

NO WAY HOME?

**It is time to remove
management of immigration
from the Home Office**

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
1. Executive Summary	5
2. History of the Home Office	6
3. Why now?	10
 Part One: The Problem	 11
1. Overview of the problems	12
2. Lost trust	12
3. Poor management of public funds	14
3.1 A self-funded system that is not self-funding	15
3.2 Focus on asylum accommodation costs	16
3.3 Outsourcing	18
3.4 Litigation decisions not in the public interest	20
4. How Home Office structures create problems	21
4.1 A reactionary remit	21
4.2 Path-dependency thinking	22
4.3 Conflicting priorities	23
4.4 The role of the Home Secretary	25
 Part Two: The Solution	 28
1. Overview of the solutions	29
1.1 The case against change	29
1.2 The case for change	30
1.3 What change?	31
2. The options	32
2.1 Option 1 a & b – Split the Home Office in two	32
2.2 Option 2 a & b – A cross-government approach	34
2.3 Option 3 – Adapting structures within the existing Department	37
3. Conclusion and recommendations	39

INTRODUCTION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The work of the Home Office covers a broad range of some of the most highly politicised and salient issues in the UK, most of all, immigration. Over its history, the department has been beset by repeated scandals, declared unfit for purpose by numerous stakeholders, and a number of restructures have been attempted. These efforts were not enough, however, to end the tendency to produce scandals. The work of the Home Office covers some of the most hotly politically contested areas and consequently the role of Home Secretary is often viewed as a poisoned chalice.

Despite attempts at reform, the Home Office has continued to exhibit deep-rooted cultural and institutional problems¹ in its management of the immigration brief in particular, over many years. Successive Home Secretaries have struggled to tackle these problems, or simply ignored them. As a result, a growing number of voices from across the political spectrum have begun to call for an exploration of options for more radical reform. In most cases, the conclusion is that the Department should be split, with the management of immigration taken out of its remit. This report aims to assess the merits of such an approach, and provide details of how it could best be achieved.

In Part One, the case for dismantling the Home Office is assessed, analysing the Department's culture, structures, and management of public funds. The findings here echo those of a wide range of think tanks², researchers and political actors from across the range of public opinion in finding the Department rife with problems, and the case for structural reform overwhelming.

In Part Two, the report examines the options for how to approach reform, examining the pros and cons of internal restructuring, splitting the Department up into two, or taking a cross-government approach to reappportioning the responsibilities currently held by the Home Secretary across different departments. Drawing on models from

The remit of the Department itself contributes to negative outcomes by linking immigration with security, but neither immigration nor security with community cohesion, infrastructure, or the country's economic needs

approaches taken in other countries and from expert researchers on governance, it assesses the potential of different structures to positively impact outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

The report finds that the Home Office has lost the trust of all major stakeholders and must be radically reformed if it is to have a hope of rebuilding confidence. It examines the legacy of poor management of public funds, drawing links between failures in value-for-money decision-making and a culture resistant to learning from past mistakes. It puts forward the case that the existing accountability structures within the Home Office are weak and ineffective, and the powers of the Home Secretary too broad, with insufficient mechanisms of checks and balances. Finally, it finds that the remit of the Department itself contributes to negative outcomes by linking immigration with security, but neither immigration nor security with community cohesion, infrastructure, or the country's economic needs.

The time is ripe for root and branch reform, and only a full break up and redistribution of the responsibilities of the Department has the potential to solve all the problems outlined above. There should be carried out an in-depth review scoping the approach to a full restructure. This ought to include meaningful consultation with stakeholders, including Home Office staff and the communities it interacts with.

1 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/home-office-problems>

2 *ibid*

HISTORY OF THE HOME OFFICE

The Home Office³ is the lead government department for immigration and passports, drugs policy, crime, counter-terrorism and police. Its mission is to build a safe, fair and prosperous UK and to ensure people feel safe in their homes and communities. The Home Office cites its core values⁴ as “compassion, respect, courage, and collaboration.” It is the fifth largest government department with around 50,000 staff. In 2024 it has seen the fastest growth⁵ of any government department in both proportionate and absolute terms. The Home Secretary has overall responsibility for all Home Office business.

A full overview of the structures of the Home Office are laid out in the 2023-2024 National Audit Office Overview⁶ of the Department. The report also assesses the Home Office budget. The Department spent £27.7 billion in the year ending October 2024, a net increase of £2.8 billion on the previous year (comprising £3.2 billion increased spending and £0.4 billion income increase).

A bit over half of that budget (£14.5 billion) went to the ‘Public Safety’ mission that covers crime, policing and fire. A further £1.7 billion was spent on the ‘Homeland Security’ mission concerned with terrorism and cybercrime. The remaining £11.5 billion was spent on the management of the immigration, borders and asylum systems. Within this, by far the largest expense is asylum support, resettlement and accommodation, which totalled £5.4 billion in expenditure, of which £3 billion was spent on accommodating asylum seekers in hotels. The different parts of the immigration and borders mission also raised a combined revenue for the department of a little over £5.5 billion, largely from visas and immigration fees.

The approved funding for the Home Office from parliament for the year 2024-2025 is £18.8 billion. This includes a forecasted £2

billion for asylum support and resettlement – a significant reduction.

The Home Office and the role of the Home Secretary have existed since 1782, when it was formed out of the Southern Department, which handled internal and colonial affairs. The Northern Department became the Foreign Office. The Home Office was not initially responsible for immigration, until the passage of the UK’s first piece of immigration legislation, the 1793 Aliens Act, for which a sub-department was created in the Home Office named the Aliens Office.

The 1793 Aliens Act was concerned with the arrival of refugees fleeing the French Revolution, and did not constitute the establishment of an immigration ‘system’ in the UK. There were essentially no controls on immigration until the 1905 Aliens Act. Throughout the 20th century, there followed a series of pieces of immigration legislation which were, according to research commissioned by the Home Office itself, designed to control immigration for the purpose of reducing the number of people living in the UK who do not have white skin. The legislation introduced work permits for immigrants, in response to the UK’s labour market needs, managed by the Department of Education and Skills. This primary basis for the British immigration system, however – to control and reduce immigration by limiting numbers of non-white immigrants – is argued in the Home Office report to have undercut progress made over modern times to instil policies of race equality and good race relations, and ultimately led to consequences including the Windrush Scandal⁷.

Both Conservative and Labour governments introduced immigration legislation throughout the later decades of the 20th century, in most part aimed primarily at instilling greater levels of control and reducing immigrant numbers.

3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office/about>

4 <https://careers.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

5 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/home-office-overview-2023-24.pdf>

6 <https://www.nao.org.uk/overviews/home-office-2023-24/>

7 <https://jcw.org.uk/reportsbriefings/windrush-scandal-explained/>

The one major exception to this rule was the adoption of the Free Movement of People between the UK and other EU countries,⁸ as a member of the EU, in 1992. This granted workers from any EU country the mutual right to live and work in one another's territories without losing any rights, and thus without being subject to immigration controls in the form of work permits or other restrictions.

The 21st century brought significant change to the Home Office. The management of work permits⁹ was moved under the purview of the Home Secretary from the Department of Education and Skills in 2001. This move was followed by an increase in segmentation of non-EU immigrants into different categories with different visas and permits, causing an explosion of complexity within the immigration system. In 2006, a scandal emerged regarding the release of around 1,000 foreign national prisoners, forcing the resignation of Charles Clarke as Home Secretary. Clarke was replaced by John Reid, who famously proceeded to describe the Department as "Not fit for purpose¹⁰." Reid's plan to address the unfit Department was to split it into two¹¹, with responsibility for prisons being taken over by the newly formed Ministry of Justice.

The 2010s saw Labour voted out of office and the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government take over. David Cameron defined this period through his failed pledge to reduce immigration numbers to the tens of thousands, and by promising a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. Cameron's Home Secretary, Theresa May, was perhaps the last Home Secretary to have projected a sense of real control over the department – she is at least the last one to have held a significantly long tenure to date. This sense of control and purpose was

achieved, however, through a culture instilled and enforced through her Special Advisors Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, of a heavily top-down, dictatorial approach¹² to ministerial direction. This approach may arguably have fuelled the creation of the closed culture where more junior civil servants felt unable to question or raise concerns about the policy direction set from above, that contributed to the Windrush scandal.

The Windrush Scandal¹³ emerged out of Theresa May's Hostile Environment policies enacted between 2012 and 2016, designed to make life unbearable in the UK for immigrants who were unable to prove their status. It began to emerge in 2017 that members of the Windrush Generation and their descendants had been targeted by these policies despite being lawful residents and in many cases citizens of the UK. Hundreds of Commonwealth citizens, many of Caribbean ancestry, were wrongfully targeted by immigration enforcement and lost their jobs and homes, were detained and sometimes deported. The scandal prompted a major crisis at the Home Office, and was investigated by Wendy Williams, who was commissioned to write the Windrush Lessons Learned Review¹⁴ to understand the roots of the failure and make recommendations. The Review made it abundantly clear that it was not only the political direction, but the culture and internal structures at the Home Office that were at fault for producing the crisis. The Review was excoriating about the failure of Home Office officials and policy-makers to heed warnings about the impacts of its hostile policies towards migrants, or to base their decisions on evidence.

The attitude of the Home Office was described

8 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/the-uk-eu-citizenship-and-free-movement-of-persons/>

9 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/geography/sites/geography_redesign/files/mru_report_js.pdf

10 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2006/may/23/immigrationpolicy.immigration1>

11 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2007-03-29/debates/07040320000005/HomeOfficeRestructuring>

12 <https://www.ft.com/content/896aaa54-12bf-11e4-93a5-00144feabdc0>

13 <https://jcw.org.uk/reportsbriefings/windrush-scandal-explained/>

14 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e74984fd3bf7f4684279faa/6.5577_HO_Windrush_Lessons_Learned_Review_WEB_v2.pdf

by an ex-official¹⁵ in 2016 during Theresa May's tenure as Home Secretary, as akin to Millwall football fans: "No one likes us, we don't care." This perspective sits starkly besides the view taken by Wendy Williams four years later in her Windrush Lessons Learned Review¹⁶ that the Department demonstrates an "institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness towards the issue of race", although the Review stopped just short of declaring the Home Office institutionally racist.

The Review was arguably overly focused on internal systems, and did not adequately address the question of whether even a very highly functioning Department would have been bound to produce similarly poor outcomes when required to pursue the political agenda of hostility it was set. The only recommendation that addressed this question was Recommendation 7, requiring a full review of the Hostile Environment policies and their impact individually and cumulatively. This Recommendation has not been fulfilled.

In response to the Lessons Learned Review, the Home Office undertook a project of transformation that included a dedication to 'righting the wrongs' of the scandal, through compensation for the victims, public acknowledgement and engagement, and a series of measures to turn around the internal culture of the department to one that was compassionate and could see the 'face behind the case.' The outcomes of this project were ambiguous¹⁷ according to Wendy Williams' progress update in March 2022, and efforts to implement the remaining recommendations from the Review were officially dropped

in 2023¹⁸ under Home Secretary Suella Braverman.

