



National Audit Office



REPORT

The asylum and protection transformation programme

Home Office

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National Audit Office

The asylum and protection transformation programme

Home Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

8 June 2023

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Key facts

£3.6bn

estimated spend on asylum support in 2022-23 (unaudited at time of publication)

173,000

people waiting for an initial decision on their asylum claim at the end of March 2023

£15.4bn

expected benefits from the transformation programme by 2031-32, coming from faster processing of asylum claims and reducing the use of hotels

£430 million expected cost of the transformation programme to the end of 2031-32, the period over which the Home Office is appraising it

1,310 average number of asylum decisions made each week during April 2023

2,200 number of decisions, on average, needed each week for the remainder of the year to clear the legacy backlog by December 2023

350 average number of additional beds in dispersal accommodation for people seeking asylum needed each week to meet the programme's expectations

48 average number of additional beds each week in dispersal accommodation in the 12 months to the end of April 2023

Amber-red the Home Office delivery confidence for delivery of the transformation programme in April 2023, meaning it was 'in doubt, with urgent action required and possible delays to delivery'

Summary

- 1** The Home Office is responsible for asylum and protection in the UK, including ensuring compliance with the UK's legal commitments. It is responsible for processing claims and supporting people seeking asylum who are destitute, by providing financial support and accommodation.
- 2** People can stay in accommodation provided and funded by the Home Office until it makes a final decision about their claim. This can be 'dispersal' accommodation in residential areas or hotel accommodation where suitable alternatives are not available. At the end of March 2023, around 173,000 people (relating to about 134,000 asylum claims) were awaiting an initial decision, with the Home Office providing accommodation for around 109,000 of them.
- 3** The percentage of asylum applications that took more than six months to process has been generally increasing since 2018. At the end of March 2023, almost 129,000 (75%) people had waited more than six months for an initial decision, compared with 43% at the end of March 2017 and 61% at the end of March 2020. A report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration found that it took on average nearly 15 months to reach an initial decision in 2021, and longer for unaccompanied children.
- 4** The Home Office spent approximately £3.6 billion on asylum support costs in 2022-23, nearly double the amount in 2021-22 and £2.2 billion more than the Home Office's funding for its Asylum and Protection Group. This has created pressure on the overall Home Office budget. Some of the costs associated with supporting refugees and asylum seekers qualify as Official Development Assistance (ODA), and the amount the government spends on ODA is around 0.5% of gross national income, so the increased spending on asylum also affects the funding available to support development overseas. The largest element of asylum support cost is accommodation. In 2022-23, the Home Office spent about £2.28 billion on hotels.

5 The Home Office has announced a series of policy changes, which it believes will improve the cost and fairness of the asylum system, including:

- **the New Plan for Immigration and Nationality and Borders Act:** The Home Office launched the New Plan for Immigration in March 2021 and set out a new framework for asylum decision-making, including treating people seeking asylum differently depending on how and when they arrived in the UK. This became law on 28 April 2022 through the Nationality and Borders Act, which then came into effect from 28 June 2022. Under the Act, the Home Office treats claims as ‘inadmissible’ if a person seeking asylum was previously present in, or had a connection to, a third country the Home Office considers safe. The Home Office does not have to consider inadmissible claims, but will consider them if it is ‘unlikely’ the person can be removed to a safe third country within a ‘reasonable’ period of time. The Home Office refers to claims received before 28 June 2022 as ‘legacy’ claims. Where we refer to ‘newer’ claims, we are referring to claims received after this date. These newer claims are dealt with under the Nationality and Borders Act;
- **the Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda:** In April 2022 the Home Office announced the Migration and Economic Development Partnership, which allows asylum claims that are deemed ‘inadmissible’ to be processed in Rwanda. From January 2022, individuals arriving in the UK via specific routes, for example those arriving by small boats from across the English Channel, can be considered for removal. As of May 2023, the Home Office has not removed anyone to Rwanda. There are ongoing legal challenges to the policy;
- **the Prime Minister’s statement on ‘illegal migration’:** In December 2022, the Prime Minister made a statement to Parliament which included an expectation that the Home Office would “abolish the backlog of initial asylum decisions” by the end of 2023. He also said that the use of hotels to house people seeking asylum must end; and
- **the Illegal Migration Bill:** In March 2023, the Home Secretary introduced the Illegal Migration Bill to change the law to allow the detention and removal of those arriving to the UK via routes deemed to be illegal, including those arriving via small boats from a third country the Home Office considers safe.

6 Alongside these policy changes, the Home Office started developing the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) in 2021. The Programme's vision is to create a system "that is fair, supportive and efficient, where decisions made are right first time and customers in need of protection receive it quickly, and all are treated with dignity and respect". It has four core objectives: improving the customer journey; improving working experience; improving public and partner trust; and creating a flexible, sustainable and efficient asylum system. The Home Office intends to achieve these objectives in part by increasing the speed of processing asylum claims and the quality of decisions, and increasing the supply of dispersal accommodation. The Home Office expects the Programme to cost around £430 million and achieve savings of £15 billion in the 10 years to 2032.

7 This report examines the Home Office's progress in delivering the asylum and protection transformation programme. The report does not evaluate the wider policy changes, but it does discuss the potential impact of the Programme on parts of the wider asylum system. We consider the wider asylum system to include any parts of the Home Office and other government organisations that a person who has applied for asylum may need to interact with. The report sets out:

- the scale of the challenge in the asylum system, and the Home Office's plans to transform it (Part One);
- the risks to achieving the benefits of the Programme (Part Two); and
- progress to date in delivering the Programme (Part Three).

Key findings

Risks of delivering the asylum and protection transformation programme

8 The Home Office plans to reduce its own costs by reducing the time it takes to make asylum decisions, but this will create pressures in other parts of the wider asylum system. The Programme aims to increase the speed at which decisions are made, which means the Home Office will be granting and refusing more claims per month than before the Programme, as it works through the backlog. By making decisions on asylum claims more quickly, the Home Office will pay for accommodation and support costs for shorter periods of time for each person seeking asylum. However, it may also increase pressure elsewhere. Specific pressures will be felt around:

- **appeals:** People who are refused asylum by the Home Office can appeal the decision in immigration and asylum tribunals, administered by HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS). The increased number of refusals brought about by more decisions being made each week is likely to increase the number of appeals. Those who would otherwise be destitute can claim support with accommodation and living expenses until the outcome of their appeal is decided. The Home Office estimates the number of appeals in progress could quadruple to 75,000 between July 2022 and March 2025. The Home Office has agreed to provide funding for the first six months of 2023-24 to help HMCTS increase its capacity to hold immigration and asylum hearings by almost 50%. HMCTS's modelling suggests it will require additional capacity beyond this if the Home Office successfully meets its recruitment and productivity targets; and
- **removals:** Immigration Enforcement (part of the Home Office) is responsible for detaining and removing people whose asylum claims have been refused. The Home Office expects that the increase in asylum decisions per week brought about by the Programme will increase the caseload of people referred to Immigration Enforcement. It has told us it is recruiting around 1,000 additional caseworkers and related staff, representing a 20% increase on its overall staffing level, and developing two new removal centres. The Home Office estimates that only 0.4% of people referred to Immigration Enforcement are immediately suitable for enforced returns and the remainder will need additional casework before a return can be considered (paragraphs 2.3, 2.11 to 2.15 and Figure 11).

9 The business case for the Programme is based on a range of highly uncertain assumptions, and only considers costs and benefits within the Asylum and Protection team. Investment decisions should take account of both costs and benefits, but measuring benefits is challenging in the asylum system because of the range of policy and operational changes and the complexity of the wider asylum system. The business case is based on assumptions about the number of people seeking asylum in the future. This is difficult to predict, particularly when considering how demand may change with respect to other policy changes and initiatives. But the Home Office has to date completed only limited analysis around how the economic benefits would change under different assumptions, for example about the number of people seeking asylum and the number of decisions caseworkers make. The business case does not consider wider costs to other areas of the Home Office, for example the costs of more detentions and removals, or those faced by local authorities or courts. Additionally, it does not include any benefits from quicker decisions allowing people seeking asylum to move into work and contribute to the economy. The Home Office plans to include more analysis around how the economic benefits could change, and more information about the impact on the wider asylum system when it updates its business case in summer 2023 (paragraphs 2.4 and 2.5 and Figure 9).

10 The Home Office has not been able to reduce the risks to the Programme. In April 2023, the Home Office gave the Programme a delivery confidence of amber-red, meaning it was ‘in doubt, with urgent action required and possible delays to delivery’. Many risks identified by the Home Office have remained high. These include demand for accommodation exceeding supply, inconsistent and incomplete data affecting reporting of progress against Programme plans, staffing capacity in parts of the Home Office that need to support the Programme, and a shifting policy environment (paragraphs 2.9, 2.10 and 3.4).

Progress in delivering the asylum and protection programme

11 In line with its current plans, the Home Office has prioritised reducing the backlog of outstanding asylum claims and reducing hotel use, and is developing work around its other Programme objectives. Senior staff described how pressure to deliver on short-term priorities made it hard to focus on the longer-term strategy. The business case for the Programme acknowledged that projects supporting some objectives, including those on improving the experience of people seeking asylum, are less well-developed. The Home Office does not routinely monitor progress against the core objectives of the Programme such as improving working experience for caseworkers, improving public and partner trust and improving the experience of people seeking asylum. Instead, it focuses on measures of decisions, caseworker activity and accommodation. It is commissioning a broader evaluation of the Programme, and expects to have interim findings by December 2023 (paragraphs 1.11, 2.4, 2.7 and 2.10 and Figure 7).

12 By the end of April 2023, around 138,000 asylum claims were awaiting an initial decision. The Home Office is starting to reduce the backlog of 'legacy' claims, from more than 100,000 at the beginning of July 2022 to about 77,000 by the end of April 2023. However, to achieve this it has decided to abandon its ambition to make decisions on 'newer' claims within six months, meaning the backlog of 'newer' claims is growing. The Home Office estimates the number of 'newer' claims awaiting a decision will increase from almost 61,000 in April 2023 to around 84,000 by the end of December 2023 (paragraphs 3.13 and 3.14 and Figure 13).

13 The Home Office is increasing the number of asylum caseworkers but only around one-fifth of those deciding claims are fully trained and working independently. The Home Office will only clear the backlog if it can recruit and retain sufficient fully effective caseworkers. The Home Office planned to have around 1,350 full-time equivalent caseworkers by April 2023 (up from 800 in April 2022) with 62% making decisions. By April 2023, it had around 1,270 full-time equivalent caseworkers, but only around 50% were deciding claims, and only around 140 of those deciding claims were fully trained and working independently. It can take six months to train a caseworker to be effective in their role so retaining staff is critical. The Home Office has reduced annual turnover of caseworkers from 46% in March 2022 to 25% by April 2023, in part by introducing a retention allowance (paragraphs 3.5 to 3.8 and Figure 9).

14 The Home Office has nearly doubled the number of asylum decisions it makes each week from about 690 in July 2022 to about 1,310 in April 2023. The Home Office expects that average weekly decisions will increase over the rest of 2023. Based on its current progress, we estimate that to clear legacy claims by December 2023, it needs to make an average of 2,200 decisions per week from May 2023. As part of its efforts to increase decisions, the Home Office has simplified processes for specific cohorts of people seeking asylum, such as the five countries where claims are most likely to be granted. It has also developed a separate process for claims from people from Albania, as the government states it is a safe country. While these processes have assisted the Home Office to increase the number of asylum decisions, it is not clear whether these improvements will be replicable for other groups with different characteristics (paragraphs 3.11 to 3.13 and Figures 12 and 13).

15 The Home Office is failing to secure enough accommodation to end the use of hotels for people seeking asylum. To reduce its use of hotels, the Home Office needs to work with local authorities to identify alternative accommodation. The Home Office expects to provide local authorities with around £283 million over the course of the Programme to incentivise them to make more accommodation available and to help fund the local services that people seeking asylum use. In March 2022 the Home Office set an ambitious target to find 500 additional beds a week by October 2022. At the time, the Home Office believed that this would allow it to stop using hotels by December 2023. It has since reduced its target to finding an additional 350 beds a week between April 2023 and March 2025, although in the year to the end of April 2023 it has only found an average of 48 additional beds a week. The Home Office now acknowledges that it is unlikely to achieve its accommodation targets and is looking at how it can increase its supply and identify different sources of accommodation (paragraphs 2.17, 3.17, 3.19 and 3.20 and Figures 9 and 14).

