HOME OFFICE | DEEP DIVE

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Home truths

Cultural and institutional problems at the Home Office

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About this report

Five years on from the Windrush scandal, this report identifies the cultural and institutional problems affecting the Home Office. The first of two 'deep dives' into the department, it assesses the questions these problems pose for the future of the Home Office. The second report, offering reforms to the department, will be published later in 2023.

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Introduction

> **"The Home Office and Ministry of Home Security are troublesome Departments. The corridors are paved with dynamite, and any Minister occupying these offices is liable to be blown up at any moment."**
>
> – Herbert Morrison, home secretary, 1942.[1]

It is fair to say that the Home Office has long suffered a crisis-prone reputation. Half a century on from Morrison's explosive rhetoric another home secretary, John Reid, would infamously describe it in 2006 as "not fit for purpose" (Reid was talking specifically about the immigration system, but the institutional implication has stuck).

Today's Home Office, led by a controversial home secretary in Suella Braverman, is no different. It faces crises on multiple fronts: small boats making dangerous Channel crossings and a growing asylum backlog; a series of scandals and declining confidence in the police; and ongoing struggles to right the wrongs of the Windrush scandal. Terrorism remains a national threat, while managing migration and the border after Brexit is putting the department under strain.

But the department's problems run deeper than its current challenges – daunting though they are. The Home Office is also beset by myriad cultural and institutional problems. The morale of its civil servants is consistently among the weakest of Whitehall departments. Over the past year this has spilled into the open with leaked opposition to ministers' controversial asylum policies – with the 'Paddington posters' furore of 2022.[2] The Windrush scandal exposed serious problems with the Home Office's decision making, laying bare its inability to take a compassionate approach and its failure to understand the human impact of its policies, particularly on the grounds of race. Five years on, the Home Office's fortress mentality persists.

The 'One Home Office' programme and comprehensive improvement plan, introduced in response to Wendy Williams' *Windrush Lessons Learned Review*, aim to fix these problems. The department has committed to changing its organisational culture and the way its officials work together, with ministers and the public,[3] though insufficient progress has been made so far. Institutional change like this takes time and requires the backing of senior leaders, both official and political; Braverman's decision to scrap key post-Windrush pledges* is therefore far from encouraging.[4]

* Specifically, these were commitments to run reconciliation events with members of the Windrush generation, introduce a migrants' commissioner, and review the remit and role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI).

Fifteen years since reforms by Reid moved the justice system out of the Home Office, questions remain about whether the department has a coherent set of responsibilities, and whether it can work effectively with other parts of government. Is the Home Office capable of managing migration policy in the interests of the whole government after Brexit? Is the division of criminal justice system – police with the Home Office, courts and prisons at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) – working? Are other departments and local government able to play their part in the immigration and asylum system?

Scope of the paper

This paper, the first of two on the Home Office, forms part of the Institute for Government's new programme of 'deep dives' into UK government departments. These projects will identify, assess and seek to answer the most pressing questions of reform for individual departments.

It seeks to identify the cultural and institutional problems facing the department, analyse how these problems affect the department's policies and services, and assess what questions they pose for the future of the Home Office. It looks at key statistics from Home Office data, its size, budget and workforce; policy problems, from small boats to Windrush schemes; and explores the cultural and institutional problems that lie behind many of its failings.

It concludes by recommending that the home secretary and permanent secretary (with the support of the prime minister and cabinet secretary) take two steps that, rather than focusing on short-term fixes, will help improve the department's long-term performance and reduce the likelihood of similar crises occurring in the future:

- **Develop and publish an update to its comprehensive improvement plan.** This should re-commit the department and its leadership to the reform programme and reconsider the home secretary's decision to scrap three outstanding pledges. It should mirror the five themes of the original plan and explain how and when the department will implement the outstanding recommendations, as well as new additions.

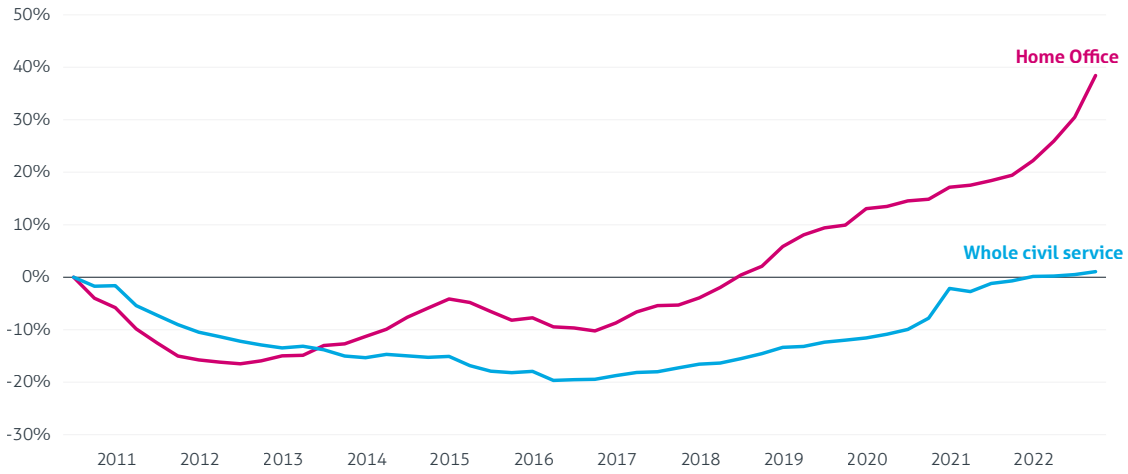
- **Commission a long-term review of the department's responsibilities and relationships with other parts of government**, as Rishi Sunak said he would do during the Conservative Party leadership contest in summer 2022. This should take the form of a home affairs systems review to assess the most effective departmental set-up and governance with which to manage migration, border, integration, crime and security policy across UK government outside the EU. It should learn from past machinery of government changes and from international comparisons.

The second report, to be published later in 2023, will recommend a series of wider institutional reforms to address the problems identified here.

The Home Office at a glance

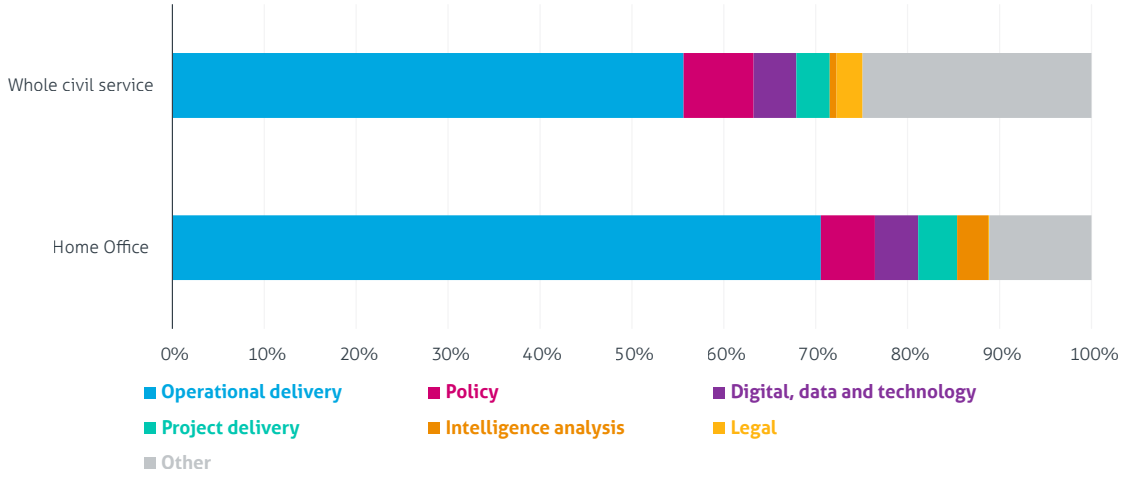
The Home Office is the third largest core Whitehall department after the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HMRC, employing nearly 39,000 civil servants (FTE). It is also growing in size at far above the civil service average (Figure 1). And the Home Office is more operationally focused than much of the civil service (Figure 2). Most of its employees are engaged in delivery: around 14,000 staff work for Border Force and Immigration Enforcement, with another 12,000 spread across UK Visas and Immigration and HM Passport Office.[5]

Figure 1 **Change in staff numbers (FTE) in the Home Office and across the civil service, September 2010 to December 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Office for National Statistics, Public Sector Employment Data, Q3 2010 to Q4 2022. Notes: This chart shows staff numbers by the Home Office's departmental group, which includes those who work for all organisations overseen by the department.

