being followed at any port inspected.
- 4.9** ICIBI's 2021 inspection report made a recommendation to ensure that when ten or more gates are in operation, sufficient resources are available to allow at least two roving officers. This recommendation was not accepted by the Home Office, which stated that: "Decisions about the deployment of staff and technology will always be subject to tactical assessments by managers on the ground." As a result of this re-inspection, inspectors concluded that this remains an issue that the Home Office should review.
- 4.10** Inspectors were told by various Border Force staff that the availability of sufficiently trained staff impacts the deployment of roving officers. Seasonal staff were routinely deployed to this role having undergone only limited training. ICIBI's 2021 inspection recommended that all staff deployed to the position of roving officer should undertake PTV training (Recommendation 1) and BD training (Recommendation 2). While both recommendations were partially accepted, it is apparent that such training has not been undertaken by all staff and the Home Office should revisit these recommendations to ensure that staff are adequately trained to undertake the roles they are deployed to.
- 4.11** Border Force at Luton uses an Operational Support Officer (OSO), who supports the Border Force Higher Officer (BFHO), to supervise the rostering of the roles associated with the gates. However, this was not being done thoroughly or consistently, and inspectors noted rosters used to assign the key gates roles were often not completed in full. At Heathrow, inspectors observed referrals desks being left unmanned for a significant period of time. At Stansted, no rota system was used, but the duty BFHO, supported by an OSO, assigns resources to these positions, or flexes them, as necessary.
- 4.12** Furthermore, inspectors observed BFHOs in 'watchhouses' which are not well connected to activity on the ground, or BFHOs having to manage competing priorities.<sup>5</sup>
- 4.13** Inspectors did not observe any assurance activity that monitored the effectiveness of deployments overall. This position is not robust or failsafe and, therefore, inspectors considered it would be difficult for Border Force to satisfy itself that safeguarding issues, which might otherwise be identified, are not being missed.

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<sup>5</sup> Watchhouse is the term used by Border Force for the room from which the duty Higher Officer monitors the arrivals control and co-ordinates the operation.

- 4.14** At all three of the ports inspected, Border Force staff are routinely performing the role of monitoring officer for more than one hour. This increases the risk of tiredness and reduces their effectiveness in monitoring the gates. The previous inspection report recommended that “staff performing the monitoring officer role do so for a maximum of one hour at a time, in line with guidance” (Recommendation 5). This was accepted by the Home Office, and an update from May 2023 considered this recommendation closed as “the Home Office has reissued the instructions relating to the monitoring officer role to operational managers and compliance will be monitored through assurance activity”. On the ground, practice, as observed by inspectors, clearly differs from Home Office guidance and it was apparent to inspectors that the reissuing of guidance or assurance activity has not been sufficiently effective to address this recommendation. The Home Office should reopen and revisit this recommendation.

## Communication

- 4.15** This inspection found that effective and timely communication between the three ePassport gates roles was insufficient. A lack of radios hinders effective communication between the roving officer, monitoring officers, and referrals officers, as well as other officers and managers involved in staffing the gates. This increases the risk to officers’ personal safety and to the security of the border.
- 4.16** Referrals officers need radios to communicate with other officers and managers. Current workarounds employed to mitigate against the lack of radios, such as waving or signalling across often busy arrival halls, are ineffective and at times unprofessional.
- 4.17** Officers are not able to contact each other quickly. This lack of a failsafe method of communicating has the potential to undermine border security and staff safety. All officers engaged in staffing the gates need to be able to react to time-critical matters, as witnessed by inspectors while on site, and the use of modern methods of communication, such as radios or telephones, would assist their ability to do so.

## Data

- 4.18** Inspectors were told by Border Force managers that the poor quality of the data they have to work with limits their ability to operate ePassport gates as effectively as possible.
- 4.19** A high number of referrals from the gates relate to historic applications for permission to remain in the UK, particularly from EU nationals. While this might be appropriate for those whose applications have been refused, some passengers who have subsequently been granted permission to remain in the UK are still being referred due to out-of-date entries on Home Office systems. This adds to the volume of passengers being diverted to referrals officers, a position, as outlined above, already over-committed in what it is having to deliver.
- 4.20** At the three ports inspected, managers expressed their frustration at the quality of management information available about use of the gates, which had deteriorated since the introduction of Border Crossing from providing detailed and granular information, to only headline figures. This limits the ability of Border Force in a variety of ways, such as workforce planning, as well as being able to continuously improve how it resources the gates, and how external factors, such as infrastructure, might be improved. In both instances, this would serve to improve the overall operation of the gates in allowing Border Force to deliver a secure and safe border for the UK.



