



ASYLUM IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

REPORT ON PROGRESS

May 2011

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SUMMARY

The Asylum Improvement Project was set up to explore new ways to speed up the processing of asylum applications. This document outlines the progress we have made so far on 25 elements of the project and explains the next steps for asylum reform. It is too early to make a robust assessment of the impact of all 25 elements of the project, but we will do so over the coming months, as part of the next phase of asylum reform.

The asylum system is performing better now than it has for many years.

- We have completed reviewing the legacy of over 450,000 unconcluded asylum cases ahead of schedule.
- We have ended the detention of children for immigration purposes.
- We are making decisions more quickly and their quality remains high.
- We have stopped returning asylum seekers to countries where their sexual orientation or gender identification puts them at proven risk of torture, imprisonment or execution.

The Asylum Improvement Project has made a good start by ensuring we can take a more sophisticated approach to scheduling each part of the process, a more consistent approach to how we approach each task and robust analysis of outcomes. Taken together, these things will ensure that we have a balanced system and continually improve our performance.

We have abolished the single target to conclude asylum cases within 6 months, which meant older cases were left untouched. Instead, we have implemented a set of indicators to measure performance of whole asylum system and keep it in balance.

We have met the commitment to explore new ways of speeding up the asylum process, but we cannot stop there. The next phase of asylum reform will be to monitor the impact of our changes and ensure that collectively they make the asylum system as efficient as possible, while also improving the quality of our decision making.

BACKGROUND

The Asylum Improvement Project was set up in July 2010 to take forward the coalition commitment to “explore new ways to speed up the processing of asylum applications”.

The project began with a series of research visits to Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and France to learn from their experiences. The project team also held workshops with UKBA operational staff and corporate partners to help identify areas for improvement.

While the initial focus of the project was on decision making, the intention is to make ongoing improvements to the end to end system as the project develops.

The project has been providing regular updates to corporate partners through the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum and the Still Human Still Here coalition.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

To conduct for the Home Secretary and Immigration Minister a project in line with the coalition agreement commitment to “explore new ways to improve the current asylum system to speed up the processing of applications”. To make recommendations, to plan for the implementation of those recommendations and to monitor success.

The outcome of the project should be ongoing improvement in three areas:

- An overall reduction in asylum support spend,
- A sustainable level of un-concluded cases,
- A lower unit cost for concluding new asylum cases.

THE ASYLUM SYSTEM

What is asylum?

Asylum is protection given by a country to someone who is fleeing persecution in their own country. It is given under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

To be recognised as a refugee, a person must have left their country and be unable to go back because they have a well-founded fear of persecution.

The UK also adheres to the European Convention on Human Rights, which prevents us sending someone to a country where there is a real risk that they will be exposed to torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

If an individual does not qualify for asylum but we think there are humanitarian or other reasons why we should allow them to stay in the UK, we may give them temporary permission to stay here.

