

News story: Inspection Report

Published: An inspection of the EU Settlement Scheme

For the Home Office, the EU Settlement Scheme represents both a major challenge and a great opportunity.

On a practical level, the challenge is to process the applications to the Scheme that it receives from the estimated 3.5 million EU citizens living in the UK and ensure that each applicant is granted either settled status or pre-settled status in line with their rights. However, against a climate of mistrust of its intentions and its competence, it is not lost on the Home Office that the Scheme is also an opportunity to demonstrate what it is capable of achieving with the right resources, appropriate input from other government departments and ministerial support for a new (“looking to grant”) approach.

The draft EU Withdrawal Agreement referred to the creation of a new Independent Monitoring Authority to monitor the Scheme and investigate alleged breaches. Ahead of this, the government acknowledged that monitoring of the Scheme falls within my remit. Since the Scheme has been developed and rolled out in phases and will run at least until the end of 2020, my intention is to carry out a number of inspections of it.

In the first of these, I examined the progress the Home Office had made in designing and testing the Scheme, focusing on the Private Beta 2 (PB2) phase that ran between November and December 2018. I looked specifically at governance of the Project, at staffing, and at the learning the Home Office had gained from its testing, including from the trialling of the ‘EU Exit: ID Document Check app’ and from the inclusion in PB2 of a small cohort of vulnerable applicants. I also looked at internal and external communications in relation to the Scheme.

The inspection found areas for improvement and my report, submitted at the beginning of March, made seven recommendations, all of which the Home Office has now accepted. At the time of this inspection the Scheme had still to launch and therefore to be properly tested, however it is important to note that compared with many other areas of BICS, where systems and staff resources appear under constant strain, forcing them to be largely reactive and to juggle different demands, the EU Settlement Scheme stood out as having been afforded the preparation time, resources and organisational priority to succeed, and morale amongst the staff working on the Scheme, many of them new to the Home Office, was high. Maintaining this when the Scheme becomes ‘business as usual’ and workloads become more challenging will be crucial and a number of the recommendations go to this point.

The Scheme went ‘live’ on 30 March 2019, since when the rate of applications received has grown substantially. I therefore plan to carry out a further

inspection of the Scheme beginning later this month.