

# Immigration Detention Estate

## Annual Report 2020

December 2021



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## Introduction

1. This report brings together the common themes and issues highlighted by Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) working in the immigration detention estate (the IDE) in their 2020 annual reports.<sup>1</sup>
2. There were two major developments affecting the IDE, and those detained, in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic, and the response to it, had a dramatic effect. With borders closed and international flights largely grounded, almost all removals from the UK were suspended, and reporting centres closed. The only legitimate reason for maintaining detention is to facilitate removal, and in circumstances where removal could not take place, a substantial number of those in detention were released on bail at the start of the crisis. Those who remained in detention after the imposition of the first lockdown were almost all foreign nationals who had served a prison sentence. For those in detention, regimes were severely restricted, but Covid-19 infection rates remained very low.
3. Enforced removals were suspended in March 2020; charter flights resumed at the end of April with voluntary repatriations. Enforced removals by charter flight resumed in July 2020, and in the summer months some men and women were brought into IRCs from the prison estate for removal.
4. The second development was the substantial increase witnessed in the summer of 2020 in the numbers of migrants crossing the Channel in small boats, and the Home Office's response to this. On arrival at Dover some of the single men were detained and transferred to residential short-term holding facilities (STHFs), mainly at Yarl's Wood, for initial screening. Some of those in detention were bailed to local hotels if they were part of a Covid-19 'bubble'. Women, children and families were taken to the Kent Intake Unit, some of whom were subsequently released and granted temporary admission. In August, the Home Office started a concentrated programme of charter flights to European Union countries party to the Dublin Convention, in order to remove people who had entered via Channel crossings before the UK left the EU on 31 December 2020. The effects of this programme of charter flights on the IDE and on those detained are described in some detail in this report, as they raised matters of grave concern for IMBs.
5. The situation at Dover was, and remains, a matter of great concern for the IMB. The IMB monitors the holding rooms at Frontier House and Kent Intake Unit, but since 2019 most migrants arriving in small boats have been held initially at a temporary facility known as the Tug Haven, to which the IMB had no access. In June 2021 the IMB was granted access, and from its visits since then it has reported a facility – intended only as a temporary measure – struggling to cope and fundamentally unsuitable for holding people for anything more than a few hours.

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<sup>1</sup> These reports are published individually on [www.imb.org.uk](http://www.imb.org.uk)

## Immigration removal centres: IMB findings

### Effects of Covid-19 in immigration removal centres – reducing and changing populations

6. The most notable effect of the pandemic was to reduce the detained population across the estate. With borders closed and many international flights grounded at the start of the March 2020 lockdown, almost all removals from the UK were suspended. Many detained individuals were released on bail early on, although for many their release was delayed by the failure of the Home Office or the National Probation Service to secure bail accommodation for them (see paragraph 58 below). Those who remained in detention were for the most part ex-prisoners. The need to provide Covid-secure accommodation in IRCs, for example in single rooms in many locations, also dictated that populations had to remain low.
7. All IRCs therefore saw their populations reduce dramatically from March until September: Tinsley House was on standby, empty, from the end of March until September, and, with the family removals process suspended, the Gatwick pre-departure accommodation was effectively closed from the end of March. It opened only on a few occasions from September to accommodate men from Brook House whose age was disputed or who were displaying symptoms of Covid-19.
8. IMBs and others have highlighted for many years the harm that immigration detention, which has no legal time limit, can cause. This reduction in numbers, whilst unplanned, was therefore a welcome development. As the IMB at Morton Hall recommended, it would be good to see an evaluation of the associated risks and rewards, with a view to achieving a permanent reduction in numbers.
9. As well as reduced populations, some parts of the estate saw a change of use, the most significant of which was at Yarl's Wood, which, almost since its opening in 2001, has been run as an IRC holding women and family groups, with, in recent years, one unit designated as a residential STHF for men. From late summer, in response to the increased numbers of Channel crossings, Yarl's Wood became a predominantly male centre, operating first as a residential STHF, and from October also as an IRC, for men. No family groups have been detained at Yarl's Wood since May 2020 and its small female population (around 20 at any one time) is now held on one unit. The centre is currently preparing to re-roll as a male IRC. Overall, the Board at Yarl's Wood felt that staff and management dealt well with the challenges presented by these changes and by the fluctuating population numbers.
10. From September to December, Tinsley House operated as an overflow STHF capacity, housing the men arriving in Dover when the Yarl's Wood residential STHF was full, with very variable and unpredictable numbers.
11. Brook House also saw a substantial change in population in the second half of the year, holding almost exclusively men who had crossed the Channel and been transferred there pending removal by charter flight under the Dublin Convention. This was a change from the high proportion of ex-prisoners previously held at Brook House and the IMB found that the population in the latter part of 2020

displayed characteristics which made them especially vulnerable, including experience of trauma, whether incurred during their journeys to the UK or previously, limited command of English, and limited awareness of systems and processes in the UK. See paragraph 19 below.

12. Because Yarl's Wood operated as both an IRC and a residential STHF during 2020, we report, as the Board did, on the centre's operations as a whole. We treat other residential and non-residential STHFs separately in this report.