The backdrop to this scandal was, of course, the passage of the Brexit referendum in June 2016, widely understood as a vote to further control and reduce immigration to the UK and focused on ending the Free Movement of People. Following the Referendum and the protracted negotiations undertaken first by Prime Minister Theresa May and then Boris Johnson, the UK officially left the EU on 1st January 2020. In terms of immigration, this meant that the Home Office would now be responsible for the first time since the 90s for implementing and managing an immigration system capable of responding to the entirety of the UK's economic, labour force, student, and family needs. The Institute for Government argued¹⁹ at the time that the Department was unlikely to be up to the task, and suggested responsibility for managing the post-Brexit immigration system should be taken out of the Home Office. Nonetheless, the transition to a post-Brexit immigration system was managed by the Home Office.

The period since Brexit has seen the Home Office beset by crises at a greater level of frequency than ever before. In a return to the approach of the early 2000s, there has been a proliferation of bespoke visa pathways²⁰ for different types of immigrants fulfilling different roles in the economy, each one with a differing set of rights. Despite the increase in 'control' that this arguably represents, we have seen numbers increase dramatically to historic highs²¹. There have been a slew of scandals²² relating to the systemic exploitation²³

15 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n21/william-davies/home-office-rules>

16 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e74984fd3bf7f4684279faa/6.5577_HO_Windrush_Lessons_Learned_Review_WEB_v2.pdf

17 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/windrush-lessons-learned-review-progress-update>

18 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-66860520>

19 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/managing-migration-after-brexit>

20 <https://www.gov.uk/browse/visas-immigration/work-visas>

21 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2023/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-each-year-including-visitors>

22 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/feb/22/exploited-migrant-farm-workers-in-uk-paid-for-picks-not-hours>

23 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/16/flawed-uk-visa-scheme-led-to-horrific-care-worker-abuse-says-watchdog>

of migrant workers caused or at least exacerbated²⁴ by the stringent conditions of their visas²⁵. The asylum system, meanwhile, has been the subject of intense public dissatisfaction and a series of high-profile failures. We have seen an age of instability in the leadership of the Department, with six different Conservative Home Secretaries taking on the post from 2016 to 2024 (one of them, Suella Braverman, twice).

In 2024 the General Election resulted in a Labour majority and Yvette Cooper became Home Secretary. Labour's manifesto²⁶ was short on detail as to its immigration policies, but did include a pledge to continue in the tradition of successive governments of prioritising reducing immigration numbers. One early action the Labour government took in April 2025 was to remove responsibility for all fire functions from the Home Office²⁷ and put them under the management of the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government (DHCLG). This restructure was undertaken in response to the recommendation of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 Report²⁸, which argued that the fragmentation of responsibility for fire safety and building regulations across several departments was "a recipe for inefficiency and an obstacle to effective regulation." There are no public plans for any further restructures or significant change in direction for the Department.



While there is a need for change in the political approach to immigration, the current structures of the Home Office in-and-of-themselves inhibit sound, evidence-based policy-making, and would probably continue to do so whatever the political direction set from above

24 <https://labourexploitation.org/news/government-must-act-to-prevent-exploitation-on-the-uks-seasonal-workers-scheme/>

25 <https://www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2023/the-systemic-drivers-of-migrant-worker-exploitation-in-the-uk/>

26 <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labour-manifesto-2024-sign-up/>

27 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/responsibility-for-all-fire-functions-moves-to-mhclg>

28 <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/phase-2-report>

WHY NOW?

2025 marks two important anniversaries for the Home Office. It has been five years since Brexit came into full force, ending the Free Movement of People and requiring the introduction of a new immigration visas system. It also marks five years from the publication of the Windrush Lessons Learned Review²⁹, a comprehensive report that exposed deeply embedded cultural problems in the Home Office's handling of immigration.

The length of time that has passed since these pivotal moments in the UK's immigration history allows us the opportunity to assess whether the Department has shown itself capable either to rectify its mistakes, or to take on new and complex systems and challenges. During this period, the failure to effectively manage migration and command trust has become recognised across an extremely wide range of expert and public opinion.

As with any Department, however, the political positioning of the incumbent government is the overarching factor which affects its ability to deliver on its stated aims. The political direction set by successive governments has been to pursue a display of hostility towards immigrants, regardless of evidence³⁰, nuance, or long-term impact³¹. No effort has been made by political leaders to communicate a narrative about immigration that reflects the reality of migrant experiences, or to provide an honest assessment of the trade-offs³² involved in immigration policy decisions, and their impact on British society³³.

In the light of this, even the most well-thought-out restructuring of the Home Office could seem a pointless exercise, as whatever new department resulted from the process, it would face the same political imperatives. However, there is significant evidence, explored in Part One of this report, that the

problems at the Home Office run deeper. Ways of thinking and interacting with evidence and stakeholders have become entrenched in a vicious cycle of mistrust and defensiveness.

So, while it is true that there is a need for change in the political approach to immigration, the current structures of the Home Office in-and-of-themselves inhibit sound, evidence-based policy-making, and would probably continue to do so whatever the political direction set from above. The structures of the Home Office need to change to make it possible for better outcomes, no matter the approach taken by government.

29 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e74984fd3bf7f4684279faa/6.5577_HO_Windrush_Lessons_Learned_Review_WEB_v2.pdf

30 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Immigration-enforcement.pdf>

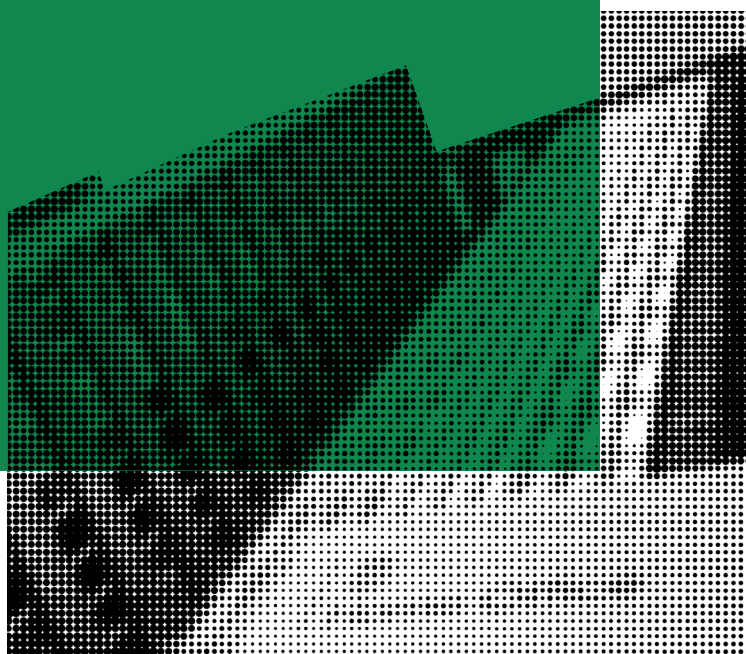
31 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5804/ldselect/ldsecleg/94/9402.htm>

32 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/the-ban-on-care-workers-family-members-what-will-be-the-impact/>

33 <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2019/06/24/migration-ageing-population/>

PART ONE

THE PROBLEM



1. OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEMS

It would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list of evidence of the problems in the Home Office in one report. This summary therefore focuses on three key aspects of the management of immigration that demonstrate the issue: First, the complete lack of trust, from across stakeholders and society, in the Home Office. Second, the Department's failure to make responsible use of public funds, and provide value for money. Third, an analysis of

how the structures of the Home Office in-and-of-themselves inhibit good decision-making and long-term, joined-up thinking, often leading to a domino effect of crises across Whitehall.

Other critiques of the Home Office, particularly from a perspective of race equality³⁴, and other equalities perspectives³⁵, are available.

2. LOST TRUST

The Home Office commands very low levels of public trust, and extremely low trust among its service users and the civil society bodies that represent them.³⁶ The prevailing narrative about the Department is that it pitches from crisis to crisis in permanent reaction-mode. When one area of tension grows out of control and becomes a scandal, resources are shifted to address it, often simply displacing resources from one part of government to another and passing the buck to other departments to pick up the pieces. The Department is trapped in a vicious cycle of mistrust and defensiveness with stakeholders, who perceive good faith engagement to be futile in most cases.³⁷

The result of the perceived dysfunctionality and cycles of failure has been that calls for the Department to be restructured or abolished entirely have grown ever-louder.

In recent times, these calls come from all ends of the political spectrum, from the socially progressive Green Party³⁸ to the most traditionalist wing of the Conservative Party³⁹. From the right-wing Adam Smith Institute⁴⁰, to the anti-racist Migrants' Rights Network⁴¹, as well as being taken seriously by non-political actors such as the Institute for Government⁴² think tank, alongside experts⁴³, academics⁴⁴ and government advisors⁴⁵. There is a startlingly strong consensus on the need for radical change, with nobody being satisfied by the status quo.

PUBLIC CONFUSION AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Public trust in the key operations of the Home Office, but particularly in how immigration is handled, is very low. A YouGov tracker⁴⁶

34 <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/hostile-office/>

35 <https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf>

36 Interview, Nick Beales, RAMFEL, 4 March 2025

37 Interview, Colin Yeo, Immigration Barrister, 7 March 2025

38 <https://greenparty.org.uk/about/our-manifesto/>

39 <https://cps.org.uk/research/taking-back-control/>

40 <https://www.adamsmith.org/research/a-broken-home-why-its-time-to-split-up-the-home-office>

41 <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/projects/hostile-office/>

42 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/cultural-and-institutional-problems-home-office_0.pdf

43 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/may/13/cruel-paranoid-failing-priti-patel-inside-the-home-office>

44 <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/too-big-and-too-political-heres-how-to-re-organise-the-home-office>

45 <https://capx.co/too-big-to-fail-why-its-time-to-think-about-splitting-up-the-home-office>

46 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/how-the-government-is-handling-the-issue-of-immigration-in-the-uk>

finds 71% of the public think the government is doing a bad job managing immigration as compared to just 15% who think they are doing a good job. These attitudes have only very slightly shifted towards the positive with the 2024 change in government. Much of this will be informed by members of the public who have lost trust after been told by successive governments that they aim to reduce immigration, while in fact numbers have gone up and up.

Public trust in policing is also in crisis, reaching new lows⁴⁷, with Londoners, women, and people belonging to ethnic minorities experiencing the least trust. This was described in 2022 by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary⁴⁸ as "one of the biggest crises [for policing] in living memory." In 2023, a report by Baroness Casey⁴⁹ on the country's largest police force, the London Met, found the force to be institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic. Following the high-profile story of the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard⁵⁰ in London in 2021, and the policing of the Summer Riots in 2024, numerous groups have become disillusioned and mistrustful. Finally, the attack in Southport in the Summer of 2024 and subsequent leaked report⁵¹ assessing the categorisation of extremism has created further public confusion around how the Home Office approaches its counter-extremism brief.