16 The Home Office has not effectively coordinated its range of work to identify asylum and resettlement accommodation, straining relationships with local authorities. Alongside the Programme, the Home Office is also seeking to identify sites for larger accommodation centres. However, the Home Office has not coordinated work across its own teams, which has created competition for limited sites and strained relationships with local authorities due to multiple approaches from the Home Office. The Home Office has recently developed a strategy to consider its accommodation needs more widely, and is looking at how it might bring all its accommodation activity together in a single portfolio. It has longer-term plans to introduce a 'place-based approach' to better coordinate accommodation services across government. More recently, the Home Office has made changes to its senior leadership team that affect responsibility for asylum policy and operations, which risks creating uncertainty about reporting lines (paragraphs 3.21 to 3.23).

17 The Home Office has been slow to implement its new casework technology, leading to duplicated effort. The new system, known as Atlas, is being delivered through a separate programme, which is behind schedule. At the time of our fieldwork, asylum caseworkers told us they had to use two systems to enter or update the same information. Weaknesses with the technology mean that the Home Office does not have all the data it requires to manage the Programme effectively. Delivering the new system will require balancing other priorities across the Home Office due to limited design and digital capacity (paragraphs 3.15 and 3.16).

Conclusion on value for money

18 The Home Office expects the asylum and protection transformation programme to reduce its costs by making asylum decisions more quickly, so it supports people seeking asylum for a shorter time; and by increasing its supply of dispersal accommodation, to reduce its reliance on costly hotels. It is making some progress, but it is a long way from meeting its ambitions. While the Home Office has nearly doubled the number of decisions made each week, it is not clear whether this is sustainable, or whether it will be enough to clear the backlog of older asylum decisions by the end of 2023. The Home Office is failing to meet its targets for securing accommodation in local authorities. It is not yet monitoring progress against its full set of objectives, but has recently assessed the Programme as amber-red risk for delivery. The Home Office is not on track to achieve the full benefits it expects of the Programme.

19 The changes the Home Office plans to implement through the asylum and protection transformation programme are necessary, but not on their own sufficient, to address the pressures in the asylum system. The changes will only work if all parts of the end-to-end asylum system can effectively manage the demands placed on them. Ultimately, to achieve value for money, the Home Office needs to better coordinate and manage the impacts of the full range of changes it is implementing. Failing to do this risks moving backlogs and cost pressures to other areas, rather than resolving them.

Recommendations

20 The Home Office should:

- a put in place a performance measurement system for the Programme that gives a comprehensive overview of performance across all of its objectives.** In particular, in its programme reporting, it should include measures of the flexibility and sustainability of the system, staff morale and retention, public and partner trust and the experience for people seeking asylum. This would allow those with responsibility for the Programme to make informed decisions around trade-offs;
- b build on its work to understand the wider impacts of changes to the asylum system by using this dynamically to inform decision-making within the Programme and more widely.** It should:
 - routinely collect the necessary data to understand the flow of demand through the wider asylum system, including local authorities, Immigration Enforcement and HMCTS, and the impact of changes on people seeking asylum;

- regularly update its analysis about the projected impact of the Programme and other policy changes on the wider asylum system and on the individuals moving through it; and
 - use this understanding to inform its decisions and share the analysis with other organisations affected by operational changes within the Home Office to support better planning in the wider asylum system;
- c clarify how the governance and oversight of the asylum system will operate within the Home Office.** Given the extent and speed of change in asylum policy and operations, and the challenges it faces securing accommodation, the Home Office needs to embed a structure that will allow it to coordinate multiple strands of activity and secure buy-in from all organisations involved. It should be clear about the implications of the move to a place-based approach, the reorganisation of its accommodation work, and recent changes in senior leadership responsibilities to provide certainty about accountability and reporting lines so that it can identify and manage any trade-offs.

Part One

Introduction

1.1 Asylum is a form of protection available to anyone at risk of serious harm in their home country, through conflict or through persecution for reasons such as race, religion, gender or political viewpoint. The UK defines an asylum seeker as someone who makes a claim to be recognised as a refugee to receive protection and assistance. To apply for asylum in the UK, someone must be physically present in the country. They can claim asylum at any point during a stay in the UK, but the Home Office states that people should claim asylum at the earliest possible opportunity at a 'designated place', which for most people is the first port of arrival (**Figure 1** on pages 16 and 17).¹

1.2 The Home Office is responsible for asylum and protection in the UK, including ensuring compliance with the UK's legal commitments.² It makes decisions on claims and provides support to people seeking asylum who are destitute.

1.3 The Home Office supports people seeking asylum who are destitute by providing a subsistence allowance of £45 per person per week and accommodation if they have nowhere to live.³ It places them in 'dispersal accommodation' in local authority areas, which private suppliers procure on behalf of the Home Office. If there is an insufficient supply of dispersal accommodation, the Home Office places people in contingency accommodation such as hotels.

1.4 When the Home Office grants asylum, the refugee becomes eligible to access services in the same way as other UK residents including those around work, benefits, education, health services and accommodation.⁴ If refused asylum, individuals can appeal the decision, which may be overturned, or are otherwise expected to leave the UK.

1 The government introduced designated places under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, and includes air and sea ports, asylum intake units and removal centres.

2 While the Home Office has initial responsibility for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, following initial processing that responsibility is passed to local authorities.

3 The Home Office makes additional payments in some circumstances, such as for families and during pregnancy.

4 The Home Office may choose to grant permission to work to people seeking asylum whose claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months. Where permission to work is granted, Home Office guidance states it should be restricted to jobs on the 'shortage occupation list' published by the Home Office.

1.5 The UK also operates three resettlement schemes for refugees, as well as country-specific routes for those fleeing from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Under these, people are granted protection before arriving in the UK.⁵ Resettlement is separate from the asylum process, and not all these resettlement routes grant a person refugee status. These resettlement schemes are outside the scope of this report.

Processing asylum claims

1.6 In the year ending March 2023, the Home Office received more than 75,000 asylum applications, relating to about 91,000 people (some claims are for more than one person). This is more than double the applications it received in the year ending March 2020 (**Figure 2** on page 18) and the highest number of claims since the year ending March 2003. In the year ending March 2023, around 44% of people who claimed asylum in the UK arrived by small boat.⁶

1.7 As demand has increased, the speed of processing asylum decisions has reduced (**Figure 3** on page 19). At the end of March 2023, around 173,000 people (relating to about 134,000 asylum claims) were awaiting an initial decision, of which almost 129,000 people (75%) had been waiting for more than six months (compared with 43% at the end of March 2017 and 61% at the end of March 2020).⁷ In July 2022, the Home Affairs Select Committee suggested that the slow processing of applications, brought about through antiquated IT, and high staff turnover has been a bigger driver of longer waiting times than the increase in applications.⁸ A 2021 report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration found that it took, on average, nearly 15 months to receive an initial decision, and longer for unaccompanied children.⁹ This is longer than some other European countries, with this average being seven months in Germany in 2021 and eight months in France.

5 Since early 2021, three resettlement schemes have been in operation in the UK: the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), which is open to vulnerable refugees who have been assessed and referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the Mandate Scheme, which resettles refugees who have a close family member in the UK; and the Community Sponsorship Scheme, which allows individuals, charities and faith groups to directly support refugees resettled in the UK. The Home Office considers these schemes to be 'safe and legal routes' to the UK.

6 The data used here do not include people who came to the UK via resettlement schemes.

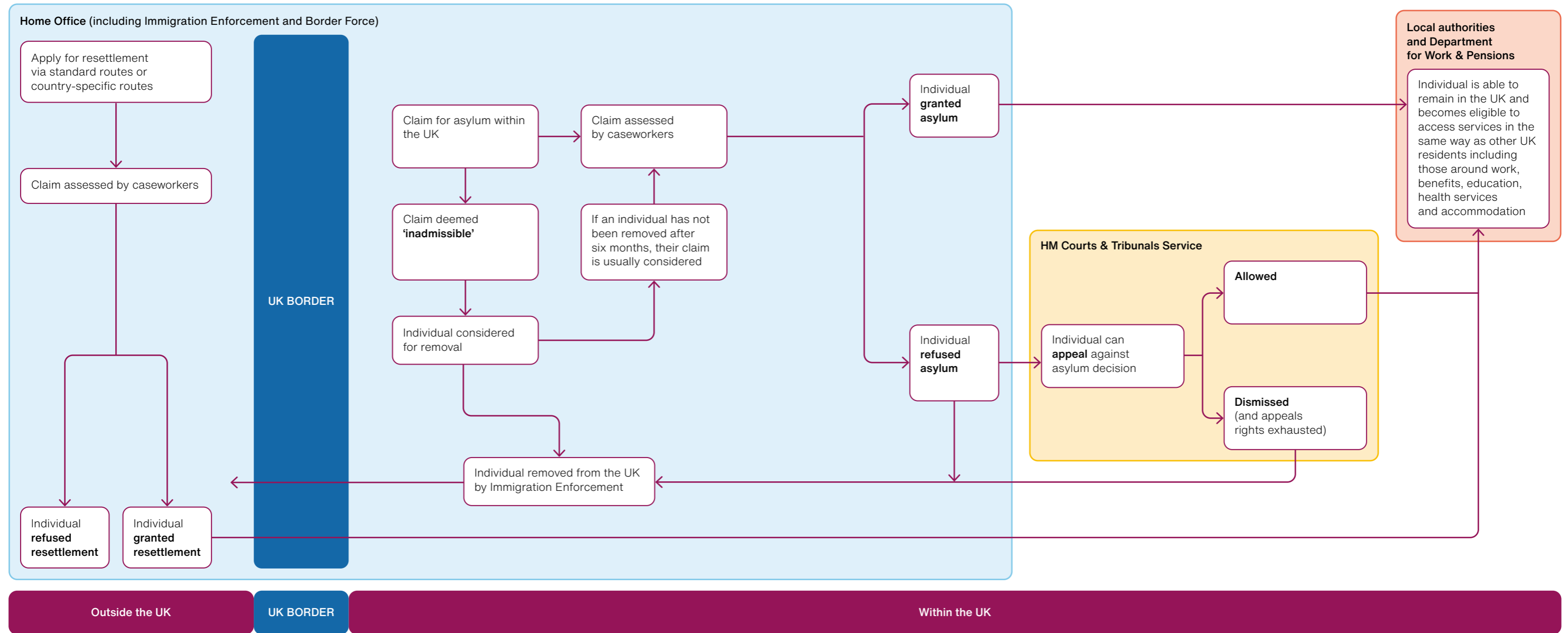
7 The data used here are from the *Immigration system statistics*, and are available here: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2023. UK Visa & Immigration Transparency Data, which the Home Office also publishes, shows that at the end of March 2023 around 66,000 asylum claims have been waiting more than 12 months for an initial decision.

8 House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Channel crossings, migration and asylum*, First report of Session 2022-23, HC 199, July 2022.

9 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, *An inspection of asylum casework (August 2020 – May 2021)*, November 2021, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1034012/An_inspection_of_asylum_casework_August_2020_to_May_2021.pdf, accessed June 2023.

