



Home Office

The Home Office response to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's report:

An Inspection of the Home Office's Asylum Intake & Casework.

April – August 2017

The Home Office thanks the Independent Chief Inspector for his report.

The Home Office's UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) command has responsibility for making millions of decisions every year about who has the right to visit or stay in the country, with a firm emphasis on national security and protecting the vulnerable.

Asylum Intake and Casework (AIC) manages the intake, registration and screening of asylum seekers and makes decisions about their claims. AIC works hard to ensure that all claims are handled professionally and sensitively and in line with policy.

The Home Office is pleased that the Chief Inspector recognised and commented on the commitment and work ethic of the staff in AIC, and it welcomes that no evidence was found to support stakeholder claims that asylum policy and process are gender biased.

We believe that this a fair report which acknowledges some positive elements, but also highlights areas where improvement is required. The Home Office accepts six of the seven recommendations and partially accepts one.

The Chief Inspector acknowledges that the Home Office has plans to reform the asylum system, including the establishment of a new asylum casework office. A range of transformation and culture techniques are being trialled that the Home Office intends to roll out to the rest of its offices. We will incorporate the Chief Inspector's findings into our implementation plans which we will take forward at pace.

The Home Office response to the recommendations:

1. Review all asylum-related recommendations from previous ICIBI inspection reports that have been accepted by the Home Office, fully or in part, and report the action(s) taken and planned (with timescales) to satisfy each recommendation.

1.1 Accepted.

- 1.2 Following the 2015 ICI report into Asylum Casework, the Home Office developed a detailed Action Plan to take forward the ICI's recommendations. That Action Plan is used to review progress on implementing all accepted recommendations in ICIBI reports.
- 1.3 Whilst not all recommendations from previous reports have yet been fully implemented, there has been good progress. Where actions have not been completed, it is generally because they involve complex cross-cutting issues which have taken some time to resolve.
- 1.4 We will update our Action Plan with the recommendations in this latest inspection and monitor progress during monthly meetings chaired by the Head of Asylum Intake and Casework. We will report back to the ICIBI by December 2017 on progress, and aim to complete the implementation of all previous recommendations by April 2018.

2. Ensure that the data captured regarding the asylum process covers all of the Home Office directorates and units involved in receiving and registering claims, making initial decisions, and dealing with appeals, and is sufficient to drive and evidence process and performance improvements.

2.1 Accepted.

- 2.2 We will review all the data that is captured by the asylum process and ensure that it is available to all parts of the Home Office. We will conduct a fundamental review of data captured during the asylum process across all Home Office databases to inform how we can improve processes. Performance of the individual units who process asylum claims is monitored and recorded internally, and we will work with these units to improve the capture of MI to help drive improvements across the system.
- 2.3 Since the last inspection, we have, in particular, improved the feedback loops in the asylum system so that asylum Decision Makers get more regular information from Home Office Presenting Officers about the quality of decisions and why they might be overturned on appeal.
- 2.4 In his report the ICIBI focuses in particular on the screening process. This is an important part of the asylum process and we accept the findings of the Chief Inspector in relation to screening consistency across all Home Office Directorates.

- 2.5 Since the ICIBI's Inspection of Asylum Casework, February – April 2015 report, the Home Office has reviewed and improved guidance to ensure that we record all actions taken, and to improve the quality and consistency of screening interviews.
- 2.6 In addition, AIC have established a team to devise a quality improvement plan that reports to the Head of AIC on a monthly basis and have developed a suite of information to measure the general health of the asylum casework system.

3. Resource (staff) the asylum process so that it is capable of managing claims efficiently and effectively, without the repeated need for remedial measures to reduce backlogs and with sufficient resilience built in to minimise the impact on 'business as usual' of surges in demand or staff vacancies.

3.1 Accepted.

- 3.2 The Home Office accepts the findings set out in the report and notes the Chief Inspector's concern about the rising number of vacancies within the department, and the pressure that this, and having a relatively high proportion of inexperienced staff, may place on progressing cases within service standards.
- 3.3 The Home Office is working to improve and streamline recruitment processes, particularly for bulk recruitment exercises where large numbers are required on a rolling basis. We are working closely with our colleagues across the Government Recruitment Service to identify the best and most effective practices employed across the Civil Service.
- 3.4 In addition, we have launched a review to better understand the reasons behind staff attrition, as well as what motivates and incentivises different demographic groups to join the department and to stay, to inform a strategy to maximise retention and minimise staff vacancies. This review, and subsequent plan, will be completed by April 2018.