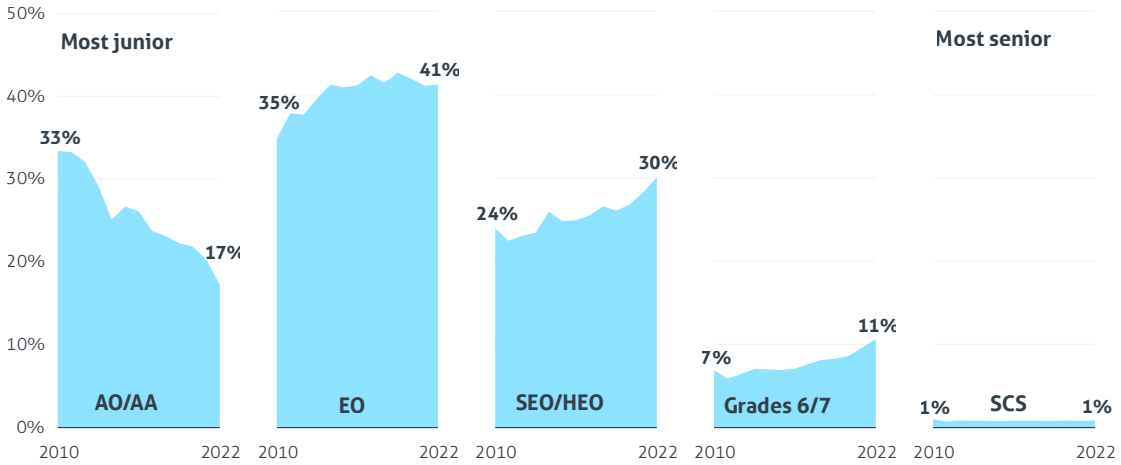
Figure 2 **Professions of staff (FTE) in the Home Office and the whole civil service, 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2022.

The operational focus of the Home Office means that it has relatively more staff at more junior grades, and a smaller proportion at grades 6/7 (the most senior junior officials), than many other departments. Civil servants at the executive officer (EO) level make up over two fifths (41%) of the Home Office but only 27% of the whole civil service.

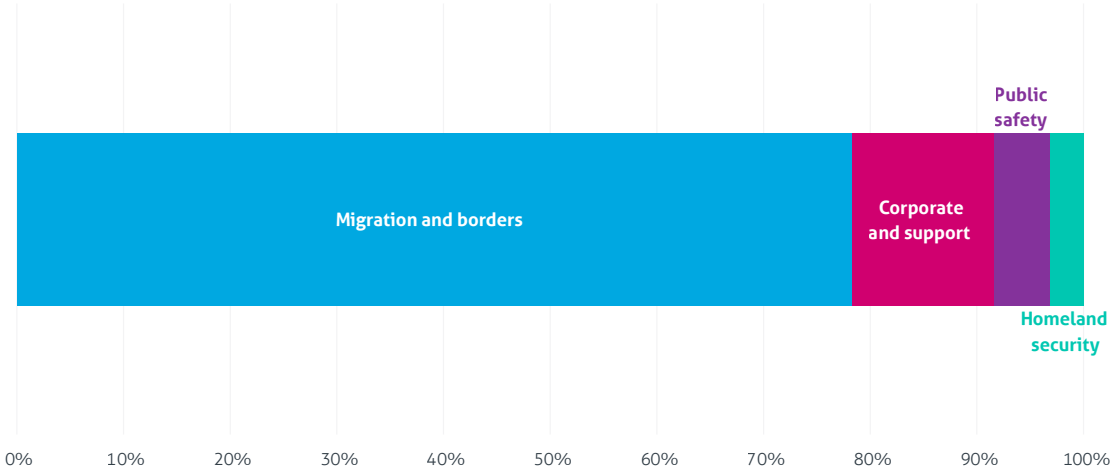
Figure 3 **Home Office grade structure, 2010 –22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service Statistics, 2010–22. Notes: This chart shows staff at each grade in the Home Office's departmental group, which includes those who work for all organisations overseen by the department. Figures exclude civil servants with an unknown grade. AO/AA = administrative officer/ administrative assistant; EO = executive officer; SEO/HEO = senior executive officer/higher executive officer; SCS = senior civil service.

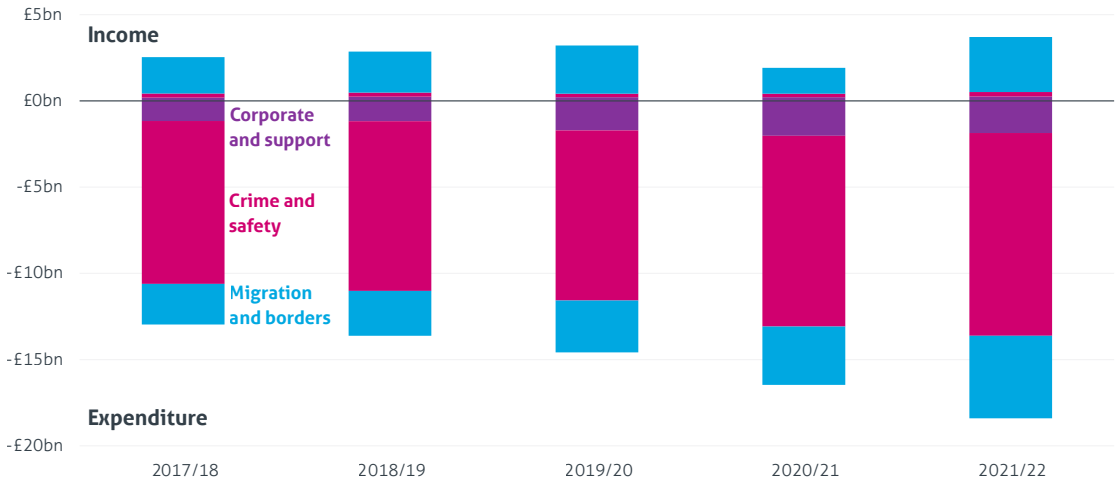
Despite nearly 80% of employees working in migration and borders functions (Figure 4), in 2021/22 around 74% of departmental resource spending went towards public safety and homeland security – mostly in the form of police grants. HM Passport Office and UK Visas and Immigration generally make a profit due to application fees: in 2019/20 resource outturn was -£855 million (Figure 5).

Figure 4 **Home Office staff composition by business area, 2021/22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, Workforce diversity statistics, 2021–22.

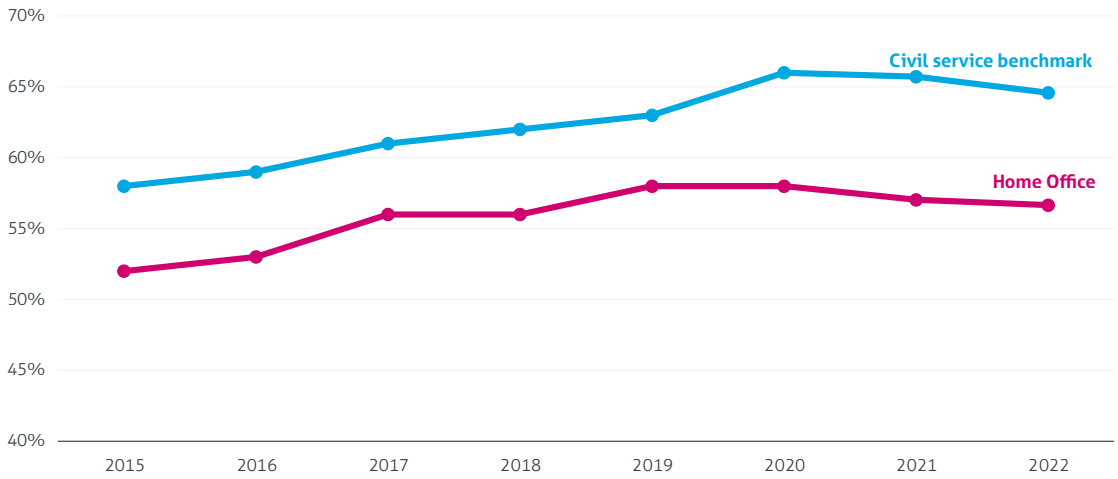
Figure 5 **Home Office departmental spending on resource, by business area, 2017/18 to 2021/22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, Annual report and accounts, 2017/18 to 2021/22.

The Home Office has a problem with workforce morale. It has the second lowest staff engagement score of any main government department after the Cabinet Office – despite increasing from 2015 to 2020, this score fell from 58% in 2020 to 57% in 2021 and 2022.

Figure 6 **Employee engagement index of staff in the Home Office and the civil service benchmark, 2015–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2015–22. Notes: The civil service benchmark is the median score for all organisations participating in the People Survey each year without weighting by organisation size.