Figure 1
The process for claiming asylum in the UK

The Home Office, HM Courts & Tribunals Service and local authorities all have responsibility in the wider asylum system



→ Process for a person claiming asylum or applying for resettlement

Notes

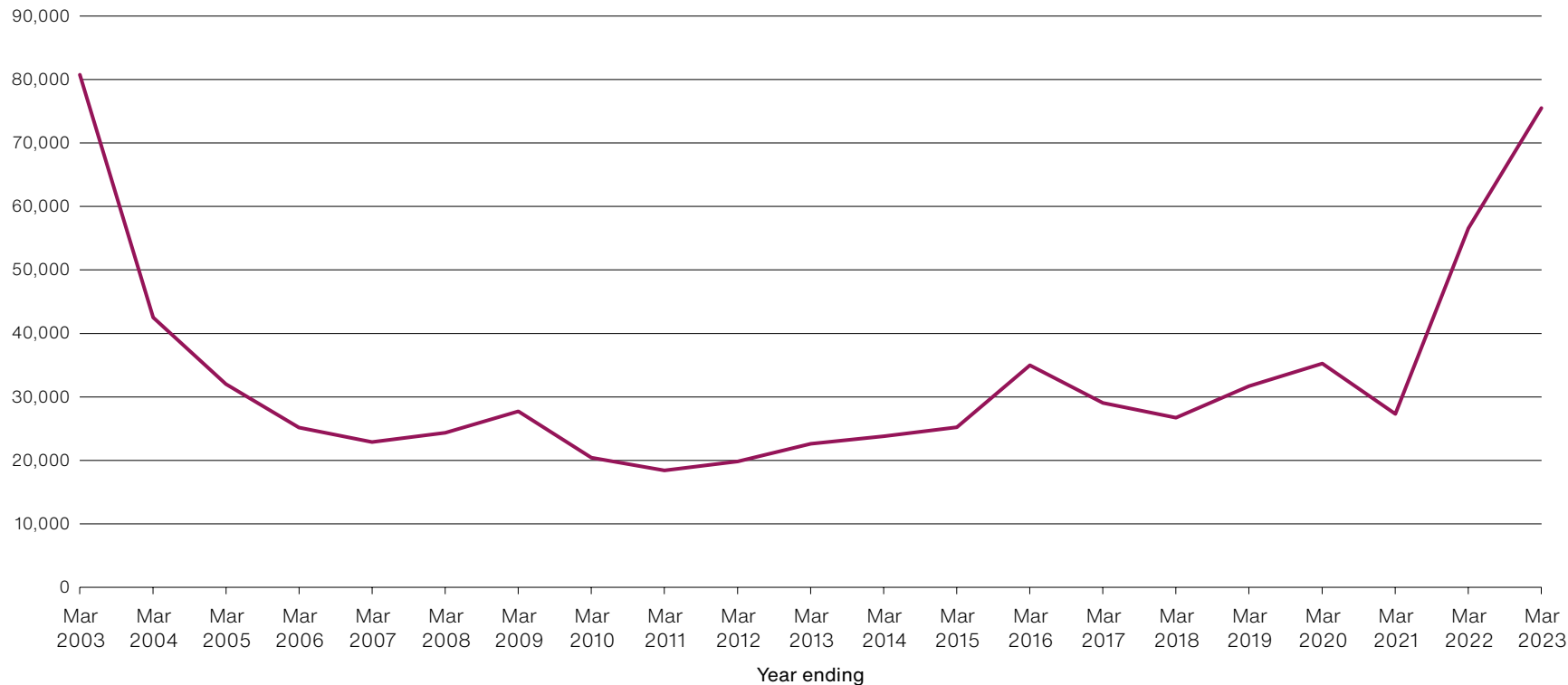
- 1 This is a simplified overview of the UK asylum process and not all changes introduced since 2022 are reflected here.
- 2 The Home Office may choose to grant permission to work to people seeking asylum whose claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months. Where permission to work is granted, Home Office guidance states it should be restricted to jobs on the 'shortage occupation list' published by the Home Office.
- 3 People seeking asylum who would otherwise be destitute can claim accommodation support from the Home Office until their appeals rights are exhausted.

Figure 2

The number of asylum applications lodged in the UK, from March 2003 to March 2023

In the year ending March 2023, there were more than 75,000 asylum applications (relating to about 91,000 people) lodged in the UK. This is more than twice the number of applications received in the year ending March 2020 and the highest number since the year ending March 2003

Number of asylum applications



Notes

- 1 The number of asylum applications lodged in the UK was highest in the year ending March 2003 (around 80,000), which was partly caused by conflict in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe and Somalia.
- 2 The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the number of people seeking asylum arriving via air routes.

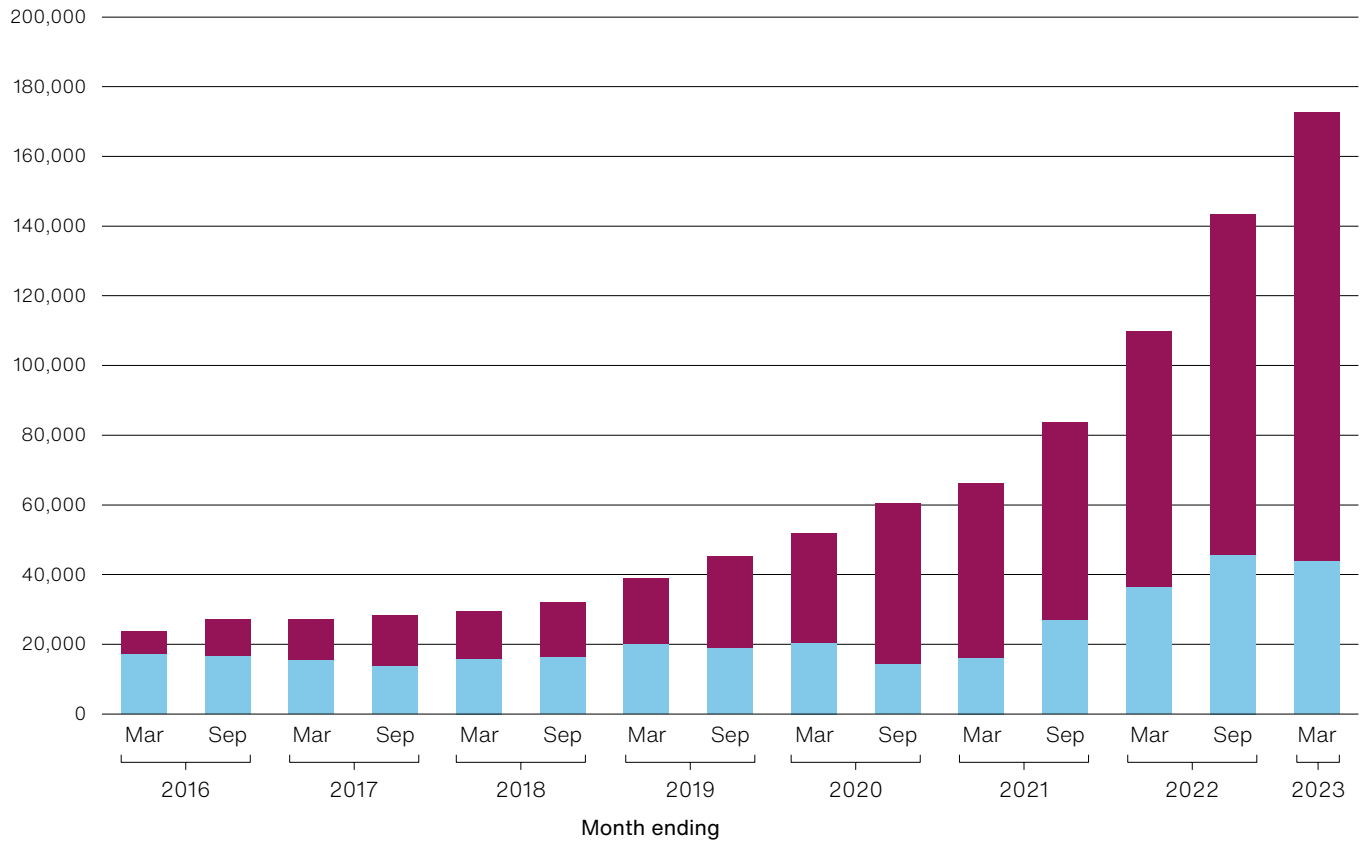
Source: National Audit Office analysis of *Immigration System Statistics, year ending March 2023*, available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.publishing.service.gov.uk%2Fgovernment%2Fuploads%2Fsystem%2Fuploads%2Fattachment_data%2Ffile%2F1156818%2Fasylum-applications-datasets-mar-2023.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

Figure 3

The length of time people claiming asylum wait for an initial decision, from March 2016 to March 2023

At the end of March 2023, around 173,000 people were awaiting an initial decision, of which almost 129,000 (75%) had been waiting for more than six months

Total number of people claiming asylum



- People claiming asylum waiting more than six months for an initial decision
- People claiming asylum waiting six months or less for an initial decision

Source: National Audit Office analysis of *Immigration System Statistics, year ending March 2023*, available at: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.publishing.service.gov.uk%2Fgovernment%2Fuploads%2Fsystem%2Fuploads%2Fattachment_data%2Ffile%2F1156820%2Fasylum-applications-awaiting-decision-datasets-mar-2023.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

The cost of the asylum system

1.8 The growing demand for asylum services, with more claims and slower processing, has increased the overall costs of the asylum system to the Home Office (**Figure 4**). The Home Office spent £3.6 billion in 2022-23 on asylum support.¹⁰ This was nearly double its spend in 2021-22, and £2.2 billion more than Home Office funding for its Asylum and Protection Group in 2022-23.¹¹ Unexpected conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine placed additional demand on support services. In particular, the demand for dispersal accommodation has outstripped supply, so the Home Office has increasingly used hotels as a contingency measure. At the end of April 2023, the Home Office was providing accommodation in hotels to around 48,000 people seeking asylum.

Figure 4

Home Office spending on asylum support, 2019-20 to 2022-23

The amount that the Home Office has spent on asylum support has increased in recent years, mostly through increased expenditure on hotel accommodation

Area of spend	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
	(£mn)	(£mn)	(£mn)	(£mn)
Asylum costs¹				
Hotel costs	Not available ²	209	922	2,285
Costs for other types of accommodation	290	409	349	432
Cash support costs	100	108	134	161
Other asylum support costs ³	80	88	101	167
Local authority dispersal grant	0	0	22	11
Other grants ⁴	269	333	334	547
Total⁵	739	1,147	1,862	3,603

Notes

- 1 The information presented shows how much the Home Office has spent on supporting people seeking asylum. It does not include costs for caseworkers making decisions on a person's asylum claim.
- 2 In 2019-20, the Home Office did not record hotel costs separately from other accommodation costs. Any hotel costs incurred in 2019-20 are included within the other accommodation costs for that year. The Home Office has told us that hotel costs in 2019-20 would have been very low.
- 3 Other asylum support costs also include travel for asylum seekers. For 2022-23 only, this also includes the costs associated with care workers and nurses for hotels accommodating unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 4 The other grants row mostly includes funding provided to local authorities to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 5 The information here is presented in a different way from the annual report and accounts. This information should not be expected to align with that which is published in the annual report and accounts, and we have not sought to audit the numbers presented here. The Home Office annual report and accounts for 2022-23 has not yet been audited, and so the spend on asylum support for the 2022-23 financial year should be seen as provisional.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office financial data

¹⁰ This figure is unaudited at the time of publication.

¹¹ The Home Office received £1.4 billion in funding for its Asylum and Protection Group in 2022-23, through the main estimates process. Funding to the Asylum and Protection Group includes the cost of the support provided to people who are seeking asylum as well as other items.

1.9 Increasing asylum costs also create pressure on the budget for Official Development Assistance (ODA). Certain spending to support people seeking asylum in their first year after arrival in the UK counts as ODA. As the ODA budget is around 0.5% of gross national income, the more the government spends supporting people within the UK, the less is available to support development overseas. A report by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) looked at the associated costs of UK aid to refugees in the UK and concluded that the short-term nature of the Home Office's response to finding appropriate and sufficient asylum accommodation has contributed to these increasing costs.¹² In 2022, around 30% of ODA funding was used to support people within the UK, compared with around 9% in 2021.¹³

Changes to the asylum system

1.10 The Home Office acknowledges that the asylum system is not working effectively and has introduced several policy changes to try to reduce costs and manage the demand facing the system (**Figure 5** on pages 22 and 23). These changes include the New Plan for Immigration, Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda. The Home Office has said that the aim of these changes is to increase the fairness and efficacy of the immigration system, deter illegal entry, and allow it to more easily remove from the UK people with no legal right to remain (see **Figure 6** on page 24). The changes also amended the 'inadmissibility' rules, whereby an asylum seeker who was previously present in or had a connection to a safe third country where they could have claimed asylum, could not claim asylum in the UK.¹⁴ These rules allow the Home Office to remove some people to a safe third country, providing any required agreements are in place.¹⁵

¹² Independent Commission for Aid Impact, *UK aid to refugees in the UK. A rapid review*, published March 2023, available at: https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/UK-aid-to-Refugees-in-the-UK_ICAI-review.pdf, accessed June 2023.