## Update on Recommendation 11

**4.21** Recommendation 11 of ICIBI’s 2021 inspection report, which was accepted, recommended that the Home Office:

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

**4.22** As at May 2023, the Home Office stated that delivering this recommendation was still in progress and that “development and design work is already underway; they [the relevant Home Office teams] hope to have it developed and ready for roll-out early October 2023”. During this inspection, inspectors noted that each port relied on local records to track and record safeguarding activity. As the Home Office continues to progress this recommendation, inspectors did not examine local record keeping in relation to the roving officer role.

## 5. The roving officer

### Effective practice

- 5.1** In general, inspectors observed roving officers demonstrating a good understanding of the role and acting in a proactive and professional manner. Inspectors noted a strong desire from officers across all three ports to fulfil their safeguarding duties. Alongside their core responsibilities, inspectors also witnessed roving officers identifying individuals meriting further examination, as detailed in the Border Force roving officer guidance, demonstrating how the role can enhance border security as well as safeguarding.
- 5.2** Inspectors further observed examples of effective safeguarding, such as a roving officer engaged with a large group of schoolchildren and their teachers. The officer made the monitoring officer aware that 35 children and two teachers were queuing to use the gates and arranged for the group to pass through the gates in a way that ensured they were accompanied appropriately. Inspectors observed officers identifying and corroborating relationships between children and accompanying adults.
- 5.3** The inspection took place outside school holidays, and it was evident to inspectors that the officers were proactive in focusing on wider immigration and customs detection work while there were fewer children arriving, conducting passport checks, and identifying passengers needing customs examination.
- 5.4** Inspectors saw a roving officer inspect the passport of a passenger eligible to use the gates, and noted it was missing pages. The officer referred the passenger to a forgery officer for further examination, demonstrating the benefits to border security of the wide scope of the role.
- 5.5** At a different airport, inspectors observed a roving officer position themselves to the side of the main gates queue. The officer's position gave them a clear view of the queue and meant that every passenger using the gates would pass them. The officer was alert, displayed a good awareness of their role, and was able to explain clearly to inspectors their safeguarding responsibilities. The officer provided inspectors with a clear breakdown of the safeguarding issues that they were looking for and of the type of indicators that would trigger an intervention.

### Inconsistent practice

- 5.6** As well as observing good practice, inspectors observed the roving officer role being carried out inconsistently and to varying degrees of effectiveness. While many officers carried out the role enthusiastically, others appeared less engaged in their duties and were unclear about the purpose of the role.
- 5.7** At Heathrow, a roving officer told inspectors they had not received any Behavioural Detection training and had only received limited safeguarding training. This is contrary to the Home

Office's response to recommendations 1 and 2 of the ICIBI 2022 report, both of which were accepted by the Home Office. The roving officer did not engage with any passengers during the 20 minutes for they were observed. They remained static, and inspectors observed no interaction with the monitoring or referrals officers. Inspectors later asked the officer if their role was to identify unaccompanied children, to which they replied that this was something the monitoring officer would pick up on. The officer's reply and general lack of engagement indicated a lack of understanding of the role and posed a risk that a safeguarding issue, or indeed a border security issue, may be missed.

- 5.8** At Stansted, a Border Force officer told inspectors that it was routine for officers without Behavioural Detection Officer training to be deployed as a roving officer. This was corroborated by a Border Force Higher Officer (BFHO), who also went on to say that there are often periods of time when no roving officer is deployed.

