

Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board Charter Flight Monitoring Team

**For reporting year
1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024**

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Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. The role of the Independent Monitoring Board Charter Flight Monitoring Team

The Charter Flight Monitoring Team (CFMT) was created on an administrative, non-statutory basis by agreement between Home Office Immigration Enforcement (HOIE) and the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) Management Board. The role of the CFMT is to monitor and report on the conditions for and treatment of people detained under immigration powers who are removed from the UK on charter flights. Its remit begins when the individual is transferred to the custody of overseas escorts and ends at the point of handover to local officials at the receiving destination. It is best practice that the CFMT also attends the briefing to overseas escorts when they muster for an operation.

To enable the CFMT to carry out our role effectively we should be afforded the same assistance as IMBs appointed on a statutory basis, with regards to monitoring rights.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that States designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMB is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

2. Background to the report

The CFMT monitored the collections and flew on eight charter operations over the year to Albania, one to Romania, one to Vietnam/East Timor and one to Pakistan. The CFMT observed the collections, but did not fly, of one operation to Nigeria and Ghana.

Those subject to removal were, principally, individuals transferred from a prison to the immigration detention estate prior to removal. We calculate that around 50% chose to leave voluntarily. Removal of the others was enforced.

HOIE achieved contemporaneous oversight of stages of the removal process on the day. An escorting contract monitor attended a staff briefing, a collection from an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), sometimes from two, and flew on all the flights we observed.

The aircraft were chartered by HOIE. Mitie Care and Custody Limited (C&C) remained HOIE's escort contractor. Healthcare services were again provided by IPRS Aeromed (Aeromed), contracted by C&C. C&C also contracted the coach company, whose vehicles were used to take returnees from IRCs to the airport.

3. Key points

3.1 Main findings

Safety

- As reported in last year's report, the HOIE continued to remove people with known vulnerabilities, whether around their mental health or their risk of harming themselves. Examples are given in the body of this report.
- There was an increase in the use of restraint on returnees as compared with 2023.

Fair and humane treatment

- As with last year, on each operation, C&C had to respond logistically to HOIE's requirements. Returnees were to be collected from detention sites around the country and delivered to the departure airport in good time. All the short haul escorting operations started in the night. HOIE determined in which detention sites returnees would be held. Some were located far from departure airports, which were also selected by HOIE. The impact on returnees of night operations and road journeys to airports, during which they were held in vehicles for hours, needs continued scrutiny.
- Provision of professional interpreters for the returnees was better this year than last. Use of the telephone translating service, The Big Word, in the absence of a professional interpreter, was only occasional, despite the need for it. On three occasions, escorts who spoke another language were used to interpret. We believe interpreters should be used on all operations, and even on returns to countries where English is widely spoken, interpreting support may be needed.
- Again, we consistently observed escorts' friendly approach towards returnees when transferred to their custody. Our own data was supplemented by analysis of other records, which gave positive examples of conversations between a returnee and the personal escort during the journey.

Health and wellbeing

- Last year the CFMT raised concerns around the removal of a man in the summer directly from a psychiatric unit. A similar removal took place this reporting year. Despite the IMB receiving legal advice that direction orders were not correctly signed off, the Home Office are consulting their own lawyers and that advice, at time of writing this report, is still not available.
- We were pleased to note that on at least two occasions a decision was made not to go ahead with a removal due to concerns over a returnee's physical and mental health well-being.

Preparation for return

- We do not know the extent to which returnees had been prepared for removal in advance in either their prisons or in the immigration detention estate.
- Despite assurances that the person concerned had consented to his return, we were not able to discover the extent to which the returnee taken from a psychiatric unit had been properly prepared for removal.

- The Home Office Reintegration Programme, IRARA (International Return and Reintegration Assistance), was introduced in August 2023 to assist the return and reintegration of people who have no legal right to remain in the UK. An explanatory leaflet, in English or the language of the country people are returned, is offered when returnees were transferred to the custody of the overseas escorts. The purpose of the leaflet is not explained in every instance it is handed to the returnee. Not every person we observed being collected received the leaflet, however the Home Office informed us that IRAR leaflets are contained in each pack which is handed to the returnee.

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

It is neither fair nor humane to subject people being removed from the country:

- to a process for their delivery to the airport, which always takes place through the night, to meet an arrival timetable HOIE has agreed with the overseas authorities and
- (as part of this process) to hours of confinement in vehicles to reach departure airports selected by HOIE.

A fairer and more humane approach should be adopted.

TO HOIE

- The processes used to identify interpretation needs are unreliable and should be improved. Consideration should be given to having translators on all operations, including ones where it might be considered most of the returnees might speak English.
- In the Board's view, the risk assessments should be written in such a way to ensure clarity, avoiding, for example, too many acronyms. This would mean that the document could be easily understood by escorting staff and observers.
- The use of single aisle aircraft presents a challenge to both the Chief Immigration Officer (CIO, an Immigration Enforcement representative who travels on flights) and the returnees wishing to speak with the CIO. On occasion, the CIO is unable to talk to everyone because aisles are blocked for (flight) operational reasons. Consideration should be given as to how the CIO's 'surgery' could best be carried out so that all returnees are given an opportunity to meet with the CIO.