It seems only the fire service⁵² – arguably the least politicised area of the Home Office's work – commanded a high level of public trust

up to the point of it being removed from the Home Office's purview⁵³ in April 2025.

HOME OFFICE STAFF DISCONTENT

Home Office staff perspectives on their place of work are generally poor as compared to other civil servants, with only staff at HMRC reporting scores lower than in the Home Office on the 2024 Civil Service People Survey⁵⁴. This measure seeks to understand how proud staff feel working for their organisation, whether they would recommend it as a great place to work, whether they feel a strong attachment to it, and whether they feel inspired and motivated to do their best to achieve organisational objectives. Other measures reported by the Institute for Government in 2022⁵⁵ found the Home Office has among the lowest percentage of staff who feel able to challenge the way things are done in their organisation among all government departments, despite the lack of ability for staff to raise concerns having been flagged as one of the factors that caused the Windrush Scandal in Wendy Williams' report two years before.

Dissatisfaction within the Home Office workforce is longstanding and at times so intense as to bubble over into public displays of discontent⁵⁶. In 2022, unionised workers for the Border Force threatened strike action, and were among actors who sought to sue the Government to protect themselves from having to enact dangerous "push-back" operations of

47 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14613557241298858>

48 <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/state-of-policing-2022.pdf>

49 <https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf>

50 <https://www.met.police.uk/notices/met/our-response-to-issues-raised-by-the-crimes-of-wayne-couzens/>

51 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Extremely-Confused-The-Governments-new-counter-extremism-review-revealed.pdf>

52 <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/public-perceptions-of-fire-and-rescue-services-in-england-2019/>

53 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/responsibility-for-all-fire-functions-moves-to-mhclg>

54 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-people-survey-2024-results>

55 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-05/cultural-and-institutional-problems-home-office_0.pdf

56 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/13/paddington-go-home-home-office-staff-pin-up-faked-deportation-notice>

migrant boats in the Channel. The policy was abandoned⁵⁷ by the then Home Secretary Priti Patel in the face of legal challenges.

The unionised Home Office workers under the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) have continued to voice objections to the impact on their members of running a border system that is ‘unfit for purpose’, fuels the operation of smuggling gangs, and leads to deaths by drowning in the Channel. In March 2025 the Union jointly launched a policy proposing a Ukraine-style visa for asylum seekers⁵⁸ to displace migrant journeys from small boats and lorries into safe and regulated routes of travel. At the parliamentary launch of the policy, front-line Home Office staff spoke of the emotional and mental impact on themselves and their colleagues of implementing a border policy associated with so many deaths and referred to the latest government reshuffling teams within the Home Office dedicated to stopping small boats as “the emperor’s new clothes.”

Unease among Home Office staff thus continues following the 2024 change in government. In March 2025, the Home Office workers unionised with the PCS in operational roles in both Border Force maritime operations⁵⁹ and at the Independent Office

for Police Conduct⁶⁰ voted by 99% and nearly 80% respectively in favour of a ballot to go on strike. These workers, who undertake sensitive operations in a highly politicised environment, are taking action over long-term inaction to review their pay and conditions, pointing to serious, ongoing dissatisfaction among operational staff.

A motivated workforce that feels adequately respected, compensated, and heard, is vital to achieve positive outcomes, and all the more so in such a politically important area of governance. There is little evidence that efforts to improve morale and institute better practices since the Windrush Scandal have been effective in the Home Office. The wellbeing of staff is crucial for retention, allowing them to gain the expertise required to develop policy solutions that will work in such a complex area. Any changes made to the structures of the Home Office must prioritise meaningful consultation with its staff and unions, along with other stakeholders, to ensure that this is achieved once and for all. For now, the Home Office does not appear to be serving well any stakeholder it interacts with, either from within, or from any side without.

3. POOR MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC FUNDS

The consistent lack of demonstrable positive results in the face of high expenditure at the Home Office points to a policy-making framework that is incapable of responding to evidence and refuses to heed warnings.

The most high profile waste of public money of the last few years was, of course, the Rwanda plan, which the current Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper claimed in parliament⁶¹ had

cost £700 million before it was scrapped. The Rwanda scheme was in fact unusual in that the Permanent Secretary to the Home Office, Matthew Rycroft, wrote to the then Home Secretary⁶², Priti Patel, to request Ministerial Direction to undertake the scheme on the basis that his Department could not provide evidence that the high cost of the scheme would provide value for money, as there was

57 [https://www.duncanlewis.co.uk/news/Home_Office_backs_down_on_refugee_pushbacks_policy_in_the_face_of_legal_challenge_by_Duncan_Lewis_and_others_\(26_April_2022\).html](https://www.duncanlewis.co.uk/news/Home_Office_backs_down_on_refugee_pushbacks_policy_in_the_face_of_legal_challenge_by_Duncan_Lewis_and_others_(26_April_2022).html)

58 <https://www.pcs.org.uk/campaigns/fighting-racism-fascism/safe-passage-refugees>

59 <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/border-force-maritime-staff-vote-strike>

60 <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/members-iopc-vote-strike-action>

61 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1rw47l2xxgo>

62 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-economic-development-partnership-ministerial-direction/letter-from-matthew-rycroft-to-rt-hon-priti-patel-accessible>

no evidence that it would have a deterrent effect. The Home Secretary duly provided the Direction⁶³, so the waste of public money on this occasion sits squarely and clearly with the Minister, and cannot be attributed to failures within the Home Office decision-making systems.

As outlined in the case study below on asylum accommodation, however, the Home Office has failed on other occasions to seek Ministerial approval before committing to significant public spending on other projects that are unevidenced, and this has led to major wastage. The Rwanda scheme, therefore, was perhaps seen as such a uniquely costly and unprecedented policy that it provoked unusual caution within the senior Home Office staff as regards safeguarding value for money. In other areas, it is clear that absence of evidence of the effectiveness of Home Office immigration policies is not sufficient for them to be questioned.

In a March 2025 assessment of the value for money of the post-Brexit flagship immigration mechanism – the skilled worker visa system, the National Audit Office⁶⁴ concluded that the Department “cannot be confident of providing value for money” from its management of the route. The reasons for this include criticisms long-familiar since the Windrush Lessons Learned Review (WLLR): a lack of adequate use of data to understand the impacts of its policies and monitor the consequences of policy changes.

The same criticism was made in the WLLR, and later by the National Audit Office again in 2020⁶⁵, when assessing the ‘Hostile Environment’ immigration enforcement policies that caused the Scandal:

“Despite years of discourse on the topic, we remain concerned by how little evidence

the Home Office (the Department) has with which to inform that debate. It is disappointing that, despite this [Public Accounts] Committee’s previous findings, the Department is still not sufficiently curious about the impacts of its actions and the underlying reasons for the challenges it faces.

“We are concerned that the Department does not make decisions based on evidence, it instead risks making them on anecdote, assumption and prejudice. Worryingly, it has no idea of what impact it has achieved for the £400 million spent each year by its Immigration Enforcement Directorate.”

3.1 A SELF-FUNDED SYSTEM THAT IS NOT SELF-FUNDING

Successive governments since the early 2000s have taken the view that the immigration and borders system within the Home Office should be self-funding, i.e. that unlike other essential government services, it should be paid for via income it obtains by charging users a fee. UK Visas and Immigration, which processes applications, aims to recover in fees twice as much as it spends⁶⁶.

This has resulted in a very dramatic increase in fees⁶⁷ charged to individuals and families applying to obtain or renew student, work, or family visas over recent years, making the UK a much more expensive⁶⁸ place to move to and live as an immigrant than other comparable countries. Despite the high sums charged, expenditure continues to far outstrip revenue⁶⁹ raised, and public trust in the value for money of the system has not improved, with the high cost of the asylum system very regularly featuring in criticisms of the Department.

63 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-economic-development-partnership-ministerial-direction/response-from-rt-hon-priti-patel-to-matthew-rycroft-accessible>

64 <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/immigration-skilled-worker-visas/>

65 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Immigration-enforcement.pdf>

66 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-annual-report-and-accounts-2022-to-2023>

67 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visa-regulations-revised-table/home-office-immigration-and-nationality-fees-9-april-2025>

68 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/qa-immigration-fees-in-the-uk/>

69 <https://www.nao.org.uk/overviews/home-office-2023-24/>

Ironically, almost every time the immigration system has been changed over recent years, the effect has been to increase bureaucratic responsibilities on the Home Office, thus vastly increasing the costs of the system.⁷⁰ Measures interpreted as increasing control in fact increase bureaucracy without reducing numbers of users. Most obviously, ending the Free Movement of People in favour of a visa system for all foreign students and workers⁷¹, but also the introduction of numerous bespoke⁷² and temporary⁷³ visa pathways, the expansion of the ten-year route to settlement⁷⁴, which requires the administration of multiple visa renewals⁷⁵, and the introduction of sub-categories of refugees and asylum seekers with differing sets of rights, have drastically increased the administrative duties on the Home Office, and therefore the cost and complexity of the system, without having any apparent downward impact on overall net migration numbers, which have reached record highs in recent years.

3.2 FOCUS ON ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION COSTS

The most expensive part of the immigration system by far is now the support and accommodation of destitute asylum seekers⁷⁶. The Home Office has frequently been reprimanded by the Public Accounts Committee for its poor management of public money in this regard. Most recently, an excoriating report from February 2025 examined the approach taken to procurement of asylum seeker accommodation sites. The report finds the site at Northeye in Bexhill-on-sea was purchased in defiance of clear warnings that it was unsuitable, and is now set to be resold or transferred for alternative use.

The conclusions of the Committee are worth quoting here at length as they demonstrate long-standing frustrations experienced by those seeking to ensure accountability from the Home Office in terms of spending, and point directly to a long-term cultural problem that inhibits learning from mistakes.

“The Home Office now accepts that it would have made different decisions if it had had the full information it has now. It claims that it has learnt lessons from this poorly managed acquisition and others such as the Bibby Stockholm vessel and the Scampton and Linton-on-Ouse sites. However, given that some of these ‘lessons’ should have been evident at the time, **we are concerned about the Home Office’s ability to put that learning into practice and prevent such an unacceptable waste of public money from happening again[...]**

“It is simply unacceptable that we must repeat the statement of our 2024 report on asylum accommodation “The Home Office’s excuse of needing to work at pace does not absolve it of its responsibilities to manage projects effectively and safeguard value for money”. **That we must restate this points to a dysfunctional culture at the Home Office in which value for money was a secondary concern.”**

“Recommendation 4. **We are concerned that the Home Office’s culture allowed it to override too easily the controls and processes in place to protect taxpayers’ money.** The Home Office appears to have been operating in crisis mode for several years and now asserts that it is moving back to business-as-usual. It argues that its response to an “emergency” meant it had to make quick decisions, which led it to unreasonably abandon controls and

70 Interview, Colin Yeo, Immigration Barrister, 7 March 2025

71 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/integration-in-the-uk-and-the-post-brex-it-immigration-system/>

72 <https://www.gov.uk/health-care-worker-visa>

73 <https://www.gov.uk/seasonal-worker-visa>

74 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/MigObs-Briefing-Migrants-on-ten-year-routes-to-settlement-in-the-UK.pdf>

75 <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-the-devastating-impact-of-10-year-process-endured-by-thousands-on-course-to-settle-in-uk>

76 <https://www.nao.org.uk/overviews/home-office-2023-24/>

weaken approval processes in acquiring the Northeye site and other large asylum accommodation sites, such as the Bibby Stockholm vessel.