## Distractions

- 5.9** In all three ports visited, inspectors witnessed roving officers being distracted from their core safeguarding and border security function.
- 5.10** At Luton Airport, inspectors observed roving officers opening and closing Tensabarriers<sup>6</sup> for passengers requiring special assistance, airport staff, and airline crew to proceed to the Primary Control Point (PCP); dealing with passenger queries on how to use the gates; and redirecting passengers who were not eligible to use the gates. While most of this work appeared helpful, this is not the role of the roving officer, and these tasks should have been carried out by presenters.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, these distractions have the potential to limit an officer's ability to identify safeguarding concerns and fulfil Border Force's duty to safeguard children under section 55 of the Borders, Immigration and Citizenship Act 2009. This issue of distraction is not a new one and was observed in the ICIBI inspection 'A short inspection of Border Force queue management at Birmingham Airport based upon onsite observations' published in September 2021.<sup>8</sup>
- 5.11** Border Force managers at Luton told inspectors that passenger volumes had "outgrown" the arrival hall, which inspectors observed was cramped and had to accommodate a large referrals queue from the gates, despite having a large area of underutilised space which was intermittently used for passengers awaiting special assistance.
- 5.12** To help officers concentrate on their core role, a podium had been installed by Border Force and was intended to be a reminder of the importance of safeguarding. Managers told inspectors that the previous roving officer positioning at the head of the queue had not been "private enough for passengers or safe enough for officers". However, with the podium placed at a busy pinch point in the queue, inspectors noted that the area did not appear particularly safe for officers, who were often surrounded by large crowds. Inspectors observed the roving officer frequently dealing with queue management and customer queries.
- 5.13** Inspectors also noted that at Heathrow and Luton, more than half of the roving officers observed were seasonal workforce staff. The need to ensure officer safety becomes even greater as seasonal workforce staff are not trained to Personal Safety Training 3 (PST3) in their role and so do not carry personal protective equipment, as may be the case for permanent

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<sup>6</sup> A Tensabarrier is a brand-named retractable safety barrier used in airport queuing management systems.

<sup>7</sup> Presenters are staff supplied by the airport provider to direct eligible passengers to the gates and help passengers use them.

<sup>8</sup> [A short inspection of Border Force queue management at Birmingham Airport based upon onsite observations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1000000/a-short-inspection-of-border-force-queue-management-at-birmingham-airport-based-upon-onsite-observations.pdf)

Border Force officers. This affects officer safety and the ability, if they are not carrying a radio as was often observed, to communicate with their colleagues. The use of seasonal workforce staff, who are not as highly trained as full-time Border Force officers, demonstrates a lack of priority given to the role of the roving officer.

- 5.14** At Stansted, despite the roving officer being better positioned than those at Luton, they were still engaged in queue management. While the officer was helpful to arriving passengers, this inevitably distracted them from their core safeguarding and border security duties. Senior management told inspectors that they had communicated to staff the importance of not becoming involved in queue management and of positioning themselves away from the front of the queue to make sure they are not distracted by other tasks.
- 5.15** During the period of observation at Stansted, there were frequent short outages of the gates meaning that passengers were unable to use them for intermittent periods of a few minutes. Inspectors observed that these outages were proactively and effectively managed by the duty BFHO, working in partnership with airport presenters, so that disruption was minimised. The roving officer played a key role in relaying messages to the presenters from the BFHO in the watchhouse and monitoring officers, which assisted the presenters in managing the queue. While this demonstrated effective engagement, it did again distract the roving officer from their core safeguarding duties.

## Deployment

- 5.16** Only one roving officer was deployed during the periods observed by inspectors at each port. This was noted even in the case where the arrival halls were very busy, with multiple queues for different cohorts of passengers near each other, and with up to 30 gates open at Stansted. This is contrary to Border Force policy recommendations, which state that “where there are more than ten e-Passport gates, it is recommended that two or more roving officers are deployed”.
- 5.17** ICIBI’s 2021 inspection report made a recommendation to ensure that when ten or more gates are in operation, sufficient resources are available to allow at least two roving officers. The Home Office stated that: “Decisions about the deployment of staff and technology will always be subject to tactical assessments by managers on the ground.”
- 5.18** At Luton, support for the PCP, including the roving officer, was provided by an Operational Support Officer (OSO), who acted as a floor-walking support function. The OSO had responsibility for maintaining a paper roster to ensure there was a roving officer present, however, this appeared to be being completed on an ad hoc basis by the OSO. Inspectors were told that a new policy had been put in place from 1 May 2023, that there must always be a roving officer present when gates were open, but when examining this roster, inspectors noted it was routinely left blank, or one officer was named at the first row with an arrow down the page. Inspectors did not observe the OSO or duty BFHO checking this roster to ensure a roving officer was consistently deployed. This meant that the purpose of the OSO was lost, and that assurance of the presence of a roving officer was not properly monitored.
- 5.19** At Stansted, the queue for the gates was particularly long and, at one point, stretched beyond the designated queuing area for the gates. Thirty gates were open, and three airport presenters were in attendance to assist passengers to use them. The presenters were proactive and managed the queue effectively. Despite the number of gates open and the size of the queue, only one roving officer was deployed throughout the period of observation.

