House of Commons
Public Administration Select Committee


Eighth Special Report of Session 2013–14

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The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC)

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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Charlie Elphicke MP (Conservative, Dover)
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The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 146. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk

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The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the internet at www.parliament.uk/pasc

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Catherine Tyack and Sian Woodward (Joint Clerks), Rebecca Short (Second Clerk), Alexandra Meakin (Committee Specialist), Jim Lawford (Committee Assistant) and Jonathan Olivier Wright (Web and Publications Assistant).

Contacts

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Eighth Special Report

The Public Administration Select Committee reported to the House on Migration Statistics in its Seventh Report of Session 2013–14, published on 28 July 2013. The Government Response was received on 8 April 2014 and is published in this Report as an Appendix.

Government response

Quality of international migration estimates

1. We welcome work the ONS has done to improve the quality of migration statistics. The ONS has done its best to produce informative migration statistics using the International Passenger Survey. However, the International Passenger Survey is inadequate for measuring, managing and understanding the levels of migration that are now typical in the UK. The Government must plan to end reliance on the International Passenger Survey as the primary method of estimating migration: it is not fit for the purposes to which it is put. (Paragraph 23)

We do not agree with the conclusion that the International Passenger Survey is inadequate for measuring, managing and understanding levels of migration. The UK Statistics Authority in its response sets out the improvements that ONS has made to the quality of migration estimates derived from the ONS. We welcome the Authority’s responses that the IPS estimates are at the national level as reliable and accurate as is possible to achieve under current survey design and levels of funding and that the central statistical estimate derived from the IPS is currently the best available estimate of ‘net migration’.

2. e-Borders data has the potential to provide better headline estimates of immigration, emigration and net migration from 2018. The ONS and Home Office should move as quickly as possible to measuring immigration, emigration and net migration using e-Borders data. (Paragraph 24)

The programme of comprehensive exit checks, which will be implemented during 2014–15, will improve the coverage and quality of data. This will provide the basis for a clearer and more comprehensive data system to help identify and act on overstayers.

We agree with the ONS response that, while valuable, this data is by itself insufficient to provide a direct measurement of migration flows. As the information on entries and exits from the UK gets more comprehensive however it will, when combined with other data sources, help improve our statistics in this area.

The Border Systems Programme requires carriers to provide Advance Passenger Information (API), which consists of names, nationality, gender, date of birth, document type, document number, issuing state, and expiry date, as well as information relating to the service being operated by the carrier. The International Passenger Survey asks, in a voluntary face to face interview, detailed probing questions that establish current permanent residence, travel intentions and future permanent residence. We would add to
the Authority’s response that it would not be feasible in the context of Border Systems Programme data collection to replicate the IPS questioning. Partial questioning would both not provide a reliable indication as to whether a person is a long term migrant and would also be subject to challenge as disproportionate.

It should be borne in mind that API data supplied to the Border Systems Programme is collected by carriers prior to arrival at the UK border and transmitted to what is called the Semaphore system for analysis. The data that is collected is mandated by domestic and European legislation. However, it should be noted that EU Free Movement legislation supported by historical European Court judgements prevent Border Force Officers from routinely asking additional questions (e.g., on duration or purpose of intended stay) of EEA nationals beyond those necessary to establish nationality and identity. For this reason the strategy, determined with ONS colleagues, has been to use Border Systems Programme data as an additional source of information that can improve the estimation of net migration, recognising that it does not hold the information to directly estimate net migration. To this end we have now provided ONS with a large extract of Border Systems Programme data for statistical testing purposes. There are some significant benefits, related to improving IPS weighting methodology and identification of main flows into and out of the UK to improve sampling efficiency.

3. Migration is an international phenomenon. Data held by other countries on migration to and from the UK could help improve the depth and quality of UK migration statistics. The ONS should co-operate further with foreign national and international statistics agencies to improve the quality of UK migration statistics. (Paragraph 25)

We agree with the Authority’s response on this point.

4. In the longer term, migration estimates based on the International Passenger Survey are too uncertain for accurate measurement of progress against the Government’s net migration target. We are struck by the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee to the Government that it should aim for net migration of only 50,000 as the only means of being certain that net migration is in fact below 100,000. The Government should not base its target level of net migration on such an uncertain statistic: doing so could lead to inappropriate immigration policy. (Paragraph 29)

We do not agree with the conclusion that the IPS is too uncertain for accurate measurement of progress in reducing net migration. ONS publish a clear indication of the statistical significance of changes in net migration that allow us to assess the reported changes. The Government has based its migration policy on the best available national estimates produced by the statistical system at this time.