TO HOIE AND TO THE ESCORTING CONTRACTOR

- The length of time returnees are held in coaches, before the road journey to the selected airport even begins, is another long-standing concern of the CFMT. These long periods of confinement have continued and should be reduced.

TO THE ESCORTING CONTRACTOR

- The plan given in response to our previous annual reports, detailing the various steps escorts would take to achieve interpreting support for returnees

when a professional interpreter was not present, has been achieved to only a limited extent. The plan was impressive, but it needs to be fully delivered.

- We recommend that further discussions take place with IRCs about locating suitable areas where – once they have gone through the induction process – returnees can be held before boarding a coach.

3.3 Response to the last report

In this section, the CFMT provides an update on progress made on the principal recommendations and concerns raised since the last annual report, published in July 2024.

Ref	Recommendation / Issue / Concern	Accepted / Partially Accepted / Not Accepted	Comments	Progress Ongoing or completed
1	<p>It is neither fair nor humane to subject people being removed from the country:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to a process for their delivery to the airport, which always takes place through the night, in order to meet an arrival timetable HOIE has agreed with the Albanian authorities and • (as part of this process) to hours of confinement in vehicles in order to reach departure airports selected by HOIE. <p>A fairer and more humane approach should be adopted. This long-standing concern of ours is recorded in paragraphs 5.2, 5.4.1 and 5.4.5.</p>	Not Accepted	<p>The departure time of all charter flights is carefully planned and considers several factors, including stipulations by receiving countries on arrival time, minimising impacts on the wider Immigration Removal Centre (IRC estate and residents, public order and transport disruption risks (day-time travel to airports means far longer journey times, and so more time on coaches). Receiving countries are influenced by a number of factors when agreeing landing timing requests such as balancing against peak arrival times and having suitable numbers of officials and support staff available for swift processing. A benefit of arriving in the morning is that this enables individuals who are being returned to make onward journeys during the daytime.</p> <p>To maximise the robustness of our delivery model, we operate from multiple locations to spread risk and mitigate against over reliance on one departure point. The portfolio of airports we</p>	N/A

			operate out of is regularly reviewed to ensure they represent the best options when considering all impacting factors of the charter operations. This includes distance from IRCs and initiating discussions with airport operators where we identify new departure airports that would offer optimum operating conditions. However, operational planning always aims to minimise the length of operation and time on coaches.	
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TO HOIE

2	The processes used to identify interpretation needs are unreliable and should be improved: section 5.9.6.	Accepted	The Home Office has identified a number of procedural changes to enhance the communication between teams to better identify the interpretation needs of detained individuals. These processes are currently being reviewed and implementation of these changes are expected to be completed by the end September 2024. Once implemented, this will be communicated to the CFMT's team leader.	Ongoing
3	Senior escorts' lack of familiarity with the current version of the ACDT should be urgently addressed: paragraph 4.4.5.	Accepted	<p>All staff are trained on the relevance and completion of ACDT's during the Initial Training Courses (ITCs) and do not complete the course until such standards are achieved.</p> <p>ACDT's are also covered in the annual DCO refresher training that is a mandatory requirement for staff to attend. The current ACDT version has now been in place for over 18 months, so all staff have covered this version either in ITC or refresher training. Additionally, we will highlight the process before each return and for staff to speak with senior managers</p>	Ongoing

			<p>should they be unfamiliar during our briefing process prior to each returns operation.</p> <p>There are areas of improvements which have been identified in the quality of the documentation. We are working with Heathrow IRC colleagues who have recently developed a comprehensive quality assurance tool which we plan to adopt from 30 September 2024.</p>	
TO HOIE AND TO THE ESCORTING CONTRACTOR				
4	<p>The length of time returnees are held in coaches, before the road journey to the selected airport even begins, is another long-standing concern of ours. These long periods of confinement have continued and should be reduced: paragraphs 5.4.2, 5.4.2.1 and 5.4.4.</p>	Accepted	<p>It is operationally challenging to reduce coach waiting times due to location of centres and airports however we do aim to minimise this. We recognise the impact this can have on individual wellbeing and endeavour to counter this by providing distraction packs to all returnees.</p> <p>We also endeavour to reduce coach waiting times by deploying advance parties to prepare documentation and property to streamline collections. We are developing a tracking tool so that we can identify trends around coach waiting times and explore any outliers either particularly long or particularly short waiting times with an eye to further streamline collections.</p>	Ongoing

5	<p>TO THE ESCORTING CONTRACTOR</p> <p>Interpretation support</p> <p>The plan given in response to our 2022 annual report, detailing the various steps escorts would take to achieve interpreting support for returnees when a professional interpreter was not present, has been achieved to only a limited extent. The plan was impressive. It needs to be fully delivered.</p>	Accepted	<p>Since the last report, we have improved our interpretation support by ensuring that interpreters are available in person and if not, then to have interpreters available by phone. We remind staff of this requirement through Charter Flight Muster Briefings, Notice to Staff (NTS) and highlight this during Detention Custody Officer Manager meetings. This area has also been added to the compliance internal audit baseline and is reviewed during all Care & Custody Overseas Escorting Charter Flight internal audits; biannual audits continue to be completed and are shared with the Home Office.</p> <p>Additionally, the translation app is available all C&C work phones which, in addition to translation tablets, enables all coach commanders / team leaders to access translation should it be needed. This is monitored by the Overseas Performance Management Team, as well as the ES Compliance Team with lessons learned fed through to staff for continuous improvement.</p>	Ongoing
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Evidence sections 4 – 6

