

Border Force Operations

What this paper is about

This paper highlights the key findings of the National Audit Office (NAO) report on the challenges for Government's management of the border in light of Brexit and the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee report on Brexit and Immigration and the Government's current work as part of the review of the Aviation Strategy.

Points for discussion

- Both reports highlight Border Force resourcing as a key issue to be addressed by the Government. ACCs are invited to comment on whether this is an issue at their airport.
- The introduction of e-gates is expanding across airports to assist in the processing of passengers. Border Force is now operating 239 gates at 19 airport terminals. ACCs are invited to comment as to whether e-gates have been or planned to be installed at their airports. It would also be helpful if those ACCs where gates have been installed could comment as to:
 - whether there has been any noticeable improvements in passenger flows
 - whether there have been any operational issues relating to the e-gates
- Delegates are invited to report on any other issues affecting Border Force at their airport that the Government needs to consider as part of its review of the aviation strategy.

Points for possible action

Dependent on the discussion at the meeting

Background

1. Over the years, UKACCs has shared experiences about the service and performance of border control at their airports, particularly in respect of passenger queuing times and the engagement ACCs have with Border Force officials at their airports.
2. The current national performance measures, established many years ago, are for 95% of the time EEA passengers to be cleared within 25 minutes and non EEA passengers within 45 minutes. From information published in the Government's response to the Call for Evidence document¹ it states that for Q3 in 2017 95.7% of passengers were cleared within Service Level Agreements.
3. Last year delegates' feedback on Border Force operations at their airport was generally positive:
 - ACCs were generally encouraged by the close and constructive relationships that they had developed with the local Border Force officials but that the terms of engagement depended upon local circumstances.
 - E-gates helped to improve passenger queue times.
4. Since last year's meeting, the National Audit Office (NAO) has looked at the challenges for Government's management of the border in light of Brexit and published its report on 20 October 2017² and the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee published report on Brexit and Immigration on 14 February 2018³. This paper highlights the key findings of those reports for discussion at the meeting.

The NAO's report

5. The NAO's review had drawn on its previous work and the progress made by Government in addressing the short comings previously identified in relation to border management across the UK (it was not airport specific). The NAO's review identified some significant weaknesses, major contract disputes and high profile failures in border management. The most notable failure was the E-borders programme, but other programmes have also delivered less than planned. It advised that in 2017, the Government still used outdated technology, some border processes remained manual and there were significant gaps in data. Whilst in many respects, border control staff managed in spite of these weaknesses, recruiting, retaining and deploying people in the right border roles remained difficult.
6. Looking forward, the NAO identified a range of challenges that the Government faced as it implements a new border management regime following Brexit, most of which will arise regardless of Brexit. The challenges include:
 - an increase in border crossings, consistent with a trend to more mobility;
 - an environment characterised by increasing and complex security threats;
 - rising citizens' expectations and the test of new, digital ways of working; and
 - the challenge of managing within constrained resources.
7. The NAO also advised that Brexit could bring complex new challenges and has stated that from past experience some changes to border management processes cannot be made without significant lead times and their successful implementation may require action from many parts of Government and industry.

House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report on Brexit and Immigration

8. This recent report raises questions about the Home Office's ability to implement the systems and staffing required to deliver proposed Brexit changes and criticises the continued uncertainty over the status of EU nationals. The Committee concluded:
 - The delays to the Immigration white paper and lack of clarity over the Government's intentions on immigration are creating anxiety for EU citizens in the UK, uncertainty for UK businesses, preventing proper planning and putting already overstretched immigration officials in an 'impossible position'. That is unacceptable.
 - With little more than a year to go, the Government is still failing to set out crucial details on the registration of current residents.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698247/next-steps-towards-an-aviation-strategy.pdf

² <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-uk-border-2/>

³ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/home-affairs-committee/news-parliament-2017/home-office-brexit-immigration-report-published-17-19/>

- Urgent clarity is needed over the Government's immigration objectives for the transition period so that Parliament can debate and scrutinise the proposals before they are finalised.
- Insufficient resources have been allocated and insufficient staff are planned to be sure of a smooth registration process or to cope with additional border requirements on people or goods.
- Given the delays, lack of decisions and resources, UK Visas and Immigration will not be able to deliver two EU citizen registration schemes (one for existing residents and one for new arrivals) effectively by March 2019.
- An already overstretched Border Force does not have the capacity to deliver additional checks at the border by March 2019 – and the problems will be worse if they are expected to deliver additional customs checks as well. The Government should aim to keep customs arrangements the same in the transition period. Rushed and under-resourced changes will undermine border security.

9. The Government's response to the Report⁴ was that it did not agree with some of its conclusions. In terms of resourcing the Government has stated that it has already invested £60 million in 2017/18, is recruiting an additional 1,500 staff across the immigration and borders system and is well advanced in the development of a new scheme to give EU citizens currently in the right to stay after Brexit. The Government will keep staffing under review as negotiations progress but will always ensure it has the resources and workforce needed to run an effective system. The Government has also stated that Border Force already checks 100% of passengers arriving on scheduled flights, regardless of nationality, and this will continue after the UK has left the EU. Ahead of Brexit, there will be an additional 300 frontline Border Force officers to deliver training to the existing workforce, in preparation for any future arrangements required for EU exit at the border. The need for additional recruitment will be kept under review.

10. The Government is also considering a range of options for the future immigration system and has clarified that there will be an Implementation Period of around two years after the UK leaves the EU. During that period, EU citizens will be able to come and live and work in the UK, but there will be a registration scheme in preparation for the future immigration system. This has been the subject of much media coverage recently.

Review of Aviation Strategy

11. From the responses the Government received to the Call for Evidence on the development of a new aviation strategy it was confirmed that the passenger experience at the border was an area that should be further explored. In the Government's response document published in April 2018⁵ it confirmed that as part of the review of the strategy under the objective of "Help the aviation industry work for its customers", it will explore how to minimise delays experienced at the border by looking at how government and industry can work together to plan for the future and improve processes. The Government will consider, amongst other things, whether there are additional or alternative funding mechanisms in the medium term and how the government and the industry can help Border Force to minimise queues, such as reducing last minute scheduling changes.

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

12. It should also be noted that the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration undertakes regular inspections of Border Force at UK airports. His recent reports to the Government for Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted can be found on the Gov.UK website⁶.

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⁴ <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2018/02/14/response-to-the-home-affairs-select-committee-report-on-brex-it-preparations/>

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698247/next-steps-towards-an-aviation-strategy.pdf

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/independent-chief-inspector-of-borders-and-immigration>