BIOT Agreement: Questions and Answers

No.	Question	Answer
About the agreement		
1	**What is the BIOT agreement about?**	The agreement is a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the UK Government (UKG) and the St Helena Government (SHG). It covers preparations for the possible transfer of migrants in the event that they arrive in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). If migrants arrive, this will involve the processing and support they would receive. The MoU has been extended until April 2028, with further arrangements set out in Annex A and Annex B. Together, the annexes form the extension agreement. They build on the original MoU and provide newer arrangements, in the event that migrants arrive on BIOT, to cover gaps that were not addressed in the original MoU. Original BIOT MoU: https://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/documents/UK-St-Helena-MOU-BIOT-Migrants.pdf
2	**Why was the agreement extended?**	The extension reflects delays to the ratification of the UK–Mauritius treaty concerning the Chagos Archipelago. It maintains existing arrangements until April 2028 while providing additional safeguards, funding and support for St Helena. SHG agreed to support the UKG interests in the welfare of persons, who may arrive in BIOT, in return for enhanced financial support to meet SHG's strategic, social and economic development needs and aspirations.
3	**Has the agreement changed from the original MoU?**	Yes. The extension strengthens several areas, including funding, preparedness, health support, immigration capability, data protection arrangements and the detailed support that would be available if migrants were ever transferred to St Helena, helping to minimise risk.
4	**What is the purpose of Annex A?**	Annex A extends and updates the original MoU until April 2028 and sets out the additional funding, preparedness arrangements and support available to St Helena. It also sets out the maximum number of migrants who can be accommodated on St Helena at any one time. https://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/documents/biot-mou-annex-a/
5	**What is the purpose of Annex B?**	Annex B establishes a secure data-sharing framework that allows appropriate health and security screening to take place before any migrant transfer can occur. It includes strict safeguards to protect personal information: • Only relevant SHG personnel will have access to this information. For example, health staff will see health screening data, and immigration staff will see security screening data. • Information is shared on a need-to-know basis only. • Information is encrypted to keep it secure. https://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/documents/biot-mou-annex-b/
6	**Does the extension mean migrants will definitely come to St Helena?**	No. The extension maintains preparedness arrangements should they ever be required. Extending the agreement does not, in itself, mean that a transfer will take place.
Funding		
7	**What funding has the extension secured for St Helena?**	Under the extension, the UK Government has committed £9.3m for St Helena, and it is payable regardless of whether any migrants are transferred to St Helena. The funding has been agreed and is provided on a claims basis. It comprises: • £8m development funding for education, healthcare, telecoms and renewable energy: – £2.3m for the Education Review and School Reorganisation Programme, with a focus on securing Council of British International Schools (COBIS) accreditation. – £2m for the purchase of medical equipment and interim support for SHG work to introduce health standards, with a focus on lowering spend on overseas medical referrals. – £3.7m for telecoms and renewable energy networks, with a focus on developing an enabling environment that supports long-term economic stability and growth. • Up to £1.05m for preparedness work: suitable housing for transferred migrants, further training for customs and immigration staff, and improvements to immigration processing systems. Work is also under way on drafting legislation and policy. • £250,000 of unrestricted ex-gratia funding. This carries no conditions and has not yet been allocated, so it can be used for whatever SHG decides.
8	**What funding was provided under the original MoU?**	Under the original MoU, SHG was given £6.65m: • £1.65m to clear the overseas health referral waiting list, which was affecting SHG's ability to focus on its preventative health strategy. • £1.5m for implementation of the preventative health care strategy. • £2m to improve education through additional teaching capacity. • £1.5m towards the ICT Modernisation and Cyber Security Programme.
9	**Would St Helena have to pay for migrants arriving under these arrangements?**	No. The agreement is based on the principle that St Helena will not bear an unreasonable financial burden. For up to five years from arrival, the UK Government will provide funding for flight transfers, allowances, housing, healthcare, social care, education, policing, legal aid, interpretation and other services, if migrant arrivals were ever to occur. This is UK-funded, on top of the funding for St Helena set out above, so these costs do not fall on St Helena taxpayers.

