



# **Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at Derwentside IRC**

**For the first quarter  
28 December 2021 – 31 March 2022**

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## Introduction

1. Derwentside opened as the UK's principal immigration removal centre (IRC) for women in November 2021, with the first ten women transferred from Yarl's Wood on 28 December 2021. This report from the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) covers the first three months of the centre's operation.

## Description of the centre

2. Derwentside IRC occupies the site of the former Hassockfield Secure Training Centre in Consett, County Durham. Existing buildings on the site have been extensively refurbished, with a prefabricated building added for healthcare. Operating capacity is 84. The site is very spacious, with separate buildings for each single-storey residential unit (of which there are currently three open), administration and activities. A fourth unit, for induction, and housing the cultural kitchen, care suite and salon, has yet to open. The detained women have free access to the facilities and to outside space throughout the day.
3. Derwentside is run for the Home Office by Mite Care & Custody. Healthcare is provided on-site by Spectrum Community Health CIC. The Detention Centre Rules 2001 (the DC Rules) govern the running of the centre. The Home Office is represented by a local detention and escorting services (DES) compliance team, which has responsibility for monitoring the contract, and by a detention engagement team (DET), which has responsibility for engaging with the detained women about the progress of their cases.
4. The IMB at Derwentside currently has six active members, of whom four are dual-boarders – two from local prisons and two from IRCs in the south. A recruitment campaign is underway, with the aim of staffing the Board with members drawn from the local community. A Covid-19 outbreak amongst the first residents prevented the Board from starting its rota visits until 11 January 2022, but weekly visits have continued since that date. Monthly Board meetings are held with representatives from the Home Office DES and DET, Mitie C&C and Spectrum. There have been difficulties for the IMB in obtaining access to the records of the centre.

## 5. Summary of first quarter findings

5.1 Our principal concerns about Derwentside relate to its location, which results in long journeys for the women – sometimes at night - and a sense of isolation which is compounded by the poor communications infrastructure. We consider that this results in unfair and unequal treatment of detained women, given that the principal IRCs for men are located adjacent to Heathrow and Gatwick airports.

5.2 Staff ratios and engagement with the women are good, and we hope will remain that way when numbers increase.

5.3 Accommodation is of a good standard with plenty of natural light and access to the open air.

5.4 Early indications of the Healthcare provision are good, but it needs to ensure that seven-day a week GP cover, and rule 34/35 availability, are maintained.

5.5 Appointments under the free legal advice scheme – indeed almost all legal appointments – are still being held remotely. We are concerned that this, together with the unreliable phone reception, means that there is no assurance of access to meaningful legal support.

## **Safety**

6. In the first quarter we were not able to observe any inductions for the detained women, although we understand these are done in four short sessions. A leaflet containing the house rules and compact is available in 20 different languages, but a helpful booklet entitled 'How Do I?' is available only in English. Translation devices are widely available in the centre and these are very useful. The IMB uses them to talk to the women on our visits.
7. Numbers of women detained are still low, having built up gradually from the initial ten to an average of 15-20 in March. There were no acts of self-harm during the first quarter. Numbers of women on ACDTs (assessment, care in detention and teamwork – the procedure for managing risk of suicide and self-harm) have varied from none to four at any one time during the quarter. ACDT paperwork reviewed by the IMB appears to be thorough but in the first quarter we were not able to attend any reviews or safer detention meetings. Weekly adults at risk meetings are now held, but with so few women detained, the wellbeing of all women is considered, not just those designated as vulnerable. It would be good to see Home Office caseworkers phoning in to those meetings. There was no use of DC rule 40 during the first quarter, although the separation unit was used to isolate a woman who had tested positive for Covid-19.

## **Fair and humane treatment**

### **Escorts, transfers and transport**

8. The main issues we have identified during our first three months at Derwentside are associated with its remote location, hundreds of miles from the other IRCs, and from the principal UK airports. Many women start or finish their detention experience in the short-term holding facility at Colnbrook, part of Heathrow IRC. The journey time in a minibus from there to Derwentside is around six hours. We tracked the journey times for as many women as we could, and we found a pattern for many of them: leaving Colnbrook in the early evening, around 7pm, and arriving at Derwentside around 1am or 2am. Women transferring back to Colnbrook were leaving on these vehicles, in the early hours, and completing their journeys at night. Furthermore, in a few cases, women were being put through these long night-time journeys, only to be released or transferred back from Derwentside one or two days later.

9. We raised this with the Home Office escorting compliance manager and we are seeing a change in the journeys, in that some women are now being given an overnight stop at the Manchester residential short-term holding facility. Whilst this does break up the journey, and more of the journeys are taking place in the daytime, this need for a disruptive overnight stay only serves to illustrate the problems associated with Derwentside's remote and inconvenient location. Given that the male IRCs (with the exception of Dungavel) are located next to the UK's principal airports in the south-east, we consider that subjecting detained women to these lengthy journeys constitutes unequal and unfair treatment.
10. Issues have also been raised, in a handful of cases, over the conditions in which the detained women have been moved. Concerns raised by the IMB over improper use of mobile phones in one case led to disciplinary action against escorting staff.