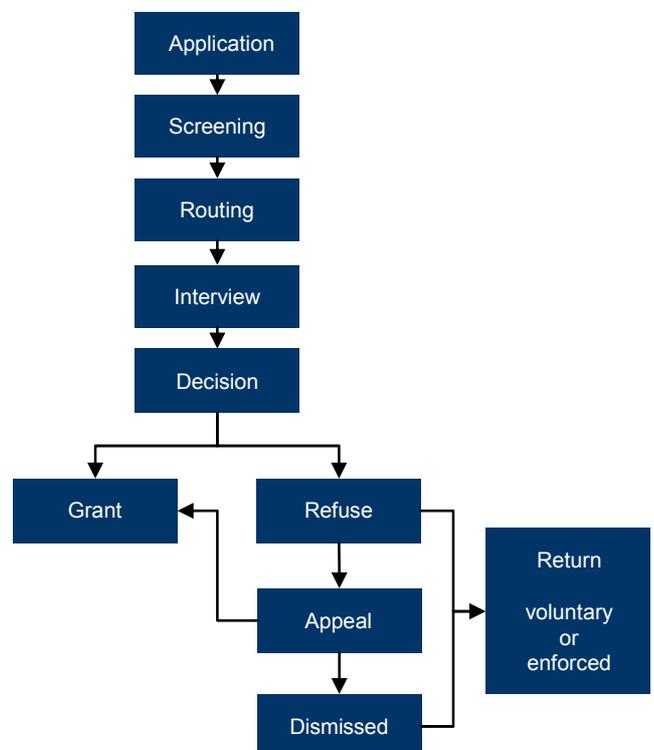
THE ASYLUM PROCESS

The first stage in the asylum process is *Screening*, which includes establishing the identity of asylum applicants and a short interview about their personal circumstances and the basis of their asylum claim.

The asylum seeker's case is then routed to an appropriate location in the UK and is allocated to a UK Border Agency case owner.

The Case Owner will interview the asylum seeker and make a decision on their claim. In most cases, if asylum is refused there is a right of appeal to an independent immigration judge.

If there is no right of appeal, or the appeal is dismissed, failed asylum seekers are expected to return to their home country. This may happen voluntarily or, if necessary, will be enforced.



CONTEXT

The improvements we have made to our processes over the last year have already begun to have a positive impact on performance, which will be discussed in the next section of this report. To place these improvements in context, this section will outline some of the other changes that have happened over the last year.

We have been successful in reducing the number of unconcluded cases in the system. In 2006 we began work to deal with a legacy backlog of over 450,000 unconcluded asylum cases. Over the last year, we have accelerated our efforts and we have now reviewed every case, ahead of schedule.

Until June last year, we were focussed on a single target to either grant or remove asylum seekers within six months. This distorted the system and actually discouraged case owners from concluding older cases. We have now replaced the old target with a suite of performance indicators to ensure the whole system remains in balance and that all unconcluded cases are progressed through the system.

We have closed the family detention unit at Yarl's Wood and, following pilots, have implemented a new process for those families whose applications are unsuccessful and need to return home. This includes an independent panel and specially trained case owners who work with families throughout the process.

We introduced better, shorter, guidance for case owners on sensitive issues, including gender. We have also revised our policies for dealing with applications from lesbian and gay asylum seekers.

PERFORMANCE

Overall, performance of the asylum system has improved in the last year. In particular, we are making decisions more quickly without sacrificing quality. Although the asylum system is demonstrably better than it was a few years ago, there is still much we can do to improve it further.

We expect to see further improvements in performance and efficiency as the changes implemented by the AIP take hold, but they are already having a positive impact on the asylum system.

- In June 2010, there were nearly 7,720 asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their application. Published statistics show that by February we had reduced that to 5,850.
- We are making decisions more quickly. On average 60% of applications now receive a decision with 30 days
- Our internal audit process shows that the quality of our decisions has remained high.
- 54% of applicants are now either granted asylum or removed from the UK within six months compared to 49% at this point last year.
- In the last year we have chartered 53 removal flights, which resulted in over 1200 failed asylum seekers and around 480 foreign national prisoners being removed from the UK.
- Removals are getting faster. 21% of asylum seekers are now removed within 12 months, compared to 12% a year ago.
- The cost of the asylum support system has been reduced by over £100 million in the last year.
- We have also reduced back office costs, for example saving around £2.3m on the cost of using police cells to detain immigration offenders, a saving of over 60%.

All of the figures quoted in this report are taken from internal management information and are therefore subject to change. This information has not been quality assured under National Statistics protocols.

PROGRESS IN THE FIRST YEAR

There are around twenty-five change projects, of varying size and potential impact, under the umbrella of the Asylum Improvement Project (AIP). Detail on each of the projects is available as an annex at the end of this document.

Alongside the Asylum Improvement Project, related projects concerned with improving the appeals and removals processes across UKBA are also underway. The AIP works with these projects to ensure end-to-end improvement in the asylum system and this document outlines progress of the parts of the appeals and removals projects that are most relevant to the asylum system.