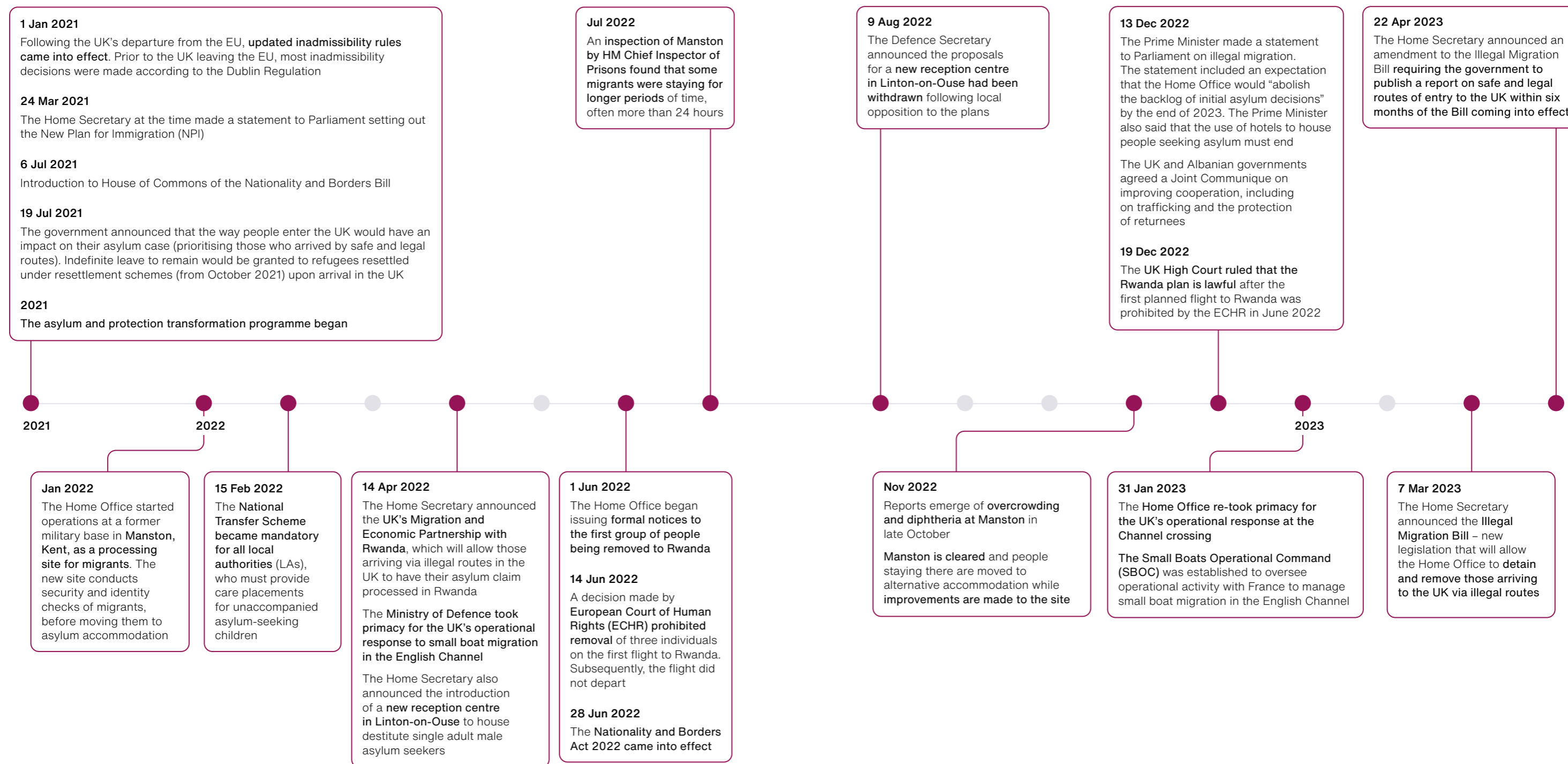
¹³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Statistics on International Development: Provisional UK Aid Spend 2022*, available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-provisional-uk-aid-spend-2022/statistics-on-international-development-provisional-uk-aid-spend-2022, accessed June 2023.

¹⁴ The Home Office defines 'safe' in this context to mean: "the removal of an individual would not breach their rights under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), including that they will not be sent onwards to another country in contravention of their ECHR rights."

¹⁵ The Home Office does not have to consider an inadmissible asylum claim, but if it is unlikely that removing the claimant to a safe third country within six months will be possible, the Home Office will consider processing their claim in the UK. From January 2021 to March 2023, around 55,000 people seeking asylum were identified for consideration of being inadmissible to the UK asylum process, of which 50% (nearly 28,000) were subsequently admitted for consideration of their asylum claim in the UK.

Figure 5
Timeline of policy and operational changes to the UK asylum process, from January 2021 to April 2023

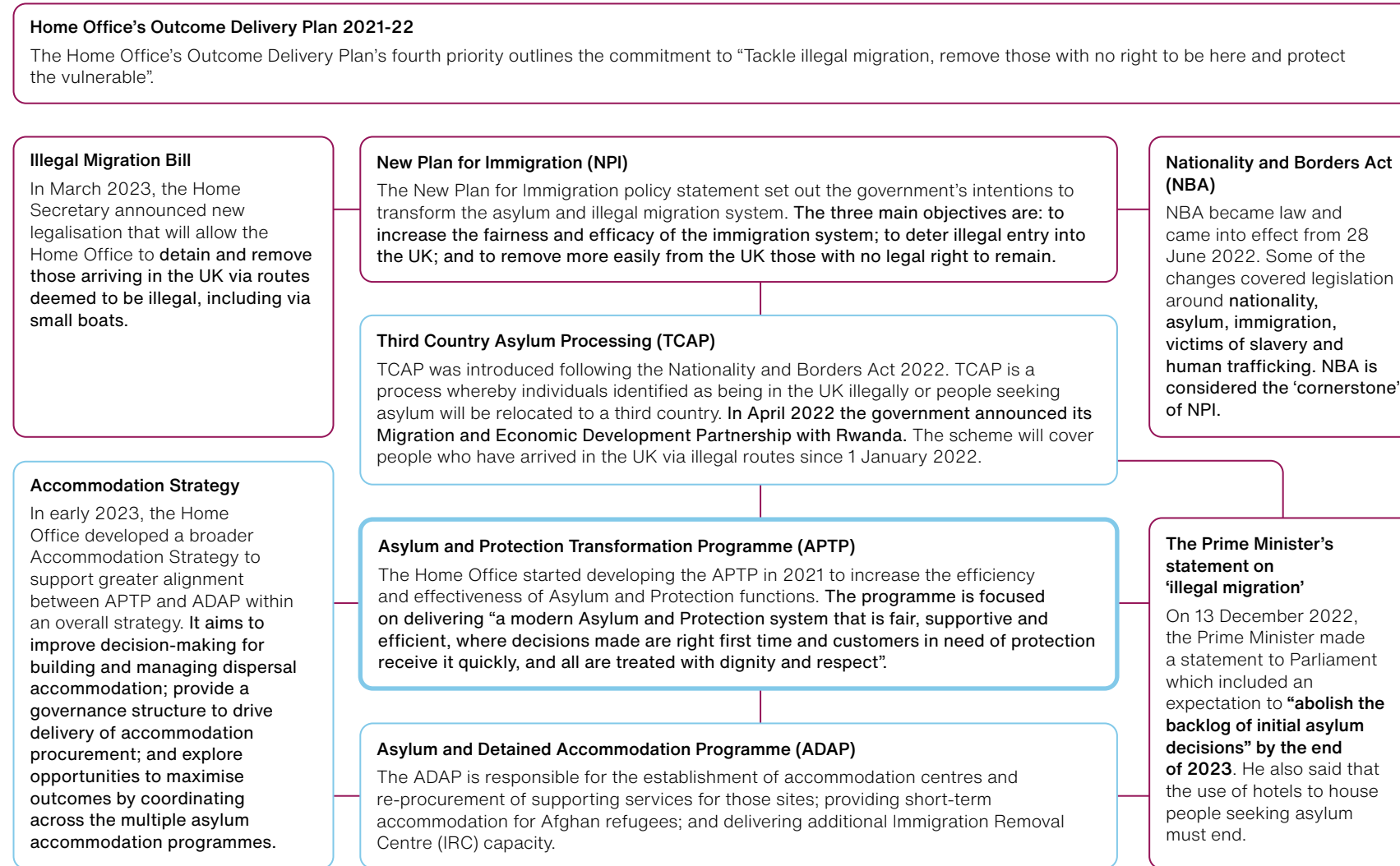
Since April 2022, ministers have announced major policies introducing new or amended rules to the UK asylum process



Source: National Audit Office analysis of public government announcements

Figure 6
The Home Office's plans to transform the asylum system, as of April 2023

The asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) is a part of wider Home Office plans to transform the asylum system



□ Policy □ Operational

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office documents

The asylum and protection transformation programme

1.11 Alongside introducing new policies, the Home Office plans to improve how the asylum system operates. Its asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) (Figure 6) aims to improve asylum claim processing and reduce the use of hotels accommodating people seeking asylum. The Home Office started developing the Programme in 2021 and expects to spend £426 million on its implementation by 2024-25, and £430 million by the end of 2031-32.¹⁶ The Programme's vision is to create a system "that is fair, supportive and efficient, where decisions made are right first time and customers in need of protection receive it quickly, and all are treated with dignity and respect". It has core objectives to make the system flexible, efficient and sustainable, to improve the experience for people seeking asylum and for its staff, and to increase public and partner trust. It has prioritised reducing the backlog of 'legacy' asylum claims and increasing its supply of dispersal accommodation, before undertaking further work on its other core objectives (**Figure 7** overleaf).

¹⁶ From 2021, the Home Office was conducting work to establish what the purpose and strategy of the Programme would be. In September 2022, the Programme received initial funding for an early version of its business case and, in March 2023, the Programme was formally accepted onto the Home Office Portfolio.

Figure 7

The asylum and protection transformation programme's objectives

The four asylum and protection transformation programme's (the Programme's) objectives aim to deliver the Programme's vision through to 2025 across three phases

Vision A modern Asylum and Protection system that is fair, supportive and efficient, where decisions made are right first time and customers in need of protection receive it quickly, and all are treated with dignity and respect.	Phase One: Stabilise (by March 2023) <i>'Enable the system to manage demand.'</i>	Phase Two: Digitise (by March 2024) <i>'Digitise what we do and how we do it.'</i>	Phase Three: Optimise (by March 2025) <i>'Build an intelligent and responsive system which delivers for the Home Office and its customers.'</i>
Objective One: A flexible, sustainable, efficient system A system that is capable of flexing to meet current needs, efficiently.	The backlog of claims starts to reduce and workflow is effectively triaged and prioritised.	Improved data to support forecasting and planning, and increased caseworker productivity with more decisions made per week.	Home Office can effectively manage peaks in asylum demand and deliver better value for money.
Objective Two: Customer journey optimisation A flexible and sustainable customer service process for every case we process and every individual we support.	Initial screening and questionnaires are improved and simplified.	Cases are increasingly digitised using different tools to support asylum seekers to view the progress of their claim.	Asylum seekers follow differentiated journeys, and receive the right support and decisions first time.
Objective Three: Strong partner and public trust Partner and public trust is rebuilt to deliver the right outcomes every time. Our relationships with partners are even stronger, enabling us to work together to support our customers.	Asylum seekers begin to be dispersed more fairly in accommodation across the UK.	Increased dispersed accommodation reduces reliance on hotels to accommodate asylum seekers. Public confidence in the asylum system improves.	An integrated and place-based approach allows the Home Office to quickly and fairly meet the needs of asylum seekers.
Objective Four: Improved colleague experience Our people are confident, motivated and inspired to lead and collaborate, and successfully contribute to high-quality outcomes for our customers. Our people are inspired by the critical work they do and understand clearly the value and transferability of their skills.	Caseworkers spend less time on initial assessment and triage due to improved screening. Some claims are auto-prioritised for decision-making.	Staff can access better training and welfare support. Caseworkers trained to use Atlas as a single system across Asylum and Protection.	Caseworkers have clearer career pathways and are rewarded for high-quality delivery.

