REPORT

An analysis of the asylum system

Home Office and cross-government

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Value for money reports

Our value for money reports examine government expenditure in order to form a judgement on whether value for money has been achieved. We also make recommendations to public bodies on how to improve public services.

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Summary

Background

1 Asylum is a form of protection available to anyone at risk of serious harm in their country of origin, through conflict or persecution. As a signatory to the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol on international refugee prevention, the UK is committed to not returning individuals to a country where they face persecution.

2 The number of people seeking asylum represented around 11.4% of overall immigration to the UK in 2024 and around 0.16% as a share of total UK population in mid-2024. Since the second half of 2021, there has been a notable increase in the number of people seeking asylum in the UK. While volumes of asylum claims represent a relatively small proportion of overall migration, the current direct cost of supporting people seeking asylum is disproportionately high (£4.0 billion in 2024-25), driven by long delays and backlogs. Delays also have wider negative consequences – for vulnerable people, for community cohesion, and for local authority housing. Delays make it harder for the government to deliver a system that is fair, well managed and resistant to abuse.

3 In June 2023 we examined the Home Office's *asylum and protection transformation programme* and concluded it was crucial that all parts of the end-to-end asylum system (including all relevant parts of the Home Office, Ministry of Justice and local authorities) worked together to manage demand effectively. We have also reported on aspects of the wider asylum system, with particular focus on asylum accommodation and support (see Figure 9 in Appendix Three).

4 In December 2024 the government committed to restore order to the asylum and immigration system: clear the asylum backlog and end the use of hotels; increase returns; and reduce small boat crossings. [1] In November 2025, the government set out proposed legal and policy changes. The proposals aim to reduce the flow of people seeking asylum in the UK, accelerate the removal of those who have no legal right to remain, and develop a new approach for admitting refugees through safe and legal routes. The proposals also include a policy shift towards granting refugee status on a temporary basis and extending the time required in the UK before indefinite settled status is granted to 20 years.[2]

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1 Plan for Change – Milestones for mission-led government, HM Government, 5 December 2024.
2 Restoring Order and Control, Secretary of State for the Home Department, CP 1418, November 2025.

Purpose and content of this report and our interactive system map

5   To achieve value for money in its management of asylum, the government needs to coordinate and manage across the complex end-to-end system. To scrutinise the government's progress effectively, Parliament also needs an understanding of that end-to-end system, its resources and capabilities, its costs, and the legal and practical constraints on making changes to it. We therefore set out to create a systems map of the overall asylum system. This report draws on that work to cover:

- definitions, roles and responsibilities of different government departments and public bodies, policy and financial context (Part One);

- our observations about the key enablers needed for value for money in the asylum system and the challenges the government faces (see a summary in **Figure 1** on page 7 and Part Two);

- a factual summary of what the government is currently doing and its latest proposals related to each of these challenges (Part Two); and

- international comparator analysis on how other countries manage their asylum systems (Appendix Two).

6   We have also published a data visualisation based on our asylum system map. It represents visually the relationships and interactions across departmental and organisational boundaries in managing asylum. It shows the reader:

- how people's claims move through the system, what happens at each stage and where delays can occur;

- how people are accommodated and supported while their claim is being processed;

- the state of the system at a recent snapshot in time, including workload and where there are case backlogs;

- the estimated costs across the whole system; and

- our overall observations about key enablers, challenges in the current system and what the government is doing.

7   The visualisation is available on our website at: *https://nao-mesh.shinyapps.io/ Asylum_Systems_Data_Visualisation/*.

Our scope and methodology

8   Our work covers the end-to-end system for managing asylum claims from the point at which someone makes a claim in the UK to the point at which they exit the asylum system, whether through a grant of protection, removal from the UK or otherwise reaching the end of the process. It does not cover dedicated asylum and protection schemes, such as the Homes for Ukraine Scheme or the three Afghanistan resettlement schemes.[3] Nor does it cover irregular migration by individuals who do not make a claim for asylum. We do not include government activities designed to prevent or discourage illegal migration, though these are clearly relevant to the flows into the asylum system. Our work covered arrangements up to November 2025 but some aspects of the system are likely to change under the government's recent proposed reforms.

9   We worked closely with operational and analytical experts in the Home Office, HM Courts & Tribunals Service, the Ministry of Justice, and representatives of local government. We also consulted with internal auditors and inspectors of the system, academic experts and stakeholder groups. During this work, we sought to understand the scope of improvement activity underway at strategic and operational levels, and we point to examples in the report, but this is not a comprehensive account of all such ongoing activities and we have not evaluated their impact. **Appendix One** sets out full details of our scope, analytical approach and methodology.

Who should read this?

10   This report and system visualisation will be useful for leaders in the asylum system and for officials working together across the departments and public bodies involved. It highlights the system constraints and challenges that we consider need addressing if the government collectively is to achieve an efficient and effective asylum system, and overall value for taxpayers' money.

11   The report and visualisation will also be useful for Parliamentarians, to support effective scrutiny of the government's proposals and accountability for its progress. As with all our work, it also allows interested members of the public to understand how their taxes are being spent and important services delivered. The work will inform future National Audit Office value for money audits in this area.

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3   Afghanistan Response Route (ARR); Afghan Relations and Assistance Policy (ARAP); Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).

Figure 1
A summary of our observations on the asylum system

We identified four key enablers needed for an effective, value for money asylum system

Key enabler – and why it is important	What is the challenge for the asylum system?
1 A whole-system approach In a whole-system approach, organisations across the system work collaboratively to establish a shared understanding of objectives and service outcomes. They agree ways of working to make consistent trade-offs between conflicting objectives and priorities in different parts of the system, using the likely impact on outcomes as the basis for trade-offs.	There is no single point of accountability for outcomes or a governance structure for the end-to-end asylum system. The parts of government involved each have their own wider objectives, distinct legal duties, statutory responsibilities and budgets. Without a whole-system approach, the government has not set out the overall outcomes it aims to achieve through the asylum system or agreed shared objectives across the different bodies involved. Interventions have tended to be reactive and focused on fixing an urgent problem in one part of the system only, such as intake or initial decisions, without a clear view of the effects on other parts. There are weak incentives for officials in one part of the system to actively support efficiency in other parts, which can lead to rework, delays and costs.
2 Addressing fundamental barriers To deliver value for money, the asylum system needs to be able to process and decide claims in a fair, efficient and timely way and implement those decisions, including enforcing removals. Lengthy delays put at risk the welfare and life chances of people seeking asylum, represent an unproductive use of taxpayers' money on accommodation and support, and erode public confidence in the system's fairness and effectiveness.	There are fundamental, known obstacles to progressing a significant proportion of claims, so people remain in the system for extended periods. This causes uncertainty, hardship and poor value for taxpayers' money. Those without genuine asylum claims may also exploit these aspects of the system to stay in the UK. The system features that prevent cases progressing include: the inability to promptly remove some people who have exhausted their appeal rights but do not leave voluntarily; a high level of repeated claims and appeals; frequent changes in policy and global events; and the fact that time spent waiting can itself make it more likely that claims are granted on appeal.
3 Timely, robust, shared data In government systems that interact with people, it is important for officials to collect accurate data once, in a standard format that can be used throughout the system, and share it appropriately to support accurate, efficient decisions and processes.	Poor-quality data, duplicate data entry and workaround spreadsheets have been a long-standing characteristic of the asylum system. The Home Office has now moved fully to its Atlas case management system, but there is further to go to provide the full functionality and to create a reliable single record of all data on each person seeking asylum. It is not yet possible to track individuals or cases through Home Office, HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) and local authority systems using a unique identifier.
4 A resilient, strategic approach to capacity and workforce In efficient, value-for-money processes, work is done right first time, cases flow through the process at a pace needed to meet people's needs without creating backlogs, and the resources in the system flex to meet reasonable expectations of fluctuation in demand.	There are several capacity constraints that limit the effective functioning of the asylum system, including recruiting and retaining experienced caseworkers, availability of suitable temporary accommodation, capacity in the legal aid sector and judicial capacity for hearing appeals. In recent years, the government's approach has been characterised by rapid surging of capacity in one part of the system. Addressing the constraints is challenging in the context of fiscal restraint, housing shortages and limits on civil service recruitment. Each of the systems within the asylum system is under pressure more widely, not just on managing asylum.

Source: National Audit Office analysis

Concluding remarks

12   The system for processing asylum claims needs to be efficient, resilient to fluctuating demand, and demonstrably fair - otherwise it puts at risk not just public money, but the life chances of people seeking asylum and the government's duties to them and to UK citizens. However, without a whole-system view and clear, agreed outcomes there has been no firm basis for the government departments and other bodies in the system to work together in pursuit of an efficient and sustainable system.

13   Our analysis shows how efforts to improve the system in recent years have often been short-term and narrowly focused on one area of the system in reaction to large backlogs and sharply increasing costs. Increases in speed of processing have sometimes come at the expense of the quality of decisions, and improvements in one area have shunted problems elsewhere. There has also been no realistic approach to the fact that in a significant number of cases it is not possible to return people whose claims have been refused. As a result, the system has incurred significant costs – primarily on accommodation and support – that might have been avoided.

14   In the course of our system analysis work we have been encouraged by many examples of officials taking action to address the root causes of quality failures, understand and model parts of the system to improve productivity, and work across organisational boundaries. But these changes are somewhat piecemeal and not yet fully embedded. Moreover, the system is still hampered by a lack of robust, interoperable data to support high quality decision-making at each stage.

Recommendations

15   The government has recently set out a package of procedural and legal reforms it describes as "an entirely new asylum model". Many of these will need time and Parliamentary approval to introduce and together they represent a complex programme for system change. In our future audit work we will be looking for evidence that the government is moving away from short-term, reactive fixes towards a sustainable whole-system approach and is paying attention to the key enablers of value for money that we have highlighted. Our recommendations are designed to help with that.

On taking a joined-up strategic approach to improve overall effectiveness and outcomes across the asylum system

a   The government should, by the end of 2026, set out and present to Parliament a strategic plan for implementing the proposed new asylum model that supports long-term sustainability and reduces reliance on short-term, reactive responses that have resulted in avoidable costs and undesirable outcomes. It should then publish an annual assessment of progress. The plan should:

● articulate high-level objectives for the asylum system as a whole;

● acknowledge the fundamental constraints that contribute to people seeking asylum spending extended periods waiting in the system and clarify how it will optimise value for money and ensure effective operation given these constraints, recognising that some may not be fully resolvable and will require approaches that work around them; and

● be explicit that to deliver the objectives and value for money in the long term, the government will need to ensure the asylum system is resilient and able to adapt to reasonably foreseeable volatility in demand.

b   To deliver and sustain the new model, the government should establish a lasting framework of joined-up governance and accountability for value for money across the asylum system, supported by senior leadership. The framework should enable shared decision-making on policy and resource allocation, manage trade-offs based on overall effectiveness, and prevent pressures being shifted between parts of the system.

On building better system performance information for improvement and accountability

c   The government should publish a broad and balanced set of system indicators that reflect outcomes, quality, and efficiency for people seeking asylum, taxpayers, and citizens. The government should report to Parliament on these indicators as part of its annual assessment in a way that:

● provides transparency on the overall state of the asylum system, acknowledging factors outside government control;

● shows progress over time by reporting year-on-year trends and explaining the drivers behind performance changes; and

● shows how the government plans to close performance gaps and improve delivery of the objectives.

d The Home Office should work with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) and other relevant partners in the asylum system to develop a blueprint and implementation plan for the data framework the asylum system needs in the long term. This will include understanding:

- the current effect on outcomes, quality, efficiency and cost across the asylum system of data quality problems and the lack of a single reliable record on each person seeking asylum;

- the causes of the key data quality problems and where in the system they arise; and

- what technical, architectural or behavioural changes would be needed to address these problems and what those changes would cost.

On ensuring that future legislative, policy and management interventions have the best chance of improving value for money across the whole asylum system

e The government should:

- bring together and build on the modelling and system design work from the Home Office and MoJ, alongside local authority analysis from MHCLG to provide a basis for joined-up policy design and decision-making; and

- taking into account the Magenta Book principle of proportionate evaluation, ensure that interventions are supported by an evidence base and theory of change, including relevant international evidence where appropriate, an assessment of expected costs and benefits across the end-to-end asylum system, and an evaluation plan, and these are published unless there is an overriding reason why that would not be appropriate.

Part One

Introduction

1.1   This part explains asylum and the asylum system and provides the context for our systems mapping work by setting out:

● volumes of asylum applications over time;

● roles, responsibilities and legal duties of the organisations involved in the asylum system;

● a timeline of relevant policy and legislation; and

● a summary of government spending on asylum.

What is asylum?

1.2   Asylum is a form of protection available to anyone at risk of serious harm in their country of origin, 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 as soon as reasonably practicable after arriving in the UK and at a 'designated place', such as a port of entry or Home Office location.