Policy snapshots

The Home Office is the government department primarily responsible for safety and security. This covers immigration and passports, crime, policing, homeland security and fire services. Its four 'priority outcomes'* are to reduce crime, reduce the risk of terrorism, enable the 'legitimate' movement of people and goods, and tackle illegal migration.[6]

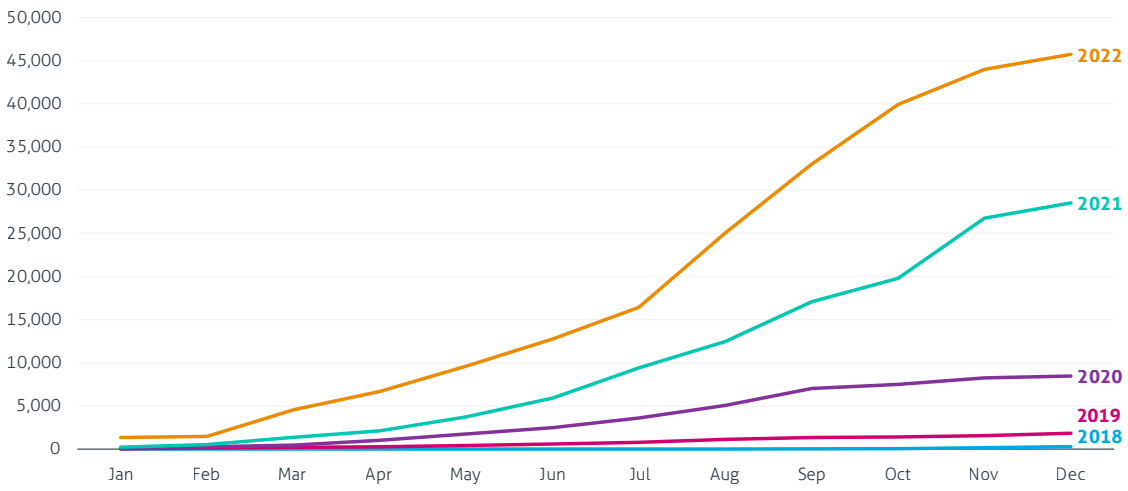
This section contains a snapshot of the Home Office's performance in four policy areas that have long posed problems for successive home secretaries – asylum and small boats; immigration; crime and policing; and the Windrush compensation schemes.

These are not intended to offer a comprehensive view of the department's work. For example, they do not include its counterterrorism and homeland security functions, a vital part of its responsibilities. Instead, the chosen snapshots are of high-profile policy areas that highlight recurring underlying problems with the Home Office itself – its remit, culture and approach.

Asylum and small boats

In 2022, a record 45,755 people arrived in the UK by small boats across the English Channel, often facilitated by organised criminals. This was 60% more than 2021 and a stark increase from the 299 in 2018. Tragically, more than 130 people have died or gone missing trying to make this journey since 2019.[7] One of Rishi Sunak's five promises made on 4 January 2023 was to "stop the boats" by passing new laws – the Illegal Migration Bill – that would give powers to the home secretary to act so that people arriving by irregular means are "detained and swiftly removed".[8]

Figure 7 **Cumulative number of people detected arriving in the UK via small boats each year, 2018–22**



Source: Institute for Government Analysis of Home Office, Irregular migration to the UK statistics, year ending December 2022.

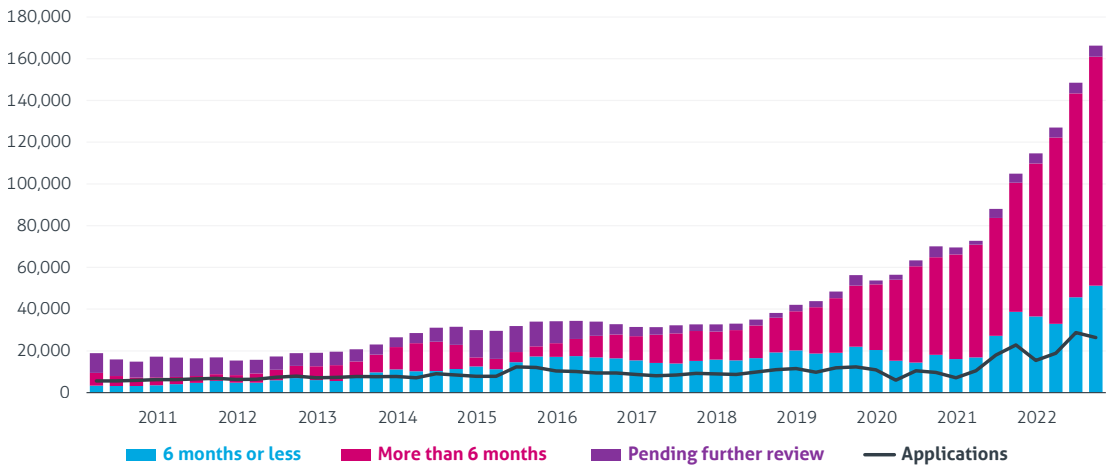
* Each department works towards a small number of objectives, called "priority outcomes", listed in their annual Outcome delivery plans.

The bill is the government's latest attempt to deter irregular migration by unsafe routes. It does this by classifying people who arrive irregularly as permanently 'inadmissible' to the UK's asylum system, and giving the home secretary a duty to remove them from the UK. The bill therefore relies upon a logic of deterrence, whereby changes to UK asylum policy aim to reduce the likelihood of asylum seekers travelling to the UK.

Removal is conditional upon returning people to their countries of origin or another country deemed safe by the government. Controversially, this would include Rwanda, with which the Johnson government agreed a plan to relocate people arriving by irregular means. Braverman described implementing the scheme as her "dream".[9] But making the home secretary's dream a reality remains difficult in the face of challenges to the High Court's ruling of the scheme as, in principle, lawful. Even if planes of asylum seekers do make it off the ground (none has to date) Rwanda's capacity to process – at least initially – only around 1,000 asylum seekers and the likelihood of individual appeals make it highly unlikely the scheme will result in the relocation of enough people to seriously deter attempts at Channel crossings.

The Rwanda scheme is only part of the response to small boat crossings; others include Border Force patrols in the Channel and successive joint agreements with France. But these steps, along with the Illegal Migration Bill, do not provide the government with substantially increased capacity to relocate asylum seekers off the UK's shores, undermining Sunak and Braverman's strategy of deterrence.

Figure 8 **Size of asylum backlog and number of asylum applications, June 2010 to December 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, Asylum and resettlement datasets, year ending December 2022.

Irregular arrivals are one of several interconnected problems with the asylum system. Another is the growing backlog of cases. At the end of 2022, there were more than 160,000 people waiting for an initial decision, more than five times as many as in 2017.[10] This was the biggest the backlog had been in at least a decade, and two thirds of those asylum seekers had been waiting for a decision for more than six months.

Long waiting times have a negative impact on applicants' mental and physical wellbeing and may increase vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation.[11] And supporting asylum seekers awaiting a decision is expensive: in December the home secretary stated the government will spend £3.5 billion on support for applicants in 2022/23, including £2.3bn on hotels where alternative accommodation had not been secured by the Home Office.[12]

What does this reveal about the Home Office?

The Rwanda scheme and provisions of the Illegal Migration Bill are the latest in a long history of the Home Office's preference for what has been referred to as 'pull factor orthodoxy' – the belief that by making the asylum system harsher, would-be asylum seekers can be deterred from making irregular journeys to the UK. But this guiding philosophy lacks any robust evidence base and the resulting policies have undermined the department's performance.

If the Home Office does manage to begin flights to Rwanda, there is no evidence to suggest the scheme will achieve its aim of deterring asylum seekers from attempting the dangerous journey across the Channel.[13] Research into why people seek asylum in the UK – including the Home Office's most recent in-depth study in 2002 – has found that few set out with a detailed knowledge of the UK's asylum policies.[14] Indeed it was this lack of evidence in support of the policy's claimed deterrent effect that led the Home Office permanent secretary, Matthew Rycroft, to request a ministerial direction from the then home secretary, Priti Patel, on the grounds that the civil service could not confirm that the policy would represent good value for public money. To avoid policies failing in the future, the Home Office needs to improve its capacity for and expectations of evidence-based policy making. Officials should commission research and evaluation in areas with a weak evidence base, and ministers should value the conclusions of that research in policy development.

The department has also been criticised for the lack of engagement in and transparency over the development of the Rwanda scheme. Other departments, key sector experts and even parts of the Home Office were not involved in the development of the policy in ways that could have benefited the scheme.[15] The Home Office's own improvement plan commits it to working more openly, with better engagement across and outside government. It is clear this did not happen.