“While the Permanent Secretary told us he was ‘proud’ of how hard Home Office staff have worked to deliver these programmes, many of these programmes have ultimately failed. Home Office staff were no doubt working hard in challenging circumstances, yet the failures surrounding the Northeye acquisition suggest **a troubling culture of repeating mistakes and a lack of internal challenge. Moreover, it has often appeared that the Home Office has prioritised appearing to address the issue of asylum accommodation over value for money and the effective implementation of projects.** In 2023–24, the Government Internal Audit Agency found “weaknesses” in the Home Office’s control framework and provided a ‘limited’ opinion on the overall adequacy of its governance, risk management and controls, as it has done for the last six years. We are particularly concerned that the Accounting Officer did not seek a Ministerial Direction in the case of Northeye, given how marginal the decision was and how little was understood about the risks involved. **Much of the Home Office’s learning from this poorly managed acquisition focuses on improving processes, but does not directly address the culture in the Home Office that allowed key controls to be abandoned so easily.** Without confronting these cultural issues, the Home Office risks repeating past failures in future projects.”
(emphasis added)

It is clear from the excerpt quoted above that in the Public Accounts Committee’s view there are severe cultural problems that inhibit the Home Office from learning from mistakes and responsibly handling large expenditures. The accusation of a tendency to prioritise appearing to address issues over effective,

value-for-money approaches is damning. It is also clear that the Committee has little faith that the Home Office is capable of breaking this cycle because it has no plan to address the culture that led to irrational and irresponsible decision-making.

There are other ways in which a poorly run asylum accommodation system represents poor value-for-money beyond procurement, that also demonstrate the willingness of the Home Office to sacrifice adherence to its own minimum standards and cut corners, in ways that ultimately lead to greater costs down the line.

The failure to provide adequate and humane conditions in asylum accommodation in line with the Home Office’s own guidelines is an example of this short-sighted economic thinking. For example, in March 2025 a Judgment in the High Court⁷⁷ found that the Home Secretary had acted unlawfully in accommodating three people who had been the victims of torture, trafficking and physical violence in the Wethersfield ex-RAF mass asylum accommodation site. The three defendants will now be paid compensation on the basis that the Home Secretary made “a most serious and inexplicable omission” in failing to assess the Equalities impact of detaining vulnerable people at the site. It is notable that the same failure to have adequate regard for the Public Sector Equalities Duty was one of the major criticisms made five years ago of the operations of the Home Office in the WLLR. The cost of defending this case ran to over £650,000⁷⁸.

Compensation payouts to migrants wrongfully detained by the Home Office in violation of its own rules are a standard part of the cost of the system at this point, with high average number of payouts in recent years. In the financial year 2023-2024 for example, the Home Office was forced by the courts to pay 838 compensation cases for unlawful detention⁷⁹, totalling around £12 million. The fact that so many instances of the Home Office failing to apply its own

77 <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/AC-2023-LON-0033447%20TG%20and%20others%20-%20Final%20Judgment.pdf>

78 <https://inews.co.uk/news/taxpayer-money-spent-defending-crisis-asylum-site-3572816?srlti-d=AfmBOoraqQWQLT6VjGiwOtYCvL04aM0KEGFCh23XeTsiTLETZ7OLvVIG>

79 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>

standards and guidelines for such serious issues as detention points to serious and structural flaws in decision making processes.

All this is in addition to the indirect costs of maintaining such a generally low standard of accommodation across the immigration and asylum estate. The cost in terms of the long-term health and wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees, who mainly go on to become long-term residents in the UK, cannot be calculated. But there are obvious immediate costs too, such as the cost of ambulances being called to the Wethersfield asylum accommodation site roughly three times per week throughout 2024⁸⁰ amidst what volunteers at the centre called a mental health crisis caused by poor conditions.

The cases above are illustrative of systemic and long-term failures in the Home Office to make decisions and provide a service that provides value-for-money for the taxpayer in asylum accommodation. The use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers over the past five years has been particularly contentious, in particular because of the high cost and the false⁸¹ perception that hotel accommodation is relatively luxurious. This political pressure was seen to justify the purchase of unsuitable mass accommodation sites as an alternative that would be seen to be less comfortable. However, this mass accommodation model has ended up costing significantly more, according to the National Audit Office in 2024⁸².

Where political imperatives to appear hostile take priority over evidence, the sound management of public funds cannot be guaranteed.

3.3 OUTSOURCING

The use of outsourcing for government services has become embedded as an approach throughout departments, creating what has been described by parliamentarians as a “shadow state” estimated to cost £326 billion in the year 2022-23, equivalent to almost a third of total spending⁸³. The full extent of the spend on outsourcing in the Home Office in particular is not known. However, large parts of the immigration estate – including in the provision of services at low quality detention and accommodation sites described in the previous section – are run for profit by private companies contracted by the Home Office, raising serious questions about accountability and value for money.

In 2019, contracts worth £4 billion⁸⁴ over ten years were awarded to just three companies, Serco, Mears, and Clearsprings Ready Homes, to run asylum accommodation, and immigration detention and removal facilities. During this time, public trust in the provision of these services has plummeted, but at least one majority shareholder of these companies has entered the Sunday Times Rich List⁸⁵. Meanwhile, in the last year 2024, a record number of people died⁸⁶ while accommodated by Home Office contractors in the asylum system.

The outsourcing of Home Office services to private companies creates an immediate block on accountability for public spending. Contracts are deemed commercially sensitive⁸⁷ and therefore exempt from Freedom of Information requests, inhibiting transparency. Outsourcing also results in greater difficulty for users of the system

80 https://inews.co.uk/news/ambulances-called-166-times-asylum-site-mental-health-crisis-3554579?ico=in-line_link

81 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/asylum-seeker-hotel-home-office-refugee-action-rwanda/>

82 <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/alternative-asylum-accommodation-will-cost-more-than-hotels/>

83 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2025-0019/CDP-2025-0019.pdf>

84 <https://libertyinvestigates.org.uk/articles/government-fails-to-monitor-firms-with-4bn-contracts-to-house-asylum-seekers/>

85 <https://www.thetimes.com/sunday-times-rich-list>

86 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/feb/10/record-asylum-seekers-died-2024-home-office-care>

87 https://hopuk-my.sharepoint.com/personal/carla_denyer_private_parliament_uk/Documents/Policy%20areas/Migration/ICO%20lo%20Public%20Contract%20Regulations%20%20Information%20Commissioner's%20Office%20https://ico.org.uk%20%20for-organisations%20%20documents



The pressure to be seen to be pursuing hostile policies is taking precedence, on a systemic basis, over value-for-money or evidence-based considerations

seeking redress for poor decisions or to make complaints. Users of outsourced systems frequently find that responsibility is passed from provider to Home Office without any clear line of accountability or redress.⁸⁸ This failure of complaints procedures not only has an adverse effect on service users, but also on workers. In 2022, at least 15 separate members of outsourced staff for the contractor Mitie sued the Home Office for discrimination⁸⁹ and unfair dismissal, claiming that complaints had been made but failed to be escalated by the organisation.

From a workers' perspective also, outsourcing government services in general has been criticised. The Public and Commercial Services Union⁹⁰ and Unison⁹¹ that represent Civil Servants across government departments including the Home Office in both immigration

and policing roles, have called for the new government to reduce or end the use of outsourcing. They point to the creation of a two-tier workforce between directly employed and outsourced workers. According to the unions, outsourced workers are seeing this gap widen, with pay and conditions eroded, forcing many to rely on Universal Credit and foodbanks, while the contractor for whom they provide government services make profits.

Given the lack of transparency, we cannot know exactly how much public money goes to private companies providing services in the Home Office. In the context, however, of the low public satisfaction with the service provided in these outsourced areas such as accommodation in particular, accountability is sorely lacking. Where the impact of outsourcing is also to reduce conditions and

⁸⁸ Interview, Nick Beales, RAMFEL, 4 March 2025

⁸⁹ <https://iasservices.org.uk/home-office-contractor-lawsuit-security-staff-sue-over-discrimination-and-unfair-dismissal/>

⁹⁰ <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/why-pcs-wants-end-outsourcing>

⁹¹ <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2023/06/avoid-outsourcing-services-unless-theres-a-clear-public-benefit-says-unison/>

morale among staff, it contributes to the same vicious cycle of stakeholder mistrust and poor decision-making structures that are a constant theme in the Department.

3.4 LITIGATION DECISIONS NOT IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The closed and defensive mindset in the Home Office and the negative outcomes this produces for public finances is starkly illustrated in which cases it chooses to fight in court.⁹² In some cases, it is extremely difficult to understand the public interest in the pursuit of these cases through the courts (see box).

This attitude of fighting every case, even where there can be little public interest justification can be seen in numerous other cases won against the Home Office in recent years. One case the Home Office lost in June 2024⁹³ relates to the duty to provide people living in the UK with a lawful immigration status called '3C leave' with documentation to prove it.

Just as when the descendants of the Windrush

Generation were targeted by the Home Office because they couldn't provide documentation proving their lawful status in the UK, the same thing was happening to people granted '3C leave'. This group, which comprises potentially tens of thousands of people every year, were not being provided with paperwork to prove they had the right to live and work in the UK. This meant they were unable to prove their right to work, or rent, and were wrongfully impacted by Hostile Environment policies. The Home Office had to be forced through litigation to start providing documentation to this group of legal residents.

As with the decision-making on asylum accommodation above, the decision-making in these litigation choices is plainly irrational. It is difficult to infer anything other from the decision to pursue such cases in the courts than that the pressure to be seen to be pursuing hostile policies is taking precedence, on a systemic basis, over value-for-money or evidence-based considerations.

92 Ibid

93 <https://www.ramfel.org.uk/news-and-blog/press-release-ramfel-and-ms-adjei-win-landmark-ruling-against-the-home-office>

THE BEREAVED PARTNER CONCESSION

In September 2024, the government conceded after a protracted legal battle. The case concerned the availability of a fee waiver on the Bereaved Partner Concession. The Bereaved Partner Concession is a legal provision whereby, if you are living in the UK as an immigrant on a spouse visa, and your spouse dies, you will be able to apply to remain in the UK, instead of losing your right to live here, which depended on your now-deceased partner. Such cases most often affect women whose British husbands have died, who have children living with them in the UK, and who had intended to live as a family in the UK for the long term.