4. Safety

4.1 Escorts' briefings

4.1.1 Escorts are briefed when they muster for an operation by the Senior Security Officer in charge of the operation. A checklist is used. The topics relating to returnees' safety are, principally:

- availability of risk assessments for each returnee
- release of a restraint could only be authorised by the escorts' security team leader
- that all returnees must be told about the use of body worn video cameras (BWVCs) at various stages during the operation
- all returnees should be addressed by name and not a number

4.1.2 These principal points were consistently covered in the muster briefings we observed. The escorts listened quietly. Escorts new to charters were identified during the muster and given further briefings. We observed on several operations that returnees' individual risk assessments were circulated later to some escorts, but not all. We remain unconfident that returnees' current vulnerabilities are always recorded on these assessments.

4.2 Induction by the escorts at the collection sites

4.2.1 Induction took place immediately after the returnee had been transferred to the escorts' custody inside the IRC. The area used for this purpose is generally suitable, although sometimes cramped. Inductions, known as a 'meet and greet' are given by the lead escort. Each returnee is individually presented. The lead escort goes through a checklist. The time spent on induction tended to be short. The inductions we observed were mostly carried out competently. One lead escort, in a rush to meet his timetable mixed up the paperwork for two returnees and it needed one of the returnees to point this out.

4.2.2 The lead escorts introduce themselves by first name and address the returnee by first name, sometimes checking in advance on its pronunciation and then check that the returnee knows they were being removed to their country of origin that day. As reported in our previous report, all did, some more accepting than others.

- A few were distressed: for example, particularly on long haul returns there were occasions on which people wept or displayed emotion during most of their induction.
- Some were reluctant to co-operate with the process because lawyers or their families were still trying to challenge their removal.
- There were some that had issues about missing property.

4.2.3 It is standard that the lead escort then asks whether the returnee understands English or needs interpretation support before passing on the basic checklist information. We doubt whether an affirmative statement from returnees that they speak English or do not need an interpreter is always a reliable indicator of their ability to understand the information they were about to be given, as it is novel and some of it about process.

4.2.4 Returnees are routinely told:

- They would be filmed at various times and most lead escorts drew attention to their BWCs.
- They cannot keep their own mobile phones but would have access to one later. Lead escorts mostly encourage returnees to write down any numbers they might want to call during the journey as their SIM cards would not be available until after they reach their final destination.
- They will be searched. This is a pat-down search, most of the time conducted in conditions of privacy.
- They can use a toilet before leaving the building. Most lead escorts, but not all, alerted returnees to this possibility.
- There is an information pack for each of them.

The returnees then check and sign for their property and leave the building to join the vehicle in which they would travel to the airport.

4.2.5 Each returnee has a Person Escort Record (PER) in which escorts were required to make regular entries. The escorts' first entry records the induction. If that first entry is to be objectively credible, it must be written at the time, not in advance. We were not entirely confident that all entries are contemporaneous. The first entries simply recorded the check list items and omitted anything out of the ordinary, even if it was positive. We remain concerned that although use of force (UOF) forms are later attached to the PER, sometimes no brief record or mention is made in the PER of any UoF being necessary.

4.2.6 C&C intend the basic information given on induction to be reinforced and supplemented once returnees are in the vehicle in which they will travel to the airport. We concluded from our analysis of PERs over the year that this mostly happens, but not always. However, we continue to have concerns around returnees' comprehension of information given to them in the vehicle in English, when there was already evidence that they did not understand English.

4.3 Coaches driven unsafely

4.3.1 This reporting year the standard of coach driving seems to have improved. There was one incident where use of a mobile phone's sat nav application meant that a coach on the way to an IRC was diverted down a route many observers felt was not suitable for a large vehicle. At night there are frequently road closures and care should be taken to ensure that appropriate alternative routes are mapped.

4.4 Returnees with specific vulnerabilities

4.4.1 We continue to witness a number of returnees expressing fear for their personal safety on return to their destination countries.

4.4.2 Returnees' actual or threatened self-harm in face of return is not considered by HOIE to be a barrier to removal.

4.4.3 An assessment care in detention and teamwork (ACDT, used to support returnees who are at risk of self-harm and suicide) plan should be opened in an IRC for an individual whose risk of self-harm is known. The objective is to manage risk.

4.4.4 Last year the CFMT noted the significant increase in returnees being subject to ACDTs. We did not know what had driven it. This year there was a decrease, but we are concerned about any future increase in returnees leaving on open plans.

4.4.5 Current ACDT documents must travel with the subject returnee and be maintained by the escorts until the returnee leaves the plane. They should be handed to the escorts in the IRC.

