

Asylum Accommodation Programme (AAP) Accounting Officer Assessment

Background and Context

It is normal practice for Accounting Officer's to scrutinise significant policy proposals or plans to start or vary major programmes and assess whether they measure up to the standards set out in Managing Public Money.

Asylum Accommodation Programme (AAP – the Programme)

This Accounting Officer Assessment follows approval of the reset Programme Business Case. The Programme was set up in response to a substantial increase in the number of asylum seekers since 2020 resulting in significant numbers being housed in hotels; and the policy of the Government to end the use of hotels as asylum accommodation in part through the provision of alternative, more appropriate accommodation.

The Programme has experienced challenges with the original large sites. It was considered in the NAO Report titled 'Investigation into Asylum Accommodation' published 20 March 2024 and the subsequent PAC hearing. The Programme has been reset and has taken account of the recommendations from this report as well as internal changes. The current scope of the Programme covers the sites at Wethersfield and Manchester Road Huddersfield plus the potential use of small sites and pilots with Local Authorities.

The Accounting Officer Assessment will be kept under review subject to new accommodation solutions being pursued.

Regularity

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provides a legal basis for providing adequate accommodation to asylum seekers, and sites will enable the department to fulfil its legal obligation to provide accommodation and support to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute. The Programme has all relevant approvals and spending is in scope of the Home Office ambit. All proposed sites require thorough due diligence, individual business cases and Accounting Officer advice before seeking specific internal and external approvals. Funding for the Programme is provided within the Home Office budget.

I consider the Programme conforms to the Regularity Accounting Officer standard.

Propriety

The Programme remains a Government priority, transparency is maintained with Parliament typically through Ministerial announcements upon committing to new sites and through PAC and HASC appearances, as well as through engagement with NAO and HMT. This programme is an important element of the plan to end the use of hotels as asylum accommodation. Lessons have been learned from previous NAO investigations and are factored into the refreshed business case and processes for securing future sites.

I consider the Programme conforms to the Propriety Accounting Officer standard.

Value for Money (VfM)

The policy of the Government is to end the use of hotels as asylum accommodation. The value for money of existing sites is kept under review and full individual assessments made of proposed future sites, in order to secure best value for the taxpayer when delivering this Government priority. As made clear above Full Accounting Officer advice is undertaken for all proposed sites with a significant focus on costs to ensure maximum value for money learning the lessons from the pathfinder sites such as not committing to sites before full due diligence to confirm viability and therefore avoid nugatory spend and losses seen in the past.

I consider the Programme conforms to the Value for Money Accounting Officer standard with close scrutiny of the remaining legacy pathfinder sites required.

Feasibility

The programme now needs to build on the reset and robust assurance and governance in place to identify viable sites in sufficient numbers to deliver capacity by programme close and contribute towards hotel exit. The reset Programme takes the lessons from previous sites, while continuing to assess the ongoing viability of those legacy sites, to ensure that all due diligence is carried out and all risks to delivery set out for each site. This is done in tandem with really close working with partners across Government and a really robust focus on engagement with all stakeholders in order to ramp up delivery of more appropriate asylum accommodation and enable hotel closure.

I consider the Programme conforms to the Feasibility Accounting Officer standard.