- 5.20** Senior Border Force managers at Stansted told inspectors that the main driver for the deployment of just one roving officer was a local risk assessment performed by Border Force staff. Because the area around the gates could get busy and crowded, the risk assessment required the roving officer to be trained to PST3. They told inspectors that there was sometimes a lack of suitably trained officers on duty or immediately available. They also stated that the port was below its staffing headcount, which placed further pressure on available staffing resources.
- 5.21** Inspectors were told by staff that on some occasions the gates were in operation without any roving officer being present, which further contravened Border Force policy. This was confirmed by Border Force managers at Stansted, who said the issue had been recorded on their risk register for three consecutive months and operational managers had been reminded about the necessity to always have a roving officer in position.

## Communication

- 5.22** At Heathrow, inspectors observed the roving officer deploy without a radio. This was further exacerbated by the lack of a radio on the referrals and monitoring officers' desks. When asked by inspectors how the officer would communicate with their colleagues, they stated that they would either shout or approach them to pass on messages. Indeed, inspectors observed officers having to shout to one another. This left all those working in the gates system unable to communicate reliably with each other or with operational managers, posing a risk to safeguarding, border security, and officer safety.

Conclusions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dedicated and enthusiastic staff are routinely distracted from their core duties by the competing demands of queue management and providing customer service</li><li>• Managers and staff are dedicated to safeguarding but are let down by poor infrastructure and lack of resources, leading to gaps in roving officer provision</li><li>• A lack of radios hinders effective communication between the roving officer, other officers involved in staffing the gates, and operational managers. This increased the risk to officers' personal safety and to the security of the border</li><li>• The recommendation to have at least two roving officers operating when ten or more gates are open was not being followed at any port inspected</li><li>• The availability of sufficiently trained staff impacts the deployment of roving officers</li></ul>

## 6. The referrals officer

### Effective practice

- 6.1** A referrals officer was always in post at the three ports observed. This increased to up to six officers performing this role at busy times. Most officers observed were engaged, alert, and displayed a good understanding of the referrals officer role. They were largely able to explain clearly to inspectors the potential border security risks, the importance of identifying imposters, and of passengers attempting to pass through the border using false documents. They were also attuned to their duty to safeguard children, especially those travelling alone.
- 6.2** The referrals desks at Heathrow Terminal 4 are positioned with a direct line of sight of the gates queue and immediately next to the monitoring officer's desk. The layout affords the referrals officer a clear view of passengers queuing for the gates and allows face-to-face communication with the monitoring officer. The layout of the Primary Control Point (PCP) at Heathrow 4 means that the referrals officer is focused solely on referrals from the gates and does not have to deal with other passengers, air crew, or port staff, as they do at Luton.
- 6.3** Similarly, the referrals desk at Stansted means that officers do not have to deal with other arriving passengers. The desks are directly in front of the watchhouse, giving the duty Border Force Higher Officer (BFHO) a clear view of activity.

### Data

- 6.4** Referrals officers at Luton deal with a high number of passengers who are referred from the gates. This is in part due to many passengers arriving who have applied for European Union Settled Status (EUSS).<sup>9</sup> While passengers with EUSS are eligible to use the gates, they are often referred from the gates due to historic data relating to previous unsuccessful applications for EUSS remaining on Home Office systems. This can continue to cause a problem even when a passenger's subsequent application for EUSS has been successful. This large number of referrals means Luton often deploys up to four referrals officers as each passenger must be questioned, and often briefly detained, while the officer makes further enquiries. This can place further pressure on the queue, which is already long. Border Force staff at Luton said that this queue contained a lot of unhappy passengers, especially those who had been referred for other reasons, such as their passport not scanning properly.
- 6.5** At Stansted, inspectors similarly witnessed a high number of referrals of EU passengers from the gates, with most of these referrals relating to data on previous applications for EUSS. Border Force managers at Stansted told inspectors that the amount of casework they undertook had increased 400% since the UK's departure from the EU, and most cases were initiated from gate referrals. Stansted had six referrals officers in place during the period observed due to the high number of referrals.

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<sup>9</sup> European Union Settled Status (EUSS) is an immigration status for EU nationals settled in the UK. It was instigated after the UK's exit from the EU.

