



National Audit Office

Report

by the Comptroller
and Auditor General

Home Office

The Border Force: securing the border

Key facts

138

ports in the UK, France and Belgium staffed by the Border Force

7,600

the Border Force's full-time equivalent staff at 31 March 2013

£604m

the Border Force's 2013-14 budget

- 10 per cent** projected growth in the annual number of passengers arriving in the UK on flights between 2011 and 2017, from 106 million to 117 million
- 28 per cent** projected growth in air freight between 2010 and 2015, from 2.4 million tonnes to 3 million tonnes
- 6 per cent** reduction in full-time equivalent staff between April 2010 and March 2012, from 8,023 to 7,527
- 12 per cent** maximum budgeted increase in full-time equivalent staff from March 2013 to April 2014, to a ceiling of 8,477
- 81 per cent** of non-European passengers cleared within 45 minutes at Heathrow in April 2012
- 99.9 per cent** of non-European passengers cleared within 45 minutes at Heathrow in March 2013

Summary

The Border Force

1 The Border Force is responsible for immigration and customs controls at 138 air, sea and rail ports across the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium. It also operates customs controls at international parcel hubs in the UK. The Border Force is a directorate within the Home Office (the Department) and has a budget for 2013-14 of £604 million, around 60 per cent of which is for staff costs. Most of its remaining spending will be on overheads, such as property and IT, and border technology such as automatic passenger gates.

2 The Border Force's main objectives include preventing harmful individuals and goods entering the UK and facilitating the legitimate movement of individuals and trade. In addition, it seeks to protect and collect customs revenues and to provide excellent customer service. Border Force officers perform a range of duties, including checking the passports and visas of passengers entering the country and searching freight and baggage arriving to ensure that it does not contain illicit goods. More than 106 million air passengers currently arrive in the UK each year.

Creating and transferring the Border Force

3 The Border Force was established in April 2008 as part of the UK Border Agency, which was created by the merger of the Border and Immigration Agency with those parts of HM Revenue & Customs responsible for border security. On 1 March 2012, the Home Secretary removed the Border Force from the UK Border Agency and transferred it to the Department.

4 This transfer was designed to strengthen the Department's oversight of border security operations at a time when it had lost confidence in the UK Border Agency's management oversight of the Border Force and the information it was providing to ministers. This followed a report by the Independent Chief Inspector in 2012, who found that border controls at Heathrow and other ports had been relaxed without the necessary ministerial consent. Within weeks of being brought into the Department, the Border Force faced further criticism for the amount of time passengers had to wait to have their passports checked at key UK ports. This was a particular concern given the forthcoming challenge of managing an influx of passengers for the London Olympics and Paralympics during summer 2012.

Key findings

Addressing operational performance issues

5 The Department has increased its oversight of frontline border security operations. The Border Force was separated from the UK Border Agency because the Department was not confident that it had a management culture capable of responding to instructions. To address this, the Department developed an operating mandate setting out standardised working practices for Border Force officers, focusing on the mandatory passenger checks that they must complete. This helped institute a culture of compliance in the organisation, and almost 100 per cent of passengers now have full passport checks at the border (paragraphs 2.8 to 2.10).

6 Through prioritising and deploying additional resources, the Border Force improved queuing times during 2012-13. By April 2012, it became clear that the Border Force was struggling to manage queuing times at ports such as Heathrow. The Department responded by putting in place a new reporting mechanism on queuing times; for example, daily reports on breaches in queuing time targets were provided directly to the Home Secretary until January 2013, when they were reported weekly. The Border Force also brought forward the recruitment of more than 70 officers at Heathrow alone and has relied heavily on temporary staff, continuing to use these in ports such as Calais. The Border Force has also developed some longer-term solutions, including a real-time staff deployment model at Heathrow. Consequently, during and after the Olympics and Paralympics, the Border Force has exceeded its targets for passenger queuing times. During 2012-13, more than 99 per cent of sampled passengers from the European Economic Area (EEA) cleared controls within the target of 25 minutes, and more than 99 per cent of sampled passengers from outside the EEA cleared passenger controls within a 45-minute target. This contrasts with April 2012, when only 81 per cent of non-EEA passengers at Heathrow were cleared within 45 minutes according to Border Force data (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.7).