1.3   As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention & 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the UK has committed to not returning individuals to a country where they face persecution. Furthermore, the European Convention on Human Rights Article 3 prohibits removal to a country where there is a real risk of torture or inhuman treatment. This applies even if someone does not qualify as a refugee. Children under 18 who apply for asylum in the UK on their own, without a parent or legal guardian responsible for their care, are entitled to support and protection under the Children Act 1989, as updated by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

1.4 Once granted protection status, people have access rights to work, education, and basic welfare. While their claim is being considered, however, people who claim asylum in the UK are not normally allowed to work. They are instead provided with accommodation and support to meet their essential living needs if they would otherwise be destitute. As at December 2025, the weekly allowance for an adult seeking asylum is £9.95 in catered, supported accommodation, or £49.18 if in self-catered accommodation.

1.5 The Home Office may grant permission to work to people whose asylum claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of their own, and there is a limited list of skilled job types in which they may work.[4] The Home Office also encourages people to volunteer while their claim is being considered. The Home Office is seeking to improve the quality of its data on the number of people it grants permission to work, which it does not currently publish. Across EU states, people seeking asylum must be allowed to access the labour market no later than nine months after their application. In Portugal, asylum seekers are allowed to work immediately, while in the Netherlands they may do so after six months, in certain occupations (see Appendix Two).

1.6 The number of people seeking asylum in the UK was particularly high in the early 2000s. This was due to a large number of people fleeing persecution from countries with conflicts and political instability, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. Since the second half of 2021 there has been another notable increase. The latest year is the highest on record (**Figure 2**).

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4   *Skilled Worker visa: immigration salary list - GOV.UK*

Figure 2

The number of people claiming asylum from March 2002 to March 2025, and their route of entry to the UK, from March 2019 to March 2025

More than 109,300 people claimed asylum in the year ending March 2025. This is higher than the previous peak in the year ending March 2003
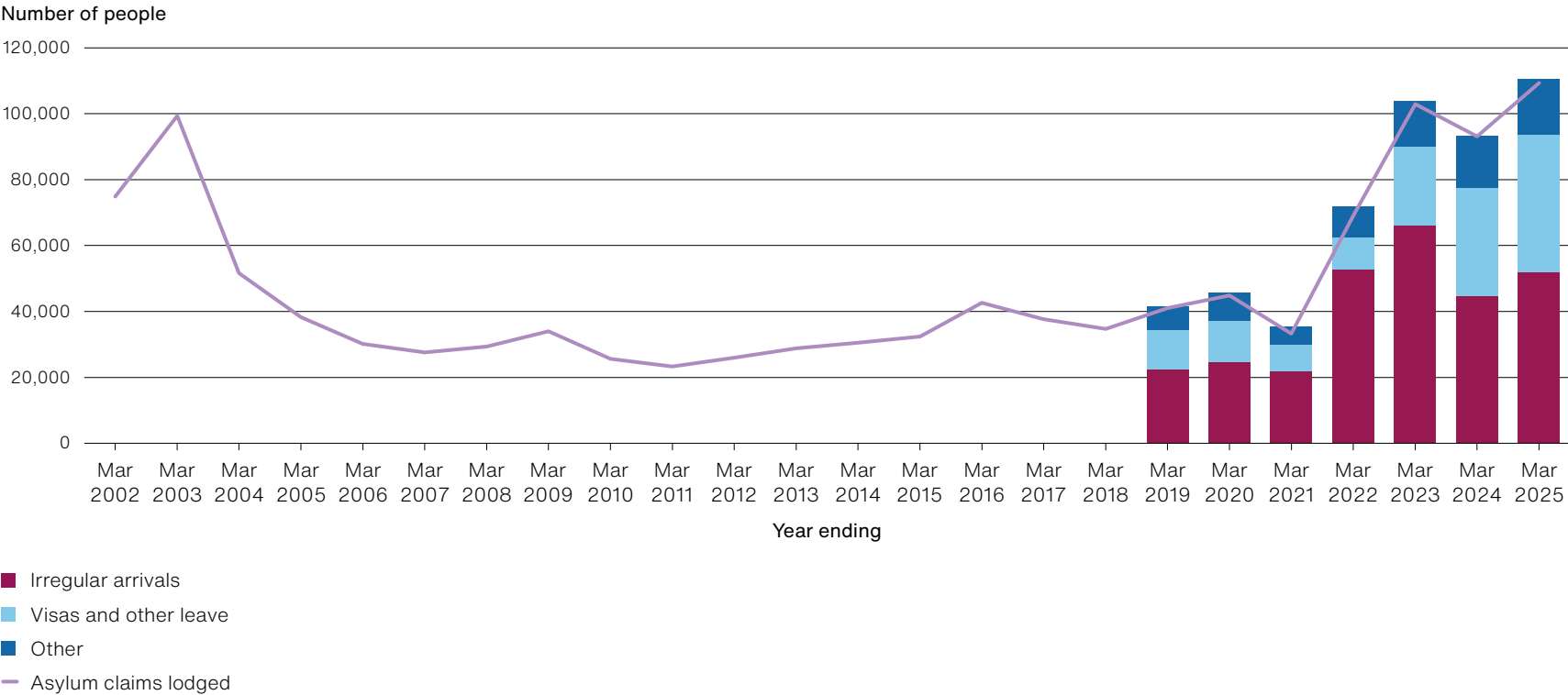
Number of people

Notes

1   Figures showing the number of people claiming asylum by route of entry (bar charts) are drawn from a live Home Office database. As a result, there may be minor inconsistencies between these figures and the total number of asylum claims (line graph), so totals may not always exactly match.

2   Figures for the number of people claiming asylum, by route of entry to the UK, are rounded in the underlying Home Office data.

3   'Irregular arrivals' relates to asylum claims from individuals who entered the UK without valid permission (including via small boat or clandestine entry).

4   'Visas and other leave' relate to asylum claims from individuals who entered the UK with relevant documentation on a visa or with other forms of legal permission to remain in the UK.

5   'Other' relates to asylum claims from individuals who entered through other routes, are UK-born children of asylum seekers or refugees or were non-visa nationals visiting the UK. prior to the introduction of the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme, as well as claims which could not be matched to a route of entry.

6   Published data on the route of entry to the UK are only available from the year ending March 2019.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office *Immigration System Statistics*, year ending March 2025

What do we mean by the asylum system?

1.7 The Home Office, Ministry of Justice (MoJ), HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) and local authorities all have responsibility in the wider asylum system (**Figure 3** on pages 15 an 16).

- The Home Office is responsible for ensuring the UK complies with its legal commitments to people seeking asylum. It makes decisions on claims, manages intake, and provides support and accommodation for people seeking asylum who are destitute. It is also responsible for enforcing the return of people who have been refused asylum and have exhausted their right to appeal, which may include detention, and for facilitating voluntary returns.

- The MoJ is responsible for overseeing the justice system and HMCTS administers appeals and tribunals, working with the independent judiciary. The MoJ is also responsible for the provision of legal aid, which is administered by the Legal Aid Agency (LAA).

- Local authorities provide support services to people in the asylum system, including social care and children's services. Local authorities have a statutory duty to accommodate an unaccompanied child, and these children are entitled to the same support as any other looked after child, regardless of their immigration status. They also have statutory duties to assist people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, which includes those who receive a positive decision on their asylum claim and are required to leave asylum accommodation. There are some limitations to the services that some people seeking asylum, who generally have 'no recourse to public funds' can access.[5]

Legislative and policy context

1.8 Over the last two decades the asylum system has seen increasingly frequent policy and legislative changes, with particular focus in recent years on interventions aimed at reducing the number of people making claims for asylum after entering the country illegally (**Figure 4** on pages 18 to 21).

1.9 On 1 September 2025, the then Home Secretary made an oral statement to the House of Commons setting out proposed interventions aimed at: disrupting people smuggling; reducing the use of hotel accommodation; speeding up the adjudication of appeals; and improving enforcement and returns. She also announced the immediate temporary suspension of refugee family reunion, ahead of proposed reforms.[6] The government's November 2025 policy statement on asylum and returns built on this, proposing policy and legal changes intended to reduce intake and increase removals, many of which will require Parliamentary approval.[7]

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5 No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) may apply to people with permission to enter or stay in the UK, or to those without permission, like people seeking asylum. It means they cannot normally access most benefits, tax credits, or housing assistance provided by local authorities.

6 Oral statement to Parliament, Strengthening border security and reforms to the asylum system, published 1 September 2025.

7 Restoring Order and Control, Secretary of State for the Home Department, CP 1418, November 2025.

Figure 3

Process, roles, responsibilities and legal duties in the asylum system

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

Home Office

The Home Office is responsible for ensuring the UK complies with its legal commitments to people seeking asylum. It manages the intake of people seeking asylum, makes decisions on claims and manages the enforcement of the immigration rules, including removing people who have no right to remain in the UK. The Home Office has a statutory duty to accommodate and support people seeking asylum who would otherwise be destitute while their claim is being considered. The Home Office also funds the support of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Ministry of Justice and HM Courts & Tribunals Service

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and HM Courts & Tribunals Service administer appeals and tribunals, working with the independent judiciary. The MoJ is also responsible for the provision of legal aid, which is administered by the Legal Aid Agency.

Local authorities

People seeking asylum are dispersed into local authority areas, into accommodation funded by the Home Office and provided by private suppliers, who procure and manage accommodation on the Home Office's behalf.

Local authorities have statutory duties to assist eligible people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They also provide some services to people in the asylum system, including social care and children's services. Local authorities are supported by 12 Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs), which provide leadership and coordination on migration in each region. SMPs are expert bodies that can assist with strategic leadership, project management, consultation and coordination, as well as engagement with the Home Office.

Other departments

Other departments also play a role. This includes the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, which delivers local authority funding and supports homelessness prevention and relief, including for people granted asylum who leave asylum accommodation. The Department for Education provides additional funding for some elements of the support of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Figure 3 *continued*

Process, roles, responsibilities and legal duties in the asylum system

Notes

1   This map is taken from our accompanying data visualisation.

2   Immigration detention can be used at any time in the asylum process.

3   The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a separate process from the asylum system – it provides a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support. NRM referrals are resolved independently of an individual's asylum claim, but the outcome of an NRM referral may affect the progression of an asylum claim. While a positive NRM decision does not guarantee that an individual will be granted asylum, it can be a factor in the Home Office's consideration of the asylum claim.

4   The process for deciding asylum claims made by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) is slightly different from the process for adult applicants. Decisions are made by specially trained teams within the Home Office, and there are different arrangements for accommodating and safeguarding children. The asylum process for unaccompanied children may also involve an age dispute, whereby social workers employed by local authorities work to determine the age of applicants.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of government documents

1.10 All such legislative and policy changes have resource implications across the asylum system. They may be followed by updates to case management systems, operational instructions and training for Home Office caseworkers and HMCTS staff, alongside further judicial training and additional information for appeal judges to take into account. Changes can also require amendments to legal aid legislation and associated regulations as well as to Legal Aid Agency contracts and processes.

1.11 Other European countries have experienced similar challenges to the UK in managing asylum claims, including backlogs in caseworking and appeals and accommodation pressure. There are many parallels between the approaches they have taken and those in the UK, and a few differences, particularly on rules about the right of people seeking asylum to work. We have summarised approaches in a selection of comparable countries in Appendix Two.

Government spending on the asylum system

1.12 There is no overall cross-government budget for the asylum system. The Home Office allocates a specific budget for certain asylum-related costs, such as accommodation and support. Caseworking staff costs are recorded within other budgets as actual spend, while the Home Office estimates costs associated with appeals and detention. Spending by other parts of government is also incorporated into their wider budgets for the justice system, housing, education or other types of support. The largest contributing element of the costs is direct spending on asylum support, on which the Home Office spent around £4.0 billion in 2024-25 (£4.7 billion in 2023-24). The main elements of this are grants to local authorities (around £883 million, including for unaccompanied children seeking asylum) and direct spending on accommodation (around £2.7 billion); the remainder is cash support and other asylum-related costs.

1.13 Actual spending by local authorities on supporting people seeking asylum is poorly understood. In 2024, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), which is responsible for local authority funding, carried out an exercise to gather asylum-related cost data. The exercise found that local authorities face additional costs for people seeking asylum, including on education, language support, integration services and social care, that are not covered sufficiently by existing funding arrangements. While councils could not calculate a cost per asylum seeker, MHCLG concluded that the asylum grant funding structure should be updated to more effectively address the costs incurred by local authorities.

1.14 Based on actual costs, we estimate that the total Home Office and MoJ spending on asylum is around £4.9 billion for 2024-25. This includes key areas of spend as shown in **Figure 5** on page 22. This figure does not fully capture all costs associated with the asylum system, particularly those incurred by local authorities which are difficult to calculate.