- 6.6** Inspectors noted from conversations with Border Force managers and staff that there would be far fewer referrals from the gates at both Luton and Stansted if historic entries on Home Office systems were deleted in a timely manner. This would free up the referrals officers to perform border security, imposter detection, and safeguarding work. While this issue is not universal, it is an important one, as the passenger profiles at Stansted and Luton mean it is an issue that causes a lot of disruption.

## Distractions

- 6.7** At Luton, the desks used for referrals are the first few in a row running perpendicular from the gates. Inspectors observed that this was a crowded and noisy environment. Referrals officers had to deal with passengers' queries, passengers using special assistance, airport staff, and aircrew, which, on occasion, led to stressful conversations between officers, airline staff, and customers.
- 6.8** At Stansted, the Controlled Waiting Area is located immediately in front of the referrals desk. Inspectors observed that although this was supervised by a dedicated officer, the amount of movement happening directly in front of the referrals desks was, at times, a distraction for the referrals officers.<sup>10</sup>

## Communication

- 6.9** At all three ports, referrals officers were not in possession of radios. Inspectors observed the negative impact this had on the officers' ability to communicate effectively with the duty BFHO in the watchhouse, the roving officer, and the monitoring officer, where they are positioned separately.
- 6.10** At Heathrow, inspectors observed a referrals officer who was not equipped with a radio or a desk telephone encounter a passenger who was the subject of an alert on Home Office systems. The officer did not inform the duty BFHO of the alert despite having to leave their desk to process it. It was left to the monitoring officer to use his mobile phone to contact the watchhouse to inform them of the alert and the need for the referrals officer to leave their post. Inspectors observed that eight minutes passed before a BFHO arrived at the referrals desk and asked the officers there "Did somebody call?". This clearly illustrated the effect a lack of communication equipment can have on the effective management of border security.
- 6.11** Similarly, inspectors observed the difficulty that referrals officers had in communicating with the roving officer due to the lack of a radio or other communications equipment. When inspectors asked referrals officers how they would communicate with the roving officer, they stated that they would shout across to them, wave at them, or the roving officer would approach them to relay a message.
- 6.12** At Stansted, the referrals officers were not equipped with radios or desk telephones. Because of the lack of radios or telephones, when the referrals officer had a query, they vacated their desk and knocked on the window of the watchhouse, positioned immediately behind them. At times, they handed passports over the top of the window. Inspectors considered this to be risky and unprofessional. Officers were observed failing to secure barriers at their desks when vacating them, increasing the potential for passengers to abscond undetected.

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<sup>10</sup> The Controlled Waiting Area is a discreet area adjacent to the arrivals control where passengers who are temporarily detained while Border Force officers (BFOs) conduct further checks, sit. They are guarded by a BFO.

- 6.13** The lack of basic communication equipment allowing messages to be passed between the referrals officer, monitoring officer, and roving officer, as well as the duty BFHO, undermines the ability of Border Force to effectively mitigate the risks associated with automation. It also has the potential to be a gap in border security that could be exploited, and has a detrimental effect on officer safety. Inspectors were not provided with an adequate explanation as to why this crucial but basic equipment is not mandated before officers are deployed.

## Imposter Detector Equipment

- 6.14** Imposter Detection Equipment (IDE) uses facial recognition technology to help BFOs establish whether a passenger is the rightful holder of their travel document. This technology is deployed in the form of a facial recognition camera at most PCP desks. The Border Force Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) states that referrals officers should “actively consider using the IDE”. Inspectors did not observe any use of the IDE at any of the three airports visited.
- 6.15** The lack of IDE use may be a consequence of the high number of referrals from gates which are as a result of poor Home Office data, rather than facial recognition mismatches. Nonetheless, inspectors were still surprised to see that it was not being used more frequently.