When we set up the Asylum Improvement Project, we said we would implement changes from January 2011 and review progress in April 2011, although it was always clear that a robust evaluation of some pilots would take longer. This section outlines the progress we have made so far on key projects.

We are drawing strands of the AIP together in a coherent way that allows us to differentiate between cases. This will enable us to take a more sophisticated approach to scheduling each part of the process, a more structured approach to how we carry out each task and provide robust analysis of outcomes.

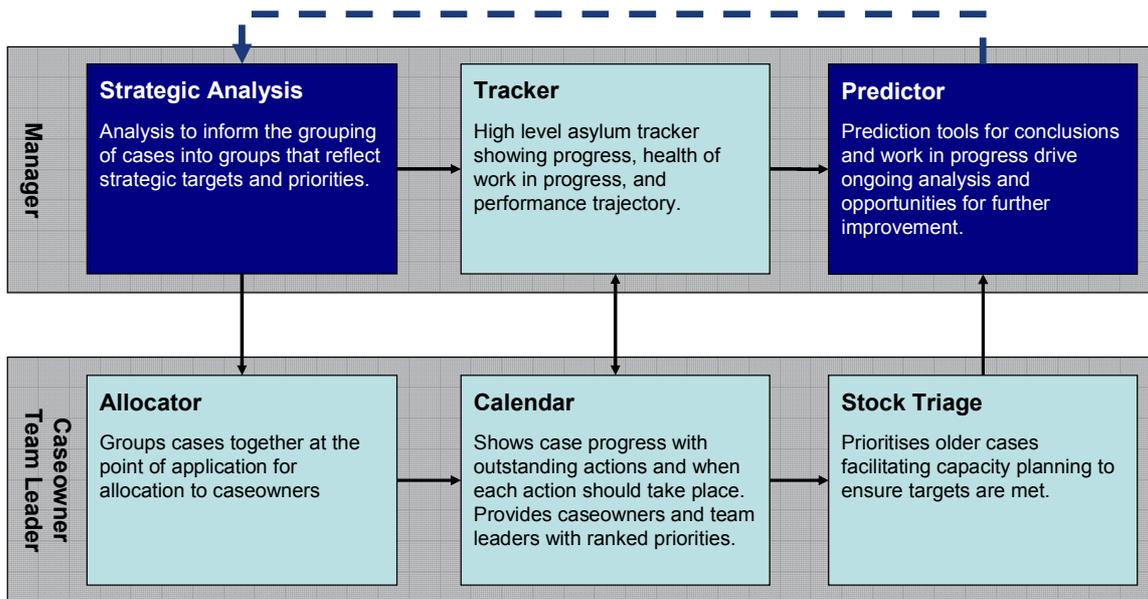
SCHEDULING EACH PART OF THE PROCESS

We have designed, built and are implementing a system for managing cases, known as Chronos. The system is underpinned by a detailed analysis all asylum cases that have been through the system since we adopted the New Asylum Model in 2007. Our analysis showed that although the New Asylum Model had improved performance, there was scope to optimise the order in which caseowners completed each task within the process, which could lead to a 15% increase in case conclusions.

Case owners had no simple way to obtain a complete picture of all their open cases and we could not properly link each task to the overall impact on the system as a whole. Chronos uses information about each case to calculate the optimum order for completion of each task. The system then automatically prioritises the tasks each case owner needs to complete, based on our suite of performance indicators and priorities set by local and regional managers. The Chronos system contains a number of tools that make it easy for case owners to see which tasks they should complete and track their own progress.

The system is simple for case owners because they are given a clear picture of all of their open cases and tasks the need to complete for each case by a given date. The system is simple for managers, because they only have to set overall priorities and the tools translate that into specific tasks for each case owner. Data within the system is refreshed and the priorities for each case owner are recalculated on a daily basis.