1.15 In the four years to 2024-25, the Home Office did not include in its Main Estimate funding equivalent to its full asylum support forecast. This was on the understanding that asylum support forecasts were highly volatile, efforts to improve efficiency were ongoing, and that the Home Office would need to clearly justify to HM Treasury that it had taken steps to manage down any asylum pressure before additional funding would be provided through the annual Supplementary Estimates process. In November 2023, the Home Affairs Select Committee expressed its concern that the Department was not able to budget accurately for asylum costs, suggesting it had "lost control of the asylum budget."[8]

1.16 At the June 2025 Spending Review, HM Treasury's funding settlement for the Home Office set out spending plans on asylum support as a separate figure for the first time. This provided improved transparency over spending plans for asylum from 2025-26 onwards, including the government's plans for savings. It also introduced stricter financial oversight arrangements. The Home Office is required to continue to provide monthly updates to HM Treasury on forecast asylum costs, including the actions it is taking to remain within its Spending Review settlement and how any underspends are being used. It must also monitor and evaluate the impact of its asylum transformation and accommodation programmes. The Home Office's settlement included £200 million of funding to transform the asylum system and the government expects reforms to reduce asylum costs by at least £1 billion per year by 2028-29 compared with 2024-25.[9]

1.17 Against this background, the next part of the report sets out our observations about the key challenges to address in the asylum system, to enable sustained improvement in value for money.

8   Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: Work of the Home Office, HC 356, 29 November 2023.
9   HM Treasury, Spending Review 2025, CP 1336, 11 June 2025.

Figure 4

A timeline of policy and operational changes to the UK asylum process, from November 2002
to November 2025

Since 2022, the frequency of major legislative and policy changes to the asylum system has been increasing, with a particular focus
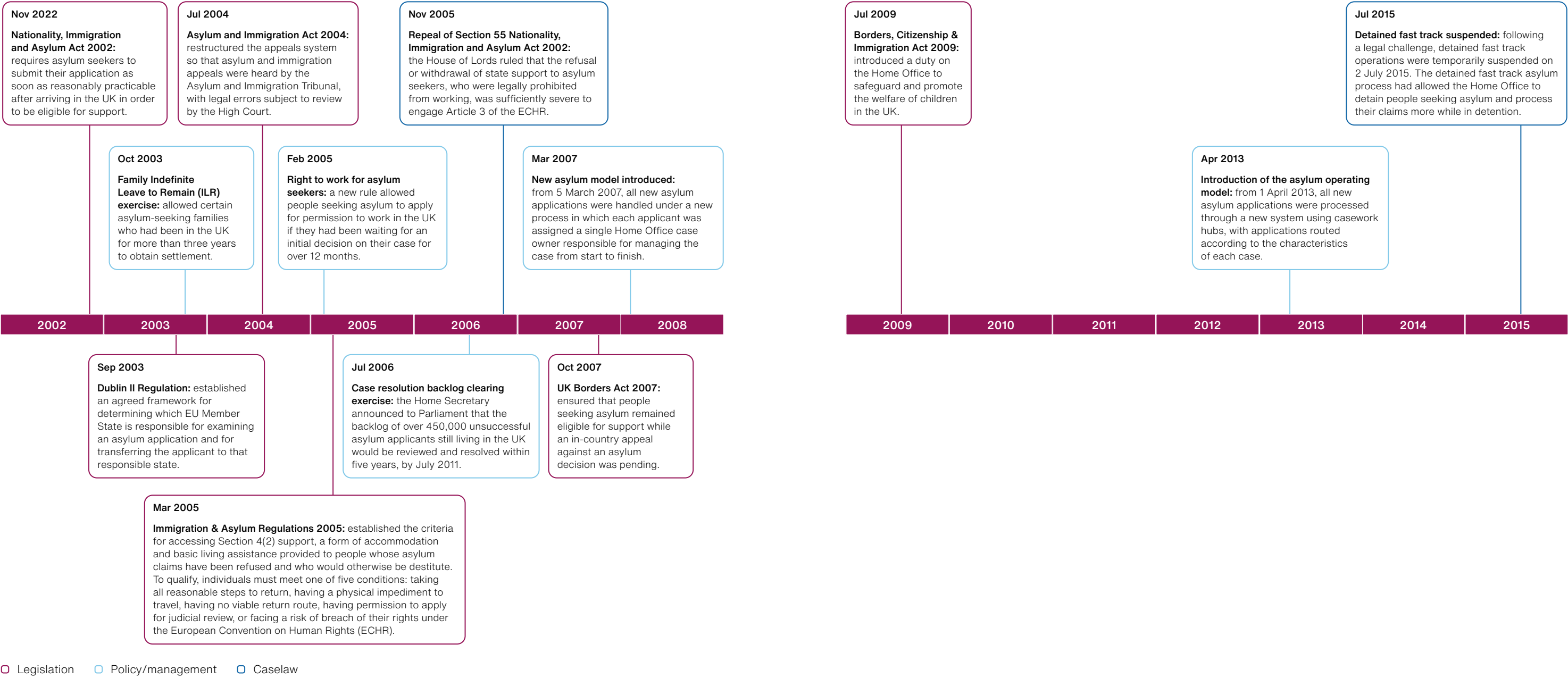on interventions intended to reduce intake

Nov 2022

Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002: requires asylum seekers to submit their application as soon as reasonably practicable after arriving in the UK in order to be eligible for support.

Jul 2004

Asylum and Immigration Act 2004: restructured the appeals system so that asylum and immigration appeals were heard by the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal, with legal errors subject to review by the High Court.

Nov 2005

Repeal of Section 55 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002: the House of Lords ruled that the refusal or withdrawal of state support to asylum seekers, who were legally prohibited from working, was sufficiently severe to engage Article 3 of the ECHR.

Jul 2009

Borders, Citizenship & Immigration Act 2009: introduced a duty on the Home Office to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the UK.

Jul 2015

Detained fast track suspended: following a legal challenge, detained fast track operations were temporarily suspended on 2 July 2015. The detained fast track asylum process had allowed the Home Office to detain people seeking asylum and process their claims more while in detention.

Oct 2003

Family Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) exercise: allowed certain asylum-seeking families who had been in the UK for more than three years to obtain settlement.

Feb 2005

Right to work for asylum seekers: a new rule allowed people seeking asylum to apply for permission to work in the UK if they had been waiting for an initial decision on their case for over 12 months.

Mar 2007

New asylum model introduced: from 5 March 2007, all new asylum applications were handled under a new process in which each applicant was assigned a single Home Office case owner responsible for managing the case from start to finish.

Apr 2013

Introduction of the asylum operating model: from 1 April 2013, all new asylum applications were processed through a new system using casework hubs, with applications routed according to the characteristics of each case.

| 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |

Sep 2003

Dublin II Regulation: established an agreed framework for determining which EU Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application and for transferring the applicant to that responsible state.

Jul 2006

Case resolution backlog clearing exercise: the Home Secretary announced to Parliament that the backlog of over 450,000 unsuccessful asylum applicants still living in the UK would be reviewed and resolved within five years, by July 2011.

Oct 2007

UK Borders Act 2007: ensured that people seeking asylum remained eligible for support while an in-country appeal against an asylum decision was pending.

Mar 2005

Immigration & Asylum Regulations 2005: established the criteria for accessing Section 4(2) support, a form of accommodation and basic living assistance provided to people whose asylum claims have been refused and who would otherwise be destitute. To qualify, individuals must meet one of five conditions: taking all reasonable steps to return, having a physical impediment to travel, having no viable return route, having permission to apply for judicial review, or facing a risk of breach of their rights under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).
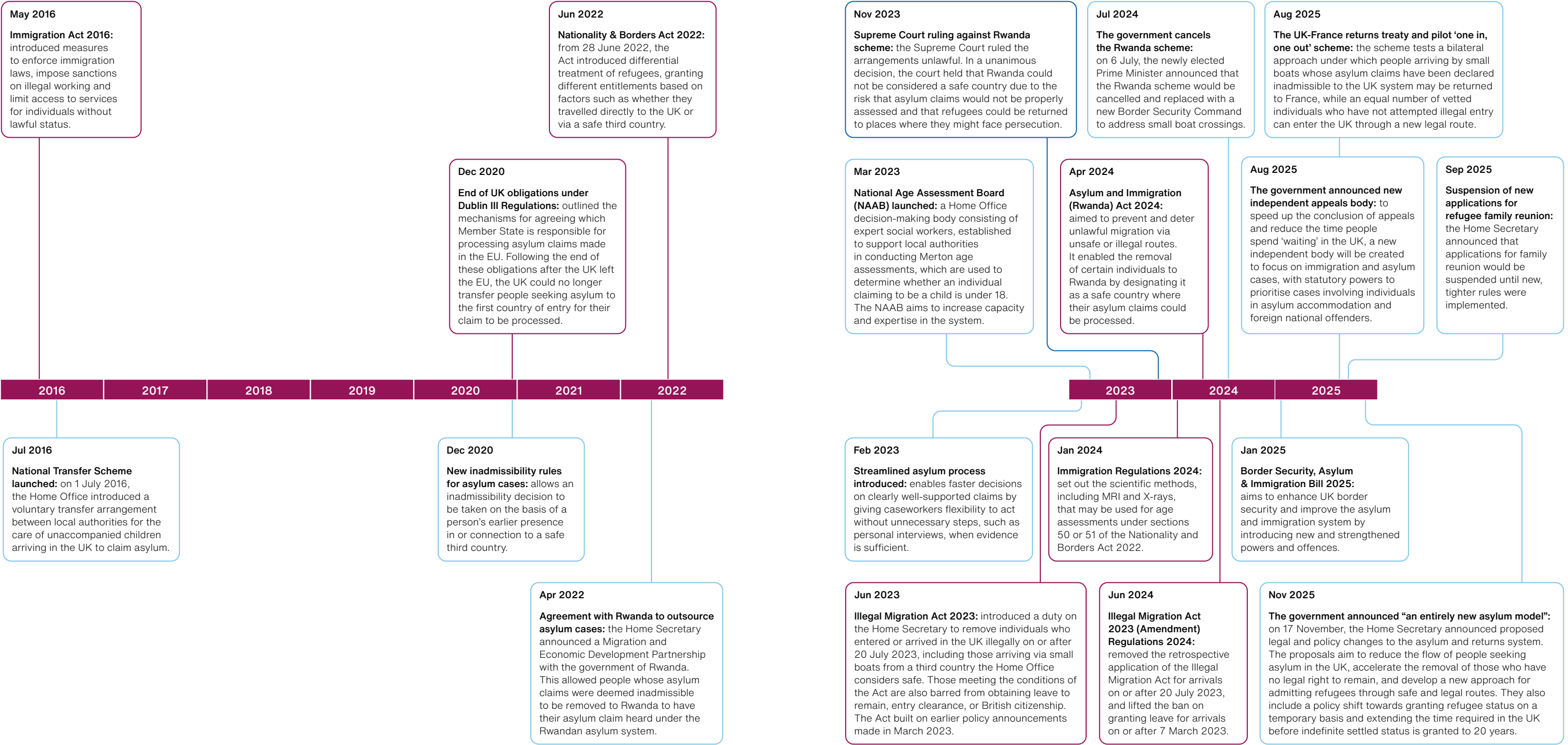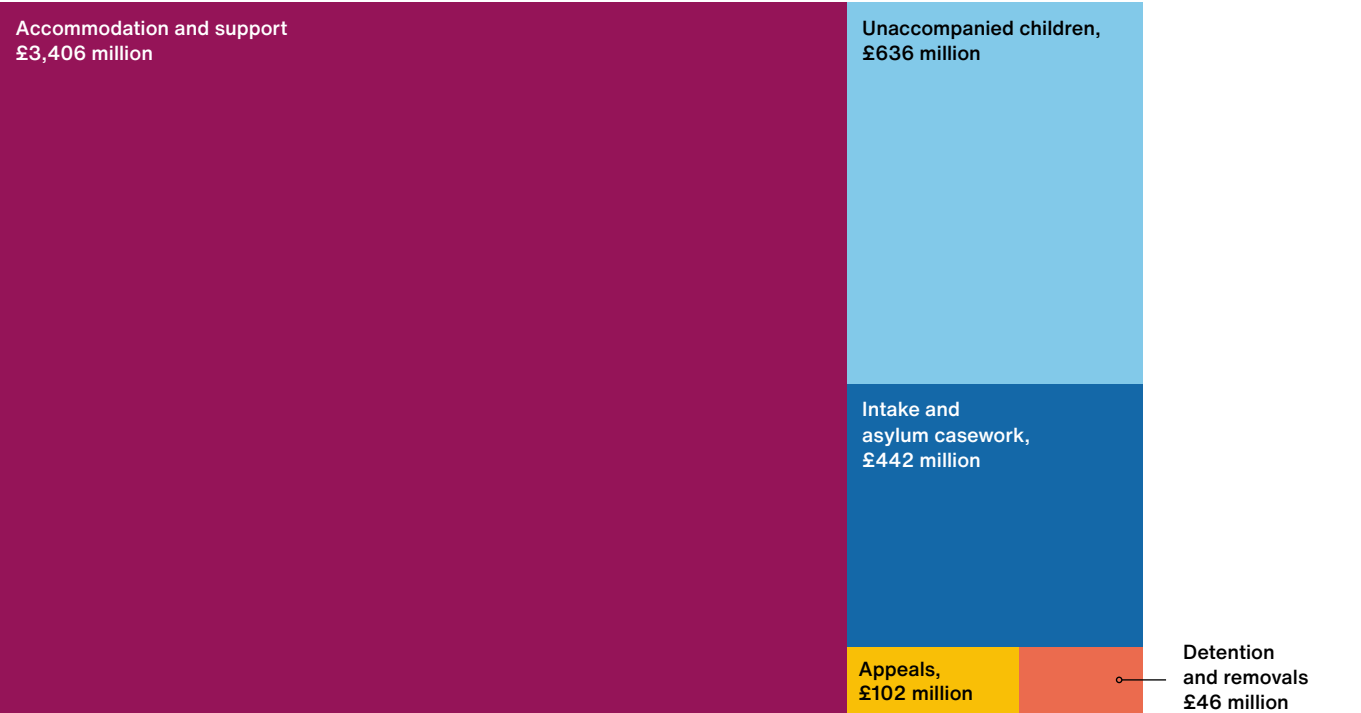
○ Legislation   ○ Policy/management   ○ Caselaw

Figure 4 *continued*

A timeline of policy and operational changes to the UK asylum process, from November 2002 to November 2025

May 2016

Immigration Act 2016: introduced measures to enforce immigration laws, impose sanctions on illegal working and limit access to services for individuals without lawful status.