There are further questions about the ownership of the asylum system and the relationships between the key institutional partners. The relatively effective cross-government management of Homes for Ukraine, which involved a stronger role for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and local government to co-ordinate accommodation and support, highlighted that asylum as a whole requires a more coherent set of responsibilities between parts of government.

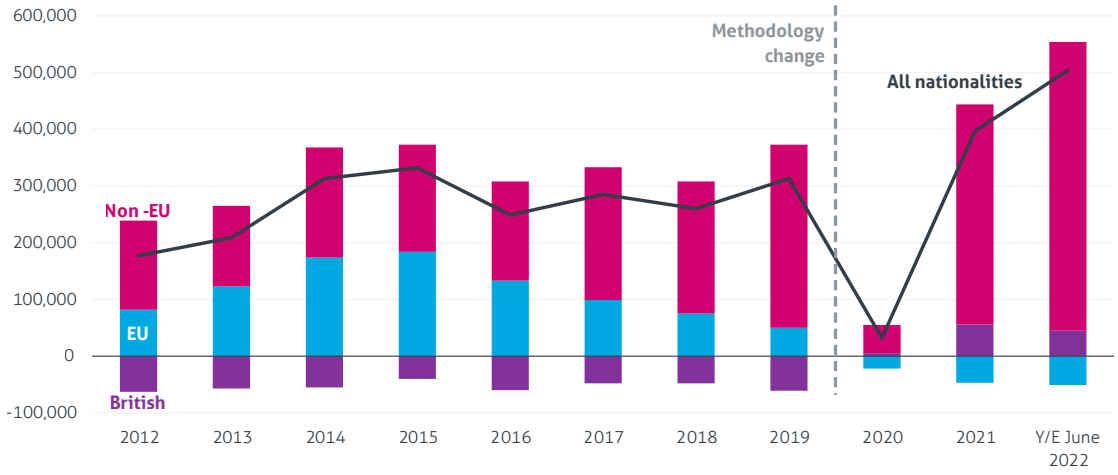
Immigration

Before the home secretary's week-long resignation in October 2022, she was reported to have clashed with the then prime minister, Liz Truss, and the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, over proposals to liberalise immigration rules and grant more foreign work visas as a way to support economic growth and public service workforces after Brexit.[16]

In contrast with her ministerial colleagues, Braverman had described her aspiration to achieve David Cameron's target of reducing net annual migration to the "tens of thousands".[17] That is ambitious. Net migration for the year ending June 2022 was 504,000, up from 173,000 in the previous year, while reporting by the *Financial Times* in mid-May suggested the figure for the year ending December 2022 could pass 700,000.[18]

Some of the 2021–22 increase was due to political decisions in Westminster: for example, special visa routes for Ukrainian refugees and Hong Kong British national (overseas) status holders, granted in response to conflict and persecution in those respective countries, boosted numbers. A post-pandemic spike in approvals for work and student visas has also played a part.[19] Notably, the 2021–22 increase was primarily driven by non-EU migration.

Figure 9 **Net migration to the UK by nationality group, 2012 to year ending June 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, Long-term international migration, citizenship, UK, 1964–2019; and ONS, Long-term international immigration, emigration and net migration flows, year ending June 2020 to year ending June 2022.

More recently, Braverman is reported to have clashed with cabinet colleagues over proposals to reduce these heightened immigration numbers, such as by increasing the minimum salary expectations of skilled workers and reducing the time foreign students can remain in the UK after their studies.[20] Other cabinet ministers are reported to have blocked most of Braverman's proposals, likely out of concern for their impact on the economy or key workforces.

What does this reveal about the Home Office?

These disagreements demonstrate the ever-present tension in immigration policy, which is led and managed primarily by the Home Office, who are held to account for overall net migration figures. And yet it is a cross-government policy area in which many departments have a stake. Some, including the Treasury and Department for Business and Trade, view migration as a 'positive' policy lever that can provide skills, secure workforces in key sectors, and promote the UK's reputation abroad. Others, such as DLUHC and DWP – and devolved and local government – have key roles in the immigration system and support community cohesion and integration. By contrast the Home Office is incentivised to control the system and, usually, to limit as far as plausible the numbers of migrants arriving in the UK.

It is understandable the Home Office's focus is on controlling numbers. Being able to control the number of people arriving in the UK is seen as a key aspect of its security remit. But the economic levers of migration are an inescapable part of the policy puzzle in response to the slow growth and workforce pressures the UK faces – especially after Brexit and the end of free movement.[21] Deciding how to operate those levers requires the Home Office (and Number 10) to work with, and balance the sometimes competing interests of, other departments.

The intra-governmental tension behind the home secretary's row with the former prime minister has not disappeared, as recent briefings of cabinet disagreements have shown. The Home Office will only ever be able to lead successful immigration policy if it is coherently brokered between departments, and if the prime minister and home secretary are in agreement over the objectives of that policy in terms of absolute numbers, contributions to economic growth and impacts on key workforces including the NHS. Structures do exist to support the brokering of migration policy across Whitehall, not least cabinet itself. The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) also provides analysis of the UK's workforce needs across the economy. But those structures ultimately rely on a clear strategy, and political agreement, among cabinet.[22]

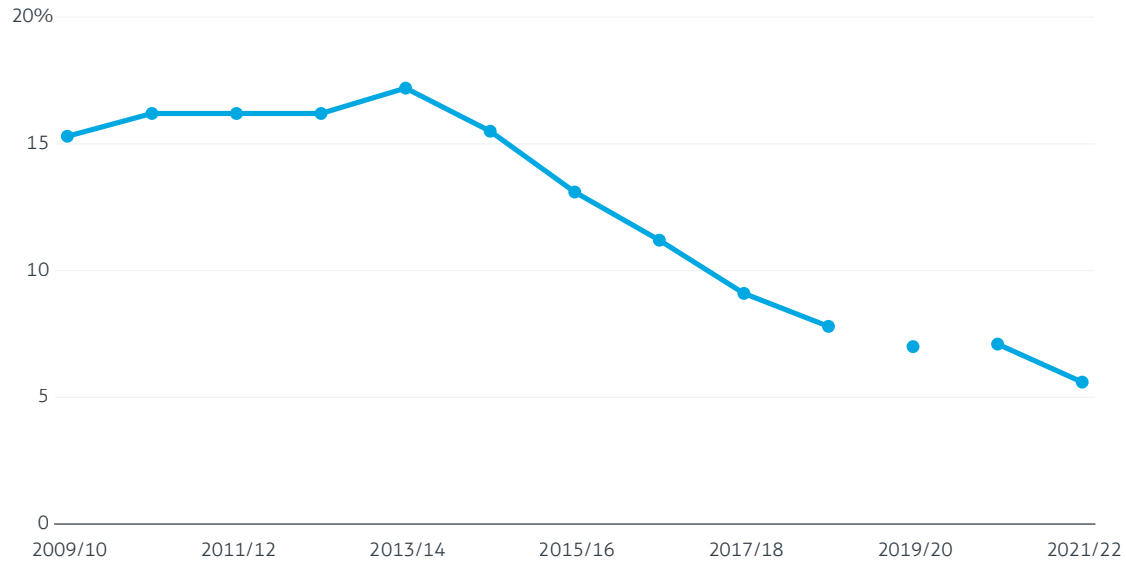
To broker migration policy effectively therefore requires a consensus that has been missing from the Conservative Party in recent years, as it was from the Labour government's migration policies in the early 2000s.[23] Even if Sunak and Braverman have reached an uneasy agreement to balance the competing departmental and political interests, it remains a key test of the current and future Home Office leadership.

Crime and police

One of the Home Office's four priority outcomes is to reduce crime.[24] The Crime Survey for England and Wales shows a long-term decline in victim-reported crime (excluding fraud, which remains high) in the past decade and in the past year.[25] But despite this fall in the number of crimes, the government faces the problem of falling charge rates. The proportion of crimes recorded by the police that result in charges fell to a new low of 5.6% in 2021/22, continuing the prolonged decline since 2013/14. Charge rates are particularly poor for sexual crimes (including rape), which fell from 11.3% in 2014/15 to just 2.9% in 2021/22.[26]

This partly reflects an increasing volume of crimes being recorded by police, likely driven by improved recording practices. But it is also due to problems with police investigations and the wider justice system contributing to the continued fall in the absolute number of charges. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS), for example, attributed low charge rates for burglary, robbery and theft to low prioritisation, a lack of capacity, poor digital forensic capability and insufficient supervision in the police.[27]

Figure 10 **Crimes recorded by the police that result in charges, 2009/10–2021/22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, Crime outcomes in England and Wales (Table 2.2), 2009/10–2021/22, supported by CIPFA. Notes: 2019/20 figures exclude Greater Manchester police force data, as following the implementation of a new IT system in July 2019, the force was unable to supply data for the period July 2019 to March 2020.