4.4.6 Indicators of vulnerability of other sorts were also not a barrier to removal:

- Once again, a returnee who was an in-patient in a secure psychiatric unit was taken directly from it to the charter flight. Another was collected from a medium secure mental health unit. In both cases removal directions were signed by medical staff at those units. They were not authorised to do so. We raised this issue at senior levels within the Home Office.
- On operations the CFMT monitored, there were 68 returnees transferred to the custody of the escorts who were on the IRC's Adult at Risk Register (AaR) – a large increase over what we observed last year - and two others on Vulnerable Adult Care Plans (VACPs).

4.4.7 There continues to be inconsistency between vulnerabilities listed on the main manifest compared to those recorded on individual Risk Indicator sheets. It is essential that known risks of suicide and self-harm are communicated to others into whose custody the returnee is passed.

4.4.8 We continue to observe that escorts with good inter-personal skills were given the role of sitting with returnees on care plans during the road journey.

4.5. Use of restraint and of force

4.5.1 Detention Service Order 07/2016 (the DSO) regulates the use of restraint and force on escorted moves for charters. Practitioners must comply with the requirements of the Home Office manual on escorting safely. Permissible criteria for use of restraint or of force include to prevent self-harm and to prevent individuals obstructing their removal.

4.5.2 We were present during some uses of restraint and were later given the official reports on all recorded uses over the operations we had observed. We were also given official reports on some individual cases we tracked remotely. We were told HOIE reviews each use of restraint or of force, including camera footage, and feeds back its observations to C&C.

4.5.3 The waist restraint belt (WRB) was the most used form of restraint. It can be applied in one of three positions: free, which allows unrestricted arm and hand movement; restricted, which allows some arm and hand movement; and secure, which totally restricts such movement. Netting can also be applied over a WRB in the secure position. The WRB can be adjusted from one position to another. If the returnee does not physically resist application of the WRB, its use is categorised as a passive use of force.

4.5.4 This year it was applied to 17 people over the operations we observed, each time during the induction process. We note the increase from the past year. We are concerned about future increases if returnee cohorts include even more people who challenge their enforced removal than we observed this year.

4.5.5 Only one of the 17 returnees in a WRB physically resisted the application of this restraint. The secure position was used initially five times and the restricted position in 11. We are unclear about the position in the remaining cases.

4.5.6 There were two particularly extreme examples of use of force (UoF). These are detailed in the appendix.

4.5.7 The DSO expectations are that:

- Use of restraint or force should be for the minimum time possible

Returnees were not usually released from a WRB until a few minutes after the plane had taken off. This appears to be C&C's standard approach. One returnee in a WRB in the restricted position was released from the belt at the airport before he boarded the plane.

- Duration should be continuously reviewed

We observed that the retention of a WRB in the secure position was reviewed and adjusted to the restricted position (typically at the airport) or adjusted earlier to this position on one side, to enable the man to make a phone call or take off his jersey.

- Use of restraint or force should be filmed

From our observations, filming did occur when a WRB was applied inside an IRC.

- Use of restraint or force should be fully documented

We, again, noted discrepancies between relevant reports on timings and WRB positions, casting doubt on the reliability of these records. It is important that all timings are recorded accurately.

4.5.8 The blanket policy of holding returnees' arms by guiding holds as they each walked up the steps into the plane was abandoned in January 2022, although this hands-off approach was still subject to individual risk assessment. Use of guiding holds in the operations observed this year was exceptional. Close escorting remained the norm, with three, four or, occasionally, five escorts walking up the steps with a returnee, but having no physical contact with him or her.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1. The timing of transfers into the detention estate

Some returnees were transferred from prisons into the immigration detention estate just before their removal. These transfers continue to be usually completed during the daytime.

5.2 Night operations

Transfer of custody to the escorts and all journeys to the airport as with last year happened during the night to Albania or Romania. The receiving authorities in Albania required returnees to arrive before noon, local time. We do not know if that applies to return flights to Romania. If HOIE's chosen airport was in the north-west or in the south-west, the escorts typically started taking custody of returnees from detention sites in the south-east before midnight. If the airport was in the Midlands or the south-east, they, as with last year they typically started between midnight and 01:00 hrs.

5.3 Transfer of custody to the overseas escorts

5.3.1 A small team of escorts, known as an advance party, arrived at the IRC earlier than the main escorting cohort. Their role was to deal with returnees' property. They continue to not be deployed at every site.

5.3.2 Escorts' approach on induction is recorded in section 4.2. We additionally noted returnees were not told how long the road journey might be. A clear indication could be given during induction, when the returnee is asked whether he wishes to use the toilet before leaving the building. There is a toilet on the coach, but conditions are inadequate (see paragraph 5.5.2). Returnees are not told from which airport the plane would leave. This is the standard approach on the grounds of security.

5.4 The length of in-vehicle confinement to which some returnees were subjected

5.4.1 The length of in-vehicle confinement has been an issue of serious concern to us for a number of years. It has been expressed in annual reports, as well as routinely in our reports on individual operations. The experience for those subject to removal has not improved. Our assessment of HOIE decisions or requirements that impact directly on C&C's operational timetabling is recorded in this section. Holding returnees in coaches for hours demeans them. A worst-case example: one man was held in a coach for eight and-a-half hours between the time he got onto it and when he boarded the plane.

