



Detainees under escort:
Inspection of escort and removals to

Nigeria and Ghana

by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

24–25 April 2025

Contents

Introduction..... 3

Summary of key findings 4

Section 1 Safety 6

Section 2 Respect..... 9

Section 3 Preparation for reintegration 11

Section 4 Progress on concerns from the last inspection 12

Appendix I About our inspections and reports 13

Appendix II Glossary 15

Introduction

This report covers a large-scale charter removal of 36 detainees to Nigeria and Ghana, including five women.

Many of those being removed knew the day they were scheduled to leave the country but were unaware of any other details. Many were anxious as it was some years since they had lived in their home countries.

Staff treated those being removed with high levels of respect and empathy, although sometimes they used the detainees' manifest numbers instead of their names, which was impersonal.

Force was used on three detainees through the application of restraints, and this was justified on the risks assessed. It was positive that the restraints, including waist restraint belts, were loosened or removed once staff were happy with a detainee's compliance. A review of records from previous removals, however, suggested that some waist restraint belts could remain in place for longer without testing the detainee's compliance.

We noted improvements in the process for sharing information with escorting staff on the vulnerabilities and risks relating to individual detainees, but this was not yet embedded. Women were transported separately from men, which was appropriate, and were allowed to board the flight first, but their mobile phones were removed from them hours before their collection, which limited their ability to maintain contact with legal representatives and family and friends.

This report describes a well-organised operation and generally good treatment of detainees. We identify a small number of remaining areas for improvement.

Charlie Taylor

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

July 2025

Summary of key findings

What needs to improve

During this inspection we identified two key concerns. Leaders should make sure that all concerns identified here are addressed and that progress is tracked through a plan which sets out how and when the concerns will be resolved. The plan should be provided to HMI Prisons.

Key concerns

1. **Women detainees were not allowed to keep their mobile phones in their possession up to the point of collection, limiting their contact with family or legal representatives.**
2. **Menstrual care products were not readily available to women detainees.**

Progress on concerns

At our last inspection of an overseas charter removal escort we raised some areas of concern. At this inspection we found that three of these concerns had been addressed, one had been partially addressed and one was not applicable.

Notable positive practice

Inspectors found no examples of notable positive practice during this inspection.

The removal in brief

Thirty-six detainees, including five women, boarded the aircraft at Stansted Airport, together with 92 escort staff, plus two paramedics. They had travelled from the immigration removal centres (IRCs) at Brook House, Colnbrook and Yarl's Wood. One was returning voluntarily, benefiting from the facilitated return scheme (FRS, see Glossary). The destinations were Lagos, Nigeria and Accra, Ghana.

In addition, seven individuals who did not have permission to remain in the UK travelled voluntarily on the flight to return to their home countries under the voluntary returns service (VRS, see Glossary). Escorting staff had no involvement with these individuals while they travelled on the flight.

The longest journey time from boarding a coach at Colnbrook IRC to arriving on stand in Ghana was just under 17 hours.

Leadership

Leaders continued to promote a decent and respectful approach towards detainees and had addressed several concerns raised at previous inspections. Staff briefings continued to emphasise the professional standards and conduct

expected of staff. A new uniform dress code had been introduced to present staff in a more professional manner.

Leaders had introduced changes into the way that individual escorting staff were made aware of a detainee's vulnerabilities and risks; while in its infancy, this was beginning to improve the information-sharing process.

Section 1 Safety

Preparation and departure from removal centres

Expected outcomes: Detainees are escorted in safety and due regard is given to individual needs and risks. Removals are conducted in accordance with law. Security and good order are maintained through proportional operational arrangements and force is only used as a last resort.

- 1.1 Most detainees were aware of the day they would be removed, but none knew when or where in Nigeria or Ghana they would be going. They told us this made it difficult to arrange to be met on arrival or to plan any onward travel needs. Some detainees reported they had no address or means of support in these countries.
- 1.2 The staff briefing at the muster point was thorough. They were provided with details of the removal operation and reminded of the standards of conduct expected, and the need to focus on the welfare of the detainee in their care and to record all interactions in person escort records (PERs, see Glossary). Escorting staff were advised they would be allocated specific detainees and made aware of the individuals' backgrounds before being introduced to them at the searching stage of the collection process. This was a positive initiative to allow individual staff to provide continuity of care for detainees throughout the removal process.
- 1.3 At the IRCs, escort coach commanders were respectful, but not all introduced themselves to each detainee and neither did some of the staff. Not all detainees were asked how they would like to be addressed. Women detainees (but not men) had their mobile phones removed from their possession up to four hours before collection, unnecessarily limiting their contact with family and legal representatives. All detainees, however, were given an opportunity to note contact numbers from their personal devices and told they could use a mobile phone on the coach to contact legal representatives, family and friends. Private cash was withdrawn from detainees' accounts and returned to them before they left the centre; if they refused to accept this, it was securely bagged in their property.
- 1.4 Detainees were asked if they required interpreting services, but none needed this as they were fluent in English. One detainee refused to speak to staff, but he was able to communicate via notes that he wrote in English.
- 1.5 Centre health staff were in attendance at the collection points and conducted a verbal handover to escorting paramedics about individual detainees' health care needs and medication. Sealed personal medical notes were handed over to escorting staff if they were required in the event of a medical emergency.