□ Objectives
 □ Phase One
 □ Phase Two
 □ Phase Three

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office documents

Part Two

Achieving the benefits of the asylum and protection transformation programme

2.1 The Home Office expects significant benefits from its asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme). To maximise these benefits, the Home Office will need to successfully manage the risks of changing a complex system in a fast-moving policy environment.¹⁷ In this part we set out:

- the expected benefits of the Programme; and
- the risks that need to be managed to achieve the intended outcomes.

The expected benefits of the Programme

2.2 The Home Office expects the Programme to reduce the cost of supporting people seeking asylum by £15.4 billion up to 2032 (**Figure 8** overleaf). It seeks to achieve these savings by:

- making more asylum decisions, so that it reduces the number of people receiving support from the Home Office while awaiting a decision; and
- moving people seeking asylum out of hotels and into cheaper dispersal accommodation.

2.3 Making asylum decisions more quickly will reduce costs for the Home Office, because it provides a subsistence allowance and accommodation to destitute people seeking asylum. The Home Office stops paying for this support 28 days after a person receives their immigration status documents following a decision to grant them asylum, or 21 days after a decision to refuse asylum.¹⁸ Making decisions more quickly therefore reduces the amount of time that the Home Office is supporting people who seek asylum, and therefore reduces the cost.

¹⁷ National Audit Office, *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*, March 2021.

¹⁸ People refused asylum continue to receive support for longer than 21 days if the person seeking asylum appeals the decision made on their claim, if the Home Office accepts there is a temporary reason preventing their departure, or where their household includes a dependent child.

Figure 8

The costs and benefits of the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) to 2031-32

The Home Office expects to save around £15 billion in asylum support costs between 2022-23 and 2031-32

	(Costs) or saving between 2022-23 and 2031-32 (£bn) ¹
Programme costs	
Improving caseworking processes to make more decisions	(0.10)
Increasing dispersal accommodation	(0.27)
Managing the Programme	(0.06)
Total costs recognised by Home Office²	(0.43)
Expected savings	
Improving caseworking processes to make more decisions	9.20
Increasing dispersal accommodation	5.92
Digital tools to enhance productivity ³	0.28
Total expected savings from the Programme	15.41
Net expected savings from the Programme⁴	14.98

Notes

- 1 The numbers in this table have been taken from the Programme's business case, produced in February 2023. We have made slight presentational changes to aid understanding.
- 2 The total costs recognised by the Home Office include an adjustment for optimism bias that the Home Office applied to the costs of its caseworking improvements and its programme management. The Home Office did not apply an optimism bias to the costs to increase dispersal accommodation. The Home Office expects the vast majority of programme costs (£426 million) to occur by the end of March 2025.
- 3 The costs associated with the digital tools to enhance productivity are included within the costs shown for 'improving caseworking processes to make more decisions'.
- 4 The business case for the Programme makes adjustments to reflect the present value of future costs and benefits expected in the Programme. It is these adjusted amounts that are presented here.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of the Home Office's Programme business case and supporting documents

2.4 HM Treasury guidance states that programmes should assess the costs and benefits for the UK society as a whole, and they should not be narrowly focused on a particular department.¹⁹ The Programme's business case focuses on asylum support costs that the Home Office expects to avoid in the future, but does not consider any costs or benefits on the wider asylum system. Nor does it quantify all areas of costs and benefits from the Programme within the remit of the Asylum and Protection area of the Home Office.²⁰ The business case excludes any costs associated with employing caseworkers, assuming recruitment has already occurred. It also excludes benefits of deciding an asylum claim quicker and someone moving into work and contributing to the economy. The Programme also expects to deliver benefits around improving the experience for staff and for people seeking asylum. However, the projects which deliver these benefits are at too early a stage for the Home Office to quantify these costs and benefits.

2.5 The savings the Home Office expects to achieve from the Programme are heavily dependent on a range of highly uncertain assumptions (**Figure 9** overleaf). Predicting the number of people who seek asylum is difficult, especially given the uncertainty around the impact that wider policy changes may have. For example, the Home Office expected that by April 2023 it would remove 250 people each month to third countries, where their asylum claims could be processed. The Home Office has completed some sensitivity analysis and considered the impact the Programme would need to have to save the Home Office money. However, it acknowledges in its business case that it has completed only limited analysis of how the economic benefits would change under different assumptions about the number of people who arrive in the UK seeking asylum, and the number of decisions caseworkers make. The Home Office plans to incorporate new analysis on this in the next version of its business case for the Programme, which it expects to complete in summer 2023.

Risks that need to be managed to achieve the intended outcomes

2.6 The Programme has multiple layers of governance to support decision-making and provide oversight and challenge (**Figure 10** on page 31). The Home Office's Finance and Investment Committee oversees the delivery of the Programme and wider Home Office initiatives and approved the Programme business case in March 2023 to secure future funding. Since January 2023, there has also been a cross-government group working together on broader asylum accommodation plans, some of which sit within the Programme.

¹⁹ HM Treasury, *The Green Book: appraisal and evaluation in government*. Published 2022, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063330/Green_Book_2022.pdf, accessed March 2023.

²⁰ The business case referred to in this report is, unless stated otherwise, from February 2023. This business case was approved by the Home Office Finance and Investment Committee in March 2023.

Figure 9

Key assumptions from the asylum and protection transformation programme business case (dated February 2023)

There is uncertainty about many of the assumptions the Home Office makes in its business case for the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme)

Assumption	Detail on assumption	Analysis
Caseworkers make 2.5 asylum decisions per week from the end of May 2023	<p>More asylum decisions are expected to reduce the supported population.</p> <p>The Programme will increase caseworker weekly decisions from its July 2022 performance of 1.4 to 2.5.</p>	<p>Unclear whether the assumed increase in caseworker productivity can be sustained in the long-term.</p> <p>The Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) reported that there was an acknowledgement within the Home Office that publicly stated targets around productivity levels of caseworkers are not realistic.</p>
There are 1,350 full-time equivalent (FTE) caseworkers, and 62% are making decisions	<p>Recruitment sits outside of the Programme, and assumes there will be 1,350 FTE caseworkers regardless of the Programme.</p> <p>From April 2023, 62% of these would be making decisions.</p>	<p>By April 2023 only 50% of caseworkers were making decisions.</p> <p>The Home Office now plans to increase its caseworkers to 2,500.</p>
Home Office achieves 350 additional dispersal accommodation beds per week from April 2023 to March 2025	<p>Additional dispersal accommodation beds will reduce the number of people staying in hotels.</p>	<p>No evidence to support the view that the private rented sector can meet demand for 350 additional dispersal accommodation beds per week.</p> <p>The Home Office assumed there would be 100 additional beds a week even without the Programme, although it has only increased supply by an average of 48 beds per week in the 12 months to the end of April 2023. The Home Office is considering reducing its target number of additional dispersal beds.</p> <p>The IPA found that there was an acknowledgement within the Home Office that publicly stated targets around dispersal accommodation are not realistic.</p>
Hotel and dispersal accommodation costs remain at current levels	<p>The price of accommodation determines the savings the Home Office makes by moving somebody from a hotel into dispersal accommodation.</p> <p>Dispersal accommodation and hotel accommodation cost will stay constant at £14.41 and £145 a night per person.</p>	<p>Due to strong competing demand, the price at which dispersal accommodation bedspaces can be procured is highly uncertain and the Home Office acknowledges that it is likely there will be upward pressure on this rate.</p>
The impact of policy changes in the asylum system will act to reduce the supported population	<p>The Programme assumes the 'New Plan for Immigration' and changes to allow third country asylum processing will reduce how many people seek asylum in the UK.</p> <p>The Home Office assumed 250 people seeking asylum would be removed to have their claims processed in a third country each month.¹</p>	<p>It is difficult to predict how many people will seek asylum in the UK, especially given the changes to the asylum system.</p> <p>As at June 2023, no people seeking asylum have been removed to third countries to have their claims processed.</p> <p>The Permanent Secretary sought a ministerial direction on the basis of insufficient evidence to demonstrate the deterrent effect of third country asylum processing.</p>

Note

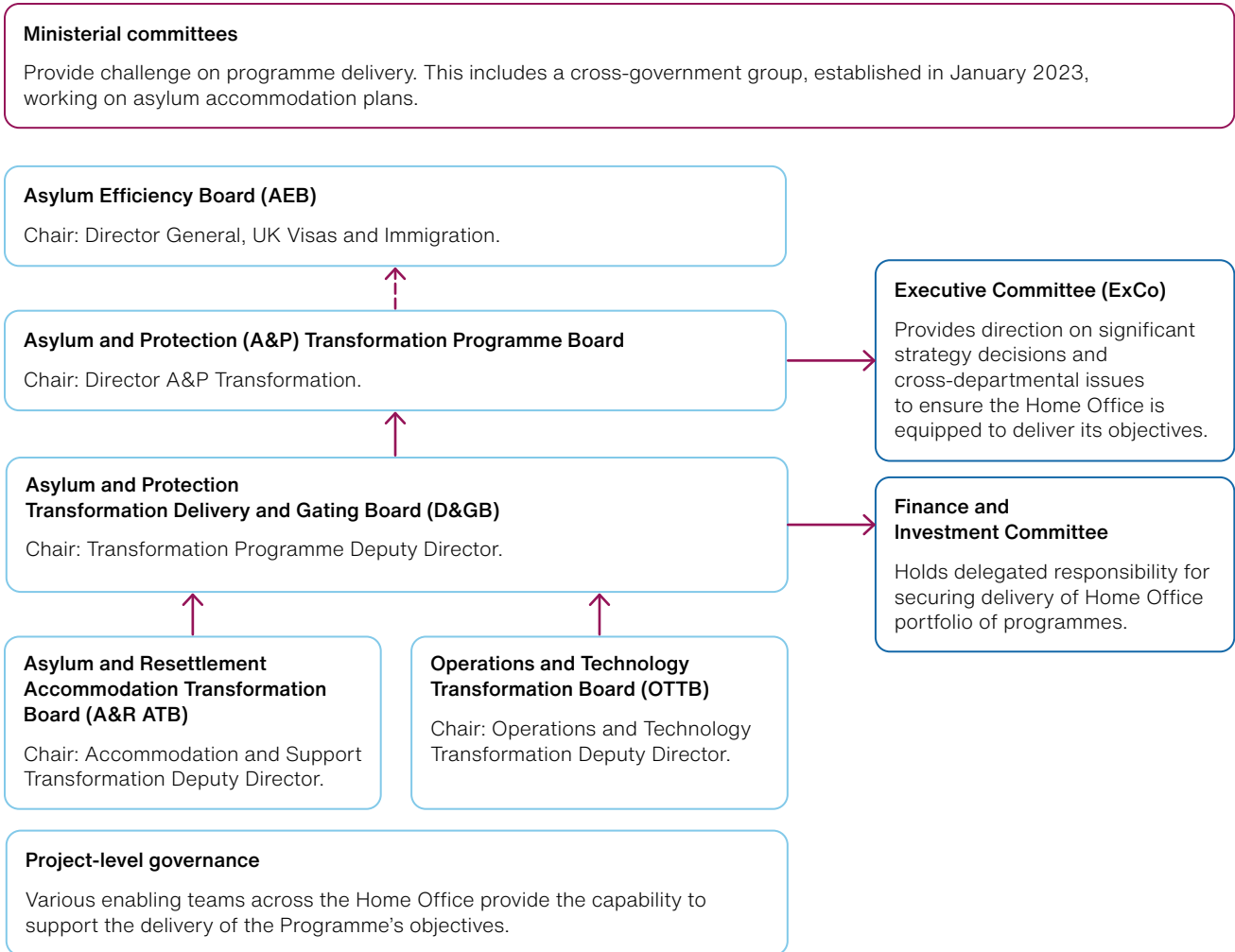
¹ The Home Office told us that its business case for the Programme assumes that 250 people per month would have their claims processed in third countries from April 2023.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of the Home Office's Programme business case

Figure 10

The asylum and protection transformation programme’s governance

The asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) has multiple layers of governance to support decision-making and provide oversight and challenge



- Ministerial oversight
- Asylum and protection transformation programme
- Wider Home Office oversight
- Reporting
- > Indirect reporting

Note

1 This is an updated governance structure which was reviewed at a Programme board in April 2023.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office documents

2.7 The Home Office produces a range of reports to monitor the extent to which the Programme is on track, but these do not present an overall picture of the health of the Programme or measure all the core objectives of the Programme. The reports cover progress against caseworking targets and recruitment, and progress on dispersal accommodation and other accommodation projects. They do not consider public or partner trust, staff morale and retention or the experience for people seeking asylum, although the Home Office is commissioning an evaluation which has research questions around these topics. The Home Office expects to have interim findings from this evaluation by December 2023, and to receive the final evaluation in March 2025. The Home Office also started to collect data on employee experience at the end of April 2023.