5.4.2 After induction, the returnee gets into the vehicle in which he or she will travel to the airport, usually a coach. They then sit in it until all the other returnees who are to travel in it have got on. The wait before the vehicle pulls out to start the road journey can be long. Our worst-case examples this year, like last year are of one person held in a parked vehicle inside the IRC for just under four hours, and others for lesser periods but more than three hours.

5.4.2.1 Long periods of in-vehicle confinement before the road journey started were not occasional. Whilst many were shorter than our worst cases, they were long.

5.4.3 As per last year- we suggested that once returnees had been inducted, they and their escorts be accommodated in an area within the IRC until they actually needed to get onto the coach. We were told C&C had discussed this with staff in a couple of IRCs. The suggestion was rejected. The CFMT suggest that this be revisited.

5.4.4 There still exists the problem that when two coaches are used when a large returnee cohort is to be collected from the two IRCs in the south-east the secure parking area inside two of the IRCs in the south-east is restricted. Two coaches cannot manoeuvre in it at the same time, and full coaches do not always leave until the other coach is ready to depart. This adds about two hours to the time the returnees in coach 1 are held in the coach outside the IRC before their road journey starts.

5.4.5 In some previous annual reports we recommended against continued use of airports far from some IRCs. The recommendation was always rejected. HOIE's continued choice of airports far from some IRCs contributed significantly to the length of time returnees spent held in a vehicle this year. We have evidence of road journeys accounting for over five hours. Returnees' tiredness and frustration about a long road journey is evident from some records.

5.4.6 The final period of in-vehicle confinement was the time spent on a coach between arrival at the airport and boarding the plane. Worst case examples:

- Returnees held on a coach at the airport for more than three hours.
- Another cohort of returnees, on a different operation, held in their coach at the airport for two hours 40 minutes.

5.4.7 Distance of travel had other impacts. A couple of flights took off late: one from an airport in the south-west, because of the late arrival of a coach from a detention site in Lincolnshire; and the other from an airport in the north-west, because of the late arrival of coaches from a detention site in the south-east. Motorway traffic during the night can be expected to be less busy than in the day but motorway roadworks contributed to the length of some journeys.

5.5 Forms of transport and amenities

5.5.1 Most returnees travelled to the airport in a coach, provided by C&C's contractor. Some travelled in C&C vans (known as Chase vehicles), typically a returnee in a WRB. Our data indicated that vans were used around 19 times.

5.5.2 There is a small WC on a coach. For most of the year, returnees did not have complete privacy of use: the door was kept slightly ajar. As in previous years, not all the WCs were fit for purpose. On one occasion, we reported the unsanitary conditions including lack of hot water. The coach driver asked escorts whether they could provide hand sanitiser. On another coach, the cubicle light was not working.

5.5.3 In the absence of toilets, disposable urine bags were carried in the vans. Their use is, necessarily, public and demeaning. We have some evidence of escorts encouraging a man to wait until they could offer access to a toilet on a coach at the airport.

5.5.4 Recreational packs were available on coaches, but returnees were not usually interested, perhaps preferring to try and sleep for some of the night en route to a departure airport.

5.5.5 A single-aisle plane was used on all but one of the operations observed to Albania and Romania and a twin-aisled plane to Vietnam/East Timor and Pakistan. On the Vietnam/East Timor operation where, due to the aircraft becoming inoperable – which led to a long delay in Vietnam with returnees and escorts plus others having to remain on the original aircraft for a long period of time - returnees and escorting staff were transferred to a smaller aircraft. Each returnee was seated beside his or her personal escort and sometimes, in the larger planes, between two.

5.5.6 Seating and toilets in the planes is typical in economy class. Pillows and blankets are available, but we never saw these being offered on the flights to Albania. We believe that the requirement of a carrier to provide these has been dropped.

5.6 Clothing and food

5.6.1 Most of the returnees we observed being collected were suitably dressed for travel, a consideration to which most escorts were alert. We have evidence that clothes and trainers were given to a few returnees who were only wearing t-shirts or sliders. A few returnees asked to change their clothes before leaving their IRC and were allowed to.

5.6.1.1 We once saw inconsistencies in approach. The lead escort required all the men to remove their belts, which were then placed in their hold luggage. We have not seen this approach since. Additionally, some returnees were allowed to wear their jewellery and others not. The rationale is not apparent.

5.6.2 Returnees were routinely offered snacks and water on the coaches. The bottled water ran out on one occasion and the returnees on that coach had to wait until they were on the plane. A cooked Halal meal or meals (depending on how long the flight took) was offered on all the operations.

5.6.3 Returnees were offered nicotine substitutes; however, these were not often accepted.

5.7 Relationships between staff and returnees

5.7.1 We continue to observe the escorts we see deployed on inductions and searches had a respectful and mostly friendly approach to people subject to removal, trying to put them at ease during this stressful part of the removal process. Our analysis of PERs again show examples of positive engagement between a returnee and the personal escort during the journey. There were exceptions, for example:

- There still continue to be entries that simply record “welfare check”. This is a meaningless entry unless the extent and quality of the check is recorded
- In one operation monitored the PER showed no recorded engagement between a returnee and the personal escort for the 50 minutes after the man had been told that the representations his lawyers had made to have his removal cancelled had failed.