**Understanding who is migrating to and from the UK**

5. Migration estimates based on the International Passenger Survey do not provide sufficient detail on the characteristics of people migrating to and from the UK to judge properly the social and economic consequences of migration and the effects of immigration policy. These data are indispensible for anticipating demand for public services such as schools and the NHS. Migration statistics should provide detailed
information on the characteristics of people migrating to and from the UK within particular periods, including information that is relevant to evaluating the impact of immigration policy and necessary for planning services. The ONS should broaden the information it gathers on the characteristics of migrants to include level of educational qualification, labour market skills, ethnic group, and languages spoken. (Paragraph 34)

6. e-Borders data could potentially provide detailed information on the characteristics of migrants subject to visa control. However, e-Borders data alone will not provide detailed information on the characteristics of those migrants not subject to visa control, or any information on the geographical origin and destination of migrants within the UK. If the International Passenger Survey is not an adequate source for this information, and no other sources are available, new sources of migration statistics are needed, even though they may come at some cost. (Paragraph 35)

7. The ONS should develop new sources of data that can provide accurate statistics on the numbers and characteristics of people migrating to and from the UK, and on their areas of residence within the UK. The ONS should link International Passenger Survey responses to e-Borders data as soon as possible. However, the need for further data may also require the creation of a new routine migrant survey covering the whole of the UK. (Paragraph 36)

Local area migration statistics

8. The International Passenger Survey does not provide accurate estimates of international migration in local areas. The Census provides the most accurate data on the number and characteristics of migrants at the local level, but it is too infrequent to act as a routine source of data. The future of the Census is also uncertain. As the only reliable source of data on migrant populations in local areas, the potential loss of the Census is a concern. Accurate estimates of migration in local authorities must be available independent of the Census. The ONS should develop new sources of data on international migration that are robust enough to provide accurate estimates of annual migration flows to and from local authority areas, even if the Census continues.(Paragraph 45)

The Authority’s response points out recommendations 5, 6, 7 and 8 all relate to the development of new sources of migration statistics.

On recommendations 5 and 6 we would additionally point to the wealth of information that is collected and published each quarter by the Home Office on visas and extensions granted to migrants, including on type of visa (e.g. whether the visa is granted for work, study, family or other reasons), which enables a detailed assessment of the impact of immigration policy.

The Home Office has also undertaken additional research to inform our wider understanding of migration and its impact on the UK. Two studies in particular have significantly expanded our knowledge on this front – the series of reports titled “The Migrant Journey”¹ and the recent analysis published last year titled “The Social and Public

Service Impacts of international migration at the local level. These are just two research reports published recently from a much longer list looking at migrants and the impact of migration policy.

In addition, we would point to the value of ONS data from the 2011 Census, which has captured a much broader range of information on migrants than previous censuses, and the rich seam of data from this source is only slowly emerging. The new questions about migration were introduced by ONS partly in response to Home Office request and the strong public concerns over immigration and we very much welcome this new source which will go some way towards meeting the recommendation of the Committee. The Home Office has also commissioned additional data to inform our understanding, such as the new question on emigration in the International Passenger Survey (the first results from which are now in the public domain); and a new question in the Labour Force Survey (the results of which are currently being analysed for future publication).

So we have not been slow to respond to the increased interest in migration matters and there is now a wealth of information that was not available a few years previously.

On question 7, we would note that it is for these reasons that we do not feel that establishing a new additional migrant survey represents good value for money at the present time, The Home Office undertook a feasibility study for such a survey the results of which were published in January 2011, but the data likely to be obtained from such a survey is currently available in a richer form from the Census and we feel that it is more important that we exploit fully the data from that source before we embark on creating an additional survey.

In addition, we would refer the committee to our response on recommendation 2 with respect to the point raised on Border Systems Programme data. The Border Systems Programme is not designed to provide direct statistical measurement of migration flows, but we are working closely with ONS to deliver the system’s statistical benefits in enhancing estimates of migration.