7 The Border Force has successfully responded to the prioritisation of full passenger checks and has reduced queuing times. However, it has not fulfilled all of its responsibilities simultaneously. Border Force officers reported that staff shortages and the requirement to prioritise full passenger checks while managing queuing times reduced the time they spent undertaking other duties, such as customs controls. During the first months of the 2012-13 financial year, the Border Force's performance was below target in some activities outside processing passengers, such as the number of entry refusals at the border, forgery detections, and seizures of cigarettes and counterfeit goods. The Department's internal auditors confirmed in April 2013 that the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics and wider resourcing issues have had an effect on the Border Force's ability to consistently resource secondary (customs) controls, and this has had an impact on the security of the border (paragraphs 2.10 to 2.13).

8 To date, the improvements the Border Force has made in secondary controls have not led to sustained performance across a full year. Performance has now improved in some, but not all, areas, although recent improvements such as in the seizure of counterfeit goods would not have been possible without specific initiatives designed to accelerate progress. There were periods in 2012-13 when the Border Force was performing significantly below its targets in a number of key areas (paragraphs 2.14 and 2.15).

9 Sustained improvements in the Border Force's performance will depend on strengthening the relationship between management and the workforce, which lacks a sense of organisational identity and is unclear about its purpose. Even though former customs and immigration organisations united in 2008 when the UK Border Agency was established, longer-serving Border Force officials typically identify themselves as being either 'ex-customs' or 'ex-immigration.' Under the leadership of its new director general, the Border Force is working to improve staff communications and is clarifying the values and behaviours it expects from all staff (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.22).

10 Automatic processing of passengers has the potential to allow frontline staff to be used more efficiently, but the Border Force is not maximising this opportunity. The Border Force has a target of processing 50 per cent of eligible passengers through automated gates, but currently only 31 per cent are processed this way. Although the Border Force has been using automatic gates for several years, it is only now planning how to locate these strategically (paragraph 2.23).

11 There are gaps in the Border Force's information about people and goods entering the country. Although it conducts checks on all passengers arriving by scheduled services, the Border Force needs to do further work to improve the coverage, quality and timeliness of advance passenger information. The Border Force does not receive advance passenger information about more than a third of passengers arriving in the UK, and what it does receive is largely from airlines arriving from outside the European Union. In addition, the Border Force receives far from comprehensive advance information about passengers arriving at UK ports by private plane, and frontline officers raised concerns that the information they do receive from these passengers could often be inaccurate. Private boats do not share advance information at all. Freight data, such as details of shipping containers arriving in the UK, can also often be of poor quality. The Border Force is taking action to address these gaps, such as by making it easier for private carriers to upload advance passenger information (paragraphs 2.28 to 2.30).

12 The Border Force is developing a more appropriate system for measuring queues. We found that queue measurement systems vary between ports and are based on a system designed for airports, which is unsuitable for car ferry ports. A recent internal audit report by the Department has also concluded that some methods of queue monitoring are unfit for purpose. While these inconsistencies may have an impact on the accuracy of queue figures, we do not consider that this fundamentally undermines the improvements reported by the Border Force for 2012-13. This is because the Border Force has introduced specific improvements to its queue measurement at Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick, airports where measures are taken more frequently and which therefore contribute substantially to trend figures. The Border Force is planning how this approach can be rolled-out to other locations (paragraphs 2.26 and 2.27).

Managing and overseeing the Border Force

13 The Border Force was slow to establish itself in its first year. Delays can partly be attributed to the Border Force's focus on the Olympics and Paralympics during 2012. It has also suffered from changes in leadership, with five different director generals or heads in post over the course of 18 months and a permanent leader appointed only in March 2013, a year after the Border Force was formed. The new director general streamlined the governance structure in May 2013, to reduce the number of boards and improve the clarity about where decisions were taken (paragraphs 3.8 to 3.9).

14 Bringing the Border Force into the Department focused its efforts primarily on border security, but beyond this it is not apparent how the Department will use this model to sustain improved performance. The Department views incorporating the Border Force as a model for both strengthening its oversight of border operations and improving performance and efficiency in these areas. It intends to replicate this model with the remainder of the now-abolished UK Border Agency, which also came back into the Department in 2013. However, the Department has not produced plans for using this structural change to improve performance and efficiency. Decision-making in key areas such as the number of checks to conduct on passengers remains firmly located with the Department (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.6 and 3.3 to 3.6).