5.7.2 We observed all the returnees on the inductions being told about an information pack and either given it then or when on their coach. Its contents included an official Home Office complaints form, a charter information leaflet and also a leaflet about reintegration support available on arrival. These documents were in the language of the nation people were being returned to. We have evidence that some escorts later tried to explain the contents of the pack.

5.7.5 Escorts listened to issues returnees raised with them during induction or later during the removal process, although could not usually resolve them, particularly if around immigration status and removal.

5.8 Relationships on the plane between HOIE and returnees

5.8.1 Each flight was led by a chief immigration officer (CIO). Access to the CIO during the flight was potentially available to all returnees. It was an opportunity to raise immigration issues with the only person who had the professional competence to address them during this last stage of the removal journey. Many returnees declined the opportunity. We were not satisfied that everyone had been told about it before getting on the plane. However, C&C administrative officers walked through the plane compiling a list of returnees who wanted to see the CIO. We were also not satisfied that everyone who wanted to, did have the chance to access the CIO in the end.

5.8.2 On some flights, the conversation with the CIO was at the returnee's plane seat and on others in a designated area of the plane. A professional interpreter was always present. Members of C&C's flight security team were always close by. The conversations were not private and could not be, given aircraft layout.

5.8.3 The CIO asked each returnee whether they were content for our representative to listen before the conversation started. All consented.

5.8.4 The CIO always gave the returnee a courteous hearing and was firm when giving bad news. Some CIOs told the returnee that he or she would be taking notes.

5.8.5 However, in some cases turbulence during a flight (requiring people to return to their seats), or a delay in meal service meaning aisles were blocked, prevented the CIO from seeing all the people who wished to meet with them. We urge that a way is found to ensure that all returnees wishing to see a CIO have the chance to do so.

5.9 Equality and diversity

5.9.1 Returnees' access to interpreting support

The interpreters HOIE use are self-employed. We were sometimes told it was not possible to provide professional cover at each detention site, whether for this or some other reason.

5.9.2 Interpreters usually attend the staff muster, then inductions at, at least one detention site, and then travel with returnees to the airport in their coach. At least one always flies. Their services continue to be well-used during all aspects of induction including during a search or to assist communication with the paramedic. Their services are sometimes called on again during a coach journey. The flying interpreter(s) are kept busy, assisting escorts' contacts with returnees and with the CIO.

5.9.3 Non-flying interpreters always remain landside at the airport.

5.9.4 In our observation, interpreters' approach to returnees was friendly and professional.

5.9.5 When an interpreter does not attend at an IRC, escorts should use a telephone translation service known as The Big Word for returnees needing interpreting support, as the first alternative. During the year, an app was also used by lead escorts on their phones, although we noticed a significant gap between theory and practice. We noted a welcome reduction in the number of returnees being used to interpret for others.

5.9.6 Returnees are given important information during induction and later, which is new to nearly all of them. Comprehension is vital. A returnee's ability to speak English is assessed in advance by staff in the IRC. As last year, we routinely found some of these assessments unreliable. An example: 11 returnees were inducted at an IRC. An interpreter attended. Seven were assessed in advance as needing the interpreter; in fact, all but one did.

5.9.6.1 Time and again, we noted some lead escorts appeared to accept a returnee's assurance about English, implying that the returnee was sufficiently familiar with the language to understand the information then given, usually at speed. We remain unconvinced that the reality of comprehension was tested on each occasion.

5.9.6.2 We had too many examples of an escort sitting with a returnee in a coach noting the returnee's English was limited but persisting with explanations, seemingly giving no thought to the merits of using The Big Word or testing comprehension.

5.10 The treatment of women returnees

Women removed on the operations observed were accompanied by female escorts throughout. Appropriate sensitivity was shown when women needed to be searched, and head coverings removed.

5.11 Faith and pastoral support

5.11.1 We did not observe pastoral support being offered during the removal process on the day.

5.12 Property

5.12.1 Returnees' property travelled in the hold of the plane. Returnees each had an individual bag. Escorts in an advance party bagged property before induction started. This made for a smoother process although advance parties did not attend at all sites. Returnees were given the opportunity of checking their property and were told how to identify their bag on arrival at the destination airport. Returnees' valuables were put in a clear plastic bag. In January we again observed the staff at an IRC giving escorts valuables bags issued by the Prison Service and clearly so marked. Their use was demeaning. We flagged it to HOIE immediately and the practice seems now to have ended.