### Conclusions

- Referrals desks are well-positioned at Heathrow and Stansted. Referrals officers at all three ports were engaged and alert in their roles
- A high number of referrals from the gates relate to historic applications for EUSS. Passengers granted status may still be referred if an obsolete claim is held on Home Office systems
- Referrals officers need radios to communicate with other officers and Border Force managers. Current workarounds employed to mitigate against the lack of radios, such as waving, are ineffective and at times unprofessional
- The referrals desks at Luton are not positioned in a way that is conducive to effective referrals officer working. Passengers using special assistance, air crew, airport staff, and others pass through the PCP here, distracting them from the core purpose of the role



## 7. The monitoring officer

### Effective practice

- 7.1** At Luton, two monitoring officers were observed during the inspection visit. Both displayed a good awareness of their role and clearly articulated their focus on safeguarding and border security. Inspectors observed the monitoring officer participating in effective communications with their counterpart roving and referrals officers, working well as a coherent team.
- 7.2** At Heathrow, the two officers observed by inspectors both had a clear understanding of their roles and the part they played in safeguarding and border security. Officers at Heathrow have a clear and unobstructed view of the gates and the gates queue, which means they are not solely reliant on the monitors but have a live and real-world view.
- 7.3** At Stansted, the monitoring officers are stationed near the watchhouse. Monitoring officers also have the benefit of clear sight of the gates from their desks.

### Distractions

- 7.4** The previous 2021 ICIBI inspection<sup>11</sup> identified that Border Force's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), which stipulates that the role should not be performed for more than 30 minutes to maintain focus and staff wellbeing, was not being heeded. The SOP states:

“It is recommended that you do not operate the gates for more than 30 minutes of continuous, uninterrupted passenger processing. For operational reasons this may be longer but should not exceed one hour.”<sup>12</sup>
- 7.5** Border Force's SOP for monitoring time follows FRONTEX (the European Border and Coastguard Agency) best practice guidelines for monitoring officers, which recommends a maximum surveillance time of 30 minutes.<sup>13</sup> In the 2021 report, ICIBI recommended that the monitoring officer perform the role for a maximum of one hour. This recommendation was accepted by the Home Office in January 2022. At all three ports, officers reported to inspectors that they regularly performed the role of monitoring officer for more than one hour.
- 7.6** At Stansted, monitoring officers were observed performing the role for one hour and 45 minutes, and officers told inspectors that they are routinely rostered to do it for an average of 90 minutes.
- 7.7** At Luton, officers told inspectors that they regularly carry out the role for more than one hour due to how busy the airport is, which means that the officer scheduled to relieve them is often diverted to other duties. One officer told inspectors that they had been working as monitoring officer for almost two hours. In addition, inspectors viewed historical deployment

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<sup>11</sup> [An inspection of ePassport gates \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>12</sup> Border Force Standard Operating Procedures of ePassport gates

<sup>13</sup> [https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Research/Best\\_Practice\\_Operational\\_Guidelines\\_ABC.pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Research/Best_Practice_Operational_Guidelines_ABC.pdf)

lists covering the key positions, which demonstrated that deployments in excess of one hour were often the case.

- 7.8** It is important that Border Force managers can roster staff so that there is adequate flexibility for officers to work for the recommended time, take breaks, and there is extra resource available if the incoming officer is diverted to other duties. Without proper breaks and limits on duty times, officers are at risk of being less alert, posing a border security and safeguarding risk.

## Communication

- 7.9** At Heathrow, neither of the monitoring officers observed were carrying radios. They both stated that if they needed to contact the watchhouse, they would use the telephone on the desk and that if they needed to communicate with the roving officer they would shout or wave, or the roving officer would approach them if they needed to speak to each other. Monitoring officers have multiple outputs to monitor across one or two screens, so would be unable to keep looking for colleagues who needed to attract their attention.
- 7.10** As mentioned in chapter 5, inspectors observed the roving officer and monitoring officer managing a school party passing through the gates by shouting to each other across the PCP, due to the lack of radios. While this was a good example of the roving officer undertaking their duties, for the monitoring officer it appeared unreliable, indiscreet, and unprofessional.
- 7.11** At Stansted, inspectors noted that the three monitoring officers working at the monitoring station were sharing one radio and had to shout messages to each other within earshot of passengers, which could potentially compromise border security.
- 7.12** The monitoring officer desks at Luton are located behind and to the side of the gates. The location gives the officers a clear line of sight of ten gates, with the remaining five obscured as they are configured at a right angle. Given that there are 15 gates at Luton, they are operated by up to two Border Force officers.
- 7.13** At Luton, both monitoring officers were in possession of a radio, as were the roving officer and referrals officers, and inspectors observed that this meant they were able to communicate immediately with each other, with clear benefits to the effectiveness of their roles.
- 7.14** Overall, communications between the roving, referrals, and monitoring officers and their duty managers at the three ports visited was inadequate and offered little resilience. There is clear evidence of the benefits of radios and telephones, and the inherent risks in not having this basic equipment. Being able to communicate straight away with other parts of the gates system is critical where there are safeguarding, border security, and staff safety issues at stake.