Safeguarding adults and personal safety

Expected outcomes: Detainees are escorted in safety with due regard for their vulnerability. Security and good order are maintained through proportionate operational arrangements and force is only used as a last resort.

- 1.6 Searches of detainees at IRCs were proportionate and respectful, and were conducted in small side rooms, but some lacked privacy as doors were not closed. The collection areas were sometimes overcrowded with staff not involved in the process.
- 1.7 Two detainees were subject to assessment, care in detention and teamwork (ACDT, see Glossary) case management as a result of their low mood and risk of self-harm. While escorting staff were made aware of this, they were not always clear how they should continue to record welfare checks on the detainees' accompanying documentation. The detainees remained under constant supervision (see Glossary) throughout the removal process without incident.
- 1.8 Force was used on three detainees at Colnbrook IRC, one of whom was held in the care and separation unit (CSU, see Glossary). All incidents involved the application of a waist restraint belt (see Glossary), and in one case leg and ankle restraints. The force used was necessary on the basis of the assessed risk due to the non-compliance of the detainees. Our check of PERs showed that staff took the decision to remove restraints or loosen them during van journeys to the airport when they were happy the detainee was compliant. Although the waist restraints remained in place until the detainees boarded the flight, these were removed quickly after take-off once it was safe to do so. Paramedics saw all the detainees both once the restraints were applied and after these had been removed.
- 1.9 The records from the previous three charter removals to Nigeria and Ghana indicated that some force had been used during two operations and that this use was justified. Rigid bar handcuffs had been applied once, guiding holds (see Glossary) twice and waist restraints on eight occasions. It was not always clear who made the decision to authorise the use of the belt or that the individuals were told of their purpose. In two cases the belts were removed quickly, one just after take-off and one just after the detainee's removal was cancelled. In the remaining six cases they remained on for longer. In five, they were removed between 26 and 51 minutes after take-off. In the remaining case, the detainee refused to let staff remove the waist restraint belt for the entire flight to Nigeria, as they wanted the receiving authorities to be aware they had been forcibly removed from the UK.

Legal rights

Expected outcomes: Detainees can exercise their legal rights. Removals are conducted in accordance with law.

- 1.10 A few detainees had their removal cancelled as a result of legal interventions. Most detainees told us they had access to a legal representative, and many spoke to them before boarding the plane.
- 1.11 All detainees had access to a mobile phone on the coach, vans and plane, which they could use to contact legal representatives, family or friends.
- 1.12 Home Office staff were available at the IRCs before departure and they monitored the operation throughout. Detainees were told that they would have access to a chief immigration officer (CIO) on the flight. We observed the CIO surgery during the flight, which was reasonably relaxed and sufficiently private.

Section 2 Respect

Physical conditions and property

Expected outcomes: Detainees are escorted in decent physical conditions and individual needs are addressed. Detainees are treated with humanity and respect.

- 2.1 Escort staff allowed detainees to change their clothing if they wished to do so before boarding the coach.
- 2.2 Food and drinks were offered regularly on the coaches, but there were not always sufficient supplies to cater for all dietary needs and hot drinks were not always offered. Hot food was provided on the flight, but detainees were not allowed hot drinks.
- 2.3 All detainees were routinely offered compression socks and nicotine replacement products during the coach journey and flight. On the plane, blankets and pillows were routinely offered for the overnight flight.
- 2.4 On both the coaches and flight, detainees were able to use toilet facilities with sufficient privacy. One of the coach toilets had stopped working before it had left the IRC, so detainees were offered the use of disposable urinal bags instead.

Respectful treatment

Expected outcomes: Detainees are treated with respect by all staff. Effective complaints procedures are in place for detainees. There is understanding of detainees' diverse cultural backgrounds. Detainees' health care needs are met.

- 2.5 The treatment of detainees during the coach transfers and flight was good. We observed many escorting staff maintaining positive and respectful communications with detainees on the coaches and during the flight, but as time passed, some staff started to converse between themselves, ignoring their allocated detainee.
- 2.6 All detainees were given a complaints form on collection at the IRCs and we heard staff encouraging detainees to fill these in if they felt aggrieved by any matters. Two complaints were submitted during the flight. The responses were not available at the time of writing.
- 2.7 Female detainees were searched appropriately by female escorting staff and travelled on a separate coach from men and boarded the flight first, where they were seated at the front of one of the forward

compartments. Menstrual care products were not readily available to them during their journey by coach and flight.