Shockingly, the Home Office had sought to extract visa renewal fees from bereaved spouses in this situation, in order to switch

from a spousal visa. The fees charged in these cases to obtain Indefinite Leave to Remain, amounted to almost £3,000.

This left grieving widows priced out of staying in their homes – an irrational policy that represented no possible real financial gain for the Home Office due to the small number of cases, but severely impacted a very small number of vulnerable people every year. The Home Office decision to defend charging these fees in court before eventually and belatedly withdrawing from the proceedings delayed justice for these women, whose mental health was profoundly impacted by the uncertainty of the ordeal, as well as costing the taxpayer money in needlessly defending a policy that is unlikely to have commanded the support of the public.

4. HOW HOME OFFICE STRUCTURES CREATE PROBLEMS

This section interrogates whether it is a cultural problem that inhibits good decision-making in the Home Office, or whether its structures are problematic in-and-of-themselves, and whether they inhibit joined-up and long-term thinking.

4.1 A REACTIONARY REMIT

The remit of the Home Office is wide, but nonetheless does not cover all the areas directly connected to and impacted by its brief. Immigration in particular is a cross-cutting concern that affects all areas of government, but policing, security and crime are also deeply enmeshed with other areas of governance. The Home Office's responsibilities⁹⁴ include 'reducing and preventing crime, and ensuring people feel safe in their homes and communities' but its remit arguably does not include any of the mechanisms that can be proven to prevent crime, only measures to respond to it after the fact. The Home Office is therefore constantly pushed into a reactionary stance as regards public security, only ever able to respond after a disaster has happened, with few tools to help build the type of society where such disasters are rarer.⁹⁵

For example, the Home Office holds the remit of counter-extremism and operationalising the Prevent strategy. But the roots of radicalisation and extremism lie in community cohesion, social exclusion, poverty, housing and education – none of which fall under the Home Office remit.⁹⁶ Similarly, while the Home Office has responsibility for immigration and citizenship, it has no power to pursue

integration policies, and in fact frequently implements policies – most obviously recently by reducing access to citizenship⁹⁷ – that run directly counter⁹⁸ to the goal of fostering integration.⁹⁹

A recent example that demonstrates this problem in yet another area can be found in the National Audit Office's October 2023 report¹⁰⁰ assessing the value for money of the Home Office's efforts to reduce the harm caused by illegal drugs. The report emphasises that there is no strategy in place in the Home Office to reduce demand for illegal drugs, noting, "The current lack of emphasis on preventing illegal drug use means that departments risk only addressing the consequences, rather than the causes, of harm."

This very problem was also identified by the Grenfell Inquiry¹⁰¹ as a factor that increased the vulnerability of the residents of the tower. Because the Home Office was responsible for fire safety, but the regulation of buildings was run by DHCLG and the regulation of products used in building materials the responsibility of the Department of Business and Trade. The fragmentation inhibited a joined-up preventative approach to fire safety. The Government has enacted the Inquiry's recommendation to remove fire from the remit of the Home Office and consolidate these areas under DHCLG.

A structural problem thus recurs across the Home Office's mandate: The Department has no involvement or accountability for policy areas aimed at fostering community cohesion, good race relations, and integrated

94 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/home-office/about>

95 Interview, Victoria Tecca, Liberty, 13 March 2025

96 Ibid

97 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-character-nationality-policy-guidance/good-character-requirement-accessible>

98 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-on-ten-year-routes-to-settlement-in-the-uk/>

99 Interview, Colin Yeo, Immigration Barrister, 7 March 2025

100 <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/reducing-the-harm-from-illegal-drugs/?nab=1>

101 https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/sites/default/files/CCS0923434692-004_GTI%20Phase%202_Report%20Overview_E-Laying_0.pdf

neighbourhoods, which are the factors that would best contribute to preventing the harms the Home Office is tasked with responding to. This makes the Home Office institutionally incapable of acting to prevent harm from occurring in the first place. **The cost of responding after harm has occurred will always be greater than preventing the harm from occurring at all, and so the Home Office is institutionally ill-suited to providing value-for-money interventions in matters of public safety and integration.**¹⁰²

4.2 PATH-DEPENDENCY THINKING

The other side of the coin as concerns the Home Office's remit is that the grouping of immigration within an overarching security remit produces problematic outcomes. Immigration management is perceived, both from within and without the Department, as primarily an issue of security, which it is not.

Even if irregular migration can be understood as falling under a security remit, the rest of the immigration system plainly does not. It is important to remember that despite the disproportionate attention paid by media and politicians to the issue of the irregular arrival of asylum seekers for example, this is in fact a very small part of the immigration remit of the Home Office. In 2024, the arrival of asylum seekers on small boats made up just 5%¹⁰³ of net immigration to the UK, and in 2023 it was closer to 3%¹⁰⁴. The overwhelming majority of the Home Office's job as concerns migration is therefore the management of visa applications and renewals within the lawful – if complex and contentious – visa system it administers.

The vast majority of immigrants are visitors, students and workers who have no connection to security or crime-related issues, yet the intertwining of these two areas within the Department has created a link between them in the minds of politicians.¹⁰⁵

This path-dependency thinking has become so deeply embedded in the psychology of immigration politics that it is difficult to imagine breaking the link between immigration and crime. Even where the impact of a narrow, security-focused lens can be seen in multiple long-term negative societal outcomes, the securitisation priority is overwhelming. This results in policies that have significant negative impacts on large groups of people, simply for the purpose of increasing the ability in the Home Office to police and control the very few people they are reasonably targeted at. Policies like long, complicated and expensive pathways to settlement¹⁰⁶ and barriers to obtaining citizenship¹⁰⁷ for long-term residents are damaging to integration and community cohesion and contribute to child poverty¹⁰⁸, but are perceived as justified by the Home Office as they facilitate its ability to potentially deport the tiny fraction of people who may transgress the rules.¹⁰⁹

Evidence of this tendency towards path-dependency thinking can be found in the new government's Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill¹¹⁰, which introduces new powers to approach people smuggling with powers that echo counter-terrorism powers. There has been no consultation with experts or stakeholders in the migration sector in the development of this legislation, and evidence that mimicking counter-terror style powers in

102 Interview, Victoria Tecca, Liberty, 13 March 2025

103 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024>

104 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2023>

105 Interview, Nick Beales, RAMFEL, 4 March 2025

106 <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-the-devastating-impact-of-10-year-process-endured-by-thousands-on-course-to-settle-in-uk>

107 <https://freemovement.org.uk/good-character-guidance-amended-to-block-refugees-from-naturalisation/>

108 <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-nearly-half-of-uk-children-with-parents-born-abroad-are-in-poverty>

109 Interview, Colin Yeo, Immigration Barrister, 7 March 2025

110 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/border-security-asylum-and-immigration-bill-2025>

immigration enforcement will be effective to reduce the arrival of asylum seekers in the UK is scarce.

But this securitised approach is far from being a new phenomenon. **What is startling when taking a slightly longer view of the Home Office's approach to immigration is the repetition of policy approaches that reflect a narrow security-driven lens, in the face of ongoing failure.** In the pursuit of reducing immigrant numbers, no government has adopted a simple policy of placing limits on the number of visas issued, for example, or pursuing much stricter eligibility criteria. The Home Office has instead repeatedly turned out policies over the last three decades¹¹¹ that make life in the UK harder for migrants, elongate the time and expense of obtaining a permanent status in the UK, and reduce the procedural rights of asylum seekers. These approaches have been shown to be a failure in as far as reducing the net number of immigrants is concerned, as they have been pursued over a course of decades during which immigration numbers have steadily increased. All the Home Office has is the hammer of security-driven politics, and all immigration issues are therefore perceived as a nail for pummelling the rights of foreign residents of the UK.

4.3 CONFLICTING PRIORITIES

There is an evident power struggle between the Home Office and other departments as regards priorities for government that inhibits joined-up thinking and effective, coherent strategies. There are, for example, direct tensions between the aims of the Home Office, which is often focused on reducing immigrant

numbers, at odds with other areas including the Department of Health, Department of Education, Department for Farming and Rural Affairs, Department for Business and Trade, and the Treasury. Unhappy compromises abound in these relationships, with migrants themselves often the ones experiencing the brunt of the impact.¹¹²

The recent decision to remove the right of migrant care workers to bring their spouse and children¹¹³ with them to the UK when they move here, for example, was one of these compromises. It aimed at fulfilling both the Home Office's priority of reducing immigrant numbers, and the Department of Health and Social Care's priority of keeping the route for migrant care workers open. The resulting choice to keep the route open, but cut the rights of the workers using it has been a very significant drop in applications for the Social Care Worker visa in the last 12 months – a result that is deeply unpopular with a significant majority of Britons¹¹⁴.

The National Audit Office's March 2025 review of the Skilled Worker visa system¹¹⁵ also highlights how the Home Office has made changes on the route 'without a detailed understanding of potential impacts across different sectors and regions [...] [and has] not collaborated effectively on the role that immigration plays in different sectors of the labour market.' The report particularly highlights how this has led to a failure to consider how the path interacts with issues of workplace exploitation. On this front, the lack of joined-up working apparently comes from both directions, as the government has been criticised¹¹⁶ for excluding any measures to protect migrant workers from the protections it is implementing of workers' rights in its Employment Rights Bill¹¹⁷.

111 https://refugeeintegrationuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Asylum_Reform_Report_20_March.pdf

112 Interview, Sachin Savur, Institute for Government, 10 March 2025

113 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/the-ban-on-care-workers-family-members-what-will-be-the-impact/>

114 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2024/08/12/2112e/1>

115 <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/immigration-skilled-worker-visas/?nab=1>

116 <https://labourexploitation.org/app/uploads/2024/10/24.10.10-FLEX-Employment-Rights-Bill-Briefing-Final.pdf>

117 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/employment-rights-bill-to-boost-productivity-for-british-workers-and-grow-the-economy>

In many cases, the Home Office is perceived as arbiter to which other Departments come as supplicants requesting more visas be made available to bring in immigrants to support their areas of work. This could be the demand from the National Farmers Union¹¹⁸ for more Seasonal Agricultural visas to be made available, or calls from the Department of Education not to limit the availability of student visas that provide financial support to our University sector¹¹⁹. The Home Office takes the role of the goalkeeper, fending off arguments about the need for immigration, which raises questions over whether it is capable of being seen to be acting as an honest broker in such discussions.¹²⁰

These tensions bubbled over in March 2025, when the Labour Government's planned white paper on immigration was delayed, reportedly due to clashes between business and between government departments over plans to further curtail visas. Business leaders briefed¹²¹ that the visas system is, once again, "unfit for purpose" and that policy must be "shaped by labour market realities, not short-term political pressures." Meanwhile, a spat developed¹²² between the Home Office and the Department for Education, which it accused of encouraging universities to lobby against curtailing student and graduate visa rights. The higher education sector in the UK is highly dependent on revenue from international student fees, and thus opposed to policies being promoted by the Home Office to reduce net immigration numbers by targeting the rights of foreign students.