4. Conduct a thorough training needs analysis (TNA) for all staff and managers involved in the asylum process; revise and deliver training in light of the TNA results, amending guidance, mentoring and performance management as necessary, and putting in place the means to evaluate the changes.

4.1 Accepted.

- 4.2 The Home Office accepts the findings of the Chief Inspector and notes his comments on training.
- 4.3 In 2016 AIC was successful in a bid to the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) to revise and redevelop its asylum caseworker training. AIC was allocated £1.7m which

allows us fund up to 12 staff, as well as to deliver training. The work to improve our training regime is ongoing and was discussed with the Inspection Team.

- 4.4 The Home Office is also about to appoint a Chief Trainer to lead and develop the training strategy for the coming years within AIC. In the next two years, the Chief Trainer will lead the transformation of training in terms of content, format and impact. This work will include training for asylum case working through the AMIF project (above) but will also pick up training requirements in facilitating functions such as administrative support.
- 4.5 This transformation will align training with business need. It will be informed by process improvements, ways of working, and lessons learned from Next Generation Casework, and digital technology, as well as keep pace with legislative, policy and legal developments.
- 4.6 Over the next 12 months, staff will receive refresher training on counter-terrorism, and advanced personal safety training. Capability planning will include a comprehensive skills audit of staff in asylum, alongside a business capability needs analysis and future needs analysis to ensure that training, learning and development provide staff with the skills they need to do their jobs.

5. Review the criteria and process for categorising asylum claims as non-straightforward, ensuring that the former are entirely outside the Home Office's control, are gender neutral, and do not disadvantage particular social groups, and that the latter is quality assured so that claims are not categorised inappropriately.

- 5.1 **Accepted.**
- 5.2 The Home Office accepts the need to review of guidance and process in respect of non-straightforward (NSF) claims.
- 5.3 It is noted that no evidence was found to support claims of gender bias. Nonetheless, the Home Office will review and monitor policies and practices to ensure that they do not discriminate against any particular groups.
- 5.4 We will immediately review existing NSF guidance to ensure appropriate quality assurance systems are in place by December 2017. A longer-term review, to ensure NSF guidance is gender neutral and does not disadvantage particular groups, will report by February, subject to the wider review of customer service standards.
- 5.5 In addition, part of the rationale behind the establishment of the Next Generation Casework office was to reduce the number of NSF cases that are in our Work in Progress.

6. Introduce and publish a 12 month customer service standard for non-straightforward asylum claims, subject to any barriers having been removed, both as a counterweight to any perverse consequences for the

quality of asylum casework and for staff morale of having a single external performance target, and to ensure that claims categorised as non-straightforward are reviewed, progressed and claimants kept informed

6.1 Partially Accepted.

- 6.2 Whilst the six month service standard was necessary, in 2014, to ensure the Home Office maintained control and focus over the asylum system, as a result of previous high intake, we accept that this may have had unforeseen consequences for other elements of the process.
- 6.3 The Home Office will continue to manage non-straightforward cases in line with the guidance, which we are revising. However, we have commenced a review of current service standards and whether they are appropriate in the current climate.
- 6.4 This review will identify potential new customer service standards and will be put to Ministers for them to consider in December 2017.

7. As a matter of urgency, provide appropriate support for Next Generation Casework managers and staff in capturing and communicating lessons learned, and in identifying and testing new ways of working, and agree how the success of the project will be measured.

7.1 Accepted.

- 7.2 We note the findings of the Chief Inspector that the Next Generation Casework team has been established to embed and test new ways of working to help progress older cases more efficiently.
- 7.3 The project is still at a relatively early stage, but a detailed Benefits Realisation plan is being developed. This will contain existing qualitative and quantitative information about the benefits of the project and how these can be rolled out to other parts of the Home Office. This process will be supported by lessons learned workshops which will look at process design, recruitment, training, estates and IT. Other topics may also be added as they emerge.
- 7.4 We have already identified how the success of the project will be measured, Next Generation Casework has four clear objectives (see below) and against each of those we have measures in place that will track benefits.

Objectives to be delivered by March 2018 include:

- clear 10,000 asylum decision cases
- provide significant savings from associated support costs

- create a new and innovative case working office, building on much of the work started in Asylum and wider UKVI
- build on work ongoing in UKVI, engaging and empowering our staff through cultures and behaviours.