

Heathrow IRC Independent Monitoring Board
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For the attention of:

Kevin Foster MP, Minister for Future Borders and Immigration
Tom Pursglove, Minister for Justice and Tackling Illegal Migration
Home Office

10th November 2021

Dear Minister

Safety & Wellbeing Concerns Relating to Heathrow IRC

I am writing to you as Chair of the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) of Heathrow's Immigration Removal Centre (HIRC) to share the Board's significant concerns about the impact that South Coast Arrivals (SCAs) being moved to HIRC from Dover is having on the Centre.

As you will know, under the Immigration and Asylum Act of 1999, an IMB has a duty to satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in the establishment that it monitors and to promptly inform Ministers of any concerns it has about that treatment. The situation currently playing out at Heathrow due to the high volume of SCAs is, we believe, so grave, it merits urgent Government attention to protect not only SCAs but also other detainees at HIRC, as well as staff.

Background: HIRC is not ordinarily a Short-Term Holding Facility (STHF). However, in 2020, two of its Units, with a capacity of 231, were designated a STHF in order to accommodate men arriving on small boats into Dover.

Centre staff quickly adapted to this new status and have done their very best, ever since, to process the arrivals efficiently and with humanity. Indeed, I should make clear that my Board and I have nothing but admiration for the way Centre staff have responded to developments over the past 18 months.

However, the Centre was not designed to be a STHF and it is not set up to function as one. Therefore, as SCA numbers have increased, certain systems at HIRC have reached breaking point with, we believe, significant safety and wellbeing repercussions for SCAs, HIRC detainees and Centre staff.

- **The Safety and Wellbeing of SCAs:** SCAs increasingly arrive with little notice, often at night. Last month, for example, four coaches arrived from Dover even though HIRC management had clearly advised that the Facility wasn't in a position to process such a large cohort of arrivals. No preparations had understandably been made and with limited staff on hand to swiftly manage the SCAs the men – who had arrived exhausted and many traumatised - had to sleep on the floor of the Visits Hall, whilst processing commenced. Some were on mats, some were given a sheet, but none had access to any blankets or pillows; and with only one functioning toilet and no shower facilities, arrivals were unable to clean themselves nor even brush their teeth.

Food and drinks were distributed, but as the area is not designated as a dining hall, it was a challenging task. The sheer numbers involved meant that it took a couple of days to process everyone, meaning that at least 35 men spent two nights sleeping on the floor in the Visits Hall. During this time the men were not screened by healthcare and had extremely limited access to a service courtyard for fresh air, exercise or smoking – again because the Visits Hall was never designed for the purpose of housing people.

The conditions were unacceptable and degrading but also unavoidable given the lack of regard given by officials to the Centre's ability to process the arrivals.

COVID will often compound these challenges. Again, only recently, three SCAs tested positive for COVID 19 on arrival at the Centre. As staff were unable to move them to the designated isolation Unit until they had been processed, they were forced to keep them in the Visits Hall, compromising the safety of both other SCAs and staff.

- **The Safety and Wellbeing of IRC Detainees:** The large numbers of SCAs arriving at HIRC has meant that the Visits Hall has had to be repurposed for the processing of arrivals. This has had a knock-on effect for detainees in the IRC, as family visits have had to be cancelled, often at very short notice, causing unrest and distress. One detainee recently missed a final visit from his family before he was deported as the Visits Hall had been closed to accommodate the SCAs. More broadly, the safety of detainees is often being compromised as staff are redeployed from standard Units to assist with processing the SCAs, leaving a skeleton staff to manage the rest of the Centre.
- **The Safety and Wellbeing of Centre Staff:** As IMB members we have seen first-hand how staff are being stretched to breaking point by the unpredictable volume and requirements of the SCAs. Managing detainees can be challenging at the best of times but the SCAs bring with them their own set of issues and needs which Centre staff are not always equipped to support. An IRC is a fundamentally different environment to a STHF. The time spent in an IRC inevitably allows trust to grow between detainees and officers. This simply doesn't happen in a STHF. Reliance on a skeleton staff has, at times, created personal safety issues for individual officers who, when left alone to manage large cohorts of SCAs, have felt extremely vulnerable. 20 members have recently resigned, and it is felt that the situation with the SCAs was a major contributing factor.

Ministers have repeatedly stressed the importance of IMBs in providing the public with independent assurance that those detained within the UK's Detention Estate are treated appropriately, humanely and with dignity. Sadly, my Board and I are currently unable to provide you with such assurances relating to Heathrow. We see no sign of any Detention Gate Keeper activity before the SCAs arrive at HIRC; while pressure on processing the men once at the Centre doesn't allow for any risk assessment of their mental state or vulnerability, creating a potentially volatile and dangerous mix of residents. Again, I would stress no criticism of Centre staff or management, who are doing everything in their power to manage the situation. Rather we believe the fault lies with a system that is sending vulnerable SCAs to HIRC with seemingly little regard to the consequences of that move.

We understand that all Immigration Removal Centres have also been designated as Short Term Holding Facilities so that they can legally be used for this purpose. However, while this may be administratively convenient, it is evident that Heathrow IRC has neither the infrastructure nor staffing to process SCAs. Border Force officials therefore need to engage far more constructively and reasonably with the HIRC. It is simply unacceptable to deliver SCAs when there is no capacity to process them decently and humanely.

I look forward to hearing your views on this important, and increasingly pressing, situation.

Your sincerely,



Karina Kielbinska
Chair, Heathrow IRC
Independent Monitoring Board.