Jun 2022

Nationality & Borders Act 2022: from 28 June 2022, the Act introduced differential treatment of refugees, granting different entitlements based on factors such as whether they travelled directly to the UK or via a safe third country.

Nov 2023

Supreme Court ruling against Rwanda scheme: the Supreme Court ruled the arrangements unlawful. In a unanimous decision, the court held that Rwanda could not be considered a safe country due to the risk that asylum claims would not be properly assessed and that refugees could be returned to places where they might face persecution.

Jul 2024

The government cancels the Rwanda scheme: on 6 July, the newly elected Prime Minister announced that the Rwanda scheme would be cancelled and replaced with a new Border Security Command to address small boat crossings.

Aug 2025

The UK-France returns treaty and pilot 'one in, one out' scheme: the scheme tests a bilateral approach under which people arriving by small boats whose asylum claims have been declared inadmissible to the UK system may be returned to France, while an equal number of vetted individuals who have not attempted illegal entry can enter the UK through a new legal route.

Dec 2020

End of UK obligations under Dublin III Regulations: outlined the mechanisms for agreeing which Member State is responsible for processing asylum claims made in the EU. Following the end of these obligations after the UK left the EU, the UK could no longer transfer people seeking asylum to the first country of entry for their claim to be processed.

Mar 2023

National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) launched: a Home Office decision-making body consisting of expert social workers, established to support local authorities in conducting Merton age assessments, which are used to determine whether an individual claiming to be a child is under 18. The NAAB aims to increase capacity and expertise in the system.

Apr 2024

Asylum and Immigration (Rwanda) Act 2024: aimed to prevent and deter unlawful migration via unsafe or illegal routes. It enabled the removal of certain individuals to Rwanda by designating it as a safe country where their asylum claims could be processed.

Aug 2025

The government announced new independent appeals body: to speed up the conclusion of appeals and reduce the time people spend 'waiting' in the UK, a new independent body will be created to focus on immigration and asylum cases, with statutory powers to prioritise cases involving individuals in asylum accommodation and foreign national offenders.

Sep 2025

Suspension of new applications for refugee family reunion: the Home Secretary announced that applications for family reunion would be suspended until new, tighter rules were implemented.

| 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |

Jul 2016

National Transfer Scheme launched: on 1 July 2016, the Home Office introduced a voluntary transfer arrangement between local authorities for the care of unaccompanied children arriving in the UK to claim asylum.

Dec 2020

New inadmissibility rules for asylum cases: allows an inadmissibility decision to be taken on the basis of a person's earlier presence in or connection to a safe third country.

Feb 2023

Streamlined asylum process introduced: enables faster decisions on clearly well-supported claims by giving caseworkers flexibility to act without unnecessary steps, such as personal interviews, when evidence is sufficient.

Jan 2024

Immigration Regulations 2024: set out the scientific methods, including MRI and X-rays, that may be used for age assessments under sections 50 or 51 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

Jan 2025

Border Security, Asylum & Immigration Bill 2025: aims to enhance UK border security and improve the asylum and immigration system by introducing new and strengthened powers and offences.

Apr 2022

Agreement with Rwanda to outsource asylum cases: the Home Secretary announced a Migration and Economic Development Partnership with the government of Rwanda. This allowed people whose asylum claims were deemed inadmissible to be removed to Rwanda to have their asylum claim heard under the Rwandan asylum system.

Jun 2023

Illegal Migration Act 2023: introduced a duty on the Home Secretary to remove individuals who entered or arrived in the UK illegally on or after 20 July 2023, including those arriving via small boats from a third country the Home Office considers safe. Those meeting the conditions of the Act are also barred from obtaining leave to remain, entry clearance, or British citizenship. The Act built on earlier policy announcements made in March 2023.

Jun 2024

Illegal Migration Act 2023 (Amendment) Regulations 2024: removed the retrospective application of the Illegal Migration Act for arrivals on or after 20 July 2023, and lifted the ban on granting leave for arrivals on or after 7 March 2023.

Nov 2025

The government announced "an entirely new asylum model": on 17 November, the Home Secretary announced proposed legal and policy changes to the asylum and returns system. The proposals aim to reduce the flow of people seeking asylum in the UK, accelerate the removal of those who have no legal right to remain, and develop a new approach for admitting refugees through safe and legal routes. They also include a policy shift towards granting refugee status on a temporary basis and extending the time required in the UK before indefinite settled status is granted to 20 years.

▢ Legislation ▢ Policy/management ▢ Caselaw

Source: National Audit Office analysis of public government announcements

Figure 5

Cost of key areas of spend in the asylum system, 2024-25

Based on actual costs, we estimate that the total Home Office and Ministry of Justice spending on asylum is around £4.9 billion for 2024-25. This figure does not fully capture all costs associated with the asylum system, particularly those incurred by local authorities, which are difficult to calculate

Accommodation and support £3,406 million	Unaccompanied children, £636 million
	Intake and asylum casework, £442 million
	Appeals, £102 million — Detention and removals £46 million

Notes

1   These costs are based on actual costs from the Home Office and Ministry Justice (MoJ) for the financial year 2024-25. Figures have been rounded.

2   Accommodation and support: In 2024-25, the Home Office spent around £3.4 billion on asylum accommodation and support (excluding on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)). This includes around £2.7 billion on direct spending on asylum accommodation, around £220 million on cash support provided to those seeking asylum, and around £247 million in grants paid to local authorities for dispersal accommodation.

3   Unaccompanied children: In 2024-25, the Home Office spent around £636 million on grants and incentive payments to local authorities for UASC and former UASC care leavers.

4   Intake and asylum casework: In 2024-25, the Home Office spent around £367 million on asylum caseworking, which includes staffing costs and associated non-pay. It also spent nearly £75 million on the Irregular Migration Intake Unit (IMIU). The IMIU is responsible for processing individuals who arrive in the UK through irregular means. This includes registering and screening those who claim asylum after arriving via small boats, lorries, or other clandestine routes.

5   Appeals: We estimate that spending on asylum appeals in 2024-25 was approximately £102 million. This is based on average costing data from the Home Office for 2024-25 of £22 million, combined with the operating costs of the Immigration and Asylum Chamber (IAC) within HM Courts & Tribunals Service, which were around £79.5 million. Of this, approximately £25.5 million was provided by the Home Office through a budget transfer to fund additional sitting days and related staff and judiciary costs. The IAC operating costs cover both asylum and non-asylum appeals, as well as onward appeals to the Upper Tribunal.

6   Detention and removals: We estimate that the Home Office spent around £46 million on asylum detention and removals in 2024-25. This figure combines costs for detention beds used for asylum in 2024-25 (£15.2 million) and costs of assisted voluntary removals (£30.4 million).

7   There are some additional MoJ-related costs not shown in the above graphic. For example, in 2024-25 around £22.8 million was spent on legal aid for asylum and immigration appeals. There were also other costs related to the IAC, including relevant overheads and non-cash costs, of around £51.2 million in 2024-25.

8   There are some additional Home Office-related costs not shown in the above graphic. In 2024-25, the Home Office spent around £2.1 million in fruitless payments from cancelled flights intended to return individuals with no right to remain in the UK, but it is not clear how much of this was in cases involving individuals who had previously claimed asylum. The Home Office also spent around £8.4 million on its customer helpline (covering passport, asylum and visa operations), and around £36.6 million on its Accommodation Transformation Programme, and had overhead costs of around £160 million.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Home Office and Ministry of Justice financial data

Part Two

Key challenges to managing the asylum system effectively

2.1 This part sets out our observations about four key enablers we consider essential to support an effective and value for money asylum system. These are also illustrated in our interactive system map. For each key enabler, we explain here:

- why it is important;

- the challenges that need to be addressed in the asylum system; and

- relevant actions the government has in progress or has announced.

2.2 Other countries have experienced similar challenges in managing their asylum systems and we have set out a summary of their approaches at Appendix Two. We highlight comparisons where relevant in this part.

A whole-system approach

Why is it important?

2.3 Our work over many years auditing the government's operational delivery of services has shown that taking a whole-system approach is one of the most important foundations for success.[10] In a whole-system approach, organisations across the system work collaboratively to establish a shared understanding of objectives and service outcomes. They agree ways of working to make consistent trade-offs between conflicting objectives and priorities in different parts of the system, using the likely impact on outcomes as the basis for trade-offs. This is often difficult, needing time and investment from senior leaders across central government departments, the centre of government (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office), local delivery bodies and non-governmental organisations.[11]

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10 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Lessons learned: Smarter delivery – improving operational capability to provide better public services*, Session 2024-25, HC 952, National Audit Office, 18 June 2025.

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

2.4 When it is done well:

- there is a focus on overall effectiveness and outcomes, rather than what is good for one part of the system;

- there is a shared understanding of risks that cross operational boundaries;

- those responsible for policy and operational delivery are working together to understand the capacity of organisations in different parts of the system to absorb more work; and

- they consider the impact of proposed policy changes on overall efficiency and quality, not just on activity completed in each silo.

How does this relate to the asylum system?

2.5 There is no single point of accountability for outcomes or governance structure for the end-to-end asylum system. The parts of government involved in asylum each have their own wider objectives, distinct legal duties, statutory responsibilities and budgets (Figure 3 and Figure 5). However, the lack of a whole-system approach means that the government has not set out the overall outcomes it aims to achieve through the asylum system, nor agreed shared objectives across the different bodies involved.

2.6 The system has had to adapt over time to changing volumes of demand and changing government policies on asylum (Figure 2 and Figure 4). But interventions to improve the management of demand have tended to be reactive and focused on fixing an urgent problem in one part of the system only, such as intake or initial decisions, without a clear view of the effects on other parts. For example:

- The government's commitment in December 2022 to clear the legacy backlog (claims made before the Nationality and Borders Act came into force) by December 2023 led to faster initial asylum decisions. In 2023, the Home Office made more than four times as many initial asylum decisions as in 2022, mainly in the second half of 2023, which saw nearly 76,000 initial asylum decisions made. However, this shifted pressure into the appeals stage where constraints on legal and judicial capacity created another backlog.

- Efforts in 2023 to clear the backlog of initial asylum decisions also led to a notable increase in individuals who had been granted protection status presenting to local authorities as homeless and requiring support, heightened by the requirement to leave Home Office-provided accommodation within 28 days.

- The Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA) introduced a new duty to remove people entering the UK illegally and added a provision that declared that asylum claims made by those people were inadmissible, and that they could not be granted permission to remain in the UK. The then government put this into practice in July 2023 but, because its Rwanda scheme for removals was not live and it could not remove those people, the effect was to pause asylum decision-making in respect of individuals who had arrived in the UK illegally since 7 March 2023. Decision-making resumed for this cohort in July 2024, when the government passed regulations that removed the retrospective effect of the IMA. This created an additional backlog in initial asylum decisions, as the Home Office was now required to make a decision in the paused cases.