15 The Border Force does not use its workforce as responsively as it could. The Border Force needs to deploy staff flexibly to respond to its competing demands, but is prevented from doing this as efficiently as it could by the terms and conditions many of its staff are signed up to. Almost a fifth of the Border Force's workforce is employed under terms and conditions that restrict working hours to fixed periods during the week, rather than allowing more flexible shifts. There are certain ports where the workforce has been more unwilling to sign up to more flexible terms and conditions. For example, at Heathrow in spring 2013, less than half the workforce was contractually obliged to work before 5 am without being paid additional benefits in kind, despite a significant number of long-distance flights arriving at that time. HM Treasury has made funding available to the Border Force to encourage increased take-up of more flexible terms and conditions during 2013-14 (paragraphs 3.12 to 3.14).

16 The Border Force has not established whether it has the resources needed to meet the demands the Department has placed on it. The Department has replaced risk-based checks conducted by frontline Border Force officers with full checks on all passengers. This increase in activity requires more resources, and the Border Force is recruiting more staff. Despite this recruitment drive, many ports we visited still had staff shortages. The Border Force is developing a detailed workforce planning model to project what resources it needs to fulfil all of its objectives while dealing with increased volumes of passengers and freight, but this is not yet complete. The Border Force needs to improve efficiency in the areas set out in this report, such as its use of technology and the flexible deployment of the workforce, before the Department can better understand the gap between its funding of the Border Force and the resources it needs to complete full passenger checks, while meeting all of the Border Force's other objectives (paragraphs 3.15 to 3.21).

Conclusion on value for money

17 Since it was separated from the UK Border Agency, the Border Force has met some important objectives: it has successfully implemented full passenger checks and it has reduced queuing times both during and after the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics. However, these objectives do not cover all of its responsibilities, and the Border Force now needs to show that it can apply the lessons learned to perform effectively on a sustained basis across the full range of its activities in order to provide value for money. The Department needs to fund it to do so.

Recommendations

- a Following a planned increase in recruitment, the Border Force should evaluate fully whether it has the right number of staff to cope with its workload.** In particular, the Border Force should assess its priorities and review whether planned additional recruitment will be sufficient to maintain performance across a range of activities, including passenger checks, managing queuing times and customs checks. In doing this, it should take account of the efficiency impacts of its new deployment model at Heathrow and the potential to replicate these at other ports, as well as the increased efficiency that can be achieved by improving its use of technology.
- b The Department needs to ensure that the Border Force's reporting measures are in line with its objectives.** Breaches in queuing targets are reported to ministers on a weekly basis, whereas other types of digression are reported only to a lower level of the Department. Although not intended, this has sent a strong message to the workforce that queues are more important than other aspects of performance. The Department should review its system of reporting to ensure that this aligns with the Border Force's new performance framework and provides it with a comprehensive and balanced view of results.

- c The Border Force needs to improve and standardise its queue measurement system.** The Border Force should review queue monitoring methods in different ports and develop an improved approach that is better tailored to the differences between airports and ferry ports, given that the existing layout of ferry ports makes it difficult for officers to identify the end of the queue.
- d The Border Force must encourage a culture of transparency in its workforce so that it is fully aware of actions taken as a consequence of prioritising one objective over others.** The combination of staff shortages, prioritising full passenger checks and managing queuing times often prevents Border Force officers from undertaking other duties. We observed a culture of fear preventing Border Force officers from reporting honestly about the consequences of this. The Border Force should encourage frontline staff to report, without fear of personal consequences, any instances where a focus on one priority, for example managing queues, has led to them being unable to fulfil other duties.
- e The Border Force needs to instil a sense of urgency in all aspects of workforce modernisation, and put greater effort into raising the morale of its officers.** The Border Force should complete its workforce planning and act quickly on measures to improve workforce morale and engagement. While in the short term morale may be affected by further changes to terms and conditions, the Border Force needs to prioritise the roll-out of annualised hours working so that it has a more responsive and flexible workforce for the longer term.
- f The Border Force needs to develop its intelligence on passenger and freight arrivals.** The Border Force should work with industry stakeholders to prioritise obtaining advance passenger information for flights arriving in the UK, and for passengers arriving by private plane or boat. The Border Force also needs to work with carriers to improve the quality of freight information.