In many cases, Home Office decisions actively hamper the ability of other parts of government to achieve their goals. The choice to bar most immigrants to the UK from accessing most benefits (No Recourse to

Public Funds) makes the aim to eliminate child poverty impossible to achieve, for example. Over a third of children living in poverty are the children of migrants, who are excluded from support from the state and whose cycles of poverty and debt are exacerbated by the need to pay extremely high visa renewal fees every couple of years.

The severe long-term impacts of this, not only for the lives of the children themselves but in terms of the cost to society as a whole was laid out in a recent report by IPPR¹²³,

"The research says children with migrant parents are more likely than other children to not have their own bedrooms, go on school trips, have a hobby, have friends over, celebrate special occasions, and eat nutritious food.

"This has long-term consequences for children who are likely to spend their entire lives in the UK. Growing up in poverty harms their future health and career prospects, increasing potential costs to society and the economy."

The report makes it clear how the impact of the imposition of high visa renewal fees and No Recourse to Public Funds on migrant families with children is unlikely to have any impact on net migration figures, as these children are very likely to live in the UK their entire lives. The policy displaces, rather than eliminating the cost of supporting these children, to other departments. A 2022 LSE report¹²⁴ found that Local Authorities were spending £60 million per year supporting families with NRPF.

The aim of eliminating homelessness is also impossible to achieve while the Home Office policy is directly creating the conditions for high levels of homelessness among the migrant and especially the refugee population.

118 <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/nfu-secures-five-year-extension-to-seasonal-worker-scheme/>

119 <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/201068/mps-to-investigate-universities-funding-reliance-on-international-students/>

120 Interview, Sachin Savur, Institute for Government, 10 March 2025

121 <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/uk-visas-shortage-key-sectors-102416642.html?guccounter=1>

122 <https://www.ft.com/content/f441caba-fef1-4413-8e37-fae5eb16ae1f>

123 <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-nearly-half-of-uk-children-with-parents-born-abroad-are-in-poverty>

124 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/lse-london/documents/Reports/GLA-report-on-NRPF-FINAL-to-send-March-7.pdf>

In the two years to September 2023, rates of homelessness among refugees in England increased by 239%¹²⁵. This spike was caused in part by the previous government changing the notice given to newly recognised refugees to leave asylum accommodation and find alternative places to stay.

The new government has reversed this change, extending the notice period from 28 to 56 days, which is still an extremely short amount of time in which to establish oneself with new bank account, benefits support and housing. However, the fact that the 28-day period that was so obviously going to severely impact destitution was – however briefly – implemented without consultation with Local Authorities or the homelessness sector is a stark indication of the failures in joined-up thinking displayed by the Home Office, once again prioritising symbolically hostile policies.

At the current time, there are serious concerns that the same burden-shifting mentality is in evidence in the asylum system again, this time focused on the asylum appeals tribunal. Over the last five years there has been a steady increase in the number of people applying for asylum in the UK, and a series of measures aimed at deterring them have been unsuccessfully implemented and then dropped. One of the approaches taken by the previous government was to stop processing asylum claims¹²⁶ of people arriving in the UK through irregular means at all. When this resulted in an immense backlog of people waiting for a decision on their claim, and no reduction in the numbers of people applying, the government sought to meet its target for clearing the backlog of legacy cases by issuing a blitz of asylum decisions – many of them refusals. Following the change in government, the new administration has continued efforts to get on top of the asylum backlog by increasing decision making capacity and

issuing a high number of decisions. The unusually high rate of refusals has held, however, under the new administration, including a bewildering 47% rejection rate of Afghan claims¹²⁷ in 2024.

Many of the people refused asylum in the first instance are now seeking to appeal the decisions, leading to a massive increase in the number of people in the appeals system backlog now, instead of the initial asylum backlog. In the last two years this backlog for asylum appeals has increased by 485%¹²⁸. In seeking to respond to one crisis without adequate cross-Whitehall working or adequate resource, the Home Office has once again simply managed to shift the crisis onto another department.

This pattern is visible across the work of the Home Office, where intense political pressures surrounding failures in the immigration system force governments to rush to move resources from one crisis area to another, often unbalancing other parts of the system and causing unsustainable pressures on other departments such as the Ministry of Justice or local government.¹²⁹

4.4 THE ROLE OF THE HOME SECRETARY

The Home Secretary is directly responsible for a huge area of complex work, including all Home Office business, but the immigration brief takes up a great deal of their time and attention. The high level of discretion the Secretary of State holds to implement decisions on immigration policy can act as a double-edged sword, and the role may actually function better if it was subject to greater constraints. There are a lack of institutional power breaks or systems of accountability on the role of the Home Secretary that can

125 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Keys-to-the-City-2024-Ending-refugee-homelessness-in-London.pdf>

126 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-uks-asylum-backlog/>

127 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk>

128 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/surge-to-clear-asylum-decisions-backlog-means-appeals-system-struggling-to-cope/>

129 Interview, Colin Yeo, Immigration Barrister, 7 March 2025

ultimately produce perverse outcomes.¹³⁰

The Home Secretary has immense power to make sweeping changes, particularly in immigration law. The immigration rules are subject to negative procedure¹³¹, meaning that they do not require approval by parliament. There is essentially no need to pass primary legislation through parliament in order to make even very significant and consequential changes to the immigration and asylum systems. However, given the immense political pressure to be seen to be ‘doing something’ about immigration – an area of such high public dissatisfaction – Home Secretaries have nonetheless chosen to put forward ‘flagship’ immigration and asylum bills at an ever-increasing rate¹³², averaging one every 2-3 years for the last three decades, and one per year in the last four years.

Ironically, these Acts of Parliament often do more to constrain the flexibility of the government’s management of immigration than anything else. There have been repeated occasions, the Illegal Migration Act 2023¹³³ being one example, where categories of people that the state had the power to remove have been designated instead as people the state now has a duty to remove, regardless of the feasibility or any other consideration. These constraints make for tough-sounding headlines about new pieces of legislation, but in fact make the system more difficult to manage by reducing reasonable discretion.

On other occasions, such as in much of the Border Security, Asylum & Immigration Bill¹³⁴ currently before parliament, much of the Bill puts measures on a statutory footing that had already been put in place, once again constraining flexibility. The Office for the Border Security Command¹³⁵,

for example, has been in operation in the Home Office for months already, but the Bill establishes its existence, presumably purely for the purpose of filling the empty pages of a promised borders bill. All this can be said to achieve in practice is to make any further reorganisation of the office at a later date more cumbersome.¹³⁶

Major acts of parliament are therefore passed, with all the accompanying parliamentary time and energy this requires, often for essentially symbolic purposes. Meanwhile, real consequential changes are made without any of the political scrutiny and time to propose amendments implied in the passage of a Bill, too. For example, while the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill has been in its Committee Stage, the Home Secretary introduced a major change¹³⁷ to the rights of asylum seekers through a simple change to the immigration rules.

This change was introduced with no warning, consultation or even a formal announcement, in February 2025. The Home Secretary adjusted the ‘Good Character’ requirement for obtaining British citizenship in order to exclude anybody who entered the UK as a refugee through irregular means from ever obtaining citizenship. This change is very likely to be challenged in the courts and could be found to be unlawful, not only because it contradicts two clauses of the Refugee Convention¹³⁸, but also because it is unlikely to reasonably reflect the meaning of ‘Good Character’ under domestic law.¹³⁹

It is not known what legal advice the Home Secretary may have received before making the change, nor what assessment of the Equalities and other impacts was undertaken, but it is quite possible that none of these steps

130 Ibid

131 <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/negative-procedure/>

132 <https://www.ein.org.uk/blog/policy-and-legislative-changes-affecting-migration-uk-time-line-1983-2024>

133 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/illegal-migration-bill>

134 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0173/240173.pdf>

135 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-launches-new-border-security-command>

136 Interview, Colin Yeo, Immigration Barrister, 7 March 2025

137 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-character-nationality-policy-guidance/good-character-requirement-accessible>

138 <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>

139 Ibid

were undertaken at all, because they do not need to be under the system as it currently operates. **This broad discretion to make significant changes without checks is often used in haste to respond to political pressures, in pursuit of a headline, and in this case as in many others may simply put the Home Office on a collision course with the courts.**

There are few mechanisms that slow the Home Secretary's hand and require accountability when these changes are being made. The publication of Economic and Equalities Impact Assessments are routinely delayed until after the policy they are assessing has come into force, and the Home Secretary can easily dismiss¹⁴⁰ the Women and Equalities Committee's requests to publish mitigation plans where equality impacts will be severe. The Office of the Independent Inspector of Borders and Immigration¹⁴¹ (ICIBI) is often maligned, and its effectiveness is hampered by limitations on its powers to publish reports according to its own timescale. The recommendation in the WLLR to increase the ICIBI's powers and to create a Migrants' Commissioner were among the ones that were dropped by Suella Braverman, and it would appear the current government intends to create a role for a Windrush Commissioner¹⁴² instead. This is a positive move in-and-of-itself but is a severe watering-down of the recommendation for a Migrants' Commissioner modelled on the role of the Children's Commissioner.

The sweeping power of the Home Secretary and toothless or ineffective systems for accountability must be reformed to ensure that policies with huge implications for the lives of migrants, the economy, community cohesion, and so on, are not made on the basis of a knee-jerk reaction to political pressure, but justified and scrutinised effectively.



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140 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmwomeq/1825/report.html>

141 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/independent-chief-inspector-of-borders-and-immigration>

142 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-to-appoint-a-windrush-commissioner>

PART TWO

THE SOLUTION



1. OVERVIEW OF THE SOLUTIONS

To borrow a phrase from the Institute for Government¹⁴³ (IfG), there is very rarely a good case for changes to government structures. Changes to machinery of government are expensive, time consuming and distracting. But, as the IfG has also concluded¹⁴⁴, the case of the Home Office represents an exception to the rule, where the case for change is stronger than the case for avoiding disruption.

1.1 THE CASE AGAINST CHANGE

As long as political dedication to a purely symbolic anti-migrant politics persists, no reform of the Department will be able to “fix” the failures of the immigration system. The cycle of scandals, poor management of public funds, and lack of trust will continue without a more honest public conversation being put forward by politicians about the trade-offs and benefits of immigration for Britain. Essentially, if civil servants are required first-and-foremost to pursue a policy direction that looks hostile, even when the evidence doesn’t support it, they cannot be expected to produce systems that will work. No version of the Home Office can overcome the toxic influence of irrational anti-migrant politics that we find ourselves in – technocracy cannot beat ideology.

The scale of the problems laid out in Part One of this report, and in other critiques of the Home Office, is vast, and the potential approaches to solutions are wide-ranging and complex. It will require a huge amount of careful planning to fully address the case for reform, requiring in-depth consultation with numerous stakeholders, modelling, and a clear direction and dedication to achieving

the change required. This represents a very significant undertaking in terms of resources and a real challenge in terms of the courage and leadership demanded of political actors who take it on. It would be a terrible waste of effort to take on such a major overhaul if the outcomes are not positive, and on such a politicised area of work, there are guaranteed to be objections from political actors on all sides.