5.12.2 Some returnees had issues around missing property which they raised with the escorts:

- The most frequent complaint continues to be about mobiles, ID documents and driving licences last seen when the individual had been detained in a police station. The lead escorts understandably continue to not be able to resolve these issues and some encouraged returnees to make a formal written complaint. Complaint forms were included in the information packs and also on the plane. In a few cases, missing documents had reached the CIO, and this was confirmed to the returnee owner on the plane.
- There were continued complaints about missing money. In one case, a returnee reported that the amount recorded during their property check was incorrect. This was confirmed, and IRC staff subsequently located and ensured the substantial balance belonging to them was correct
- A few returnees were in possession of postal orders. The lead escorts were observed explaining that the returnee needed to contact the sender in this country about how to obtain a refund.
- On the collections for the flight to Vietnam and East Timor, confusion about which returnee was being met meant that one returnee almost was handed a large sum of money that was in fact another returnee's property. It was only the honesty of the man that avoided this mistake, and the money returned to its rightful owner.

5.13 Complaints

5.13.1 Returnees had access to guidance on making an official complaint to the Home Office and complaint forms throughout the journey from their stay in an IRC to removal on the day. Completed forms were handed to the CIO on the plane. We were notified of 27 complaints over the year. There was only one alleging physical mistreatment during a charter operation. It was accepted as a Detention Services complaint and was referred to the Professional Standards Unit (PSU) for investigation. The complaint was unsubstantiated. However, the CFMT were not happy with the terms of the reply because it contained no real evidence of in-depth investigation. The complaint's PER and the UoF reports were supplied to the PSU but there is no express reference to consideration of this data in the reply.

5.13.2 Whilst we are entitled to be notified of complaints made during charter operations, we are not informed to the outcome unless the complaint fell to be investigated by C&C. Complaints lodged during a charter operation hardly ever relate to events on the flight.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Fitness to fly

Returnees are deemed fit to fly unless assessed to the contrary by a healthcare professional. Of the operations we monitored, on one occasion the paramedic overseeing collections at an IRC decided that a returnee was not fit to fly due to medical concerns, and at another collection a return was cancelled owing to concerns about the mental health of another man due to be returned.

6.2 Physical or mental health care risk indicators

At the staff muster escorts were routinely informed that risk assessments were available for them to read later, although not all healthcare indicators were recorded on the risk indicator document they saw. The risk assessments are often difficult to decipher due to obscure and occasionally obsolete acronyms and the CFMT has regularly asked if they can be made more comprehensible, so it is easy for everyone – including escorts – to understand the risk indicators.

6.3 The role of the Aeromed paramedics

6.3.1 One, sometimes two, paramedics attend at each detention site from which returnees were collected. The paramedics assume responsibility for the physical and mental healthcare of every person subject to removal, taking charge of any confidential medical documents and prescribed medication for the whole of the journey. One paramedic generally travelled to the airport in the coach with those being removed. Two paramedics generally travelled on each of the flights we observed.

6.4 Medical interventions

6.4.1 The paramedics attend to people who complain of minor ailments during the removal process and dispense over the counter and prescribed medication as necessary.

6.4.2 The most common minor ailments of which the returnees complained continue to be headache, muscular pain and motion sickness.

6.4.3 The paramedics conducted healthcare checks of returnees with documented health issues and made interventions. We observed paramedics administering medication to returnees at the appropriate time, as had been advised by medical staff at the IRCs from which people had been collected.

6.5 The approach of the paramedics

6.5.1 None of us is a healthcare professional. Subject to that caveat, it seemed to us that continuity of care during the removal process on the day was appropriate

6.5.2 We have some evidence of forward planning around availability of prescribed medication. For example, a paramedic ensured that prescribed medication accompanied a returnee in the van in which they were to travel to the airport.

6.6 Examination after use of restraint or force

A paramedic should examine a returnee on whom force, or restraint has been used for signs of injury, if the individual consents. We have evidence these examinations were carried out although typically not immediately after the restraint had been released. We have an example of escorts loosening a restraint at the paramedic's request.

6.7 Respect for medical confidentiality

6.7.1 For most of the year the paramedics returned medication and medical notes to their owners towards the end of the flight. Last year we reported that returnees' prescribed medication was handed over, en masse, to the Albanian receiving authorities, seemingly at their request. We continue to consider these handovers of medical documents and medication to be a potential, if not actual, breach of medical confidentiality, and there was no guarantee, as far as we were aware, that they would be restored to their rightful owners. Returnees continued to be offered their medical notes, in a sealed envelope, before the end of the flight.

6.7.2 Not all returnees wanted to take their medical notes with them. They were not obliged to.

7. Preparation for return and re-integration support

7.1 Timely preparation for removal

We continue to not be able to gauge to what extent people subject to removal were properly prepared in advance in either their IRC or, in some cases, in their prisons.

7.2.1 Financial support

Financial support is available of a resettlement grant under the FRS scheme, available to eligible foreign national offenders who had agreed to leave voluntarily. Payment is downloaded to a card which the successful applicant was given on the plane with an explanatory letter in English. The flying interpreter explained the procedure.

7.3 The Home Office programme, known as IRARA, was introduced in August of 2023. It is intended to assist the return and reintegration of foreign nationals who have no legal right to remain in the UK into the country to which they are returning to. The programme offers a wide range of services, providing assistance on arrival and longer-term support.

7.3.1 An explanatory leaflet should be included in the general information pack returnees were offered. We did not witness these information leaflets being included in packs handed to people returning to Nigeria and Ghana.