- 2.8 Paramedics were at each site during collection and two travelled on the flight. A few detainees required medical treatment during their removal for minor ailments or the administration of prescribed medication. Most detainees had their personal medical notes returned to them during the flight, but some declined to accept these.
- 2.9 We reviewed half of the detainee PERs once they had disembarked. These were mostly filled in well during both the coach journey and flight, clearly recording the mood, actions and interactions of the detainees.

Section 3 Preparation for reintegration

Expected outcomes: Detainees are prepared for their arrival and early days in the destination country. Any unacceptable behaviour in destination countries is appropriately challenged.

- 3.1 Many detainees said they had not lived in their home countries for some time, and a number said that they had no family or friends in the country, fearing they would be homeless on return. All detainees were, however, given a useful leaflet at the IRCs that contained details and contact numbers of an organisation (IRARA), which provided a range of support on arrival in Nigeria and Ghana, including with short-term accommodation and transport.
- 3.2 One detainee was removed under the facilitated return scheme (FRS), which provided some financial assistance to help with their reintegration in Nigeria.
- 3.3 In both Lagos and Accra, local authorities were present for the arrival of the aircraft. The CIO conducted a handover, after which the detainees disembarked the flight on to waiting buses. There were no incidents during disembarkation.

Section 4 Progress on concerns from the last inspection

Concerns raised at the last inspection

The following is a list of all the concerns raised in the report of our last published inspection of an overseas charter removal escort to Albania in December 2023.

Safety

Concerns

Despite wanting to return voluntarily, many people were held in detention for several weeks before their flight.

Partially addressed

Interpretation was not always used when required and the need for interpreters was poorly assessed at detention centres.

Not applicable

Detainees were not always allowed to use toilets with complete privacy.

Addressed

The routine opening of personal medical notes without the detainee's consent breached medical confidentiality.

Addressed

Information about vulnerability and risk was not clearly communicated to escort staff or paramedics.

Addressed

Appendix I About our inspections and reports

All inspections carried out by HM Inspectorate of Prisons contribute to the UK's response to its international obligations under the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT). OPCAT requires that all places of detention are visited regularly by independent bodies – known as the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) – which monitors the treatment of and conditions for detainees. Escorts are included in this remit. HM Inspectorate of Prisons is one of several bodies making up the NPM in the UK.

All Inspectorate of Prisons reports carry a summary of the conditions and treatment of detainees, based on the tests of a healthy establishment that were first introduced in this Inspectorate's thematic review *Suicide is everyone's concern*, published in 1999. For inspections of escorts and removals the tests are:

- Safety
- Respect
- Preparation for reintegration.

Our assessments might result in identification of **areas of concern**. Concerns identify the areas where there are significant weaknesses in the treatment of and conditions for detainees. To be addressed they will require a change in practice and/or new or redirected resources. Concerns are summarised at the beginning of inspection reports and the body of the report sets out the issues in more detail.

We also provide examples of **notable positive practice** in our reports. These list innovative work or practice that leads to particularly good outcomes from which other providers may be able to learn. Inspectors look for evidence of good outcomes for detainees; original, creative or particularly effective approaches to problem-solving or achieving the desired goal; and how other providers could learn from or replicate the practice.

This report

This report outlines the priority and key concerns identified during the inspection. There then follow three sections each containing a detailed account of our findings against our *Expectations for immigration detention. Criteria for assessing the conditions for and treatment of immigration detainees* (Version 4, 2018) (available on our website at [Expectations – HM Inspectorate of Prisons \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/expectations-hm-inspectorate-of-prisons/)). Section 5 lists the concerns raised at the previous inspection and our assessment of whether they have been addressed.

Inspection team

This inspection was carried out by:

Fiona Shearlaw	Team leader
Rachel Badman	Inspector
Martin Kettle	Inspector
Kellie Reeve	Inspector
Nadia Syed	Inspector

Appendix II Glossary

We try to make our reports as clear as possible, and this short glossary should help to explain some of the specialist terms you may find.

Assessment, care in detention and teamwork (ACDT)

ACDT is a case management system for detained individuals at risk of self-harm or suicide.

Care and separation unit (CSU)

A unit for detainees removed from association with others on the main residential units, under rule 40 (removal from association) or rule 42 (temporary confinement) of the Detention Centre Rules 2001.

Constant supervision

Also known as constant watch, this takes place when a detainee's risk of suicide is deemed high, and so they are directly observed by a specific officer for 24 hours a day.

Facilitated return scheme (FRS)

Early removal scheme for foreign national prisoners to their country of origin. The FRS provides some financial support for reintegration.

Guiding hold

Where an officer takes hold of a detainee's arm to guide them when walking. This is recorded as a use of force.

Person escort record (PER)

The key document for ensuring that information about detainees' risk and health issues is communicated to escort staff, and that their mood, actions and interactions with escort staff are recorded during their removal.

Voluntary returns service (VRS)

Provides support for individuals who do not have permission to remain in the UK to return voluntarily to their home countries. The VRS can assist with travel documents, travel arrangements, etc.

Waist restraint belt

A device that allows a detainee to sit and travel comfortably but still be restrained.

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