The following diagram explains how the system works to provide user friendly tools for case owners and provide strategic control for managers.



A MORE STRUCTURED APPROACH

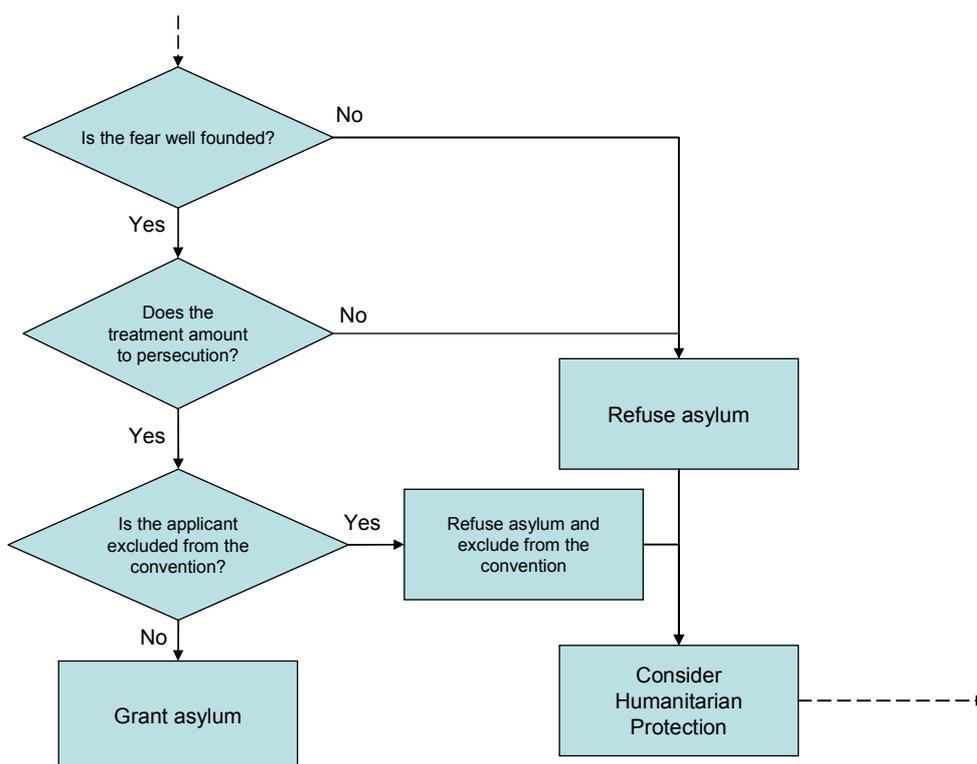
To ensure consistency and accuracy of decision-making, case owners are currently given a large amount of guidance on policy, process and conditions in specific countries. There is no logical structure to much of this guidance and there is limited cross-referencing, which makes it difficult and time consuming for case owners to find the answers they need. In addition, much of the guidance is generic and therefore does not always provide a specific answer to specific questions.

We are developing a more structured approach to decision making that will improve the way case owners access the information they need. Each case will still be decided on its individual merits, but the way caseowners go about making a decision will be more consistent and follow a more logical process. This will improve both the quality of our decisions and the productivity of our caseowners, leading to more efficiency and greater speed.

We have identified a “core route” which identifies a logical order for each of the tests that need to be applied to make a decision to grant or refuse asylum.

Each of the steps in the core route is underpinned by a set of rules that make it clear for case owners whether an applicant has met the required test.

An example of a section of the core route is shown on the right.



The core route and the rules identify each step of the decision making process and put them in a logical, repeatable order. This makes it possible to organise our guidance into a logical, repeatable, format and map it to each step of the core route. Guidance will be easier to maintain and case owners will be able to access it far more quickly. We are testing online tools that will allow case owners to directly access the relevant sections of guidance for any given point in the core route.