7.3.2 We understood that IRARA representatives would be on hand in the processing centre to which returnees were taken after leaving the plane. We do not know if this was actually the case. In 2024 we asked for evidence of the take up of this programme, but we were told this information is not held centrally.

7.4 Continuing access to independent legal advice

Returnees who wanted to contact their lawyers after collection could use a C&C mobile phone up to the point when the flight took off. We reported the lack of such a phone on a coach once. We also reported that at one IRC, mobile phones were removed from returnees before they were brought down to the waiting area. This could have prevented them having communication with their legal representatives.

7.5 Continuing access to immigration advice: section 5.8.

7.6 Contact with family or friends during the removal process

As with the previous reporting year, we had evidence that returnees regularly used C&C phones to contact family generally as well as to notify family of impending arrival and arrange to be picked up. Note however the problem as mentioned in paragraph 7.4.

8. The work of the CFMT

8.1 The CFMT is composed of IMB members from Boards across the prison and immigration detention estates. Our duties are additional to those on our home Boards. The CFMT had four members at the beginning of the year and eight at the end of the year.

8.2 The operations monitored this year were to Albania in February, March, April, May, July, September, October and December. An operation to Romania was monitored in November and to Vietnam/East Timor and Pakistan in July and December respectively. A collection for people returning to Nigeria and Ghana was monitored in October.

8.3 We presented formal reports to HOIE on each monitored operation and received formal responses, to which C&C contributed.

8.4 Our team leader's quarterly meetings with HOIE and C&C continued.

APPENDIX: case studies

Long haul returns present challenges to escorting staff. Although the CMFT appreciate the difficult task that staff may have in ensuring a return is completed successfully with no physical injury caused, it is important that the rules and regulations around the use of force or restraint and the application of a WRB are applied correctly and that accurate records are kept. We detail two examples where the CFMT raised concerns about situations that required a use of force.

1. One returnee was in the CSU, having reported to have recently threatened another resident. He stated he did not want to go and confirmed a solicitor was working for him with whom he was later in touch. He was placed in a WRB at 18:16, in the restricted position, both sides, in a passive application. It was removed at 23:15. To note:

- The WRB was put on in the search room. The returnee was described as compliant and in one Annex A as making a joke. He was described at various later stages as being “chilled” or “calm” and “very talkative”. It is accepted that he said he did not want to go but there is no evidence that the reality of any possible non-compliance was tested before the WRB was put on. There is no written evidence his statement was accompanied by any aggression whether verbal or physical.
- The PER refers to CCTV being turned off after the returnee was in the van but one of the Annex As refers to an escort turning his BWC off in the van.
- The PER refers to the wrist straps being loosened when the returnee was on the plane as the returnee had been “as good as gold” and one of the Annex A refers to “straps/hands now loose”. If this adjustment was from the restricted to the free position, it should have been formally recorded in the correct document.

2. Mr X was in the CSU and presented to Mitie C&C by a fully kitted up team. He was compliant during the search and the meet and greet which was conducted through an interpreter. He repeatedly stated that he didn’t want to go back to his country of origin. A WRB was applied passively in the restricted position at 16:11 whilst in the CSU. Mr X checked his property and was escorted outside to the waiting chase vehicle. As he mounted the step to enter the van he violently pushed backwards and was observed to start screaming and behaving aggressively.

- A RBH was applied to the left wrist at 16:15. Four escorts lifted Mr X into the van and placed him in the centre seat at rear of the van facing forwards. He pulled his trousers down thereby exposing himself. Leg and ankle restraints were applied at 16:15. The RBH was removed and the WRB adjusted to the secure position on leaving the IRC at 17:58. Mr X appears to become hysterical and attempts to hold his breath. He wraps the seat belt tightly round his wrists causing his hands to swell. At 19:20 mandibular angle pain was

applied in a failed attempt to release the seat belt from his wrists. Shortly afterwards, thumb flexion on right hand was successfully used to remove the seat belt from Mr X's wrists. There is no record of time of arrival landside at the airport but the PERs evidence would suggest it was around 20:00.

- Mr X was carried onto plane using HOME approved technique at 21:48. He soiled himself whilst boarding. He was seated in the middle seat in a row towards the rear of the plane. A member of the CFMT observed Mr X screaming and struggling throughout this period. He then stood up and pain was applied to the left wrist using the top of the cuff to force Mr X to sit down and allow the seat belt to be fastened.
- Continual efforts were made to calm Mr X in both English and their primary language and he did finally become calmer shortly before take-off. The WRB, leg and ankle restraints were removed 10 minutes after take-off at 22:50, some 6 hours and 49 minutes after their application.
- A paramedic attended Mr X whilst he was in the chase vehicle at 21:40 shortly before boarding the plane – pain relief for hands and prescribed medication was given later than it should have been. The medic report does suggest that the delay in the medication might have been part of the cause of Mr Xs behaviour. A paramedic re-visits at 22:30 and again at 03:32 when further pain relief for swollen hands is given. The medical report states that no injuries were incurred as a result of the restraint and the swollen hands and wrists were self-inflicted. No staff injuries were reported.



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