2.7 Efficiency in each part of the asylum system depends on casework and data about people flowing smoothly from the previous stage. But a siloed structure means there are weak incentives for officials in one part of the system to actively support efficiency in other parts, which can lead to rework, delays, and costs:

- Home Office asylum case progression teams receive some cases that are not ready for review, often because of insufficient or missing evidence from earlier stages. This requires additional documentation or a second interview, introducing delays.

- Delays in the Home Office providing information to the tribunals to support appeals, or late notice withdrawals by the Home Office, can lead to inefficient use of tribunal capacity and disrupt case scheduling. Delays can also be caused by individuals making appeals or their legal representatives not complying with the tribunal's requirements, for example by not providing documentation in a timely manner.

- Inconsistent engagement between the Home Office, asylum accommodation providers and local authorities can lead to competition for the same accommodation resources or tension over accommodation choices. Different parts of the public sector require similar types of accommodation supply to fulfil various statutory obligations. This can lead to competition in some cases as demand for the same stock rises.

- Our 2024 investigation into the Home Office's plans to establish large sites to accommodate people seeking asylum and reduce the use of hotels found that the Home Office had faced legal challenges regarding its obligations on the grounds of planning regulations and the impact on local people.[12]

2.8 There is also no systematic approach for capturing learning through the stages of the asylum process. We noted that Home Office teams do carry out ad hoc reviews to look for patterns in appeal outcomes and learning for staff, and caseworkers are encouraged to attend tribunals, but there is no formalised approach for learning from upheld appeals.

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12 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Investigation into asylum accommodation*, Session 2023-24, HC 635, National Audit Office, 20 March 2024.

What is the government doing?

2.9 The government has recently set out a package of procedural and legal reforms it describes as "an entirely new asylum model". Many of these will need time and Parliamentary approval to introduce and together they represent a complex programme for system change. Creating a truly effective whole-system approach and successfully implementing the new asylum model will require system leadership, political support and collaborative decision making by the bodies involved. They will need a willingness to test, understand and learn from the impacts of the changes on the whole system. Without these elements, there is a risk that the government reverts to a pattern of counterproductive quick fixes as we reported in 2023, and before that in 2009, when we examined the New Asylum Model, itself a response to a previous backlog.[13] The government has in train, or has announced, some relevant actions and improvements. For example:

- The Home Office has established a new Asylum Group (previously called the Asylum Taskforce) to work with other departments and the centre of government. The Home Office appointed a Director General to lead the Asylum Group in November 2025.

- The Home Office is building its capability in system design, process modelling and evaluation. It is using these approaches to understand better how people's cases flow through the system and the potential impact of policy proposals.

- The Home Office and HM Courts & Tribunal Service (HMCTS) are working to improve information sharing and collaboration, including how they share forecasts and assumptions to improve planning.

- The 2025 spending review included spending commitments in different parts of government to help reduce the use of asylum hotels. As well as £200 million for Home Office reforms, there were commitments to increase asylum appeals capacity, and funding more generally to increase the supply of temporary accommodation in communities.

- Since 2019, the Home Office has added quality review stages to test how well-founded its decisions are before going to appeal. The aim is to reduce unnecessary appeals work and improve outcomes, although late-notice withdrawals can still lead to inefficient use of tribunal capacity and disrupt case scheduling.

13   Comptroller and Auditor General, *Management of Asylum Applications by the UK Border Agency*, Session 2008-09, HC 124, National Audit Office, 23 January 2009.

Addressing fundamental barriers

How does this relate to the asylum system?

Why is it important?

2.10 To deliver value for money, the asylum system needs to be able to process and decide claims in a fair, efficient and timely way and implement those decisions, including enforcing removals. Lengthy delays put at risk the welfare and life chances of people seeking asylum, represent an unproductive use of taxpayers' money on accommodation and support, and erode public confidence in the system's fairness and effectiveness.

How does this relate to the asylum system?

2.11 There are clear opportunities to enhance the efficiency and quality of the current system for processing asylum claims. However, without either removing some of the fundamental barriers to progressing claims, or designing the system to take account of them, some people seeking asylum will continue to remain in the system for extended periods. This prevents the system from operating as it should and undermines the government's ability to achieve value for money. Those without valid claims may also exploit these aspects of the system to stay in the UK when they are not genuinely in need of asylum.

2.12 A key factor that stops the system from operating as intended is the inability to promptly remove some people who have exhausted their appeal rights but do not leave voluntarily. Where detention is used for the purpose of removal, legislation requires that the Home Office should only use it when there is a realistic prospect of removal within a 'reasonable' period of time. Where this is not possible, some individuals remain within the asylum system, with their cases unresolved. The reasons why a failed asylum seeker cannot be removed include:

- That the UK has limited bilateral agreements with some countries on returns. This applies to some countries from which asylum claims are normally certified as 'clearly unfounded' - even where agreements exist, compliance by foreign authorities can be limited; and

- That some individuals do not have verifiable identity documents and cannot obtain them from their country of origin.

This leads to significant expenditure on support and accommodation or detention, without progress towards resolution of the case. In our sample of 5000 people who claimed asylum in January 2023, we found that the claims of more than a third (41%) of people in our sample remain open but are not awaiting an appeal decision or the outcome of further submissions to the Home Office. These claims are not being progressed, and the individuals involved have not been removed from the UK.[14]

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14   Our data visualisation is available here: *https://nao-mesh.shinyapps.io/Asylum_Systems_Data_Visualisation/*

2.13 Another feature of the current system is the potential for repeated claims and appeals processes. UK law protects the right to appeal against a refused asylum decision through a statutory process involving an independent tribunal, and evidence from the Home Office suggests that, in 2024-25, 68% of people who received a refusal at initial decision went on to lodge an appeal.[15] In addition, there is no limit on the number of times an individual may make further submissions to the Home Office with new evidence that might change the outcome of their claim, even late in the process or after appeal rights against the initial claim are exhausted. Further submissions provide a further right of appeal, even if an individual's appeal rights had previously been exhausted.

2.14 The right to appeal a decision that an applicant or their legal representative feels is incorrect, and the ability to provide new information to Home Office decision-makers, are important in ensuring fairness in the asylum system. Moreover, there are several legitimate reasons why repeated submissions and appeals might occur. They may reflect genuinely new information or valid changes in an individual's circumstances, or may be due to the complexity of the system and the difficulty applicants face in engaging with it. However, some individuals whose claims have been refused, and who have been found to have no right to asylum, can deliberately use further submissions or new appeals to frustrate their removal and prolong the amount of time they spend in the UK.

2.15 Frequent changes in policy on asylum have been a feature of recent years (paragraph 1.8). Global instability also means that the government's guidance on which countries are deemed safe can change. Both types of change alter asylum claim admissibility rules and may overturn an initial decision by the time it reaches tribunal. Finally, some types of claims are particularly subject to delays, which can prolong the process for several years – including age disputes, referrals for investigation of modern slavery and new rights of appeal for fresh claims.

2.16 All the above system features can prolong the time that individuals spend in the asylum system. There is also a reinforcement effect between these features and process inefficiencies. Process delays make it more likely that the individual is deemed to have established a life in the UK or that the circumstances in their country of origin have changed, which may change the ultimate outcome on their claim.[16] In all cases, long delays waiting in the asylum system create uncertainty and hardship for individuals, extend the time in which they are unable to work and participate in society, and make integration for people granted asylum harder.

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15 The Home Office noted that appeals data is still in the process of transitioning to the new Atlas caseworking system and that there are ongoing issues with data quality in this area, meaning that this figure is subject to change.
16 Data on appeals means that it is not possible to see how many cases involving an asylum claim were eventually granted on Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (1998), which protects an individual's right to private and family life.

2.17 Improving any complex public service requires open discussion of the problems, innovation to challenge current thinking, and taking well-managed risks.[17] In the case of the asylum system, addressing the obstacles to improvement, or adjusting the system to function effectively around these obstacles, will also need political leadership and detailed work to ensure that any changes balance the duties, rights and objectives of those involved in the system. Ultimately some changes will require Parliamentary support. The experience of other countries could also be instructive – for example some choose to offset the cost and wider impact of supporting people seeking asylum by allowing them greater access to the labour market (Appendix Two).

What is the government doing?

2.18 We noted that the Home Office is working to target its immigration enforcement activity towards people it considers it has the best chance of successfully removing from the UK, and in November 2025 it announced several new measures. It is too early to judge whether these efforts add up to an effective approach to resolving the barriers to removal or adapting the asylum system to operate effectively despite the presence of people who cannot be removed. The measures the government already has under way are:

- The UK-France returns treaty and pilot 'one in, one out' scheme. The Home Office told us that an objective of this scheme is to demonstrate whether a new bilateral approach to returning people arriving by small boats whose asylum claims have been declared inadmissible to the UK system will work in practice and could be scaled up to include more partner countries. The Home Office agreed its approach with HM Treasury and incorporated a formal evaluation of the pilot to assess its early impact.

- Arrangements with Iraq and Moldova and a joint communiqué with Vietnam to strengthen cooperation on returns.

- The UK, alongside its Five Eyes partners, has committed to adjusting visa access for countries that refuse or delay accepting the return of their nationals. The government has told Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Namibia that if they do not comply with international rules and norms on returns it will impose visa penalties on them.

- Increasing the use of AI facial age estimation technology with the aim of strengthening age assessment.

17   Comptroller and Auditor General, *Lessons learned: Smarter delivery – improving operational capability to provide better public services*, Session 2024-25, HC 952, National Audit Office, 18 June 2025.

2.19 Newly proposed measures yet to be implemented, some of which will require Parliamentary approval, include:

- Measures to enforce removals to countries which are judged to be safe, and to remove families with failed claims if their home country is judged to be safe.

- Introducing a faster track for appeals assessed as having low prospects of success, moving to a single right of appeal for each claim, and tightening the rules on further submissions so that only evidence that is materially different from that considered in the original decision can be raised.

- Legislation to reform the interpretation of human rights and modern slavery protections and prevent their misuse by people not entitled to protection.

- Measures that seek to increase contributions by people seeking asylum to the cost of their support, where they have assets or income. The government has not announced changes to the list of permitted occupations for people seeking asylum awaiting a decision.

Timely, robust, shared data

Why is it important?

2.20 We frequently find across government that robust data are not a priority and that there is a culture of tolerating and working around data that are not fit for purpose. It can be challenging to make the case for long-term investments to improve the quality and sharing of data. And government tends to be poor at monitoring the time and costs involved in sorting poor-quality, disorganised data, which exacerbates that challenge.[18] Our work on complex cross-government systems also shows how important it is for leaders to have an understanding, based on a shared set of trusted data, of what is happening across the whole system and why.[19]

How does this relate to the asylum system?

2.21 Poor quality data and workarounds have been a long-standing characteristic of the asylum system. In 2023 we reported that the Home Office had been slow to implement its new case management system, Atlas. At the time, asylum caseworkers were using two systems to enter or update the same information. The Home Office has now moved fully to Atlas for asylum case management (as well as all other migration and borders casework), but the transition has been complex and there is further to go on data quality, system functionality and data sharing with other parts of government.

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18 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Challenges in using data across government*, Session 2017–2019, HC 2220, National Audit Office, June 2019.
19 *Improving operational delivery in government: A good practice guide for senior leaders*, National Audit Office, March 2021 page 8.

2.22 The Home Office has faced significant challenges with transferring and merging its legacy data, improving functionality and upskilling staff to create a single reliable record in Atlas for each person seeking asylum. The process of resolving identities and linking records across systems is ongoing. The lack of a single, complete, reliable record of all the necessary data on each person seeking asylum is a constraint on the efficiency and quality of decision-making and the Home Office's ability to manage and forecast demand across the system. On our visits to Home Office processing centres we observed that:

- errors or omissions in the data recorded in Atlas about people at the point they make their asylum claim was leading to time-consuming follow-up later by decision-making staff;

- staff were continuing to refer back to the closed Case Information Database (CID) system that Atlas has replaced and there was evidence of case identifying numbers from that system still being used; and

- some teams used additional spreadsheets to help them manage their flow of work because Atlas does not yet provide the functionality they need.

2.23 There is no unique asylum case identifier shared by Home Office, HMCTS and local authority systems. The Home Office and HMCTS have developed arrangements to link applicant data between Atlas and the new HMCTS appeals case management system (CCD). However, we saw problems with data sharing across the system making it impossible to directly track individual cases through the entire asylum process:

- A lack of standardised information flow between local authorities and from the Home Office and accommodation providers to local authorities means that councils are not always notified when people move into or out of their areas, and may not be notified promptly when people who have been granted asylum move out of asylum accommodation. This hampers the ability of local authorities to provide appropriate, proactive support or to plan and allocate resources effectively.