We will also be able to ensure that the guidance we give to case owners actually gives them the specific answers they need. Operational Guidance Notes will clearly set out UK Border Agency policy on specific issues for specific countries. As now, Country of Origin Information will be available to case owners to help them assess the credibility of an applicant's account.

ANALYSIS OF OUTCOMES

Our quality audit process shows that the quality of our decision making remains high, but too many decisions are still being overturned on appeal. We are working to build a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for this, so we can address them systematically.

We know that the allowed appeal rate is higher for some groups than for others, but we do not have any reliable data on why this is. For instance, we know that female applicants are more likely to have a negative decision overturned on appeal than male applicants, particularly where the decision took more than six months to make. This is clearly something we are keen to address, but we first need to understand the reasons why it is happening.

Following successful pilots in West London and the Midlands, we have now begun comprehensive analysis of asylum decisions overturned at appeal. For the first time, we will be able to understand quantify and analyse the reasons why decisions are overturned. We will then be able to take action to address the problems. We will identify patterns and take action to address them, either by changing our guidance, making decisions differently in the first place or presenting our case more effectively to the tribunal. Comprehensively analysing allowed appeals is time consuming, but it is the only way to understand why a judge disagreed with our decision. Results from the Midlands and West London show that the allowed appeal rate can be significantly reduced by adopting this approach, which ultimately makes the system more efficient and improves the quality of our decision making.

The information we gather from systematically analysing allowed appeals will also inform our quality audit process. We will conduct thematic quality audit reviews of our decisions to provide more detailed information about the way our decision making process translates into appeal outcomes. We have started thematic reviews on gender and sexual orientation and will conduct more as we build a more detailed understanding of why decisions are overturned on appeal.

NEXT STEPS

The coalition agreement committed us to exploring new ways to speed up the processing of asylum applications. We have met that commitment, but we cannot stop there and have begun to implement changes to improve the system.

We know that the asylum system is in a more healthy condition now than it has been for many years, but we cannot assume that our work to improve the system is finished. In contrast to the “big bang” changes of the past, we will relentlessly pursue an ongoing programme of innovation and reform. Although asylum intake is at historically low levels, we cannot assume that this will always be the case and world events may cause them to rise again. If intake rises, it will be even more important that we have an efficient, balanced asylum system.

Through the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum and other groups, we will continue to keep our partners informed and involved in asylum reform and we will continue to report on performance in an open and transparent way.

We will build on the progress made by the Asylum Improvement Project and this section highlights what we intend to do in the key areas of IT systems, Screening, early intervention and Removals.

IT SYSTEMS

Our improved approaches to decision making, scheduling and analysis of outcomes will form the building blocks for our Immigration Case Work (ICW) programme, which will transform IT and case management in the Border Agency, providing a simplified set of processes and single end-to-end caseworking system.

ICW is being implemented for asylum cases early in 2013 at which point we will be able to automate and integrate the processes and systems that the Asylum Improvement Project has put in place. A unified case working system will also make it easier to access and analyse management information to ensure that the system is operating efficiently.

SCREENING

Screening is the first stage in the asylum process. It is important we get it right as the information we gather and the processes we operate at screening form the foundations for steps later in the process. We have started a wide-ranging process of reforming the Asylum Screening Unit in Croydon, which is where screening takes place for the majority of asylum applicants.

Some of the information we collect at screening is duplicated later in the process, which is not a good use of time for applicants or for our staff. We will minimise this duplication and speed up the screening process for the majority of applicants. This will make time available for those applicants who have particularly complex cases or personal circumstances that take more time to resolve. We propose to make changes to the physical environment to make it more flexible and user friendly. Our aim is to create an environment in which applicants feel it is safe to disclose their claim.

Finally, we will ensure that our staff have the right skills. It is important that the screening process, including the screening interview, is conducted in a professional and courteous way and that applicants feel able to be open about their circumstances. We will be clear with our

staff about the purpose of screening and make sure they have the specific skills and training they need to do their jobs effectively.