Many of the problems the Home Office experiences cut across Whitehall and are not peculiar to the Home Office itself. These are the difficulties of managing the complex and sometimes contradictory priorities of governance. Often, fiddling with the structure is unnecessary, and it is better to let Civil Servants get on with the job.

Finally, it is not the case that the Home Office is entirely incompetent – there are indeed areas where it performs well, including in exceedingly complicated and sensitive areas. While the transition after Brexit has inevitably thrown up challenges, the design and implementation of the EU Settled Status Scheme¹⁴⁵ was relatively well done, with the vast majority of the 5.7 million applicants experiencing a smooth and straightforward system that guaranteed their long-term rights in the UK as promised. Similarly, there are parts of the non-EU immigration system that run well, notably in the management of visas for highly skilled (and highly paid) immigrants.¹⁴⁶ Even within the asylum system there are notable successes to point to – the Homes For Ukraine¹⁴⁷ and Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme¹⁴⁸ are both areas where large numbers of refugees have found secure protection in the UK with

143 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG-Migration-After-Brexit_4.pdf

144 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG-Migration-After-Brexit_4.pdf

145 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2024/how-many-people-have-been-granted-settlement-via-the-eu-settlement-scheme>

146 Correspondence, Ian Robinson, Vialto Partners Global Mobility Solutions, 10 March 2025

147 <https://homesforukraine.org.uk>

148 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-resettlement-schemes-factsheet-march-2021/vulnerable-persons-and-vulnerable-childrens-resettlement-schemes-factsheet-march-2021>

relatively straightforward administration and strong public support.

These areas of success suggest that not only is the Home Office capable of working effectively with other government departments, but it is capable of running relatively smooth services that can respond to the needs of high numbers of applicants. All these schemes were underpinned by strong direct support from the Prime Minister, clear objectives, and the distinction of being schemes primarily aimed to bring people in, not keep them out. It is perhaps the fact that keeping people out is inherently more difficult that creates Home Office failures, not any real problem with the competence, structures, or culture of the Department.

1.2 THE CASE FOR CHANGE

The Home Office has so fundamentally lost the trust of such a broad range of society that it is difficult to imagine it can be rebuilt. This cuts across its remit including a crisis in confidence in the police, but mainly focuses on dissatisfaction from all sides regarding the management of successive governments of migration. Put simply, the Home Office does not deliver what politicians promise us on immigration. We do not have a system that is firm or fair, we do not see numbers reduce when we are promised that they will, we do not see an end to irregular and dangerous arrivals, we do not see positive integration outcomes or good race relations, and yet we continue to see skills shortages in key areas of the economy. It is difficult to imagine at this point how public perception can be reassured without a clear moment to mark a point of significant change.

The staff of the Home Office have long had a poor relationship with the Department too, and without their confidence and good morale, the difficult job of enacting such a complicated and broad operation becomes impossible. Other stakeholders including migrant communities and their civil society representatives have all but given up on good faith engagement or reasoning.

The Home Office is trapped in a series of vicious cycles that exacerbate one another and produce poor outcomes. The entrenched

defensive culture stifles possibilities for accountability and evidence-based policy making, further eroding trust and increasing criticism it receives from all sides, which then contributes to the bunker mentality becoming ever more ingrained. An inability to heed and respond to evidence has led to immense waste of public money and throws doubt on the Department's ability to responsibly manage public funds at all. The Home Office's inability to cooperate with stakeholders is reflected back again in the Department's failure to build policy that takes into account or supports the agendas of other departments, resulting in policies that undermine efforts to improve society from eradicating poverty and homelessness to promoting fair pay and workers' rights.

Putting everything else aside, the very structures of the Home Office inhibit positive outcomes, forcing it always to take a reactionary position when crises occur. The Home Secretary's role is too little constrained with too few pathways to accountability, meaning too few institutional blocks on the imposition of knee-jerk policy changes in response to political pressures, many of which inevitably pile up more problems down the line in what has become a constant doom-loop. The Department is too big, too angry, and too powerful for its own good. There are no indications that it is capable of reforming itself – five years on from its supposed transformation programme with the publication of the Windrush Lessons Learned Review it continues to be as dysfunctional as it ever was.

The Home Office needed to be seen to act as an honest broker between departments, balancing the needs of the treasury, education sector, and labour market after Brexit. It has instead acted as a beleaguered autocrat, introducing ill-evidenced schemes to segment and silo immigrants into different visa pathways, and quite simply completely lost control of the asylum system. Immigration now dominates the agenda of the entire department to an even greater degree than before, all while dissatisfaction with the management of immigration dominates national politics. There has been no successful rebuilding of relationships with stakeholders

since the disastrous Windrush Scandal, nor evidence of lessons learned and systems improved. In short, the case for change is now overwhelming, and outweighs the preference for avoiding disruption.

1.3 WHAT CHANGE?

If change is needed, then it must be carefully considered, with the balance of pros and cons entailed in each approach measured. The options examined below have been developed on the basis of the analysis that makes up Part One of this report. The changes under consideration aim to reduce the breadth of the Home Office's remit making it more coherent; separate immigration from security matters; introduce greater balance between government departments; and introduce accountability frameworks to increase transparency in particular as regards producing evidenced, value-for-money policies.

Create a more coherent remit for the Home Office

- Could be achieved by breaking up the existing Home Office into two or more departments each with a smaller more coherent remit
- Could be achieved by splitting off parts of the Home Office's remit and putting them under the purview of other departments as was recently done with fire services

Separate immigration from security

- As above this requires at the very least splitting the Department in two so that immigration management can be tied to considerations of labour market, skills, economy, humanitarian intervention and integration, instead of tied to security and policing concerns

Introduce balance between government departments

- Could be achieved by creating joint teams across departments with shared budgets to manage key parts of the Home Office's brief breaking up the role of the

Home Office as 'goalkeeper' preventing other departments from getting the visa concessions they require

Introduce frameworks for accountability, transparency and value for money

- Could be achieved by curtailing the power of the Home Secretary to change secondary legislation, introducing stronger systems in the procedures of policy change, requirements on consultation, a timetable for the publication of evidence and Impact Assessments
- Could be achieved by creating more statutory bodies with the power to compel the Home Secretary to adhere to accountability and value-for-money standards, including the creation of a Migrants' Commissioner role and/or strengthening the role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders

Any restructure must take lessons from what has and has not worked in the past, and crucially must be well-thought-out with a clear purpose, beyond political signalling. The options considered here require more in-depth review.

2. THE OPTIONS

OPTION 1 — SPLIT THE HOME OFFICE IN TWO

OPTION 1A: SPLIT THE HOME OFFICE INTO TWO NEW DEPARTMENTS, KEEPING THE SAME RESPONSIBILITIES

Split the Home Office down the middle into two departments covering the same range of responsibilities as it currently holds.

One Department for Community Security, comprising policing, drugs, counter-terrorism and security, and one Department for Immigration.

This would bring our structures into line with a number of other countries for whom immigration is of significant political and strategic importance considered to require its own dedicated ministerial team, such as Canada, New Zealand, and, until recently, Australia.

Pros:

- A comparatively simple approach that doesn't impact the work of any other Department as it maintains the overall Home Office brief intact, simply dividing it in two more manageable parts
- Increased focus and ministerial capacity dedicated to each new Department, potentially also enabling clearer lines of accountability and the creation of cleaner structures with more manageable budgets
- Removes problematic grouping of immigration with security and attendant path-dependency thinking
- Significant restructure allows space for considering the creation of new direction, fostering new cultures, better opportunities for cross-governmental thinking, and more effective systems of accountability and oversight

Cons:

- A significant change that will require planning, resources, and entail a temporary hit to productivity while new Departments are established, added to increased long-term cost of running two Departments in the place of just one
- Risk that a Department of Immigration may become even more subject to political pressures than the current Home Office, where the fevered job of managing immigration could be seen to be 'watered down' by the inclusion of other areas of responsibility
- Does not in-and-of-itself address the internal cultural problems that exist in the Home Office, or address the problematic powers of the Home Secretary to change the immigration rules and lack of accountability mechanisms
- Does not resolve issues of the remit in each new department lacking capabilities on prevention, community relations, and integration

OPTION 1B: SPLIT THE HOME OFFICE INTO TWO NEW DEPARTMENTS WITH SOME NEW RESPONSIBILITIES AND STRUCTURES

In countries where there is a dedicated Department for Immigration, there is often a recognition of the impact of immigration policy on community integration, housing, and local government. The current remit of the Home Office does not include responsibility for long-term integration, infrastructure planning, and community cohesion, which can be problematic. On the other side, the Home Office's brief forces it into a reactive stance on matters of policing and security.

This option aims to avoid the outcome possible in Option 1a that the two departments resulting from splitting up the Home Office end up replicating the old department's problems just across two separate bodies.

This option entails taking a more

comprehensive look at what the form of the new departments would be, and considering areas where relevant responsibilities could be taken over from other departments, or where structures could be created to ensure better joint work.

For example, the new Department for Immigration could become a Department for Population, Infrastructure, and Immigration, taking on joint task forces with shared budgets with Department for Housing, Communities, and Local Government in order to ensure a long-term approach to the country's population, workforce and infrastructure needs is built into the management of immigration policy.

The new Department housing policing and security matters could become a Department for Community Security, and include joint teams working across mental health, housing, homelessness and social services to manage addiction, allowing policing work to be better integrated with a prevention approach to crime.

Pros:

- Increased focus and ministerial capacity dedicated to each new Department, potentially also enabling clearer lines of accountability and the creation of cleaner structures with more manageable budgets
- Remove problematic grouping of immigration with security and attendant path-dependency thinking
- Introduce a stronger framework for long-term decision-making on immigration which takes into account population, infrastructure, and integration, forcing a consideration of more long-term impacts of immigration beyond the headlines generated by each quarterly net migration statistics release
- Introduce responsibility for prevention strategy into the governance of policing and security
- Renaming and changing the remit of each new Department signals a new direction, potentially helping with trust to ensure this is clearly more than a rebranding exercise

Cons:

- Significant additional complexity entailed in not only breaking up one department but also creating effective joint-working platforms or even transferring responsibilities from other departments into the new ones
- Immigration is an issue that cross-cuts the whole of government, so it would be difficult to prevent a department tasked with taking into account all these angles from becoming another behemoth that is unable to act nimbly and decisively
- Does not in-and-of-itself address the internal cultural problems that exist in the Home Office, or address the problematic powers of the Home Secretary to change the immigration rules and lack of mechanisms of accountability

OPTION 2 – A CROSS-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

OPTION 2A: A CROSS-GOVERNMENT APPROACH TO BREAKING UP THE HOME OFFICE

Some countries split the brief held by our Home Office across a number of different departments. Under this option the Home Office would be broken up and its functions taken in under a range of existing departments, instead of split into two new ones. In Sweden and the Netherlands, immigration and visas are handled by the Department of Foreign Affairs, while asylum is under the purview of their justice ministries.