High-profile scandals within police forces have added to the crisis. In July 2022 HMICFRS placed the Metropolitan Police in special measures* following its poor handling of the Stephen Port case, the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving Met officer, the strip search of three children, and problems with the behaviour of officers at Charing Cross police station, among others. Baroness Casey, as part of her review into the Met, found the force to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic and recommended a range of reforms.[28] Five other police forces have also been placed in special measures – the highest number of forces ever under that category at the same time.[29]

* Officially known as the advanced 'Engage' phase of the HMICFRS monitoring process.

This poor performance is contributing to declining public confidence in the police. A variety of sources show a marked loss of confidence in policing in recent years. One survey found 50% of respondents had little or no confidence in the police to deal with crime, up from 45% the year before.[30] This is a problem for many reasons, including because forces operate under a 'policing by consent' model, whereby their power is "dependent on public approval of their existence, actions and behaviour and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect".[31] To keep their legitimacy, police must maintain public trust and confidence. The behaviour of officers and the culture of police forces are important to keeping that trust, as is the perception that the police are competent at responding to, and preventing, crime.

What does this reveal about the Home Office?

The Home Office has an interest in, and the home secretary some responsibility for, crime, charge rates and police standards. But the department and its ministers are not solely responsible for resolving these problems. They are part of a complex system of accountability, through which these issues are managed. This includes individual police forces and police and crime commissioners (PCCs), mayoral combined authorities, and public bodies with varying degrees of independence such as the College of Policing, HMICFRS, the Crown Prosecution Service and the National Crime Agency.[32]

This system is complex for appropriate reasons. It is right, for instance, that ministers do not have direct lines of management over operational command of police forces. But the crises facing police forces do suggest the police accountability system has problems that need to be fixed. For example, Rick Muir, director of the Police Foundation think tank, has argued that the complexity of the police accountability system has confused forces' priorities for reform.[33] As the institution charged with overseeing and reforming that accountability system, it is the Home Office's role to change the current set-up so these issues can be addressed.

The government's target to recruit 20,000 new police officers is an example of the need for, and sometimes failure of, the Home Office to properly consider the consequences of centrally made decisions on other parts of the criminal justice system. The Casey review found that the target – a 2019 Johnson government manifesto promise – encouraged a focus in the Met on recruitment figures over all else, including over the development of a workforce plan that incorporates a view of the Met's skills and diversity needs.[34]

And the MoJ expects the influx of officers to put further pressure on criminal court backlogs and prison capacity.[35] The shadow home secretary, Yvette Cooper, has proposed a "national police workforce strategy" to be developed with the College of Policing.[36] Any strategic workforce planning also needs to collaborate with the wider justice system.

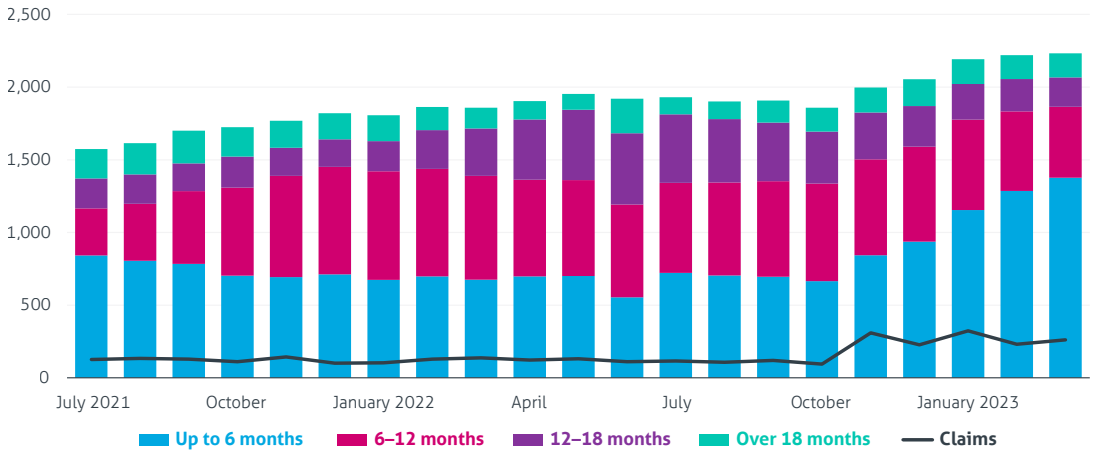
The problems with crime and policing described above require action to be taken between partners across the justice system. The Home Office's role in responding to those problems, therefore, will depend on its ability to collaborate with outside partners – whether that be other departments such as MoJ, police forces or public

bodies. The Home Office must also act as a system leader within the policing and wider justice system. This includes reforming the complex accountability systems themselves, if they are preventing current crises from being addressed.

The Windrush scandal

The Home Office has launched several schemes intended to compensate and support people affected by the Windrush scandal. These include the Windrush Scheme, to provide documentation proof of right to work in the UK; the Windrush Compensation Scheme, to repay losses suffered; the commissioning of an organisation to provide free, independent assistance to those who want to make a claim; and a community fund to pay grassroots organisations to help promote the schemes. These schemes demonstrate the department's intention to right the wrongs of the Windrush scandal.

Figure 11 **Windrush Compensation Scheme cases awaiting a final offer and claims received, July 2021 to March 2023**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, Windrush Compensation Scheme data, March 2023.

These schemes have been troubled by backlogs, delays to payments and administrative problems. At its worst, in June 2022, approaching three quarters (71%) of the 1,920 claims awaiting a final offer had been waiting for more than six months. More than 30 people are thought to have died while awaiting a decision on their compensation claim.[37]

The rate of decision making has improved more recently. Of those awaiting a decision in March 2023, 38% had been waiting for more than six months[38] – despite the number of applications increasing, at above 200 a month.

What does this reveal about the Home Office?

The Home Affairs Select Committee has criticised the Home Office's handling of the Windrush Compensation Scheme, reporting: "It is a damning indictment of the Home Office that the design and operation of this scheme contained the same bureaucratic insensitivities that led to the Windrush scandal in the first place."[39] The committee is considering recommending that an arm's-length body administer the scheme due to the lack of trust in the Home Office among many of the groups affected.[40]

While the department has paid grassroots organisations to promote its schemes, its community fund had to be relaunched due to a lower-than-expected rate of applications from non-Caribbean communities.[41] The allocations for 2022/23 were eventually scrapped, reportedly due to concerns that some grant recipients had criticised the department on social media, raising further questions about the department's openness to scrutiny.[42]

It is also revealing that the government only became aware of the scale of the Windrush scandal due to campaigning by civil society groups with close links to the groups concerned. The department's failure to engage those organisations proactively (and reportedly, its lack of collaboration subsequently) has impeded its efforts to move on from the scandal, while the home secretary's decision in January 2023 to abandon several key reforms previously agreed to from Wendy Williams' 'Lessons Learned' review will do little to soften the image of the Home Office.

The compensation scheme is likely to receive increased scrutiny in 2023, with the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury docks in June. Recent increases in the numbers of people applying for the schemes and the relative reductions in waiting times are welcome. Ensuring people are able and willing to claim compensation, and that claims are dealt with promptly and with a sensitive consideration of the 'face behind the case', is key to demonstrating that the Home Office has learned from and changed since the Windrush scandal. This will be symptomatic of the department's wider efforts to reform in the wake of this scandal, and should therefore be an urgent priority for the home secretary.