REMOVALS

We have analysed the reasons why some removals fail and we will work to reduce the number of avoidable errors. We will ensure that staff involved in the removals process have the skills and experience they need to implement a “right first time, every time” removals process.

We will open up new routes of return, following our recent re-introduction of volume removals to Sri Lanka and now Zimbabwe. We will also continue to work with other countries to speed up the time it takes to obtain travel documents. We will build on our success over the last year in making good use of charter flights, which are a cost-effective way of securing large numbers of removals.

EARLY ADVICE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

We will continue to test the impact of providing access to high quality advice for asylum seekers as part of the Early Legal Advice Pilot in the Midlands and East region and the Key Worker Pilots in the North West.

The Early Legal Advice Pilot aims to test the impact of providing asylum seekers with access to high quality legal advice early in the process. If the pilot is successful, it will lead to higher quality decisions and fewer appeals, which is ultimately more cost-effective. The pilot is ongoing and results of the evaluation will be available later in the year.

The Key Worker Pilot and Family Key Worker Pilot are currently running in the North West, to test the impact of providing asylum seekers with access to a voluntary sector key worker. The key workers provide information about the asylum system, to improve asylum seekers’ understanding of the system. An improved understanding may lead to greater levels of engagement with the system and, ultimately, to larger numbers of failed asylum seekers returning home voluntarily. The external evaluation of the Key Worker Pilot should be available in June 2011.

ANNEX A

EACH ELEMENT OF THE PROJECT

This section outlines the progress made on each element of the Asylum Improvement Project, grouped by the stage of the process they affect.

BEFORE THE DECISION

Early Legal Advice Project – The project aims to test the impact of providing asylum seekers with early access to high quality legal advice. The project is ongoing in the Midlands and we expect early results will be available later in the year.

Key Worker Pilot – This is a pilot to test the use of voluntary sector “key workers” in the asylum process for 200 clients. The aim is to increase asylum seekers’ understanding of, and engagement with, the asylum process and assess whether a greater proportion of those refused asylum return home voluntarily. The pilot completed in March and we expect the external evaluation to be available in June 2011.

Family Key Worker Pilot – This is similar to the Key Worker Pilot above, but exclusively for families. The pilot is ongoing in the North West and we expect the results of the first quarterly evaluation to be available very shortly.

Providing translated process information – We considered whether central translation of some documents for asylum seekers would be more cost-efficient. A very limited number of suitable documents have been identified, which meant the benefits of translating them centrally did not outweigh the costs. Local translation of documents will still be possible and translated versions of common documents will be shared nationally.

Interviewing in initial accommodation – The potential benefits of conducting some asylum interviews while the applicant was still in Initial Accommodation (temporary accommodation provided by the UK Border Agency in the first stage of the asylum process) did not outweigh the costs, so no further action will be taken.

Electronic asylum support forms – “Print and post” electronic forms will be available online shortly to make the process of applying for asylum support more straightforward. We will monitor the impact of the new forms closely and intend to make a fully online process available in due course.

Smart routing and specialisation – Specialisation of case owners and teams will be taken forward as part of Chronos (see below). We have investigated the potential for a more sophisticated approach to the way we decide which part of the country to process an asylum application in. However analysis shows that there is unlikely to be any significant benefit to this approach. The proportion of asylum seekers who are routed by UKBA is small in comparison to the numbers that have access to their own accommodation and therefore remain in their own regions.

INTERVIEWS AND DECISIONS

Quality Audit Team website - Guidance and checklists have been produced by the UK Border Agency Quality Audit Team and the instructions we give our caseworkers are being revised to ensure that interviews and decisions are focussed and efficient. An internal website has been set up for UKBA case owners to provide convenient access to the guidance they need.

Structured Decision making – tools are being made available to case owners which guide them through a simplified and more structured approach to asylum decision making, alongside focussed guidance. We will make an electronic version of the tools available to case owners shortly.