Putting asylum in the Department of Justice could have a number of advantages, including decoupling refugee protection, which is a question of moral obligation and governed largely by international law, from the management of the wider immigration system, where political questions about how to appropriately control numbers and what types of migration is desired are more appropriate political questions.

Separating asylum seekers in this way could possibly help to make the differences in different types of immigration clearer to the public and aid understanding of the system, including the small proportion of it represented by irregular arrivals. However, neither in Sweden nor the Netherlands is asylum a depoliticised issue by any means,

so it is clearly not a sufficient measure on its own. The other potential advantage from the perspective of managing the asylum system is that the Department of Justice may be capable of taking a more end-to-end view of asylum applications, eliminating the current delineation between initial asylum applications and the appeals process that is currently the site of significant delays and difficulties for users.

An immigration and visas board could be situated, as in other countries, within the Foreign Office. This body would be tasked with devising immigration policy and managing issuing visas and compliance. The board could comprise representatives from all the government departments with a significant stake in immigration, including Treasury, Health, Business and Trade, Farming and Rural Affairs, Housing, and Education. This would arguably much better reflect the post-Brexit reality wherein the visas system is central in supporting our workforce and economic needs. There is a possibility in doing this to deconstruct the role of the Home Secretary as the controller against which these other departments must struggle to obtain leniency on visa numbers, and create instead a more whole-government approach to immigration management driven by the needs of different sections of society.

Under this option the remaining functions of the Home Office, policing, security, and drugs could remain as in Option 1a or 1b as a new smaller Department of Community Security with similar functions as now.

Pros:

- The entire asylum procedure to be managed under one department at the MoJ could prevent delays and bottlenecks forming at pinch-points and encourage an end-to-end more streamlined approach to decision-making
- Decoupling asylum and immigration could be a way to reduce the politicised nature of the debate surrounding each issue, or at least reduce confusion between the different areas providing more clarity to the public on an area of significant interest
- Removes the problematic role of the Home Secretary in acting as arbiter for the immigration needs of all parts of society, potentially ensuring immigration policy better reflects the needs of our economy, rather than the politics of appearing hostile

Cons:

- Significant additional complexity in the adoption of parts of one department by others, including the necessary redirection of funds, staff, and operational capabilities
- A board with equal participants from across Government each competing for their own interests as regards immigration with no clear arbiter in the place of the Home Secretary with oversight of the policy direction could make it difficult to make decisions
- Putting the asylum system under the purview of the Ministry of Justice could produce perverse incentives of its own, and potentially could further separate the needs of asylum seekers to access integration services and build community ties
- Decoupling asylum and immigration has disadvantages too, given that in reality these two categories are not entirely discrete from one another, but have plenty of overlap and creating such a strong arbitrary boundary between the two types of migration could reinforce unhelpful black-and-white thinking about deservingness



The Home Office has so fundamentally lost the trust of such a broad range of society that it is difficult to imagine it can be rebuilt

OPTION 2B: MAKING USE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Another cross-government solution to the break-up of the Home Office would be to put the management of immigration and visas (including asylum) under the remit of the Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This would require a more joined-up approach to planning for immigration policy with a view to community cohesion and integration. It would make planning for the infrastructural needs of a growing population an inherent priority concern when planning visa policy. Tying immigration policy to community and housing policy could potentially ensure necessary funds are earmarked for services and infrastructure in the planning stages of developing visa pathways, instead of the current situation where costs are passed onto Local Government by Home Office policies

that create destitution, poverty and poor community relations.

Under this option, the non-immigration functions of the Home Office could remain as in Option 1a or b as its own smaller Department for Community Security. Or it could similarly to immigration be broken up and assigned to congruent areas of government. One approach would be policing, fire, and drugs also being placed under the purview of DHCLG. Once again integrating the community cohesion, integration, and prevention work that is lacking from policing and crime work currently and knitting the briefs together to ensure prevention work is prioritised. Under this framework, however, counter-terrorism and intelligence work currently under the Homeland Security grouping in the Home Office would need to find a locale and must have clear ministerial responsibility given the sensitive nature of the brief. It could remain a separate smaller department of its own, or potentially could be incorporated under the Cabinet Office.

Pros:

- Integrating immigration and communities would promote a longer-term outlook towards visa and asylum policy-making, overcoming the current problem of the Home Office displacing costs and future problems onto other Departments including most obviously DHCLG
- Integrating policing, drugs, and communities would create incentives to work within a prevention and community cohesion framework that is otherwise lacking from the Home Office, pushing policing into a constant reactive position
- One department having responsibility over housing and immigration would create a powerful set of incentives to ensure that considerations of infrastructure needs were built into considerations of workforce, student accommodation, and the impact of population change on local communities, potentially preventing problems that create a backlash against immigrants

Cons:

- Significant additional complexity in the adoption of parts of one department by others, including the necessary redirection of funds, staff, and operational capabilities
- Particularly if policing powers are integrated into DHCLG as well as immigration, this makes the new Department very large indeed, with a wide range of responsibilities, potentially recreating some of the pitfalls that have made the Home Office dysfunctional

OPTION 3 – ADAPTING STRUCTURES WITHIN THE EXISTING DEPARTMENT

MAKE USE OF ARMS-LENGTH BODIES

This option could be implemented without splitting up the Home Office, and could be seen more as an extensive internal restructuring of the existing Department. However these reforms could also be implemented as part of any of the other options laid out above, ensuring that any new or split Departments created by this process benefit from stronger accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure they do not eventually replicate the problems of the past.

The focus of these changes would be in embedding mechanisms of accountability and oversight into the functions of the immigration side of Home Office responsibilities above all, and to curtail some of the powers of the Home Secretary.

Some of the more ambitious recommendations of the Windrush Lessons Learned Review that were largely dropped by the previous government can be used as a framework for these changes. Strengthening the role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders to ensure the role has real teeth and is able to hold the Home Office to account for its operational activities, including those that are outsourced, would be one way to go about this. The reformed ICIBI should have an expanded budget, the power to set its own inspection agenda, the power to publish its own reports according to its own timetable, and to compel Ministers and high-ranking civil servants to provide evidence.

The creation, in addition to this, of a Migrants' Commissioner role, based on the model of the highly effective office of the Children's Commissioner could serve to rebalance the internal conversation in the Home Office towards considering the impact of its policies over the long-term on migrant communities.

The creation and extension of these two roles would require resource, but there would also need to be a review of the self-funding model of the Home Office's immigration business

and a commitment to adequately fund the different areas of operation in order to address the issues of low staff morale and of resources being diverted from one area to another, moving crises around without ever having the manpower in place to run an effective end-to-end system

Finally, reform must include revisiting the discretion held by the Home Secretary to make changes to the immigration rules without needing an act of parliament or to satisfy any requirements for Impact Assessments and consultation. This could involve the imposition of frameworks requiring the publication in advance of all but minor changes of Economic and Equality Impact Assessments, and a transparent and clearly defined framework for addressing any negative issues identified in these Assessments. It could also require the Home Secretary to create a cross-governmental advisory board with representatives from all the departments with a stake in immigration and to hear from them before taking decisions that interact with their policy areas.



**Any restructure must
take lessons from
what has and has not
worked in the past,
and crucially must be
well-thought-out with a
clear purpose, beyond
political signalling**

Pros:

- Does not have to entail dismantling the Home Office as a department, potentially saving money and effort
- Increased resources within the Department could go some way to tackle low staff morale and recruitment and retention problems, enabling the building of real centres of expertise within the Home Office
- These provisions could be implemented into other approaches to Home Office reform, to strengthen a new Department if one were created, for example

Cons:

- Increasing the bureaucracy and administrative hurdles required at every stage of decision-making within the department could significantly slow things down, resulting in a sclerotic system incapable of responding to immediate areas of concern
- Ultimately all of these changes could be eroded, undermined, or thrown out by the next Home Secretary who came along, leaving no lasting legacy of change
- The internal restructuring of the Department sacrifices the potential for a galvanising political moment of visible change capable of resetting trust among stakeholders and the public.



The work to dismantle and restructure the Home Office will be insufficient without turning around the narrative of hatred and racism that defines our current political moment

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The options for reform outlined above cover a wide range of options. From a maximalist restructure that would impact many areas of Government, to the introduction of better systems for accountability and oversight into an unchanged Departmental structure.

This report has concluded firmly that there is a need for significant restructure of the Home Office, not least because it has reached a point where it simply does not command the trust of stakeholders. A restructure that is perceived as mere window-dressing must be avoided – a real moment of defining change is needed to inspire belief in the possibility that things will be managed differently and more accountably from now on. For this reason, simply going ahead with the more minimal approach outlined in Option 3 is insufficient and this option alone can be immediately discounted.

However, all the reforms outlined in Option 3 are absolutely necessary in order to effectively break up the problematic powers of the Home Secretary and the opaque structures of the Department that have served us so poorly. In looking at the other options and balancing their pros and cons, Option 1b is the most viable in terms of balancing the scale of the overhaul required with the feasibility of achieving the aims of restructure.

It has the advantage of not requiring the additional full reorganisation of any other Departments, as it does not shed Home Office responsibilities en masse to DHCLG, or the Ministry of Justice, risking creating newly enormous and unwieldy Departments in other parts of Government. Instead, it creates smaller, more manageable remits that are focused on promoting cross-Whitehall-working and geared towards long-term and harm-prevention, but – in combination with the reforms from Option 3 – implies the most comprehensive and realistic scale of reform that is therefore ambitious enough to have a chance and effecting the level of change required.

■ **Recommendation: The creation of a new Department for Population, Infrastructure and Immigration, and a second Department for Community Security as described in Option 1b.**

This would mark a serious point of change with the potential to embed more effective approaches across all parts of the Home Office's complex and contentious remit, especially as regards changing the structures of accountability and oversight embedded into the design of the new Departments from the start, as in Option 3.

■ **Recommendation: The Cabinet Office to undertake a review and outline a projected budget and timeline for these reforms.**

Deep consultation with Home Office staff, service users, and other stakeholders including devolved administrations ought to be embedded into the planning process. Given the ambition of the changes proposed, the project must be undertaken in such a way as to ensure the dedicated buy-in from the top of Government, all nations, and a significant degree of trust from impacted groups in society.

■ **Recommendation: Politicians of all parties must stop demanding the Home Office act as a performance space for symbolic acts of cruelty to migrants, and start treating the Department as a serious arena to achieve honest and evidence-based policy-making.**

It must be emphasised again that even the Platonic ideal of a departmental structure cannot produce positive policies on immigration in a context where the Government direction is to pursue the symbolic politics of hostility towards foreigners as a first priority. The work to dismantle and restructure the Home Office will be insufficient without turning around the narrative of hatred and racism that defines our current political moment. Politicians should work hard to counter hateful and misleading narratives about immigrants and seek to promote truthful conversations about the huge benefits of immigration to the UK, and focus on how to run the systems that manage it well.

