

With permission Mr Speaker I would like to make a statement on border security. In November last year, it became apparent that certain border security checks had been suspended without ministerial approval.

As a result, the Head of the UK Border Force was suspended with immediate effect, full controls were reinstated, and I commissioned John Vine, the independent Chief Inspector of the UK Border Agency, to report on what had happened.

Today, I have laid the report before the House and copies will be available from the Vote Office.

Checks have been suspended since at least 2007

The [Vine Report](#) reveals that security checks carried out at the border have been suspended regularly and applied inconsistently since at least 2007.

In June of that year ministers accepted a policy that allowed the limited suspension of Warnings Index checks on certain health and safety grounds. But the Vine Report found that those checks were suspended on many occasions for other reasons.

In July 2008, ministers approved the relaxation of Warnings Index checks for school coach parties at specified French ports. But the Vine Report found that the Border Force had waived checks for other passenger groups over and above what had been approved by ministers.

The Report also uncovered evidence that between 2007 and 2011, Warnings Index checks were not carried out on European Economic Area nationals travelling to the UK on Eurostar services from a number of French resorts. This is likely to have resulted in 500,000 EEA nationals not being checked against the Warnings Index.

To put those numbers into context, around 100 million passengers enter the UK each year. These Eurostar passengers are judged to be low risk and they still had their passports checked. But the fact remains that these suspensions were completely unauthorised and that is simply not acceptable.

The Vine Report is clear that the risk to the border needs to be kept in perspective. No one was waved through; everyone had their passports checked; and Warnings Index checks were almost always carried out so that those who had previously come to the attention of the authorities would still be identified and refused entry.

Quite reasonably, ministers under the last government gave permission for Warnings Index checks to be suspended in limited circumstances. But the Vine Report shows that the Border Force went much further, suspending those checks in unauthorised circumstances and abandoning them entirely for some passengers. The Report is clear that this happened without the authorisation of ministers under this government or the last government.

Confirmation that checks were suspended without authorisation

The Vine Report also makes clear that the suspension of checks of which I informed the House in November occurred without ministerial approval.

I've just described the suspension of Warnings Index checks, which date back several years, but the Report also finds that Secure ID – the system for checking the fingerprints of foreign nationals who require a visa to come to Britain – was suspended on a number of occasions without ministerial approval.

Although the Vine Report makes clear that there should have been a policy setting out the use of Secure ID when it was introduced from 2009, the Report finds that ministers and senior Border Force officials believed that Secure ID should be a mandatory check.

In May 2011 – when officials asked for permission to sometimes suspend Secure ID checks – I explicitly refused. Despite that clear instruction, the Vine Report finds that Secure ID checks continued to be suspended at Heathrow.

The Report also confirms that checks on the biometric chip – which contains a second photograph and no further information – were sometimes suspended without ministerial approval.

The pilot

The Vine Report makes clear that these suspensions of checks were, as I told the House last year, entirely separate from the pilot I authorised.

That pilot, I will remind the House, meant that – in limited circumstances – EEA national children, travelling with their parents or as part of a school group, would only be checked against the Warnings Index when assessed by a Border Force official to be a credible risk. It also allowed, in limited circumstances, Border Force officials the discretion to judge when to open the biometric chip – containing a second photograph – in the passports of EEA nationals.

The pilot was designed to focus resources on the highest-risk passengers and journeys, and allow Border Force officers to conduct more targeted, intelligence-led, checks. As the Home Affairs Select Committee concluded, it could have been a promising framework for a new approach to border security.

But as a result of the unauthorised suspension of checks, it is impossible to know fully what effect the pilot had. While we can remain open-minded about the principle of risk-based checks, they must only be implemented in a controlled and authorised way.

Operation Savant

The Vine Report also uncovered a local initiative at Heathrow, which allowed students from supposedly low-risk countries to enter the UK even when they did not have the necessary entry clearance. There was no ministerial authorisation for this activity.

The Report finds that Operation Savant, as it was called, was potentially discriminatory and unlawful. The Home Office Permanent Secretary is undertaking a review of this activity and will

decide whether any disciplinary action should follow. And that review will report by the end of March.

Mr. Speaker, the Vine Report reveals a Border Force that suspended important checks without permission; spent millions on new technologies but chose not to use them; was led by managers who did not communicate with their staff; and that sent reports to ministers that were inaccurate, unbalanced and excluded key information.

Recommendations

The Vine Report makes a series of recommendations about how to improve the operation at the border, and I accept them all. Many of them we're already implementing; the rest we will implement in full. But most importantly, I want to make clear to the House that all of the suspensions detailed in the Vine Report have now been stopped.

We will shortly issue an operating policy on the use of Secure ID fingerprint checks.

And we will follow that up by implementing a new operating mandate for border control.

This will detail the minimum level of mandatory checks for all passengers; it will set out which additional checks apply to which groups of passengers; and it will cover the opening of chips on passports, interviews for visa holders and the use of Secure ID. It will detail explicitly the additional checks that border officers can apply at their discretion; it will specify the record-keeping standards to be maintained; and it will make clear that no unauthorised suspension of checks is acceptable under any circumstances.

As part of our wider work to improve the border, we have already made a number of other important improvements.

We have separated immigration policy work from operations.

We have created a Strategy and Intelligence Directorate to analyse intelligence; measure performance; develop rules, procedures and guidance; and monitor compliance with those rules.

We have established a new UKBA Training Academy to raise professional standards.

And we are reviewing service standards for queuing times and staffing levels.

The future of Border Force

But, Mr Speaker, I do not believe the answer to the very significant problems exposed in the Vine Report is just a series of management changes. The Border Force needs a whole new management culture, and I can tell the House today that I have appointed Brian Moore, currently the Chief Constable of Wiltshire Police, as the interim Head of the Border Force.

In addition, from next year, the new National Crime Agency will be charged with improving our intelligence capability at the border, investigating serious and organised border crime, and tasking law enforcement assets across all the relevant agencies.

There are many hard-working and dedicated members of staff in Border Force. They want to get on with their work securing our border, and I want to make clear that this Report is in no way a criticism of them.

But, as the Home Affairs Select Committee and its Chairman have argued consistently, there is no getting away from the fact that UKBA, of which the Border Force is part, has been a troubled organisation since it was founded in 2008. From foreign national prisoners to asylum seeker backlog to the removal of illegal immigrants, it has reacted to a series of problems instead of positively managing its responsibilities.

With a new chief executive and a plan for comprehensive change, I believe that UKBA is in better hands for the future. But I also believe that the extent of the transformational change required – in the Agency's caseworking functions and in the Border Force – is too great for one organisation.

I can therefore tell the House that from 1 March, the UK Border Force will be split from UKBA and will become a separate operational command, with its own ethos of law enforcement, led by its own Director General, and accountable directly to ministers.

Mr Speaker, many of the changes I've outlined today cannot happen overnight: they will take time but we will make them as quickly as possible. They will ensure that not only will we have a stronger border in future, but that Border Force becomes the disciplined law enforcement organisation it was established to be.

And I commend this statement to the House.