2.8 The Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) reviewed the Programme in February 2023 and rated its delivery confidence as ‘amber’.²¹ The IPA praised the experience of the Programme team and found that the business case had been put together in a way that allowed all parties to understand the risks and complexities in the Programme. But it also highlighted significant risks to the Programme, including unrealistic ambitions around accommodation and the productivity of caseworkers.

2.9 The Home Office has identified some high risks for the Programme. Risks have remained high around demand for accommodation exceeding supply, inconsistent and incomplete data affecting reporting of progress against Programme plans, staffing capacity in parts of the Home Office that need to support the Programme, problems with the Atlas system and a shifting policy environment.

2.10 The Home Office recognises the fast-moving policy environment as a significant risk for the Programme. It has had to change priorities and timetables regularly as new policies and priorities were announced. Its original transformation strategy set out a plan to remove the backlog of ‘legacy’ claims within four years, while making decisions on newer claims within six months, so that a new backlog did not build.²² However, the Prime Minister’s statement to Parliament in December 2022 included an expectation that the Home Office would clear the backlog of initial decisions for legacy claims by the end of 2023, two years earlier than originally planned.²³ Some senior Home Office staff described how pressure to deliver on short-term political priorities made it hard to focus on the longer-term strategy.

21 The IPA describes its amber rating as meaning that “successful delivery of the programme to time, cost and quality appears feasible but significant issues already exist requiring management attention”.

22 Asylum claims submitted before 28 June 2022, when the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 came into force are referred to as ‘legacy’ claims.

23 The Prime Minister made a statement on illegal migration on 13 December 2022, saying “ we expect to abolish the backlog of initial asylum decisions by the end of next year.” The full speech is available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-illegal-migration-13-december-2022

Managing the impacts on other organisations

2.11 Alongside the need to manage the shifting policy environment, the Home Office is also delivering change which affects multiple departments. To achieve the ambitions of the Programme, each part of the end-to-end asylum system must work effectively together.

2.12 Our previous work has discussed the importance of taking a whole-system approach to understand and manage how different parts of a system integrate, and of understanding capacity constraints elsewhere in the system.²⁴ The Home Office is starting to consider the impact of its ambitions on other parts of the wider asylum system such as HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) and Immigration Enforcement (Figure 11 overleaf).²⁵

2.13 To handle increased demand without affecting current service levels, HMCTS and Immigration Enforcement will need to increase their capacity (Figure 11). Without this, people who are refused asylum by the Home Office may become part of a new backlog waiting for a decision on their appeal or waiting to be removed from the UK. They may continue to receive support and accommodation during this period. Published court statistics show that First-Tier Tribunals concluding between October and December 2022 relating to asylum and protection took, on average, 54 weeks to conclude.²⁶ Removing people who are refused asylum can also take time, and the Home Office estimates that only 0.4% of people referred to Immigration Enforcement are immediately suitable for enforced returns, with the remainder needing additional casework before a return can be considered.

2.14 The Home Office has agreed to provide HMCTS funding of £5.2 million for the first six months of 2023-24 to help increase capacity for immigration and asylum hearings by almost 50%. HMCTS has completed modelling which indicates more capacity than this will be needed if the Home Office meets its recruitment and productivity targets. The Home Office is also expecting to spend £67.5 million on new Immigration Enforcement caseworkers to meet the increased demand. However, the business case for the Programme does not consider such costs, which fall outside of the Programme. The business case also does not consider costs that other government departments might face as a result of making asylum decisions more quickly, such as the Department for Work & Pensions, if a refugee needs to claim benefits once their claim has been granted.

²⁴ National Audit Office, *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for leaders*, March 2021.

²⁵ HM Courts & Tribunals Service is an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice that supports the Immigration Tribunal, which hears appeals of asylum decisions. Immigration Enforcement (IE) is a directorate within the Home Office, and is responsible for removing and detaining people who have been refused asylum.

²⁶ Tribunal statistics quarterly release: October to December 2022, published 9 March 2023, shows a mean time of 54 weeks for asylum and protection First-Tier Tribunal decisions. Statistics are available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2022, accessed June 2023. Just over 20% of First-Tier Tribunal decisions were appealed again to an Upper Tribunal, so may take significantly longer.

Figure 11

The impacts of the asylum and protection transformation programme on HM Courts & Tribunal Services and Immigration Enforcement

HM Courts & Tribunal Services (HMCTS) and Immigration Enforcement will need to increase their capacity in response to the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) to avoid affecting current service levels

Issue	HMCTS	Immigration Enforcement
Role in asylum process	To hear appeals against a negative asylum decision	To detain and remove failed asylum seekers from the UK
Estimated potential change in activity ¹	Possible quadrupling of appeals in progress to around 75,000 between July 2022 and March 2025	Failed asylum seekers awaiting removal could increase to 76,000 people by March 2025
Planned increase in capacity	Increase capacity for immigration and asylum hearings from 11,000 sitting days to 16,100 (around 50%)	Recruit around 1,000 additional Immigration Enforcement caseworkers and related staff, representing a 20% increase on its overall staffing level
Costs of extra capacity	The Home Office has agreed to provide funding of around £5.2 million for the first six months of 2023-24 to help provide extra capacity ²	The Home Office estimates this to be approximately £67.5 million a year for caseworking staff
Infrastructure	HMCTS may need additional space to hear appeals	Immigration Enforcement is establishing two new immigration removal centres
Challenges	HMCTS expects recruiting judges to be the most significant capacity challenge. Recruiting these judges is expected to take 12–18 months, and there is a small pool to recruit from	To facilitate a return, Immigration Enforcement needs to resolve issues around documentation, medical or safeguarding issues, and have returns agreements in place where required. The Home Office estimates that only 0.4% of people referred to Immigration Enforcement are immediately suitable for enforced returns ³

Notes

- 1 The estimated potential change in activity for HMCTS and Immigration Enforcement is an estimate from the Home Office in February 2023 of the potential change in activity by March 2025. For the number of appeals in progress, the quadrupling is since July 2022. These estimates assume that the Programme meets its objectives around caseworker efficiency, the Home Office is successful in its recruitment plans, and there are no changes to other parts of the asylum system following an initial asylum decision. The estimate does not include any impacts from the Illegal Migration Bill, which was announced after this estimate was made.
- 2 The Home Office has agreed to provide HMCTS with funding for the first six months of 2023-24 to help fund the additional sitting days that HMCTS will require. There will be an in-year review to review whether this funding is sufficient to cover the costs and agree the arrangements beyond the first six months of 2023-24.
- 3 The estimate relating to the proportion of people immediately suitable for an enforced return was a Home Office assumption as of August 2022. The Home Office has told us that this is difficult to estimate, and was based on limited management information and the opinion of business area experts within Immigration Enforcement. The estimate only includes the proportion of people who are immediately suitable for enforced returns, with the remainder needing additional casework before a return can be considered.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office and HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) documents, and interviews with HMCTS and Immigration Enforcement

2.15 How the Home Office chooses to prioritise the processing of asylum claims may also affect how HMCTS and Immigration Enforcement cope with increased demand. For example, if the Home Office was to prioritise applications from people seeking asylum from countries whose claims are more likely to be approved, such as Afghanistan, fewer claims may move to appeals or removals. This might provide more time to create the capacity to manage greater demand. In contrast, focusing on claims from countries the government deems safe could increase refusals and therefore create more demand for appeals and removals.

2.16 Local authorities also face a range of costs in supporting people who have sought asylum. For example, children between the ages of 5 and 17 must go to school. When someone is granted asylum, they gain ‘recourse to public funds’, meaning they can access more public services, become eligible to work and may become eligible for benefits. Local authorities also have a legal duty to help refugees to find accommodation. Even where a person has had their asylum application refused and has no further right to appeal against this, local authorities are required to offer help and signposting and can be required to find emergency shelter for the person if they are with their child.²⁷ Local authorities can also face costs as a result of rough sleeping from those whose claim is refused once Home Office support has been revoked and where individuals do not promptly leave the UK.

2.17 The Home Office expects to give more than 60% of the Programme’s funding (£283 million up to the end of March 2025) to local authorities through a ‘dispersal grant’ of £3,500 for each new dispersal bed, to help fund the local services that people seeking asylum use. This grant is on top of the amount the Home Office pays for the accommodation through private providers, and is designed to encourage local authorities to find more dispersal accommodation. The Home Office set the dispersal grant amount at £3,500 based on limited information provided by local authorities about the expected cost of supporting a person seeking asylum in dispersed accommodation. It acknowledges that these data are inconsistent and incomplete. The Home Office is also piloting an additional one-off payment of up to £3,000 for new dispersal beds which are identified and occupied quickly. While this funding helps to support local authorities, it is lower than equivalent funding provided to help people fleeing the war in Ukraine. The Home Office has told us that it is reviewing this disparity. It recognises that it needs to understand more about the impact of the Programme on local authorities and has told us that it plans to include these impacts in future versions of its business case.

²⁷ Local authorities also have responsibility for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Part Three

Progress in implementing the asylum and protection transformation programme

3.1 In this part we set out the Home Office's progress to date in delivering against the objectives of the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme), and its likelihood of achieving its priorities for this year. Where we report data to the end of April 2023, this is based on Home Office management information and has not been through the standard quality checks for official statistics.

3.2 The Programme brings together numerous projects, which it groups into two portfolios of work:

- **Increasing the number of asylum decisions** by redesigning processes, implementing new technology and improving staff retention.
- **Increasing the supply of dispersal accommodation** by working with local authorities, and improving management of Home Office accommodation.

3.3 The Home Office classifies asylum claims depending on whether it received them prior to the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act on 28 June 2022. Claims received before this date are known as 'legacy' claims and staff make decisions based on previous asylum rules.

3.4 The Home Office's original ambition for the Programme was to gradually reduce the number of legacy claims awaiting a decision while making decisions on most newer claims within six months. This was to maintain the flow of newer claims through the system and ensure a new backlog did not develop. However, the Prime Minister's statement to Parliament in December 2022 included an expectation that the Home Office would "abolish the backlog of initial asylum decisions" by the end of 2023. The Prime Minister also said that the use of hotels to house people seeking asylum must end. The Home Office has therefore reprioritised its activities to achieve these shorter-term targets, but recognises the challenge it will face in achieving them. In April 2023, it rated the delivery of the programme as amber-red, meaning it was 'in doubt, with urgent action required and possible delays to delivery'.

Progress in increasing asylum decisions

Recruiting and retaining caseworkers

3.5 Increasing the number of asylum decisions depends on both recruiting and retaining more caseworkers and improving the productivity of those caseworkers.²⁸ By April 2023, the Home Office employed around 1,270 full-time equivalent caseworkers (an increase of 59% from 800 in April 2022).²⁹ This is slightly below the expectations set out in the Programme business case, where the Home Office expected to have around 1,350 full-time equivalent staff by the end of March 2023. Since December 2022, it has had plans to increase its workforce to 2,500 asylum caseworkers. The Home Office believes it will achieve this by September 2023 through a large external recruitment campaign, recruiting via job centres and reviewing recently closed campaigns.

3.6 However, the Home Office has a high turnover of asylum caseworkers. In April 2022, the annual turnover of asylum caseworkers was 46% (compared with 8% for the equivalent grade in the wider Home Office). The reasons for this high turnover have included workload pressures and relatively low pay. The Home Office aims to reduce this to around 20% and has introduced a retention allowance to overcome the pay issues. The retention allowance provides an additional payment to a caseworker on top of their salary, of £1,500 if they stay for a year, and an annual additional payment of £2,500 if they stay beyond two years. Annual turnover had subsequently reduced to 25% by April 2023.³⁰

3.7 High turnover and rapid recruitment in any organisation can affect productivity and quality, and it will take time to realise the full benefit of increased recruitment.³¹ The Home Office estimates that it can take six months for an asylum caseworker to become fully effective, during which time they require significant training and support. It will therefore be the end of 2023 before all the current recruitment activity shows its full impact, and it will be important for the Home Office to retain their fully trained caseworkers. Even if the Home Office succeeds in reducing caseworker attrition to 20%, this means it will be replacing and training one-fifth of the workforce each year.