- Information sharing between the Home Office, local authorities, accommodation providers, and other relevant parties such as the police about safeguarding and risk management is not always effective. Local authorities have a statutory duty to safeguard adults seeking asylum living in their areas. However, both the Home Office and representatives of local authorities told us that it was difficult to share information consistently and effectively. This is made more complicated by the fact that there is no standardised process for sharing information – including about safeguarding and other needs – with and between local authorities and other local services. The Home Office is taking steps to improve this, including by developing a standardised referral form and through the development of a Quality Assurance Framework for its safeguarding work.

2.24 More broadly, we recommended in 2023 that the Home Office routinely collect the data necessary to understand the flow of demand through the whole asylum system, and the impact of policy changes on people seeking asylum. In this audit, we found several examples of data that could help the government better understand outcomes within the asylum system that were not routinely being collected, or which they could not provide. For example:

- the Home Office was unable to provide data on the number of people in the asylum system who were not receiving any form of state support or state-funded accommodation;

- the Home Office could not provide data on the outcomes of further submissions;

- the Home Office did not hold complete data on the number of people who had absconded from the asylum system, or the total number of people currently subject to some form of enforcement action, or on all unsuccessful removals and their causes;

- the Ministry of Justice could not provide data on the total number of cases received by the Upper Tribunal, although it told us they have a manual system in place for the Upper Tribunal to collate and share management information on a four week retrospective basis; and

- the MoJ did not hold reliable data on the level of repeated appeals.

What is the government doing?

2.25 The Home Office told us it has assessed the maturity of its data on asylum and is using the results to develop a data strategy which reflects the Government Data Quality Framework.[20] It has a programme of work planned that will focus on improving data input quality, building staff's trust in Atlas, and establishing robust data controls. At the same time, the Home Office is continuing to make engineering improvements to the underlying architecture of Atlas.

2.26 The Home Office also told us it is working to improve data flows to its partners in other parts of the asylum system. At various stages of development, it has introduced:

- a Place-Based Visibility Tool, which provides local authorities with data to support asylum accommodation planning and service delivery;

- a tool to extract data to transfer to HMCTS;

- a process for sharing information when asylum-seeking children move schools which is being finalised with the Department for Education; and

- a Property Management Platform, which is intended to integrate with Atlas and provide real time location data on asylum seekers in supported accommodation by the end of 2026.

20 The Government Data Quality Framework - GOV.UK, published 3 December 2020.

A resilient, strategic approach to capacity and workforce

Why is it important?

2.27 In efficient systems that deliver sustainable value for money, work is done right first time, work moves through the process at the pace needed to meet service users' needs without creating backlogs, and hand-offs between different people and steps in the process are seamless.[21] The asylum system is subject to fluctuating demand and significant peaks driven by external factors. It is therefore even more important to understand how cases flow through the whole system, address capacity constraints and design in flexibility to demand, while designing out the causes of failure, inefficiency and rework.

How does this relate to the asylum system?

2.28 There are several capacity constraints that limit the effective functioning of the asylum system, and addressing them is challenging, particularly in the context of fiscal restraint, housing shortages and limits on civil service recruitment. Each of the systems within the asylum system is under pressure more widely, not just on managing asylum (**Figure 6** overleaf). These system capacity constraints around judicial capacity, case-management and accommodation are paralleled in other countries. We noted similarities in approaches as well as some differences that may offer learning for the UK (Appendix Two).

2.29 In recent years the Home Office has been working to improve the productivity of its casework, moving away over time from individual caseworkers taking cases through their whole journey towards a chain of process elements, each with dedicated staff resources, productivity targets and management oversight. In 2021, it started developing the asylum and protection transformation programme to deliver 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". The programme included streams of improvement work across all parts of the Home Office process.[22]

21 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Lessons learned: Smarter delivery – improving operational capability to provide better public services,* Session 2024-25, HC 952, National Audit Office, 18 June 2025.

22 Comptroller and Auditor General, *The asylum and protection transformation programme*, Session 2022-23, HC 1375, National Audit Office, 16 June 2023 - Figure 7.

Figure 6

Capacity constraints on the asylum system

We identified four of the most pressing capacity constraints that limit the effective functioning of the asylum system

Aspect of system capacity	Effects of this	Challenges
Judicial capacity	Availability of judges is the biggest constraint on increasing sitting days in the appeals system. We heard that cases were sometimes listed but had to be adjourned at short notice due to no judge being available.	The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) finds it challenging to recruit enough salaried judges across its tribunals, including for the Immigration and Asylum Chamber (IAC) of the First-tier Tribunal, particularly when compared with fee-paid roles. Recent recruitment campaigns have fallen short of targets. Judges told us there were poor incentives for working in the IAC in comparison to other competing tribunals, due to the complex and taxing nature of the asylum appeals work that makes up an increasing proportion of cases heard by the IAC. Frequent policy changes have also created an additional training burden. Judges also pointed to negative media attention and personal attacks in the press as factors making recruitment more challenging.
Supply of legal aid services	Individuals claiming asylum are eligible for legal aid, subject to a means and merits test. This includes advice on their initial application to the Home Office and advice and representation at an appeal. The lack of legal advice and representation can mean that issues which could have been resolved at the initial decision stage are instead pushed to appeal, increasing the appeals backlog. The MoJ also told us that there has been an increase in the number of individuals representing themselves in person at tribunal. This requires additional support from legal officers and can result in further disruption and delay for the tribunal.	The MoJ's review of civil legal aid showed that the immigration and asylum sector faces acute challenges with high demand and a shortage of legal aid providers in some areas, largely driven by unsustainable fee levels. The findings of our report into the government's management of legal aid reinforced this.[1] There are particular pressures in some areas such as south-west England.
Experienced caseworkers	Home Office caseworkers in asylum case management have a challenging role. They face complex cases and changing guidance. The robustness of asylum decisions depends on their skills, training and the support provided to them.	Staff retention is improving but rates of churn are still high. Managers felt it took on average seven months for new staff to become fully effective in their roles, yet in 2024-25 there was an almost 35% staff attrition rate for asylum caseworkers in the Home Office (although this was reducing in the first half of 2025-26). Decision-makers learn valuable skills in their role, and this makes them marketable elsewhere.
Local dispersal accommodation	A shortage of dispersal accommodation has led to the Home Office using hotels and large sites as contingency accommodation.	The Home Office has few levers to control the cost of hotels which, may be more profitable for the suppliers than other forms of accommodation. It began using vessels and ex-military bases (large sites) in 2020 as an alternative to hotels and continues to work with the Ministry of Defence on potential new sites for asylum accommodation.[2]

Notes

1   Comptroller and Auditor General, *Government's management of legal aid*, Session 2023-24, HC 514, National Audit Office, February 2024. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/governments-management-of-legal-aid/.

2   Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Home Office's asylum accommodation contracts*, Session 2024-25, HC 874, National Audit Office, May 2025. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-home-offices-asylum-accommodation-contracts/.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of site visits, Home Office and Ministry of Justice documents, which includes from unpublished management information from HM Courts & Tribunals Service

2.30 However, we found that progress with the transformation programme's broad-based improvements has been undermined by the need to respond to urgent political priorities and rapid policy changes that focus on one part of the system only (such as reducing illegal entry, speeding up initial decisions, or reducing the use of hotels) (paragraph 1.8). For example:

- Increased demand for caseworker capacity to tackle a backlog of claims awaiting decisions meant the Home Office relaxed its recruitment arrangements and some of the people it recruited were ill-suited to making complex decisions on asylum cases. This has had an impact on decision quality, and our work suggests it has generated further demand and problems in other areas of the system, including the tribunal system.

- We found that the Home Office's attempt to acquire the Northeye site within just a few months of adopting it onto the non-detained asylum accommodation programme led it to cut corners and make a series of poor decisions. This resulted in it purchasing a site that was unsuitable for that original purpose, and it paying more for it than it needed to.[23]

- At the time of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the MoJ approved the recruitment of additional judges for the Upper Tribunal, but this additional capacity was not needed when policy changed. However, some of this capacity has been flexibly deployed to the First-tier Tribunal.

What is the government doing?

2.31 Home Office operational leaders told us they had captured significant learning from the experience of rapidly surging activity to tackle the case backlog in 2023, in terms of understanding the drivers of efficient case flow, the factors that affect decision quality, and how they are linked. The Home Office has returned to more rigorous recruitment procedures for caseworkers and implemented a quality improvement plan. It is focused on improving technical support to caseworkers, addressing their knowledge gaps through targeted coaching, and bringing together feedback from appeals to improve decision quality. The Home Office is also trialling the use of AI tools to summarise lengthy case notes to save time for caseworkers. At the same time, caseworkers we spoke to were frustrated by continuing problems with data quality and interoperability (paragraph 2.21). Decision quality remains a challenge, with 42% of sampled decisions in a rolling twelve months to May 2025 having significant or fail errors.

23 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Investigation into the acquisition of the Northeye site for asylum accommodation*, Session 2024-25, HC 305, National Audit Office, 15 November 2024; Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Home Office's asylum accommodation contracts*, Session 2024-25, HC 874, National Audit Office, 7 May 2025.

2.32 The Ministry of Justice is considering a range of ways to improve judicial capacity as well as recruitment, including working with the judiciary to facilitate judges from other First-tier Tribunal chambers to sit in asylum cases. It has also introduced a legal officer role to support judges and make better use of their time. Legal officers assist with case management and preparation, helping cases reach hearings efficiently and ensuring court time is used effectively. This support also helps reduce the number of adjournments caused by poor evidence quality, saving judicial time.

2.33 The Ministry of Justice is taking action to support the capacity of the legal aid market, including fee uplifts to improve the financial viability of asylum and immigration civil legal aid work and incentivise providers to take up and expand their legal aid work.

2.34 The Home Office is exploring a variety of short-, medium- and longer-term accommodation options, such as former student accommodation and government properties, to reduce the use of asylum hotels. We also noted that the Home Office has made better use of the accommodation capacity it has purchased. It sought to maximise available space – for example by converting double hotel rooms to twin rooms, and other large spaces (such as conference rooms) into dormitories. This required the Home Office to gather detailed information on bed spaces and room-sharing constraints (such as medical and safeguarding issues), and analyse data on empty rooms, enabling conversations with providers about bringing them back into use. For dispersal accommodation, the Home Office worked with providers to digitally map the estate and optimise its usage in real time.[24]

24   Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Home Office's asylum accommodation contracts*, Session 2024-25, HC 874, National Audit Office, 7 May 2025.

2.35 If the government's most recently announced reforms succeed in moving cases through the asylum system faster, for example by reducing repeated appeals, this could relieve pressure on decision-making and judicial resources.[25] However, the set of proposed changes is complex, and the challenge is to set out a sustainable approach to capacity and capability for the asylum system based on an understanding of how people and casework flow through the whole system. Otherwise, there is a risk of unintended consequences for already stretched systems, as well as for wider government priorities such as homelessness. The latest announcements include:

- The creation of a new independent appeals body focused on immigration and asylum appeals, with statutory powers to prioritise cases from those in asylum accommodation and foreign national offenders. The new body will be staffed by professionally trained adjudicators, with safeguards to ensure high standards. The government has not yet announced further details of how this body will be resourced or the implications for existing appeals capacity. In November the government indicated that, once established, this body will also provide people seeking asylum with independent legal advice.

- A change in the length of time for which successful asylum seekers are granted leave to remain, from five years to 30 months. It will be renewed only if the individual is still considered in need of protection. The implications of these more frequent reviews of right to remain on the Home Office's case management capacity or on the appeals system is not yet clear.

- Removing the legal obligation to support people seeking asylum who would otherwise be destitute, replacing it with a discretionary power where support will depend on people seeking asylum meeting certain conditions.

- Measures designed to encourage people seeking asylum to take up work, where they have the right to do so, and contribute to their support costs.

- Expanding detention capacity for people who have been refused asylum and are awaiting removal from the UK.

25 Asylum and immigration – briefing note, Home Office, 2 September 2025; RESTORING ORDER AND CONTROL, a statement on the government's asylum and returns policy, Secretary of State for the Home Department, CP 1418, November 2025.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

Our scope

1   We took as our starting point for this work our conclusion in 2023 that all parts of the end-to-end asylum system must work together to manage demand effectively. We set out to map the end-to-end asylum system in a visual, interactive way that would aid transparency, accountability and value for money decisions.

2   Our work covers the end-to-end system for managing asylum claims from the point at which someone makes a claim in the UK to the point at which they exit the asylum system - through a grant of protection, removal from the UK or otherwise reaching the end of the process. The work is presented in the form of an interactive data visualisation based on a systems map of the asylum system, and a covering report to Parliament.

3   We bring together data and insights from across the asylum system in an analysis of the journey of people seeking asylum, the flow and quality of data, and the interactions between organisations. We carried out the work to support this report and the data visualisation between April and October 2025 and it covers arrangements up to November 2025, but some aspects of the system are likely to change under the government's proposed reforms. The report includes factual updates on the government's evolving approach, but we do not conclude on their value for money.

