

3. Executive summary

3.1 Background to the report

Three events each had a significant impact on detainees at Brook House in 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic, Serco taking on the contract to operate the centre from 21 May and the Home Office running a compressed programme of charter flights to European countries in the latter part of the year.

- Impact of the pandemic – as the wider community was subject to restrictions following the March national lockdown, so too was the centre, its detainees and staff. In particular, throughout most of 2020 there was less free association and mixing off the wings; accommodation moved to single occupancy; and in-person social and legal visits were stopped or restricted. In addition, pressure on temporary accommodation provided by the government often meant long delays for some detainees between being granted bail and their release. The centre was declared a pandemic outbreak site in December, leading to the release or transfer of all detainees.
- Change of contract provider from G4S to Serco – the most noticeable change to date has been a welcome increase in the number of staff.
- Charter flights to European countries – from late July, the centre's detainee population shifted to detainees who had arrived in the UK after crossing the Channel in small boats. The Home Office used Brook House as the base for its plans to remove these detainees to European Union (EU) countries party to the Dublin Convention before 31 December 2020.
- The combination of the compressed nature of the charter flight programme, with Brook House as its sole base for Dublin Convention flights, and the fundamental changes in the centre's population and nationalities, their different vulnerabilities and their needs, put the centre's systems, detainees and staff under great stress and raised some serious concerns for the Board. Most notably, there was a dramatic increase in levels of self-harm and suicidal ideation, deficiencies in the induction process and increased needs for legal support and Detention Centre Rule 35 assessments.

The issues are discussed in detail in the different sections of this annual report.

3.2 Main judgements

How safe is the IRC?

- The Board's view is that, due to circumstances related to the Dublin Convention charter programme, in the latter months of 2020 Brook House was not a safe place for vulnerable detainees who had crossed the Channel in small boats (see section 4).
- This is evidenced by the high levels of self-harm and suicidal ideation in that time (see section 4.2).