National Audit Office

The UK border

Issues and challenges for government's management of the border in light of the UK's planned departure from the European Union

Foreword

This publication draws on our audits of government's management of the UK border. It provides Parliament with insights on the issues and challenges of managing the border.

It raises specific challenges for border management that could arise as the UK prepares to leave the European Union (EU) in 2019. It does not seek to evaluate the government's progress in preparing for EU Exit.

What does this publication include?

In this publication we set out how government works at the border and our views on the challenges that it needs to tackle to manage the border effectively.

There are four parts to this publication.

Part One describes the UK's border. We show that the border is a complex concept and is more than the traditional line on a map. We also show that the border can be crossed at many locations, and under a wide array of circumstances.

Part Two sets out the main organisations and activities involved in border management. We describe government's overarching goals for border management and set out high level process flows.

Part Three brings together our view of the issues and challenges to consider in managing the border. To inform this part, we reviewed previous reports written by the National Audit Office (NAO) dating back to 2001 and synthesised relevant findings.

Part Four looks ahead to the UK's departure from the EU and sets out some key implications for government. We highlight existing challenges to border management and describe a number of existing border-related programmes. We then look ahead to the implications for border management that might arise from the UK's departure from the European Union.

Executive summary

Border management is fundamentally important to national security, effective trade, tourism, well-managed migration, healthy communities and the environment. How well the government manages the UK's border is seen as an important test of the success of the UK's transition to a new relationship with Europe and the rest of the world after it leaves the European Union (EU) in March 2019. It is in this context that we have produced this publication.

Issues in border management

As government's auditors, we have set out the findings of our previous work to help inform Parliament and key stakeholders. We have reported on a number of long-standing issues in border management that could create challenges as the UK leaves the EU.

Drawing from our analysis of NAO reports dating back to 2001, we have identified a range of themes relating to border management. We have found that the government's overall approach to border management has been stable over this period. We have also found that government is using data better and has had some success in improving services.

However, there have been some significant weaknesses, major contract disputes and high profile failures in border management. The most notable failure was the E-borders programme, but other programmes have also delivered less than planned. In 2017, the government still uses outdated technology, some border processes remain manual and there are significant gaps in data. In many respects, people working at the border manage in spite of these weaknesses but, even here, recruiting, retaining and deploying people in the right border roles remain difficult.

Existing challenges

Looking forward, we have identified a range of challenges that the government faces as it implements a new border management regime from March 2019, most of which will arise regardless of EU Exit. The government may have to manage:

- an increase in border crossings, consistent with a trend to more mobility;

- an environment characterised by increasing and complex security threats;

- rising citizens' expectations and the test of new, digital ways of working; and

- the challenge of managing within constrained resources.

New challenges brought by EU Exit

The UK and the EU are currently negotiating the UK's exit from the EU and the new relationship that will apply from March 2019. Like others, we therefore do not know the details of the border management regime that will apply from then. We know that EU Exit may bring complex new challenges. The number of decisions that have to be made over whether to permit people and goods to cross the border could increase significantly (potentially 230% and 360% respectively) through the need to make decisions on traffic from the EU. It may require bespoke processes for managing the land border with Ireland and the replacement of (or significant changes to) border services currently provided by European member states.

Our previous work shows that some changes to border management processes cannot be made without significant lead times and their successful implementation may require action from many parts of government and industry. The government will therefore need to make reasonable planning assumptions and take action where necessary to allow the border to be managed effectively from March 2019.