4   This work does not cover dedicated asylum and protection schemes such as the Homes for Ukraine Scheme or the three Afghanistan resettlement schemes. Nor does it cover irregular migration by individuals who do not make a claim for asylum. We do not include government activities designed to prevent or discourage illegal migration, though these are clearly relevant to the flows into the asylum system.

Our overall analytical approach

5   Our overall approach was iterative and exploratory, and involved two parallel streams of work – system mapping and capturing audit insights about the asylum system – supported by a range of methods (**Figure 7** overleaf). Our team combined audit and analytical skills and was also supported by NAO experts on operational delivery, data and digital transformation. As we pursued our various audit methods, we synthesised, analysed and refined what we learned about the system in an iterative way, including through a phase in which we tested our emerging findings with officials in the audited bodies and stakeholders. We also identified additional datasets and questions to ask as we did so. In this way we developed both the data visualisation (which contains our system mapping work) and the covering report (which contains our key system observations) in tandem. See Our evidence base below for more detail on each of our methods.

Development of the interactive data visualisation

6   We tested a range of proprietary visualisation and presentation tools before deciding to use our in-house programmers to build the systems map and to present the results using the scrolling 'story' approach. We built the data visualisation using the programming language R, specifically the Shiny and VisNetwork packages. We used the VisNetwork package to build and customise the system maps; Shiny adds the interactivity to allow the user to scroll and click on to specific parts of the visualisation. We tested our data visualisation on a mixed group of NAO staff who are not subject matter experts to help refine its user interface.

7   We often create simple system maps as part of our audits of government activities. Less frequently we have been able to do more sophisticated process mining analysis to understand the flow of cases through a system, including the time taken for different activities, how resources are used and where bottlenecks occur. We considered process mining of the asylum system but found that it was not feasible for data quality reasons.

Figure 7

Overall methodology and analytical approach

We took an iterative approach to developing our methods and analytical framework

System mapping and development of data visualisation

Workshops with audited bodies and stakeholders to test and refine

Audit methods

Interviews with government departments

Discussions with other auditors and inspectors

Discussions with system stakeholders and other experts

Financial and data analysis

Document and model review

Site visits

Data sampling

International comparisons

Team synthesis sessions to identify themes

Input from National Audit Office experts

Testing of themes against data using copilot

Data visualisation (system mapping)

Covering report (context and key observations)

Audit insights and development of key observations

Source: Summary of National Audit Office methodology

Our evidence base

Interviews with government departments

8   Between March and November 2025, we conducted over 50 interviews with staff from government departments to understand their teams' roles in the asylum system, their challenges and successes in recent years, and how they have responded to changes within the system. These discussions were primarily with officials from the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), but we also spoke to staff from the Department for Education (DfE), the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and HM Treasury. We met with staff working on forecasting and modelling, policy development, operational teams, stakeholder engagement, data and management information, and enforcement. We also spoke to a number of teams covering specialist topic areas such as legal aid, appeals and litigation, caseworking, asylum-seeking children and community cohesion. Interviews were mainly conducted online. We used the findings from these discussions to enhance our understanding of different areas of the system, and in the development of our thematic findings.

Discussions with other auditors and inspectors

9   While developing and refining our understanding of the asylum system and the emerging findings of this audit, we worked with other arm's-length bodies from across the government with a role in the system, including the Government Internal Audit Agency, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, and HM Inspectorate of Prisons. These conversations enabled us to further contextualise our work by learning more about the recent findings of other bodies carrying out evaluative work within the asylum system, and to enrich and refine our findings by testing them with others who are familiar with the system.

Discussions with system stakeholders and other experts

10 We held interviews and workshops with ten stakeholder organisations working in and around the asylum system. We identified stakeholders through desk research and, in some cases, discussion with government departments, and contacted them inviting them to contribute to the audit. We held discussions with:

- representatives from the regional Strategic Migration Partnerships;

- the Local Government Association;

- the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities;

- the Law Society (including the Immigration Law Committee);

- the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association;

- the Refugee Council; and

- the British Red Cross.

In addition, we spoke to the following organisations which have published reports and research on the asylum system, to understand more about their findings:

- the Migration Observatory (based at the University of Oxford);

- the Institute for Government; and

- Migration Watch.

11 Preliminary discussions with all ten groups covered topics such as, but not limited to, how effectively the asylum system works; the impact of policy changes; the experiences of people who have claimed asylum; and the impact of government policy on local authorities and legal practitioners. Later in the process, we tested our high-level findings and a draft version of our data visualisation with some stakeholder groups.

Financial and data analysis

12 In our analysis, we have drawn on information from the Immigration System Statistics published by the Home Office, which provide data on the number of people claiming asylum and their outcomes. We have also used data from the Tribunals Statistics Quarterly published by MoJ, which include information on the number of asylum-related appeals made and their outcomes. Wherever possible, we have used data up to the end of March 2025, to ensure consistency. However, it is not always possible to make direct comparisons between datasets, as information is recorded slightly differently by departments. Where we have used unpublished data from management information, we have not sought to verify the accuracy or completeness of the underlying data provided to us. The management information we have used has not been quality-assured to national or official statistics levels.

13 Where we refer to the amounts that the Home Office or MoJ spent on asylum in the 2024-25 financial year, these figures are largely drawn from the audited data from their annual reports and accounts. We have indicated where figures are based on financial information provided directly to us (see notes under Figure 5).

Document and model review

14 We assessed the work of the Home Office and MoJ in modelling aspects of the asylum system and how these models inform operational and strategic decision-making. Our aim was to assess the way modelling was carried out and used but not to audit the models directly.

15 We gathered information through interviews, model walkthroughs and documentation. We applied aspects of the National Audit Office's model review framework to evaluate model risks, assumptions, uncertainty estimates, and the use of outputs.[26] We considered data sources, assumptions, output types, modelling frequency, and stakeholder engagement. We focused our review on:

- the Home Office's suite of end-to-end models for the UK Irregular Migration System, including strategic, operational, planning, and tactical components; and

- MoJ models used for financial and operational planning within the HMCTS Immigration and Asylum Chamber.

16 We assessed the modelling work between June and October 2025 and our work does not reflect updates after that period.

17 We conducted 10 interviews with Home Office officials covering:

- models for asylum intake, casework, post-decision processes (including appeals), and accommodation/support;

- the 'Future State' model and Immigration Enforcement models (detention and returns);

- economic models, including appraisal;

- modelling for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and intake projections shared with local authorities;

- the theory of change for system-wide reforms;

- Performance Reporting & Analysis Unit (PRAU) data monitoring and quality; and

- mapping of asylum system flows.

26   Good practice guidance, Framework to review models, National Audit Office, January 2022.

18 We also held five interviews with MoJ and HMCTS officials on:

● appeals processes and legal aid;

● intake and case progression models for courts and tribunals; and

● models assessing demand versus system capacity and constraints.

19 We reviewed documents from the Home Office and MoJ including model explainers, methodologies, user guides, data quality logs, and assurance reports. These covered models for intake projections, initial decision simulations, system volume, estate planning, financial planning, procurement, and enforcement capacity. We assessed all the documents against the themes we identified (see Figure 7).

Site visits

20 We carried out five site visits, to:

● an Immigration Removal Centre near Heathrow Airport;

● a Home Office decision-making unit, where caseworkers made initial decisions on asylum claims;

● a Home Office site where specialist caseworking teams are based, including teams responsible for secondary caseworking, further submissions, and the Home Office's appeals and litigation work;

● an HMCTS Service Centre, where staff carry out administrative duties to progress appeals; and

● A First-tier Tribunal (Asylum and Immigration) site.

21 The visits enabled us to see first-hand how operational staff worked in the system on a day-to-day basis, and helped us to develop our understanding of the pressures and constraints within the system, and the impacts they can have on how key operational processes work. During these visits, we carried out a mixture of observation, unstructured conversations, and interviews, both individually and with small groups of staff. We were also able to sit alongside caseworkers as they carried out their job, to observe and ask questions about the processes at hand. The findings from these visits were used both to help us develop our thematic findings, and as a rich source of examples to illustrate some of those findings.

Data sampling

22 In September 2025, we received a data sample from the Home Office representing 5,000 individuals who made an asylum claim in January 2023. The anonymised data contained the date at which each claim reached key decision milestones within the asylum system and its status when the data was extracted. This allowed us to see common routes through the system and the time taken during the processes represented.

23 Limitations in the available data meant that we were only able to show high level outcomes (for example, further submission made to the Home Office and eventual decision), but not the more granular details of an asylum seeker's journey through the system. These cases were first lodged in January 2023, and there have been several legislative and system changes since then. As such, the analysis is intended to be an illustration of possible paths through the system and the points at which long delays may occur. It is not intended to represent how long it may take a claim made today to progress through the system. Our analysis of the sample data is presented in the data visualisation under the section entitled "Journeys through the asylum system" and is also referenced in this report at paragraph 2.12.

International comparisons

24 We conducted international comparative analysis to explore how other countries manage their asylum systems. The purpose was to understand whether other countries face similar challenges in their asylum systems, and how they have responded to these challenges. The findings may offer insights that could help inform the management of the asylum system in the UK. To select comparable countries, we used the following criteria:

● their geographical location (in northern Europe);

● a similar immigration and asylum context to the UK (primarily 'destination countries');

● volumes of asylum applications (high volumes of applications relative to the population); and

● demonstrated efforts to streamline asylum processing.

25 We then selected four countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands and Sweden) based on additional factors we deemed most relevant to the UK's context, such as shared challenges including caseworking backlogs and limited housing capacity for people seeking asylum.

26 We carried out a desk-based review of publicly available sources in all four countries, including European Union reports on immigration and asylum and national government websites and reports. We extracted relevant findings and analysed them against elements of the UK's asylum system (caseworking, accommodation and right to work, appeals, detention and return). The results are in Appendix Two.

Appendix Two

International comparisons

1 We conducted desk-based research on approaches to asylum policies and processing to identify alternative approaches and potential lessons for the UK. **Figure 8** on pages 48 to 51 summarises our findings.

Figure 8

Different overseas approaches to managing asylum claims

We identified the approaches taken by four European countries to managing asylum cases that may offer learning for the UK