28 Recruiting caseworkers is not part of the Programme, although work to improve retention is.

29 This data is based on Home Office management information.

30 The turnover rate referred to here is calculated by dividing the number of caseworkers who left their roles over the previous 12 months by the average number of full-time equivalent caseworkers over the previous 12 months. The Home Office told us that it calculates this rate by dividing the number of full-time equivalent caseworkers at the end of the 12-month period, which results in a figure of 22% annual attrition rate by April 2023.

31 See for example, Comptroller & Auditor General, *The Police Uplift Programme*, Session 2021-22, HC 1147, National Audit Office, March 2022.

Improving the productivity of caseworkers

3.8 While there are more caseworkers in post than in April 2022, not all are fully trained, working independently and making decisions on claims. At the end of April 2023, around 640 of 1,270 caseworkers (around 50%) were making asylum decisions, and only around 140 of those making decisions were fully trained and working independently. Those not making decisions were either in training, working to support new recruits, or absent for reasons such as long-term sickness. The business case for the Programme assumed that by April 2023, 62% of the assumed 1,350 caseworkers would be making decisions.

3.9 The Home Office has received recommendations to streamline and improve asylum processes as far back as 2012. It has made various changes to try to do this since then and in 2022, established the Prioritising Asylum Customers' Experience (PACE) project to simplify decision-making and improve productivity. It engaged consultants, Newton, to support this work, on a contract worth £24 million. The Home Office hoped to increase productivity so each caseworker made an average of 2.5 decisions a week by the end of May 2023. In April 2023, the 640 active caseworkers (those making decisions) achieved the 2.5 decisions weekly.

3.10 Since December 2022, PACE has focused on increasing asylum decisions in six 'priority' cohorts through processes or rules specific to an asylum seeker's nationality. The Home Office has assessed whether there are any negative equality impacts from the Programme and did not identify any impacts, including from its decision to create specific processes for different cohorts. However, prioritising certain cohorts means that people in other cohorts, who may have particular protected characteristics, could wait longer for their asylum decisions. This may also affect other opportunities, such as access to work.

3.11 One priority cohort is Albania, which the government considers a safe country. The Home Office now requires people from Albania who claim asylum to physically report to Home Office officials, and the Home Office will consider the person seeking asylum has withdrawn their claim if they do not turn up without a good reason. The remaining five priority cohorts are for people seeking asylum from five countries where most claims result in either asylum or protection being granted. For these cohorts, the Home Office is collecting more detailed information through a questionnaire, which the person seeking asylum (or their representative) must complete in English.³² It hopes that, by gathering this information earlier, caseworkers will be able to make a decision without an interview, although the requirement to complete the questionnaire in English is also likely to present difficulties for some claimants. In early May 2023, Home Office staff raised concerns that the rate and quality of questionnaire returns were lower than their assumptions. This could result in a lower quality of asylum decision and additional work for the Home Office and HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) should people make further asylum claims or be more likely to appeal against the decision.

³² The five countries currently completing a detailed questionnaire are Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen. This system was introduced on 23 February 2023.

3.12 These new approaches are starting to increase the speed of decisions, but it is not clear whether this is sustainable or replicable for remaining cohorts. The Home Office has nearly doubled the number of decisions it makes per week from about 690 in July 2022 to about 1,310 in April 2023 (**Figure 12**). However, 72% of decisions in April 2023 were ‘administrative decisions’.³³ Administrative decisions include what the Home Office refers to as ‘explicit withdrawals’, where a person seeking asylum withdraws their claim, and ‘implicit withdrawals’. The Home Office may consider a claim implicitly withdrawn if, for example, a person seeking asylum leaves the UK before an asylum decision is made, fails to attend an asylum interview, or fails to complete an asylum questionnaire when asked to do so.

Figure 12

The number of asylum decisions made each week, from July 2022 to April 2023

The number of decisions made per week has increased since the start of 2023 but it will need to increase pace further to make decisions on outstanding legacy claims by the end of 2023

Total number of asylum decisions per week



— Total decisions per week

- - - Number of weekly decisions required to clear legacy backlog by the end of 2023

Note

1 We estimated the number of weekly decisions required to clear the backlog by the end of 2023 by dividing the number of outstanding legacy claims at the end of April 2023 by the number of weeks left in the year.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office management information and data

33 In the case of Albanian claimants, 84% of decisions were ‘administrative decisions’.

3.13 While decisions are increasing, the Home Office is not yet making enough decisions on legacy claims to clear the backlog by December 2023. The Home Office expects average weekly decisions to increase over the rest of 2023. We estimate that the Home Office will need to make, on average, 2,200 decisions each week for the remainder of the year, to clear the legacy claims by the end of the year. By the end of April 2023, it had reduced the number of legacy claims to around 77,000 from more than 100,000 (a reduction of 24%) at the beginning of July 2022.

3.14 To focus on clearing the legacy backlog, the Home Office decided to compromise on its ambition to keep on top of claims it had received since the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act (see paragraph 3.4). At the end of April 2023, there were almost 138,000 claims awaiting an initial decision. Of these, almost 61,000 were newer claims, and the Home Office expects this could grow to around 84,000 by the end of December 2023 (**Figure 13**).

3.15 Alongside its work to streamline caseworking processes, the Home Office is developing a new immigration technology platform, known as Atlas. This is being delivered through a separate programme, but delays developing Atlas have affected caseworker productivity and senior programme staff told us that it could impact progress on the Programme if delays continue.³⁴ For example, during our fieldwork, caseworkers told us they currently could not add notes on asylum claims in Atlas, so recorded these in the older system. Asylum caseworkers told us they used both systems and had to 'double key' information between them, although the Home Office told us this ended in April 2023. The Home Office expects to decommission its old system by September 2023, but progress will depend on managing competing demands for design and digital capacity from other Home Office digital programmes, such as the Future Border and Immigration System.

3.16 The delays introducing Atlas also affect the Home Office's ability to understand the Programme's performance and the impact of changes to the asylum system. To bring together the information necessary to inform strategic decisions, staff need to collate information from separate spreadsheets, which is time-consuming. Once complete, Atlas should allow quicker generation of reports.

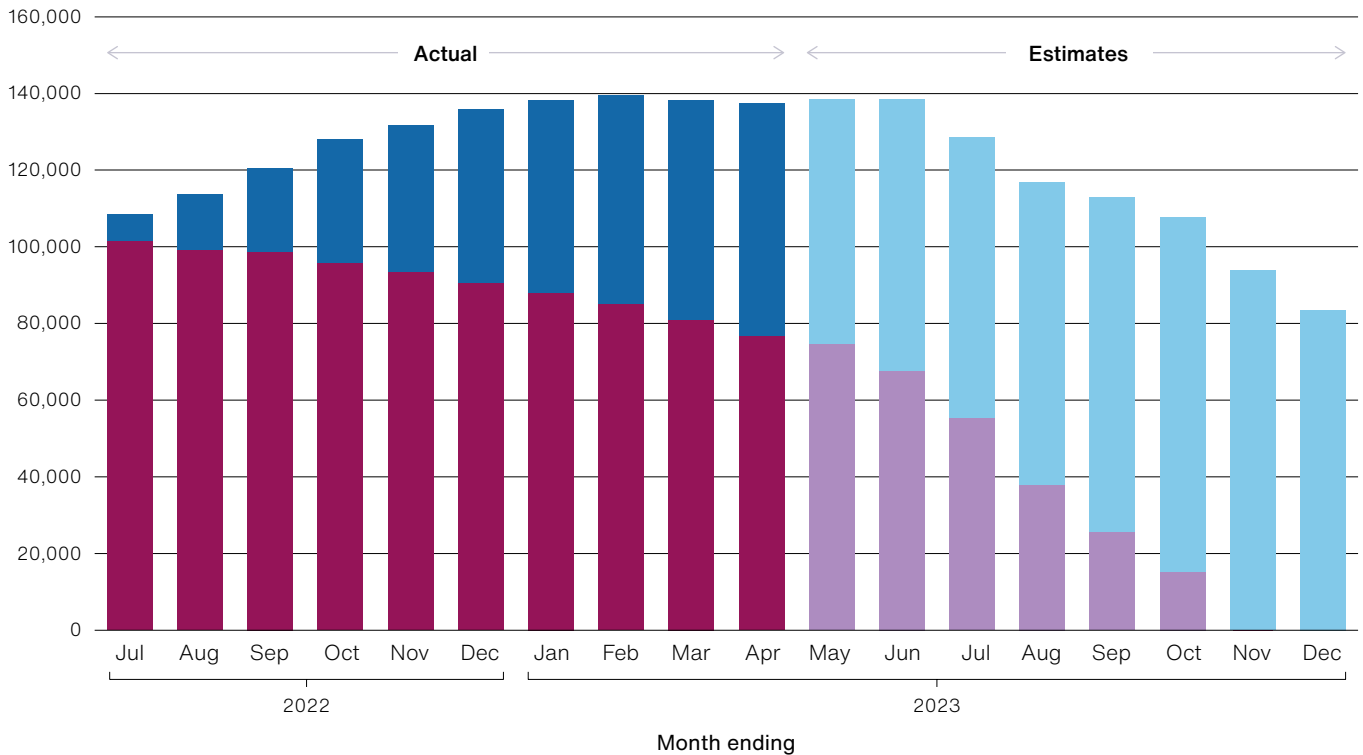
³⁴ In 2022, the implementation of Atlas was rated 'amber' by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA). The IPA rates a project as 'amber' if successful delivery appears feasible but significant issues already exist, requiring management attention, which appear resolvable and, if addressed promptly, should not present a cost/schedule overrun.

Figure 13

The number of claims awaiting an initial decision, from July 2022 to April 2023, and the estimated number of claims awaiting an initial decision, from May 2023 to December 2023

The number of legacy claims is reducing, but the number of new claims awaiting an initial decision is likely to increase before reducing

Number of asylum claims awaiting a decision



- Total legacy claims awaiting an initial decision (actual)
- Total legacy claims awaiting an initial decision (estimated)
- Total newer claims and inadmissible claims awaiting an initial decision (actual)
- Total newer claims and inadmissible claims awaiting an initial decision (estimated)

Note

1 Actual data on legacy and newer claims were taken from Home Office management information and estimates of the number of legacy and newer claims awaiting an initial decision from May 2023 were produced by the Home Office. The Home Office estimate from May 2023 is based on the assumption of recruiting 2,500 caseworkers, with the average caseworker productivity reaching 3.6 decisions made per week. The Home Office told us that these estimates include the impact of the asylum policy changes announced on 8 June 2023, but exclude potential impacts of the Illegal Migration Bill, which may affect new claims entering the system.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office data

Progress in procuring dispersal accommodation

3.17 At the end of April 2023, the Home Office was providing accommodation to around 109,000 people, of which around 55,000 were in dispersal accommodation and around 48,000 were in hotels.³⁵ The Home Office plans to reduce its use of contingency hotel accommodation by working with local authorities to remove barriers to finding, and increasing, dispersal accommodation capacity. The Home Office aims to distribute people seeking asylum equitably by region, relative to the size of the general population in the area, by 2029. In April 2022, 196 local authorities (52%) did not have any people seeking asylum staying in dispersal accommodation in their area. This had reduced to 147 by the end of April 2023 (41%).

3.18 The Home Office manages seven regional Asylum and Accommodation Support contracts with private providers, to identify and procure accommodation on its behalf. In late 2022, the Home Office renegotiated the contracts to increase the maximum number of beds in some regions.