### **Accommodation, clothing and food**

11. The accommodation is fresh and clean, with attempts made to soften the environment. There are large windows in the bedrooms and living areas giving plenty of natural light, and the women are free to spend time outside and to walk to activities and other areas during the day. It would be good to see the outside areas planted up – at the moment there is only grass. There are supplies of fresh clothing and toiletries.
12. The IMB samples the food on each visit – usually at lunchtime. The quality of prepared dishes varies, but there is an adequate choice and plenty of salad and fresh fruit. In addition, there are bread, yoghurts, drinks and snacks available in the unit serveries to which women can help themselves during the day and night.

### **Staff demeanour and treatment of the detained women**

13. There is plenty of interaction between staff and residents. We have observed kind and helpful treatment of the detained women by staff; and the women we have spoken to have told us they are treated kindly. With a maximum occupancy of 20 women during the first quarter, staffing ratios are high, and we hope this level of support will be maintained as numbers of detained women increase. It is good to note, as well, the high proportion of female officers.

### **Faith and religious affairs**

14. There is a full-time manager of religious affairs and a part-time Christian chaplain on site. A female imam has recently been appointed. Visits from ministers of other faiths can be arranged and there is a full programme of religious services for all faiths. Good arrangements were put in place for Muslim women observing Ramadan.

## **Health and wellbeing**

15. Healthcare is provided at Derwentside by Spectrum Community Health CIC in a prefabricated building, which is clean, new and welcoming. Nurses – including mental health nurses – are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. A GP attends twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays; initially this was a visiting GP but a female, local GP has recently started. Telephone consultations can be arranged on other days and a dentist attends as and when required.
16. We have not yet had any applications from the detained women about healthcare; we have asked for general feedback from women we have spoken to and the feedback has generally been good, particularly about the mental health nurses. This is important because a number of the women have described symptoms of anxiety caused by their detention and uncertainty over their future.
17. There was one matter of immediate concern around the healthcare provision: under DC rule 34: ‘every detained person shall be given a physical and mental examination by the medical practitioner ... within 24 hours of [their] admission to the detention centre’. With the GP visiting only two days a week, it was not clear how that could be achieved. Prompt rule 34 assessments are vital in assessing the detained women’s physical and mental health needs and vulnerabilities. We have been in discussions about this with Spectrum and with the local DES team and have been informed that the Spectrum GP service is used if required on other days.
18. Rule 35 appointments, to assess whether women’s health may be injuriously affected by detention, whether they may have suicidal intentions, or if they may have been victims of torture, are currently done by a GP who visits from Gatwick IRC each week. We understand that the recently-recruited female GP will be shadowing those appointments with a view to assuming this role. We have been told that if an assessment is needed more quickly, that can be arranged.

### **Exercise, time in open air**

19. As mentioned above, there is plenty of opportunity for the women detained at Derwentside to access the open air. There is also a well-equipped indoor gym, and staff organise outdoor activities such as a running club to encourage women to exercise in the fresh air.

## **Preparation for return or release**

### **Education, activities, paid work**

20. There is a well-stocked library, IT suite, arts, crafts and music rooms, staffed by helpful and enthusiastic officers. A teacher provides English and maths classes, and other activities such as knitting and jigsaws are available on the units to provide a degree of distraction. A number of paid roles have recently

been created for the detained women, such as cleaning and working in the servery. The hourly pay rate of £1 is the same as it was when paid work was introduced many years ago. It seemed low even then. There is also a residual power for the Home Office to prevent a detained person from having a job if they do not comply with the immigration process.

### **Case management**

21. The Home Office DET staff have regular, face-to-face engagement with the detained women to inform them about progress on their immigration cases. The charity Hibiscus also has staff on site who we see assisting the women.

### **Access to legal advice**

22. The duty legal aid advice scheme is in operation at Derwentside. Women who are detained are entitled to a free consultation with a solicitor from an approved panel, who will give them some initial advice and consider whether they have a case that they are willing to take on. There are no locally-based law firms on the legal aid panel, which means that even initial appointments are held remotely, despite the easing of Covid restrictions. Appointments should be available two days a week. We discovered during an early rota visit that this was not working as it should be: instead of fixing a timed appointment for the detained woman to receive a call, the solicitors were simply taking the women's details and calling them at their own convenience during the day. The problem with this approach is that the mobile phone reception at Derwentside is unreliable – see below – and women were missing calls from the solicitors.
23. The IMB raised this as a concern with the DES team, and a training session was held in March for the Mitie welfare team and providers, setting out expectations. Skype is also available and has been used for some legal visits, but it is important that a proper in-person legal advice surgery system, such as was running in other IRCs pre-Covid-19, is instituted at Derwentside. We are concerned that the combined effect of the remote appointments and the unreliable phone reception means that there is no assurance of access to meaningful legal support for the women at Derwentside.

### **Family contact**

24. As mentioned above, the mobile phone reception at Derwentside is unreliable. The women tell us that they cannot make or receive calls in their bedrooms, and when we visit we see their phones left on the windowsills in the communal areas in the hope that calls will come through. This has been raised as a concern since our first visits but has not been resolved. It makes it very difficult for the women to keep in contact with their legal advisers and their families. This, coupled with the location of Derwentside which makes it very difficult for families to visit, can only add to the sense of isolation.



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