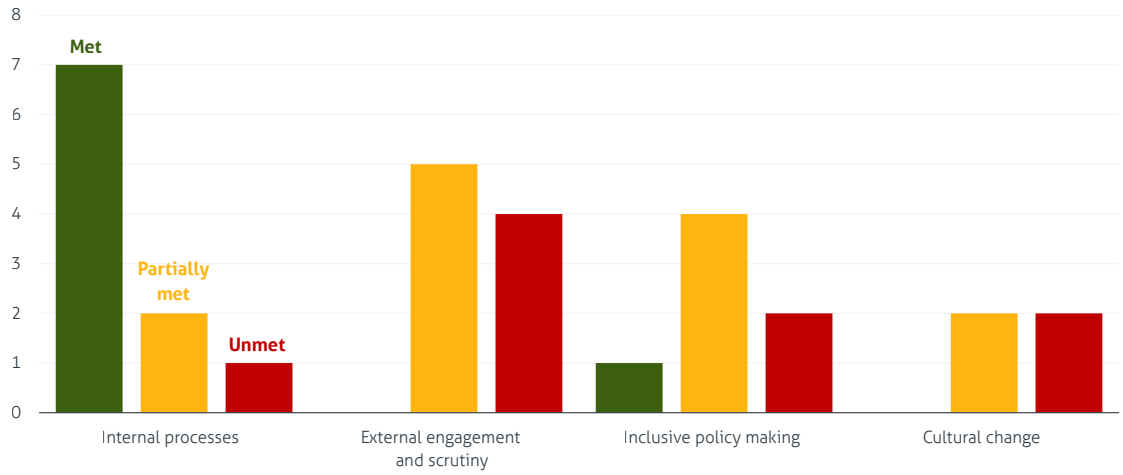
Cultural and institutional problems

The Windrush scandal that erupted in 2018 brought many of the Home Office's long-standing cultural and institutional problems back to the fore. Many of these were examined closely in Wendy Williams' subsequent 'Lessons Learned' review. The Home Office's 'comprehensive improvement plan', introduced in 2020 in response to that review, put forward the official categorisation of these problems – and the department's plans to address them – in five themes:

1. Righting the wrongs and learning from the past
2. A more compassionate approach
3. Robust and inclusive policy making
4. Openness to scrutiny
5. An inclusive workforce.[43]

In her 2022 progress update, Williams found that the Home Office had either met or partially met 21 of the review's 30 recommendations. It has, for example, agreed and published a new purpose and set of corporate values, set up an overarching race advisory board and established a new framework for managing risks. Interviewees told us that the steps taken as part of the improvement plan had led to pockets of improved practice. And, as covered in greater detail below, although the Home Office continues to have some of the worst Civil Service People Survey scores of any department, its 2022 results bucked a negative trend across government and held steady, even marginally improving on some metrics.

Figure 12 **Home Office progress on *Windrush Lessons Learned Review* recommendations, 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, *Windrush Lessons Learned Review*: progress update, 2022.
Notes: While the Home Office changed the status of many of these recommendations to 'Monitoring' or 'In development' in February 2023, there has been no independent progress update since 2022. The progress judgments represented in this chart reflect those made by Williams in her 2022 update, the categorisation has been made by the IfG.

However, the headline numbers don't tell the whole story. While the Home Office has made progress on many of its internal processes reforms, its performance on some of Williams' most important recommendations – on external engagement, inclusive policy making and cultural change – is severely lacking. Of these few have been fully met, and some abandoned outright. The home secretary has, for instance, ditched plans to review and strengthen the remit of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI); to create a new, independent migrants' commissioner to improve external scrutiny and engagement; and to run reconciliation events with Windrush victims.[44]

It is now unclear what status Williams' remaining recommendations, and the reform plan as a whole, have within the department – even prompting Williams to make public in January 2023 her "[disappointment] that the department has decided not to implement what I see as the crucial external scrutiny measures".[45]

Recent events, in particular the development of the Rwanda scheme and Illegal Migration Bill, certainly suggest that lessons have indeed not been learned. The department was roundly criticised for failing to engage widely within its own workforce, let alone outside experts, in the development of its controversial asylum scheme. Leaked examples of internal anger over those policies highlight ongoing problems with the Home Office's workforce management and morale.

The delay to releasing the equality impact assessment, and lack of published economic impact assessment, in support of the 2023 bill in particular raises again Williams' critique of the department's approach to policy making and scrutiny. As does the government's decision to minimise scrutiny of the bill by expediting its passage through parliament.[46]

That the department is still struggling on these fronts is unsurprising. These are deep-rooted problems that will require sustained political and official support over a long period of time to address. And yet they are integral to the department's performance and visibly slow progress and political rejection of important reforms will set the Home Office back. For that reason:

- **The home secretary should reverse the decision to scrap key outstanding pledges. She and the Home Office permanent secretary should publicly re-commit to the reform programme in full, and develop a new departmental improvement plan to mark the 75th anniversary of the *Empire Windrush*'s arrival in the UK, in June 2023.**

That plan could maintain the five themes of the first instalment, setting out next steps to build on what progress has been made. And it should sit alongside a public evaluation plan, so that the department's performance against its commitments can be transparently understood.

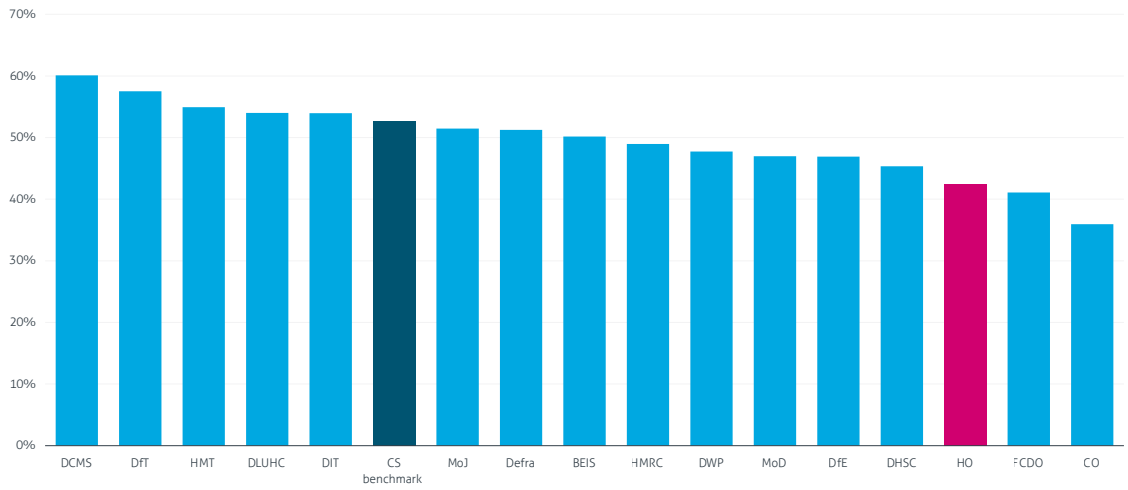
The rest of this paper summarises the current status of these cultural and institutional problems, how they are affecting the Home Office's work, and what the department is (and is not) currently doing to fix them. We have categorised these into four organisational problems that overlap with, but are not aligned to, the department's own improvement plan.

Leading a motivated workforce

Poor workforce morale is a long-running but urgent problem. The Home Office has the second lowest level of staff engagement* of any core Whitehall department, and has been among the worst performers over the past decade.** As shown in Figure 6, the gap between median civil service engagement levels and those for the Home Office staff has grown in recent years, from a stable rate of 5–6 percentage points from 2015 to 2019, to 8–9 percentage points in the years since.[47]

Williams identified a particular problem with staff not feeling "confident enough to raise any doubts of their own" about the way policy was being developed or implemented.[48] This is supported by the department's poor performance against the People Survey question asking staff if they "think it is safe to challenge the way things are done in" their organisation. The Home Office has the third worst score of any Whitehall department for this question (42%), with only the Foreign Office and Cabinet Office performing worse.

Figure 13 **Percentage of staff feeling safe to challenge the way things are done in their organisation, by department, 2022**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2022. The civil service benchmark is the median score for all organisations participating in the People Survey each year without weighting by organisation size.

* Staff engagement refers to the Engagement Index, the headline metric of the Civil Service People Survey taken annually to track the attitudes and experience of civil servants. For further information about the survey, see the IfG's explainer on the topic.

** The overall Home Office engagement score was 57% in 2022, compared to the civil service benchmark of 65% and the Treasury's top score of 68%.

In 2022 this morale problem manifested in internal opposition to the government's Rwanda asylum scheme, leading to division between ministers and officials. Leaked messages from an internal communications network highlighted vocal opposition, with one official posting: "Do we have a responsibility to not just leave, but to organise and resist? We cannot simply wash our hands and walk away."[49] The unofficial Twitter account @OurHomeOffice details anonymous officials' internal opposition to departmental policy, including by distributing stickers opposing the Rwanda scheme to display in the department.[50]

For civil servants to actively frustrate the implementation of legal policies decided by ministers is wrong and contradicts the civil service code. The code specifies that officials should not allow "personal political views to determine any advice" or actions, or "frustrate the implementation of policies once decisions are taken by declining to take, or abstaining from, action which flows from those decisions".[51] If civil servants feel unable to implement a legal policy, having raised concerns by all appropriate means, they should resign.

Equally, accusations by politicians of officials standing in the way of policy can undermine staff morale and effectiveness, as shown by the response to a Conservative Party email written in the home secretary's name in March 2023, which blamed "an activist blob of left-wing lawyers, civil servants and the Labour party" for the government's failure to stop small boat crossings.[52]

None of this should be conflated with civil servants offering honest advice on the practicality and legality of proposals, which ministers should encourage, and which will involve robust, legitimate interrogation of policy ideas.