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Numbers, transfers and safeguards		
10	**How many migrants could St Helena accommodate, and for how long could they stay?**	The agreement sets a maximum of 52 migrants at any one time. This figure is set by the accommodation available. Housing would be managed through private rentals, and the conversion of the ex-Longwood First School (adjacent to the St Helena Golf Club). Migrants could stay on St Helena for up to five years from their arrival, even if that goes beyond the end of the agreement in April 2028. UK Government funding and support would continue throughout that period, until they are naturalised, repatriated or relocated off the island (up to five years maximum).
11	**Would individuals arriving on BIOT automatically be transferred to St Helena, and how long would that process take?**	No. Arrival on BIOT does not automatically result in transfer to St Helena. Any individual being considered for transfer would first be subject to the necessary health, safeguarding and security assessments by St Helena Government to determine whether their needs can be appropriately supported within St Helena's services and infrastructure. Following completion of these assessments, and where St Helena Government confirms that a transfer can be appropriately accommodated, the UK Government would coordinate onward travel arrangements. While timescales may vary depending on individual circumstances and transport availability, transfers could take place within a relatively short period where all required checks have been completed and there are no unforeseen delays. St Helena Government is already undertaking planning and preparedness activities with relevant agencies to ensure that appropriate arrangements, procedures and support systems are in place should any transfers be approved. This work is intended to ensure that all health, safeguarding, security and operational considerations are properly managed before any arrival takes place.
12	**How would transfers to St Helena be managed?**	Any transfer of migrants under these arrangements would follow a managed process: 1. **Notification:** SHG is informed first if a transfer is requested. 2. **Screening:** UK authorities carry out security checks and health screening before any approval. 3. **Approval:** SHG reviews the results and can approve or decline the transfer. 4. **Transfer:** Only approved migrants travel, by controlled charter flight to St Helena, with UK funding and oversight. This process is designed to protect the welfare and safety of both those transferred and the wider St Helena community at every stage.
13	**What checks and safeguards apply after a transfer?**	Support and safeguards continue after arrival, so the process is managed through different stages beyond the transfer itself: • **On arrival:** initial screening (health, immigration and welfare checks) and accommodation placement. • **Ongoing:** welfare and integration support, and community cohesion management. • **Community safety:** policing and public order preparedness. Removal support is also available if an individual is considered a danger to the community.
Impact on the community		
14	**Will migrants arriving under these arrangements have more access to services and benefits than islanders?**	No. The agreement does not provide migrants with greater access to services or benefits than St Helenians. The arrangements are designed to ensure that any migrants transferred to St Helena have their basic needs met in accordance with international obligations, while ensuring that the costs of doing so do not fall on St Helena taxpayers or reduce services available to the local population.
15	**Would the arrival of migrants affect jobs?**	St Helena currently has gaps in employment that are not easily filled by the local workforce, particularly in roles such as carers, education staff and nursing staff. Migrants transferred to St Helena may be able to help fill some of these gaps, supporting the island's workforce rather than replacing existing jobs held by islanders.
Preparedness and public communication		
16	**How is SHG preparing for the possible arrival of migrants?**	SHG has been taking a proactive and coordinated approach to preparedness across a number of government services and partner agencies. Recognising that any response would require support from multiple sectors, we have adopted a multi-agency planning approach to ensure all key areas are considered, including immigration, health, education, housing, social care, safeguarding, emergency planning, policing and wider community support services. To support this work, SHG has already facilitated two multi-agency workshops involving relevant stakeholders to identify potential challenges, roles and responsibilities, and key actions required across government. These sessions have helped shape planning and strengthen coordination between agencies. The next phase of preparedness is a Tabletop Exercise, which will bring together participating agencies to test plans against a range of potential scenarios. The exercise will provide an opportunity to assess arrangements, identify any gaps, improve coordination, and ensure that all agencies understand their respective roles and responsibilities. While the timing and scale of any future arrivals remain uncertain, SHG's objective is to ensure that appropriate plans, processes and partnerships are in place so that the government is as prepared as possible to respond effectively should the need arise.
17	**How will the public be informed if a transfer to St Helena is proposed or confirmed?**	The public would only be informed once the go-ahead has been given for any migrants to be transferred. Communication would be made only through official SHG channels, to ensure that authentic information from a reputable source is provided. Details of what information can be shared, and where people can find updates or ask questions, have not yet been determined. These can only be confirmed if the scenario arises.