3.19 The Home Office set a challenging target for the number of dispersal beds it would find each week, but has since reduced its ambition. It originally hoped to find 500 additional dispersal beds per week from October 2022, and a September 2022 version of its business case expected this to allow the Home Office to stop using hotels by December 2023. The Home Office has since reduced this to 350 additional beds, which it hopes to achieve each week on average between April 2023 and March 2025. In the 12 months to the end of April 2023, it has increased supply by 48 beds per week on average (**Figure 14**). The Home Office acknowledges that, even if it meets its business case assumptions around the amount of accommodation it will find and the number of decisions caseworkers make, this alone is not expected to stop the use of hotels. The Home Office is looking at other ways to increase its supply of accommodation.³⁶ The Home Office is now considering reducing its target number of additional dispersal beds again and reconsidering the funding that it offers local authorities. To encourage local authorities to support more people seeking asylum, the Home Office has provided a grant of £3,500 for each new dispersal bed, and £250 for each person seeking asylum accommodated by the Home Office (see paragraph 2.17). This has increased to £750 from April 2023. The Home Office expected to have paid £22.3 million through this grant between April 2022 and March 2023, equivalent to approximately 6,370 additional beds. It paid £11.4 million, equivalent to approximately 3,250 beds.

³⁵ The remaining people were in initial accommodation, provided whilst their request for asylum support is being assessed. Initial accommodation can include hostels or other forms of contingency accommodation, such as former military barracks.

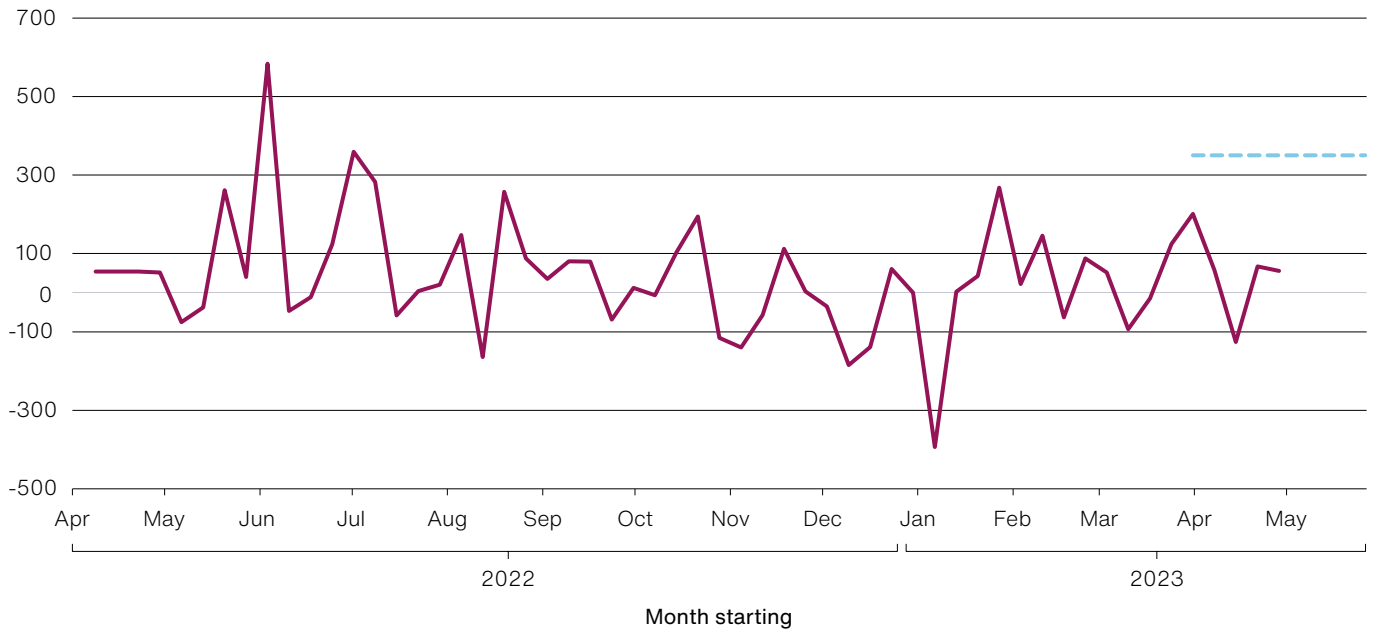
³⁶ The Programme business case does not expect that the Programme alone will stop the Home Office requiring hotels to accommodate people awaiting an asylum decision. This view is partly dependent on the projections of the number of people who seek asylum in the UK in the future. In its business case, the Home Office has projected the number of people who might seek asylum in the UK to 2024-2025, and used the same estimate throughout the rest of the appraisal period of the Programme.

Figure 14

The weekly change in the number of occupied dispersal accommodation beds, from April 2022 to April 2023

The Home Office is not finding as many dispersal beds as it hoped to. It had expected to find 350 additional beds per week from April 2023

Change in dispersal accommodation beds



- Weekly change in dispersal accommodation beds
- - - Weekly change in dispersal accommodation beds expected in the Programme business case

Notes

- 1 The dotted line shows the weekly change of dispersal beds as outlined in the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) business case, which states the expectation to reach its target of finding 350 additional beds per week from April 2023 to March 2025.
- 2 The weekly change in occupied beds can become negative in a particular week if more beds have been taken out of use than have been added to the portfolio of accommodation.
- 3 Other Home Office activity to find accommodation for people seeking asylum, including accommodation centres and military sites, might affect the number of dispersal beds that need to be found.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office data

3.20 The Home Office's efforts to increase the supply of dispersal beds is affected by a range of issues. These include increased demand within the housing market, and a relative lack of suitable accommodation in some areas. In this context, local authority planning or licensing constraints can also be barriers to supply. For example, the Home Office's providers have experienced problems in getting permission to use properties to house multiple single people. The government intends to use (subject to Parliamentary approval) newly introduced regulations so that properties used by the Home Office to provide accommodation for people seeking asylum would be exempt from Houses of Multiple Occupancy licensing. The Home Office also recognises that it needs to strengthen its capability around the management of its accommodation contracts.³⁷

3.21 Competing demands for accommodation from different Home Office programmes have affected the Home Office's ability to work effectively with local authorities. The procurement of hotel beds at short notice and attempts to procure larger-scale accommodation centres, alongside procuring dispersed accommodation, have led to multiple approaches to local authorities from Home Office suppliers, which has damaged its relationships with local authorities and undermined work to ensure there is dispersal accommodation within all local authority areas.³⁸ The Home Office has not coordinated the various strands of activity well, with accommodation needs for people coming to the UK through resettlement schemes increasing competition for sites and further straining relationships.

3.22 The Home Office acknowledges the need to be more joined-up and has developed a strategy to improve the use of asylum accommodation and how it works with its stakeholders. It is implementing a 'place-based approach', to better coordinate the accommodation of people seeking asylum and those arriving through resettlement schemes. The Home Office originally planned to design this approach by November 2022, but it now intends to pilot the approach in autumn 2023 and implement it by December 2025.

3.23 The Home Office is also looking at how it can bring together its accommodation activity in a single portfolio. It has recently set up an Asylum Support and Resettlement Accommodation Delivery Board. The draft Terms of Reference, dated May 2023, state the board's purpose is to provide a clear view of the supply and demand gaps, support a whole-system view of the problem and to help create a sustainable system while considering the implications for operations. More recently, the Home Office has restructured its senior leadership to bring together the accommodation portfolio and work to oversee the Migration and Borders Group under the second Permanent Secretary, appointing a new director general to oversee the Illegal Migration Bill and retaining asylum caseworking under another director general. These changes risk creating uncertainty about reporting lines for the Programme and wider changes to the asylum system.

³⁷ In April 2023, the government proposed a temporary exemption for asylum accommodation with regards to these licensing requirements for a two-year period. These regulations were not in force yet at the end of April 2023.

³⁸ Work to procure accommodation centres is part of the Home Office's Asylum and Detained Accommodation programme (ADAP), which is working to increase the supply of accommodation for people seeking asylum. It aims to develop solutions for the supply and operation of asylum accommodation and detention centres. It is run as an independent programme.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

1 Our independent conclusions on the Home Office's plan to transform the asylum system were reached following our analysis of evidence collected between October 2022 and May 2023.

2 As part of our work, we also looked at the potential impact of the asylum and protection transformation programme (the Programme) on parts of the wider asylum system. We consider the wider asylum system to include any parts of the Home Office and other government organisations that a person who has applied for asylum may need to interact with.

Document review

3 We reviewed published and unpublished documentation to understand the overall UK asylum system, and the progress of the Programme. We reviewed documents including:

- public statements and legislation on the UK asylum and wider immigration process;
- the Programme strategy and business case;
- reporting packs and various board minutes, including the Programme board;
- risk registers;
- change of contract notices for the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts (AASC); and
- independent reviews conducted by third parties, including the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on Channel crossings in July 2022, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's inspection of asylum caseworking in 2021, and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) review of UK aid to refugees in the UK in 2023.

4 We drew on the National Audit Office's (NAO's) back catalogue of reports and good practice guides on *Improving operational delivery in government* (March 2021, February 2023), *Evaluating government spending: an audit framework* (April 2022), *Understanding challenges to delivering project objectives* (November 2022) and *Digital transformation in government: assessing the barriers to efficiency* (March 2023). We used these reports to identify good practice against which to assess the Home Office's progress, and to understand how it is managing the likely risks.

Interviews

5 We interviewed officials from the Home Office to further our understanding of the Programme. These included:

- officials responsible for policy, operations, finance and governance;
- data and analysis teams;
- caseworkers and their managers; and
- staff responsible for managing contracts for asylum accommodation and support.

6 We interviewed other government bodies and stakeholders to understand their views of the Programme and how well the Home Office is working with them to deliver their asylum transformation plans. These bodies include:

- HM Courts & Tribunals Service;
- Immigration Enforcement (Immigration Enforcement is part of the Home Office but is a separate directorate from Asylum and Protection);
- Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities;
- Infrastructure and Projects Authority; and
- Local Government Association.

7 We also spoke to organisations outside of government, including the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, The Migration Observatory and Migration Watch UK to understand their views of the Home Office's work to transform the asylum system and the strengths or risks of this approach.

8 We used the interviews to inform further lines of enquiry that we followed up with the Home Office and to inform our assessment of the challenges faced in delivering the Programme. The findings presented in this report reflect the range and diversity of the views of stakeholders interviewed.

Fieldwork visit

9 In November 2022, we visited a decision-making unit in Bootle, Liverpool to understand how well the Home Office was implementing changes to asylum caseworking through the Programme. During the visit, we spoke to:

- senior operational staff;
- a focus group of caseworkers; and
- external consultants running the Prioritising Asylum Customers' Experience (PACE) initiative.

10 We used the fieldwork visit to gain deeper insight into the practicalities and challenges of delivering the Programme and to gain operational staff's views on its implementation. However, the sample size of these interviews is very small and not statistically representative.

Data analysis

11 We have analysed departmental data including:

- caseworker recruitment and retention;
- caseworker productivity and decisions;
- accommodation procurement; and
- financial data.

12 In most instances we have based our analysis on management information to the end of April 2023. Where the analysis differs from this date (for example where a lag is required to assess progress or we have used official statistics) we have stated the relevant dates for that analysis in the report.

13 We analysed management information from the Home Office to understand its progress against its objectives. This information has been extracted from Home Office reporting packs for the Programme, and underlying data systems. We have used this to present the most up-to-date information, while recognising that this presents the position of the Programme at a specific point in time, and that this is a fast-developing programme. Where possible, we have sought to specify the extent to which future policy changes are incorporated in the data but we have not sought to verify the accuracy of the reporting packs or the underlying data provided to us. The information we have used has not been quality-assured to national or official statistics levels.

14 While we have sought to work with the Home Office to understand the information that it has provided to us, the level of analysis we have been able to complete has been limited by the availability and consistency of that information. The Home Office has explained that this is due to differing levels of data cleansing and quality assurance.

15 In our report we have also made use of the information presented in the Immigration System Statistics, which provides information about the number of claims awaiting a decision, and the number of people this relates to. We have used the latest Immigration System Statistics, which were published 25 May 2023 and provide information until the end of March 2023. Note that the Home Office published new statistics relating to the Illegal Migration Bill, including information about the number of asylum applications awaiting an initial decision as at 28 May 2023, on 5 June 2023. These later statistics are provisional and have not been cleansed to remove duplicates.

16 We have reviewed the Programme's economic model to understand the assumptions it is making and their sensitivity to the outcomes it is trying to achieve. We have not sought to verify the underlying inputs to the model.

17 Where we have referred to the amount that the Home Office has spent on asylum support in the 2022-23 financial year, these figures were not audited at the time of publication and may be subject to change before the publication of the Home Office annual report and accounts.

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