Staff morale and engagement are therefore problems that ministers cannot dismiss. Both ministers and senior officials are responsible for setting the culture of their departments. Workforce culture cannot be neatly separated from the work employees are being asked to undertake and the policies they are being tasked with implementing. And the communication of ministers to their officials, in which they relay their priorities, has an effect on how those civil servants work.

Nor should morale and engagement be viewed as a matter of workplace wellbeing only. Leading a motivated, engaged workforce is integral to the effective implementation of ministers' policies. Williams concluded that Home Office officials' inability to challenge decision making contributed to the Windrush scandal by limiting the extent to which policy decisions could be tested, and risks identified, before and during implementation.

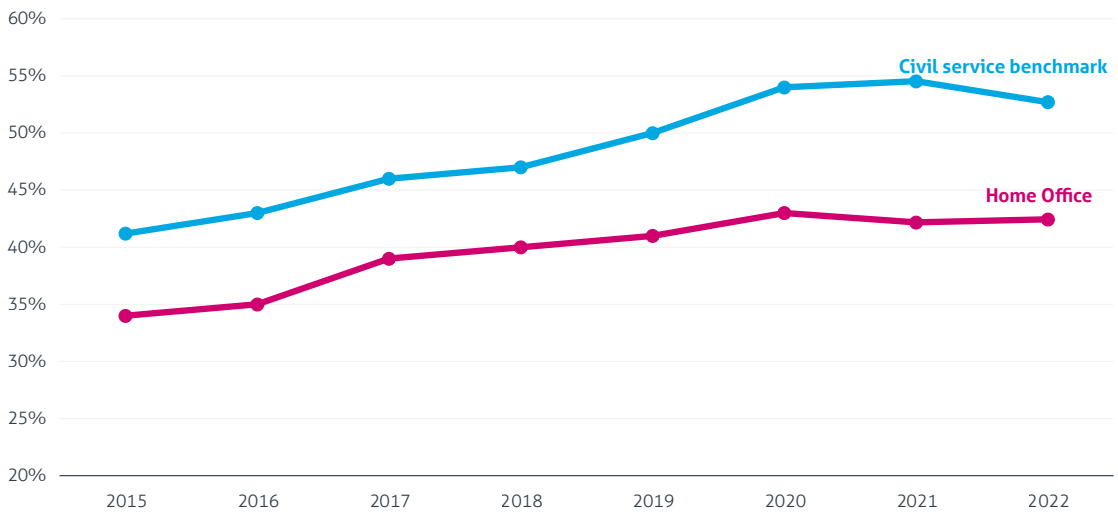
In 2021 the department launched One Home Office, its transformation programme informed by Williams' review. The programme aims to "learn the lessons" of Windrush and achieve the vision of a workforce that is "proud of the work we do and the organisation to which we belong".[53] It is structured around four outcomes: clearer roles and responsibilities; more integrated teams; increased focus on customers and service delivery; and an inclusive organisation.[54]

Williams praised One Home Office as a "well-considered programme with a clear vision", governance and reporting structure.[55] In particular the One Home Office Connect scheme aims to support internal debate and challenge. Internal enthusiasm for the programme has remained fairly high since its launch. And Williams reported early signs that the culture is beginning to change, or that there is at least broader agreement on the need for change.

The first signs that this programme might be having a positive effect on the morale of the workforce emerged from the department's scores in the 2022 Civil Service People Survey. The Home Office was the only department in which officials' attitude to their leadership and their ability to manage change did not decline between 2021 and 2022. It was one of only three departments in which officials' perception of their ability to "challenge the way things are done" held steady. And it was the only department in which attitudes towards and experience of inclusion and fair treatment, and the resources and workload of officials, (slightly) improved.[56]

The Home Office remains among the worst performing departments on almost all counts, but the latest data on morale shows that senior officials' efforts outlined above have had an impact, despite a particularly challenging context, and demonstrate the importance of keeping up momentum.

Figure 14 **Percentage of staff feeling safe to challenge the way things are done in their organisation, in the Home Office and across the whole civil service, 2015–22**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office, Civil Service People Survey, 2015–22. The civil service benchmark is the median score for all organisations participating in the People Survey each year without weighting by organisation size.

Nevertheless, views remain mixed. Some interviewees are unconvinced by the department's efforts to improve morale and workforce culture, questioning whether junior staff are genuinely able to challenge decisions, and whether the department's commitment to change is embraced consistently at a senior official and ministerial level. For instance, while the department's latest status update indicates that it is 'monitoring' its training for senior officials on advising ministers, Williams criticised the fact that only 10 senior civil servants attended focus groups in the development of the training programme.[57]

It is not yet clear that the One Home Office programme has had a significant effect on the day-to-day delivery of front-line services or the morale and engagement of the workforce. It is vital that both ministers and the senior civil servants who lead the Home Office provide the political buy-in and leadership required to achieve this kind of long-term change. In particular, unless political support is provided by the home secretary – which has so far been lacking – the potential of these reforms will remain unrealised.

Taking a compassionate approach

The Williams review found that the Home Office's failure to assess the impact of its decisions on particular racial groups, and the lack of compassion in decision making at a personal and policy level, contributed to the Windrush scandal.[58] Enver Solomon, chief executive of the Refugee Council, told an Institute for Government event in 2022 that "a culture of disbelief" from Home Office officials created an environment in which people interacting with their services are seen as "guilty until proven innocent".[59] The Home Office itself implicitly recognised this was sometimes the case when stating that it would "be looking to grant, not for reasons to refuse" applications to the EU Settlement Scheme.[60]

These findings formed a central part of Williams' subsequent recommendations, some of which the Home Office has since implemented or begun to implement as part of its improvement programme. For example, the department has:

- Agreed a new mission and set of four values – compassion, respect, courage and collaboration
- Launched an ethical decision making model for decision makers* and appointed a board-level ethics adviser
- Established a strategic race advisory board, chaired by the permanent secretary and including staff network representatives and external experts
- Published its initial findings of the review of the compliant environment, finding that the policies have "disproportionately" affected people of colour.

These are welcome steps. And some officials and outside experts report pockets of improved practice across the Home Office, where teams are taking a more compassionate approach to front-line services and decision making in line with the department's aim of seeing a 'face behind the case'.[61]

* The model is comprised of a four-stage process intended to ensure decision makers reflect on potential ethical or unintended consequences of individual decisions and escalate them where appropriate.

But achieving major culture change in any large organisation takes time and sustained leadership, and requires more than one-off internal process changes. Williams's progress update to the review found that key recommendations were either unmet or progressing slowly. For instance:

- The home secretary has chosen not to run reconciliation events, in favour of "more effective ways of engaging with those impacted" by the Windrush scandal.

- The consolidation of immigration legislation is making slower than expected progress.[62]

- The department is still developing its learning programme on UK history.[63]

The representativeness and inclusion of the workforce is important to better understanding race and taking a compassionate approach. The proportion of senior officials identifying as from a minority ethnic background is increasing in the department, reaching 9.5% in December 2022,[64] but it has not yet met the 12% target set in 2018.

The Home Office needs to accelerate its efforts to enact the letter and spirit of Williams' recommendations, clarifying the status of outstanding recommendations and reversing the decision to drop several of them. But the home secretary should also ensure that her and her ministers' policy decisions adhere to the "more compassionate approach" described in the Home Office's improvement plan.

The recommendations in the plan focus on "putting people first in everything [the department does]". While it focuses on "how we work every day", it should not exclude the content of departmental policy, upon which officials' ability to take a compassionate approach is dependent in the first place. This means the reform plan should not be seen as the sole responsibility of civil servants, or just pertaining to the way officials work rather than the nature of its policy.

The home secretary has described the Illegal Migration Bill as "the compassionate thing to do",[65] but the onus remains on ministers to demonstrate *how* policy is consistent with the department's stated values and reforms.

Ministers have sought to justify the Rwanda asylum scheme, for instance, on the grounds that deterring people from attempting dangerous Channel crossings is a compassionate objective. This makes it all the more important that the department evaluates the scheme, if it is launched, to collate evidence to ascertain whether or not that objective is being met.

Without robust, public evaluation it will become increasingly difficult for ministers to justify how their policies adhere to the department's stated values and objectives.

Being open to scrutiny

In its improvement plan, the Home Office recognised the urgent need to "be more transparent", enabling "greater external scrutiny of policy and processes" and incorporating the "insights and experiences of the communities we serve".[66] The department has made insufficient progress towards these aims. It has established a community and stakeholder engagement hub, but this is yet to translate into an openness either within its policy making or in its attitude to outside scrutiny.