**Home Office migration statistics**

9. We welcome improvements in the breadth of migration data published by the Home Office since 2011. The Home Office and ONS should use e-Borders data to produce more accurate measures of immigration, emigration and net migration by age, sex and nationality at the national level as soon as possible. (Paragraph 61)

We welcome this positive feedback of the breadth of our data on migration. We would again refer the committee to the Authority’s and our response under recommendation 2.

10. The Home Office should move as rapidly as possible towards integrating visa information with e-Borders data, with the aim of measuring immigration, emigration and net migration by people in different visa categories. This would also provide data on the number of people in different visa categories currently living in the UK, and

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would enable the Home Office to gather detailed information on the characteristics of migrants subject to migration control. The Government should formulate and publish a plan for integrating UKBA’s IT, which sets out its objectives, how they will be achieved, and in what time. (Paragraph 62)

11. The Home Office’s programme to modernise IT across the immigration system provides an opportunity to improve significantly official migration statistics. It is vital that ONS and other government statistical needs are fully understood and incorporated into new IT specifications. The Home Office and ONS should together develop a coherent strategy for better migration statistics. (Paragraph 63)

We would refer back to the responses to recommendations 2, 5 and 6. We do not plan to use Border Systems Programme data to directly estimate of net migration for the reasons set out in the responses to recommendation 2.

Detailed information on those subject to immigration control is already collected and published. Cross referencing Border Systems Programme data with the new case-working systems may be feasible in future and would provide information on the flow of people with different visas. The Home Office IT modernisation programme presents potential opportunities to enhance the statistical information available within system design and budget and is looking to consider statistical requirements and benefits as part of these plans.

**Communicating migration statistics**

12. The net migration target can disguise the nature of actual population change in the terms which concern many members of the public. Members of the public do not always understand the distinction between immigration and net migration, and many are more concerned by some types of immigration than others. The Government should do more to enable better public understanding of migration, in order for the net migration target to be meaningful to and understood by the public. (Paragraph 68)

13. Public understanding of migration statistics is poor. This is partly because migration is a complex phenomenon, but also because official migration statistics do not present a full and accurate picture of migration to and from the UK. As a consequence, the public debate about migration has too often focussed on the headline measure of net migration, without considering the size and composition of its component flows, the range of behaviour it summarises, and the different types of people it covers. (Paragraph 73)

14. We welcome improvements in the reporting of migration statistics by the Home Office. The Home Office has substantially increased the range of data it publishes on immigration control. The Home Office Immigration Statistics User Guide is an effective summary and explanation of the available statistics. We also welcome the new Home Office website at Gov.uk, which addresses some of the criticisms of the Home Office website made in evidence to this inquiry. (Paragraph 74)

15. We welcome improvements in the reporting of migration statistics by the ONS, including the Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, which summarises the most recent migration statistics, and the new topic page for migration on the ONS website.
However, the clarity and accessibility of the information that the ONS provides on migration statistics could still be improved. The ONS has improved the presentation of the material it publishes on migration statistics but it should also consider the content of this material, and the way it is explained and presented. The aim should be that a non-expert user should be able to develop an understanding of migration statistics with no prior knowledge or experience. Migration statistics should be presented alongside related guidance on their sources, methodology, use and interpretation. (Paragraph 75)

We agree with recommendations 12, 13, 14 and 15 and welcome the Committee’s recognition of the improvements we have made.

As the committee has noted, the Home Office has done much to enhance the clarity of presentation of its national statistics in recent years, including the move away from the Command Paper format to a completely new format of topic-based summaries of data available through our pages on the GOV.UK website. We have introduced a range of new sources of information, including the Migrant Journey reports, new data on Sponsorship for students and skilled workers, and new statistics on visa extensions. Together this information aims to help the public understand the complexity of migration flows and the different trends in the various forms of migration.

We will continue to work closely with ONS, involving users of migration statistics, to continue to improve the statistical system in this area, including by ensuring the statistics are presented in a way that is meaningful and better understood. I would add that it is not only the statistical service who are responsible for this clarity and we rely on all those who use and interpret to data to assist in this respect.

16. The ONS should produce a user guide to ONS migration statistics similar to the Home Office’s Immigration Statistics User Guide. This should explain what migration statistics measure, how they are produced, and what data are available—including table by table guidance. It should be honest and open about the weaknesses of the data. (Paragraph 76)

We welcome the Authority’s response on this point.