	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden
Asylum profile	With a total population of 68.6 million, France has long been a major destination country for migration. It received over 130,000 first time applications in 2024, mainly from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Democratic Republic of the Congo. The initial grant rate for refugee status in 2024 was 38%. Recent reforms aim to centralise and expedite asylum procedures but also introduce stricter controls.	Germany's population is 83.6 million. Germany is Europe's largest recipient of asylum seekers. In 2024, it received over 229,000 first-time asylum applications, primarily from Syria, Turkey, and Afghanistan. Germany has an initial grant rate of 59% for refugee status. While Germany has a robust asylum infrastructure, recent policy shifts have focused on tightening migration and asylum policy.	The Netherlands, with a population of 18.1 million, has historically been a destination country. It received 32,000 first-time applications in 2024, mostly from Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. The country has an initial grant rate of 75%. Recent political shifts have led to a push for a much stricter asylum regime.	Sweden's population is 10.6 million. It remains a destination country, though the number of asylum applications has declined, reaching just over 11,000 in 2024, mostly from Syria, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Sweden's initial grant rate for refugee status is 30%. The country has shifted since 2015 toward a more restrictive stance on asylum.
Caseworking and productivity	The average processing time for applications has increased (from 4.2 months to 4.5 months) and delays and backlogs persist, particularly in complex cases. The government has taken steps to improve productivity, including digitalising procedures, and increasing staff capacity. Nonetheless, complex processes involving multiple steps and stakeholders such as the immigration authority, courts, and local prefectures continue to affect the overall efficiency of the system.	Germany has taken steps to improve asylum casework productivity, including substantial budget increases to expand staffing and digital infrastructure at the immigration authority. For example, AI systems are used to help identify languages and dialects when applicants lack documentation. The average processing time for asylum applications rose to 12 months in 2025, up from 8.7 months in 2024, largely because the immigration authority prioritised the clearance of older, long-pending cases. As of August 2025, the backlog stood at 135,389 cases.	By 2025, the Netherlands had a backlog of more than 50,000 asylum cases, driven by surging applications and compounded by staffing and housing shortages. This was despite an initiative between May 2023 and mid-July 2024 to prioritise high-probability cases—such as those from Syria—which saw over 18,000 additional applications processed. The EU-funded CELIA project is developing AI-based language analysis tools to support caseworkers.	By the end of 2024, Sweden's asylum backlog stood at 3,971 cases. Average processing times dropped from 16.7 months in 2018 to 6.1 months in 2024, though there were fluctuations. A Swedish Agency for Public Management review highlighted inconsistencies in asylum decisions. The Swedish Migration Agency has used video interviews for years to improve accessibility, mainly for applicants far from interview locations or with special needs. While these are generally effective, challenges remain, including communication issues and difficulty assessing credibility. Video interviews declined sharply, from 1,620 in 2022 to 430 in 2024.
Accommodation and right to work	France's national reception system offers asylum seekers accommodation through dedicated centres, emergency housing, and reception facilities, managed by semi-public or non-governmental organisations under contract to the government. There were around 101,200 places in 2025 (around 49,200 in dedicated centres, around 45,400 in emergency housing, and around 6,700 in reception facilities). Despite expanding infrastructure and diversifying housing types, France accommodated only 64% of eligible asylum seekers in 2024, leaving tens of thousands without a place to stay. Most centres are designed for families, creating gaps for single men who make up the majority of applicants. In France, since March 2019, asylum seekers may access the labour market only if the asylum authority has not ruled on their case within six months of lodging the asylum application and the delay is not their fault. They generally do not pay housing costs, except when income exceeds a set threshold.	Asylum seekers in Germany are housed in initial reception centres for up to 18 months before being moved to collective accommodation centres. However, the system is under pressure, and emergency shelters, such as repurposed airports, are being used due to a shortage of long-term accommodation. In 2024, Germany replaced its lump-sum refugee funding model with a per-applicant system, paying €7,500 for each first-time asylum seeker—totalling €1.8 billion in 2024, with costs projected to fall to €1.3 billion in 2025. Stakeholders have expressed concerns that the new model may not sufficiently cover the actual costs of reception and integration. Since March 2020, asylum seekers in Germany cannot work while in initial reception centres. Some may obtain permits after nine months under specific conditions. Asylum seekers generally do not pay for housing, but if they have more than €200 in cash or assets, they must use these resources to cover accommodation and legal costs before receiving social benefits; authorities may seize amounts above this threshold.	In early 2025, about 72,600 people were entitled to asylum accommodation in the Netherlands, but most stayed in overcrowded emergency sites such as halls, ships, and tents with poor sanitation and limited health care. The 2024 Dispersion Act aimed to spread responsibility across municipalities, but uncertainty over its repeal has slowed progress. A severe shortage of social rental housing is the main reason 10,800 recognised refugees remain in reception facilities. Asylum seekers in the Netherlands may work after six months, but only if an employer obtains a work permit and the applicant meets several legal conditions. Those who earn money must pay a contribution for their support and accommodation but may keep 25% of their income, up to €269 a month. Asylum seekers may also do voluntary work or small paid tasks in reception centres.	The Swedish Migration Agency provides accommodation from the moment asylum seekers apply. Since 2025, people must stay in Agency-allocated housing to receive an allowance, ending the previous freedom to arrange their own housing. Exceptions apply for immediate family. Accommodation is often in shared flats, with adapted housing offered for vulnerable groups. If asylum seekers have income or assets, they must pay for accommodation and food; undeclared earnings incur retroactive charges. Asylum seekers who do not have money do not have to pay for accommodation and food; they can work if approved, with conditions noted on their asylum card for employers to verify.

Figure 8 *continued*

Different overseas approaches to managing asylum claims

	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden
Appeals	Most rejected asylum seekers in France have one month to appeal to the specialised asylum court, which reviews both facts and law. Some categories—such as people in certain accelerated procedures, those refused at the border or in detention, and those challenging transfers—have shorter appeal windows and appeal does not suspend removal. A second appeal to a higher court examines only legal correctness and does not suspend removal. After a final refusal, a removal order can be challenged within one month. In 2024, France reorganised its appeal system, creating regional chambers and expanding single-judge decisions. Appeal cases took about five months.	All rejected asylum seekers in Germany can lodge an appeal, though there are different procedures. In the accelerated procedure, the appeal must be filed within seven days, and it does not automatically suspend removal. At the border and airport, deadlines are tighter: appeals do not suspend removal and must be lodged within two to three days. First-instance appeals before the administrative courts review facts and law, while higher courts examine only legal correctness and do not suspend removal. Appeals in 2024 took an average of 16.7 months, contributing to large backlogs. Reforms have expanded the use of single-judge decisions, prompting concerns about fairness and procedural safeguards.	All individuals whose asylum applications are rejected in the Netherlands may lodge an appeal. The deadline is usually one week for accelerated, inadmissible, manifestly unfounded, or dismissed cases, and four weeks in other cases. Appeals do not automatically suspend removal. The main exception is when the rejection decision relates to the "safe third country" concept — meaning the government says the person travelled through another country that was safe for them where they could have asked for asylum. In most other situations, asylum seekers do not automatically get to stay in the Netherlands while their appeal is being considered, though they can make a request to do so.	All rejected asylum seekers in Sweden may lodge an appeal. Appeals must be submitted within three weeks of the decision. Appeals in the regular procedure automatically suspend removal. Applicants may challenge both the facts and the law. In 2024, the Migration Courts took an average of 9.6 months to decide appeals and changed 7.4% of decisions. If an application is rejected as inadmissible on "safe third country" grounds, the appeal does not automatically suspend removal and the applicant must request a suspension. Sweden has no list of safe third countries, but the safe third country concept is regularly applied in practice.
Detention and return	France uses immigration detention mainly to enforce removal and Dublin transfer decisions, particularly where a 'non-negligible risk of absconding' is established under criteria defined in law. The 2024 immigration law additionally allows the detention of certain asylum seekers on specific public-order or absconding-risk grounds. Detention is in administrative detention centres, may last up to 90 days, and any extension beyond 48 hours requires authorisation by the Judge of Liberties and Detention. The French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) manages a Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme. This programme supports individuals whose asylum claims have been rejected or who are undocumented. It offers assistance with travel logistics, passport procurement, and reintegration support, including help with employment or starting a business in the country of origin. OFII operates through a network of regional offices across France and maintains several international offices, for coordination and outreach.	Germany has been working to streamline return procedures, particularly under the framework of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. Recent legal reforms have extended permitted detention periods: individuals can now be held in pre-deportation detention for up to six months (previously three), and detention under the airport procedure can last up to 19 days. Under this airport procedure, asylum applications made at international airports are examined before the applicant is formally admitted to German territory, and the person may be kept in the airport transit area for the duration of the procedure. Germany has adopted measures to improve the enforcement of return and deportation procedures. When an asylum application is rejected, a return decision is generally issued and is often notified at the same time. Legal appeals and lack of cooperation from countries of origin are common barriers to returns. Federal and state authorities continue to operate voluntary return programmes which provide travel and financial start-up assistance.	In July 2025, the Dutch Parliament approved the Asylum Emergency Measures Act and the Two Status System Act. The latter introduces a distinction between two categories of protection: one for refugees fleeing persecution based on political views, religion, or sexual orientation, and another for those escaping war or natural disasters. The second group will receive fewer rights and a less secure status. The new laws also abolish permanent residence permits and restrict family reunification to spouses and minor children only. The changes have been a source of controversy and are still awaiting approval in the Senate. Under current law, territorial pre-removal detention can last up to 18 months, and certain forms of asylum detention may initially be ordered for shorter periods but extended on specified public-order or procedural grounds. Rejected asylum seekers always receive a return decision together with the negative asylum decision. In parallel, the Netherlands and Uganda have signed a letter of intent for a small-scale pilot "return hub" in Uganda, under which a limited number of rejected asylum seekers from nearby countries would be temporarily accommodated there and supported to return voluntarily to their country of origin.	Sweden uses immigration detention mainly to enforce removal and in Dublin transfer decisions, particularly where there is a risk of absconding. Supervision is used as alternative – this involves regular reporting to the police or to the Swedish Migration Agency. It may also entail surrendering passports or identity documents. Detention is in specialised facilities under judicial oversight, and the duration is limited, typically to two months, with possible extensions in specific cases. If an asylum application is rejected, the Swedish Migration Agency typically issues a return decision at the same time. The Swedish Migration Agency operates "departure centres" for persons who have agreed to voluntarily depart to their country of origin or for Dublin cases. In 2025, the Swedish government agreed to significantly increase the financial incentives for people to voluntarily return to their country of origin, starting in January 2026.

Notes

1 We conducted international comparative analysis to explore how other countries manage their asylum systems. The purpose was to understand whether other countries face similar challenges in their asylum systems, and how they have responded to these challenges. The findings may offer insights that could help inform the management of the asylum system in the UK.

2 Comparable countries were selected based on: geographical location in northern Europe; a similar immigration and asylum context to the UK; high volumes of asylum applications relative to population; and efforts to streamline asylum processing. Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden were chosen, reflecting additional factors relevant to the UK's context, such as caseworking backlogs and limited housing capacity for asylum seekers.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of public information

Appendix Three

Previous National Audit Office work on the asylum system

Figure 9

The National Audit Office (NAO) has recently examined several aspects of the asylum system, particularly accommodation and support which represents the largest area of spending

Part of the asylum system	Date	NAO findings
Caseworking, accommodation and support	June 2023	In *The asylum and protection transformation programme* we looked at the processing of asylum claims and plans for asylum accommodation. We highlighted serious challenges in the Asylum and Protection Transformation Programme, including a large and growing backlog (173,000 people were awaiting decisions), rising costs (over £2 billion in 2022-23), and limited progress in digitising or streamlining casework processes. We noted weak programme oversight, unclear delivery plans and an overall lack of evidence that the reforms were improving outcomes. We concluded that while the planned reforms were necessary, they would not be sufficient unless all parts of the end-to-end asylum system could manage demand effectively.[1]
Accommodation and support	May 2025	In *The Home Office's asylum accommodation contracts* we provided factual briefing to the Home Affairs Select Committee on the performance, profitability and oversight of the Home Office's contracting for asylum accommodation and support.[2]
	September 2025	In *Managing children's residential care* we concluded that central government and local authorities have successfully worked together to accommodate 30% more unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the period between March 2020 and March 2024. The Department for Education and the Home Office jointly run a national transfer scheme, mandatory since December 2021, to ensure responsibility for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is fairly distributed across local authorities. Local authority allocations reflect their existing social care pressures, and regional cooperation has meant some local authorities offering to take more children than assigned. The Home Office also incentivises local authorities through payments for quicker transfers and greater participation.[3]
	November 2024	Our *Investigation into the acquisition of the Northeye site for asylum accommodation* looked at how the Home Office acquired the Northeye site and the reasons for the site not being operational.[4]
	March 2024	Our *Investigation into asylum accommodation* looked at the Home Office's plans and actions to reduce the use of hotels and the costs of asylum accommodation.[5]
Legal aid capacity	February 2024	In *Government's management of legal aid* we looked at the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ's) progress in understanding the impacts of legal aid reforms, and legal aid's effectiveness in ensuring access to justice. We concluded that, while the MoJ had succeeded in reducing spending on legal aid, some of the changes may have shifted costs to elsewhere in government and had led to stakeholders raising concerns about the efficiency of the justice system.[6]

Figure 9 *continued*

The National Audit Office (NAO) has recently examined several aspects of the asylum system, particularly accommodation and support which represents the largest area of spending

Part of the asylum system	Date	NAO findings
Accommodation and support	July 2024	In *The effectiveness of government in tackling homelessness* we noted that the Home Office's policy on housing asylum seekers in hotels, and on notice periods for those granted asylum to move out of funded accommodation, both had an impact on local authorities' ability to assist people at risk of homelessness.[7]
Enforcement and returns	June 2020	In *Immigration enforcement* we found that, while the Home Office had introduced significant changes to its enforcement activity, it could not demonstrate that overall performance was improving.[8]

Notes

1 Comptroller and Auditor General, *The asylum and protection transformation programme,* Session 2022-23, HC 1375, National Audit Office, June 2023. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-asylum-and-protection-transformation-programme/.

2 Comptroller and Auditor General, *The Home Office's asylum accommodation contracts*, Session 2024-25, HC 874, National Audit Office, May 2025. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-home-offices-asylum-accommodation-contracts/.

3 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Managing children's residential care,* Session 2024–2026, HC 1290, National Audit Office, September 2025. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/managing-childrens-residential-care/.

4 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Investigation into the acquisition of the Northeye site for asylum accommodation,* Session 2024-25, HC 305, National Audit Office, November 2024. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/investigation-into-the-acquisition-of-the-northeye-site-for-asylum-accommodation/.

5 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Investigation into asylum accommodation,* Session 2023-24, HC 635, National Audit Office, March 2024. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/investigation-into-asylum-accommodation/

6 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Government's management of legal aid*, Session 2023-24, HC 514, National Audit Office, February 2024. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/governments-management-of-legal-aid/.

7 Comptroller and Auditor General, *The effectiveness of government in tackling homelessness,* Session 2024-25, HC 119, National Audit Office, July 2024. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-effectiveness-of-government-in-tackling-homelessness/.

8 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Immigration enforcement,* Session 2019–2021, HC 110, National Audit Office, June 2020. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/reports/immigration-enforcement/

Source: National Audit Office summaries of our previous work

National Audit Office