Indeed, the home secretary has since scrapped key pledges designed to boost outside scrutiny. It is no longer planning to review the remit of the ICIBI. The inspector has a track record of spotting risks in the asylum and immigration system before they develop into crises. For example, an ICIBI report from February 2022 warned that poor data collection had undermined the Home Office's ability to properly plan for the resourcing required at Manston – well before unsafe conditions emerged in migrant processing centres. But it is unusual among government inspectorates in being unable to choose when to share its findings. Instead the Home Office often publishes reports long after they have been submitted. Giving the ICIBI the power to publish its own work and requiring the Home Office to explain publicly any deviation from its recommendations would have strengthened, and made more timely, scrutiny of the department's policy and services.

The Home Office is also no longer planning to establish a new, independent migrants' commissioner. This role was intended to understand, relay and champion the migrant experience in government – aiding decision making early enough in the policy process to make a difference. The role's independence from the department would have ensured its ability to scrutinise Home Office policy, which is more difficult to achieve internally.

The ill effects of this persistent lack of transparency have been made increasingly plain. In the last two years alone, the Home Office has been criticised for:

- not publishing its internal research on 'pull factors' affecting asylum seekers' decision to travel to the UK[67]
- refusing to publish a commissioned paper about historic causes of the Windrush scandal (which was subsequently leaked)[68]
- litigating (unsuccessfully) to prevent the publication of a draft country policy and information note about Rwanda used in the development of the asylum scheme[69]
- failing to engage outside expert organisations in the development of that scheme
- failing to publish an impact assessment ahead of the Illegal Migration Bill's scrutiny in parliament.[70]

This would be an unenviable record for any department, but given that the Home Office's own comprehensive improvement plan, now two years' old, explicitly recognised that greater scrutiny would help to improve performance, it is particularly concerning. Regardless of short-term incentives, Suella Braverman should honour her department's pre-existing commitments and encourage, not restrict, external scrutiny.

Working collaboratively

Any future priorities for reform must also include plans to strengthen the Home Office's ability to work collaboratively with other parts of government and partners outside government – a skill the department has lacked. Again this is seen in its response to the Williams review.

Nearly all of the recommendations Williams deemed to have been met in her 2022 progress update were actions the department was able to complete in relative isolation, even if doing so effectively required engagement outside the Home Office. Such internally focused goals included creating its own comprehensive improvement plan; setting a purpose, mission and values for the organisation; a new risk management framework; a new system for storing submissions; and a diversity and inclusion strategy.

By contrast, seven of the nine recommendations Williams concluded were unmet were changes that definitively required outside input. Some necessitated collaboration with others, such as running reconciliation events with victims of the Windrush scandal, creating a new migrants' commissioner, and expanding the work of the Law Commission to consolidate immigration legislation. Others Williams specified should be taken with outside input, such as developing a learning plan on UK history with academic experts, reviewing the 'compliant environment' policies in partnership with outside experts, and reviewing the department's diversity and inclusion training in partnership with sector experts.

The Home Office's reputation for a lack collaborative working is seen outside of its response to the Williams review too, most notably in its handling of the asylum system. It frequently comes under criticism for this from other parts of government and the wider public and social sectors. Local councils have even resorted to taking legal action against the Home Office for its use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers, which is often communicated at short notice and with little consideration for the role of local services.[71]

The Home Office's poor cross-government co-ordination has also crowded out spending on priorities elsewhere: one third of the international aid budget went towards domestic asylum costs in 2022. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact found that this has undermined the efficiency of the Foreign Office's humanitarian aid and minimised incentives for the Home Office to reduce accommodation spending.[72]

The asylum system is complex and cuts across several policy areas. Poor cross-government working, especially from what should be the lead department, is hampering the government's response and having a real impact on the lives of often very vulnerable people. The ambiguous responsibility for unaccompanied children seeking asylum has been made stark after hundreds were found to have gone missing from Home Office-procured hotel accommodation. Since then, the Home Office has sought to formalise its role as the provider of accommodation for these children. But the Children's Commissioner for England has expressed concerns about these proposals, suggesting that unaccompanied children should instead be in the care of local authorities, with the Home Office playing a co-ordinating role in ensuring safeguarding.[73]

Asylum charities and front-line services have routinely lamented the Home Office's failure to engage with them in the development of policies including the Rwanda scheme, a recent questionnaire used to simplify asylum decision making (but which was only available in English) and the provisions of the Illegal Migration Bill.[74] The department has argued that it was unable to engage externally on controversial policies such as these while avoiding leaks to the media. But this is to avoid the underlying issue: if the Home Office is to learn the lessons of the Windrush scandal it will need to change the way it makes as well as delivers policy, even – or especially – when it is difficult to do so.

Conclusion: what does the future hold for the Home Office?

As head of one of the 'great offices of state' the job of home secretary is a busy one. Every week another urgent crisis is reported that requires their attention, whether on small boat crossings, delays at the border or failing police standards. These are important problems of policy. But the official response to them – from the secretary of state and their department – also reveals symptoms of the cultural and institutional problems that have long beset the Home Office, described in this report.

These organisational problems were most palpably laid bare during the Windrush scandal that erupted in 2018, and mostly encapsulated in detail by Wendy Williams' review into it. But despite some action taken, and progress made, by the Home Office over the past few years, these problems remain. Suella Braverman has watered down the Home Office's commitment to post-Windrush reforms, and rejected outright some deemed most "crucial" by Williams. This is a mistake. Ministers neglect these more deep-rooted problems at their peril – they undermine the department's performance today and in the future.

That is why the home secretary should reverse her decision to scrap key outstanding Windrush pledges. She and the permanent secretary should **publicly re-commit to the Windrush reforms in full with a new departmental improvement plan to mark the 75th anniversary of the *Empire Windrush*'s arrival in the UK**, in June. This should sit alongside a public evaluation plan, to improve transparency and scrutiny.

These issues exist within a more fundamental, long-term debate about **whether the Home Office has the right span of responsibilities in the first place**. Experts and commentators have long called for a range of more radical machinery of government changes which, it is argued, could help UK government to handle more effectively its home affairs systems of migration, citizenship, the border, crime and security.

Some call for a dedicated department for the border, migration and citizenship.[75] Others think asylum policy should be given to a new public body away from home secretary's direct management.[76] An honest assessment of the division of responsibilities, and relationships, between the Home Office, MoJ and wider criminal justice system is made even more important by the multiple crises facing the police, backlogs in the courts and a stretched prison capacity.

Despite the risks and costs of machinery of government changes, the Institute for Government has previously recommended that government should review the potential merit of larger-scale changes to the Home Office – arguing in 2019 that it was not prepared to manage migration after Brexit and the cabinet secretary should consider alternative institutional set-ups for the long term.[77]

Outside of post-Brexit migration, it is also reasonable to consider whether machinery of government changes could help the Home Office address some of the intractable cultural problems described in this report. Would more substantial institutional changes provide a means by which the government could draw a line under bad practice, signal and stimulate culture change, and unburden officials from some of the baggage of the Home Office's history?

During the Conservative leadership contest in summer 2022 Rishi Sunak committed to "commissioning work to look at more fundamental Home Office and Border Force reform".[78] As prime minister he should follow this through. The question he most needs to answer is whether, in the long term, the Home Office is itself capable of handling the problems it creates, and whether it is the right vehicle through which to manage its responsibilities.

Since then, Nick Timothy, the former Home Office special adviser and Number 10 chief of staff, has been brought back to "review the effectiveness" of the department and the "structures and systems which support the home secretary".[79] It is right that the department is investigating these questions, but the remit, contributors and timeline of Timothy's review is unclear.

The prime minister should ensure Timothy's review has an adequately broad scope, and if not **commission a long-term review of the government's home affairs systems and services**. This should identify the best structure and governance through which to manage migration, integration, border, crime and security policy.

These are systemic policy areas that span departments across Whitehall and levels of government, and consequently the review should not be limited solely to the Home Office's remit. It should incorporate analysis of what has worked and not worked from past machinery of government changes, and how other countries manage similar home affairs policy. It must invite the experience of front-line experts and service users.

That will be the topic of the Institute for Government's second departmental deep-dive into the Home Office, to be published later in 2023. This will assess the prospects for long-term reform of the department's culture, institutional set-up and span of responsibilities. It will offer analysis and recommendations to contribute to any such systems review in the future.

Five years on from the Windrush scandal, it remains vital that the Home Office grapples with the home truths described in this paper, if the department is going to avoid similar crises – and failing the country – in the future.

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