## Reliability of gates

- 7.15** During the inspection at Stansted, it was clear that there were several technical difficulties with the gates. There were four outages in a two-hour period. One fault took two minutes to resolve, while the longest, affecting a bank of five gates, took approximately 15 minutes to fix. Border Force's SOP highlights that the monitoring officer is not a "machine minder" but is there to discharge the same responsibilities as on the manual control in relation to safeguarding, customs, vulnerability, and counterterrorism. Inspectors noted that gate reliability during the

period of observation distracted from this, as monitoring officers had to log faults and attempt to restart the gates systems.

- 7.16** Inspectors observed a gate develop a fault whereby the exit doors became stuck in an open position, creating the potential for a passenger to exit through the gate without undergoing any checks. A monitoring officer noticed this immediately, left their monitoring station when the fault occurred, intercepted the passenger, and checked with another monitoring officer whether the last passenger to exit this gate had been granted entry correctly by the system. Once satisfied the passenger had been processed accordingly, the monitoring officer returned to their station and the passenger exited the controls. While Border Force guidance advises the monitoring officer not to leave their station, inspectors noted the monitoring officer's swift response prevented a potential control breach of the border.<sup>14</sup>

#### Conclusions

- Officers are routinely performing the role of monitoring officer for more than one hour, which increases the risk of tiredness, reducing their effectiveness in monitoring the gates and potentially having a negative effect on staff wellbeing
- Officers take their role seriously and understand the role they play in safeguarding the vulnerable, and maintaining border security
- The lack of radios hinders the ability of officers to pass messages quickly and effectively to other officers staffing the gates system, or to operational managers. This lack of a failsafe method of communicating has the potential to undermine border security and staff safety

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14 A control breach is where the passenger is allowed through the ePassport gate in error.

## 8. Management information

- 8.1** Border Force managers told inspectors that the ePassport gate management information (MI) provided to them by the Home Office provides little insight into patterns of gate rejections, reliability, and document trends. A weekly report is produced by Digital, Data and Technology, highlighting the total number of passengers arriving through the gates and the number referred to the referrals officer. This gives very little information other than core numbers, and inspectors were told it was of little use to local teams.
- 8.2** All three ports had their gate systems migrated from the Warnings Index<sup>15</sup> to Border Crossing (BX)<sup>16</sup> in 2021. Before this system change, more comprehensive MI on the gates was provided to local Border Force teams. That data included transaction figures for individual gates and a breakdown of the referral categories, including how many referred passengers were:
- underage
  - of a nationality ineligible to use the gates
  - unable to pass facial recognition checks
  - using documents that the gates system could not read
  - using the gates incorrectly
- 8.3** Senior leaders at Stansted explained how this data would “inform conversations” with port operators about the provision of presenters. A senior leader at Luton commented how the previous MI could highlight issues with individual gates which could then be addressed. A senior leader at Heathrow told inspectors how a return to the provision of detailed MI would be beneficial as they “could do with seeing this for the 10- and 11-year-old trial”, the trial allowing children between the ages of 10 and 12 to use the gates.
- 8.4** Inspectors were shown how the BX system provides a reason code that can be viewed by referrals officers to explain why a passenger has been rejected from the gates. If these codes were recorded by the system in a form which could be analysed to provide more granular MI available to managers, better planning of resources or mitigating actions might be enabled.

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<sup>15</sup> Warnings Index was a back-end system, first introduced in 1995, which provided the passenger watchlist.

<sup>16</sup> Border Crossing is the replacement back-end system for Warnings Index and went live on 1 December 2020.

- 8.5** Inspectors considered that, if the Home Office engaged with Border Force managers to address their concerns about MI, improvements might be made to some of the issues raised in this inspection report.

#### Conclusions

- In all ports, managers expressed their frustrations with the quality of management information that can be extracted from Border Crossing for use by local Border Force teams. This limits the ability of Border Force in a variety of ways, such as workforce planning

# Annex A: 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 her behalf. The legislation empowers the Independent Chief Inspector to monitor, report on and make recommendations about all such functions 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 section 19D of the Race Relations Act 1976 (c. 74) (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 her 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 she 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.

## Annex B: 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 (Borders, Immigration and Citizenship System) ‘owner’**

- The BICS ‘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)

# Acknowledgements

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