Non-verbatim interview records and digital transcription – trials of non-verbatim records of asylum interviews and the use of digital transcription technology have both shown encouraging results. Although both of these approaches have the potential to reduce interview time, their benefits will overlap with those from our Structured Decision Making tools. We will not be taking any further action on either of these approaches until the Structured Decision Making tools have matured and are in widespread use.

Credibility – Assessing credibility is one of the most difficult parts of assessing an asylum application and is an issue that often arises at appeal. Work to improve the way that the UK Border Agency assesses credibility is being taken forward by the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum sub-group on quality.

Certifying asylum cases – In some cases, asylum decisions can be certified to restrict the right of appeal against those decisions. We are producing enhanced management information on the number of cases certified, as well as whether the certificates were correctly applied. Structured Decision Making will formalise consideration of certification and help to improve the number of correctly certified cases.

Reducing the basis of claim – Decision letters often contain far more detail on the basis of an applicant's claim for asylum than is necessary. A pilot to reduce the amount of unnecessary detail included in decision letters has been running in West London with considerable success. The approach will be implemented nationally by providing guidance and examples to case workers through the Quality Audit Team website.

APPEALS

Targeted work to increase presenting capacity – The UK Border Agency is normally represented in appeals by a specially trained presenting officer. Case owners in London have received presenting officer training which has increased the number of hearings that UKBA is able to attend.

E-bundles – The Asylum Support e-bundles pilot started on 21 February and has facilitated the transfer of 452 communications to the First-tier Tribunal (Asylum Support) including asylum support appeal bundles (documents and evidence relevant to an appeal), travel letters, withdrawals and responses to further directions. Evaluation of the pilot is now underway.

Assessing the link between quality scores and allowed appeals – This analysis is now complete. The results show that a high score on the UK Border Agency quality audit framework is a good predictor that a decision will be sustained at appeal, but the link between low quality scores and the allowed appeal rate is less clear. We are building on this analysis to make changes to the Quality Audit marking scheme.

Allowed appeal determination analysis – Building on earlier work in the Midlands, we have piloted a systematic approach to analysing the reasons for decisions being overturned at appeal in West London. We have also carried out some work at a national level to analyse successful appeals by Somali applicants. The systematic analytical approach has now been adopted nationally.

REMOVALS

Intensifying removals engagement with key countries – We continue to engage with priority countries including returns as a priority within our overall migration dialogue. We have increased removals to Afghanistan and established a charter programme to Iraq. We have also resumed enforced returns to Zimbabwe. We now need to look at potential levers across the whole of government in order to advance our negotiations with other countries.

Reducing the number of failed removals – We will continue to focus on improving removals efficiency by introducing a ‘right first time, every time’ approach to removal directions. We aim to reduce the number of failed removals in 2011 by 20% by focusing on maximising the efficiency of our processes, tackling disruptive behaviour on departure, prosecuting non-compliance where appropriate and expediting Judicial Reviews.

CROSS CUTTING PROJECTS

Chronos – Chronos is a triaging tool that ensures asylum cases are progressed in the most efficient way. It does this by analysing past performance and scheduling tasks for case owners to complete. The tools are currently being used in Leeds and London, with plans in place to implement them in all regions during 2011.

Case owner model – We have looked again at our model of end-to-end case ownership to ensure that we are using our staff in the most efficient way possible. Differences between regions, particularly in terms of geography and case mix, mean that we will need to allow a degree of regional variation. All regions will continue to ensure that every case is owned at every stage of the asylum process, but there will be some local variation in team structure and the members of staff who carry out specific functions.

Process engineering – The Home Office Value for Money Team have completed analytical work in the Asylum Screening Unit (the first stage of the asylum process for most applicants) to improve efficiency by making changes to processes. Implementation of changes is being taken forward as part of a wider project to reform the screening unit. We are also scoping some end-to-end process analysis in specific Local Immigration Teams.

Community Sponsors and the Compact – Planning is underway with Citizens UK to implement a system for trusted community members to support asylum seekers through the process.