## Safety

### Covid-19 safety

13. At the start of the national lockdown in March 2020, there were concerns that the infection would spread, with devastating effect, through IRCs. These concerns did not materialise: management was well-prepared and the number of cases of Covid amongst people in detention remained very low. As reported above, many detained individuals were released on bail, and for those who remained in detention, accommodation and regimes were adapted. IRCs adopted the practice of reverse cohorting, whereby a group of new arrivals was kept separate from the existing population and given separate accommodation and services for a period of two weeks, so as to ensure there could be no inadvertent transmission of Covid-19 from outside into the centres. Those who might be considered vulnerable in Covid terms were placed on supported living plans in order to provide them with extra protection.
14. As happened in the outside community, Covid-19 precautions and practices developed and improved over the course of the year. From the outset there were adequate supplies of PPE for staff, and from October it became compulsory for staff and visitors to wear face masks in all parts of the IDE. Many people held in detention also chose to wear masks, which were supplied for them. In Brook House and Heathrow IRCs, each residential unit was treated as a household, so that men from different units were not allowed to mix, and activities and services had to be accessed by each unit at different times. The IMBs at these centres found it somewhat inconsistent, however, that staff were permitted to work across different units, thereby increasing the risk of infection. Boards also reported that social distancing measures between staff and people in detention, which were initially poor, markedly improved in the latter part of the year. The information provided to people in detention about Covid-19 was good: at Dungavel, for example, they received daily texts to remind them about handwashing and social distancing, and also had daily temperature checks. Dungavel is located in a part of Scotland that suffered a very high rate of community infection and although some staff did contract Covid-19, there were no cases amongst detained individuals.
15. There were discrepancies, however, around Covid testing of new arrivals at Yarl's Wood. All arrivals into the IRC were given lateral flow tests at reception, but those arriving into the STHF were not, which the IMB viewed as a matter of concern and raised with management. The same concern was raised at Tinsley House on the occasions when it was used as an overflow capacity when Yarl's Wood was full. The discrepancy was removed in the early part of 2021, so that all arrivals are now tested. However, there were only six cases of Covid-19 at Yarl's Wood during 2020. At Heathrow IRC there were only five cases, which the IMB regards as a reflection of the hard work put in by the contractor and the Home Office.

## Reception and induction

16. The Yarl's Wood IMB reported that the men arriving from Dover sometimes arrived in wet clothing, after a lengthy coach journey. There were also occasions when men arrived with serious injuries which had not been treated at Dover despite the men being in Home Office custody there. It was common for men to arrive without an IS91 (the authority to detain), or with the IS91 bearing incorrect names or photographs. The Board also felt that the induction process needed improvement to adapt to the needs of a different population. Some of the men seemed anxious and not clear about why or how long they were being held, or where they were being discharged to. The Brook House IMB echoed that concern: in the second part of 2020, with the shift in population and purpose, some systems did not adapt quickly enough to the needs of this population. The Board reported that inductions could be ad hoc and inadequate, with interpretation services not always available. The people detained in Brook House at this time were vulnerable in a number of respects, and in terms of induction they had very limited awareness of UK systems and institutions, unlike the previous population, of whom around 50% were ex-prisoners who had experience of prison and many of whom had lived in the UK for some time.
17. A more positive picture was reported at Heathrow IRC, where virtual reality headsets, which allowed new arrivals to learn about the centre at their own pace, and in a language of their choice, were introduced, together with an informative 'How do I?' leaflet. At Dungavel all those arriving who did not speak English were offered a fellow detained individual who could speak English to assist with their induction; if that was not possible, officers used Big Word, and a buddy system operated.

## Suicide and self-harm

18. There was a very variable picture around self-harm and ACDT (assessment, care in detention and teamwork: the process for identifying those at risk of self-harm) across the estate. Yarl's Wood saw a reduction in acts of self-harm and the number of individuals on ACDT, but the throughput of people there was such that it was difficult for all their risks or vulnerabilities to be assessed (see paragraph 24 below). At Morton Hall there was a reduction in acts of self-harm that was greater than the reduction in the centre's population, but the Board reported that self-harm was still a feature of life in the centre and allied to the feelings of frustration and uncertainty that people in detention expressed to them. In the second part of the year, there were four men at Morton Hall who repeatedly self-harmed. At Heathrow IRC, there was also a reduction in self-harm and use of ACDT, but ACDTs as a percentage of the centre population was higher than in 2019 (14.3% as against 10% in 2019), and there were 220 acts of self-harm by 74 individuals, of which around one in ten was serious enough to require hospital treatment. In a case that caused particular concern, an individual who was on constant supervision after ingesting foreign matter managed to do so a second time.
19. It was at Brook House, however, that rates of self-harm increased to such an extent that the Board in its annual report made the assessment that the centre was not a safe place for vulnerable people who had crossed the Channel. As mentioned

above, in the second half of 2020 the population was almost exclusively made up of those men, who were being held at Brook House in order to be removed in the concentrated programme of charter flights under the Dublin Convention. From 12 August to 22 December there were 19 such flights, approximately one a week. A further seven flight sectors were arranged under the Convention but were cancelled, typically the day or night before, as a result of legal challenges or Covid-19 considerations. (A sector is a portion of an itinerary, or journey, which may consist of one or more legs or segments.) The people brought to Brook House for these flights were often fearful and anxious about their removal and what might await them; they were sometimes bewildered about their detention and affected by the hopelessness of those around them. The seriousness of the situation was evidenced in the statistics for ACDT and self-harm for this period.

20. Between August and December, while the concentrated programme of removal flights was taking place, the incidence of self-harm at Brook House increased dramatically, reducing again in December when the programme started to wind down. For all of this period, acts of self-harm expressed as a percentage of population were above 20% (compared with 5% of the population in 2019) and reached 55% in August 2020. At any one time, there was never less than 40% of the population on an ACDT (2019 figure: 15%); 205 ACDTs were opened during this period, 51 of them in response to an act of self-harm, the rest as a result of a threat of self-harm or suicidal ideation. Of these, each month around 30 men out of an average population of around 100, were on constant supervision: this is where the risk of self-harm is judged to be so serious that a member of staff has to watch the individual 24 hours a day.
21. The Board at Brook House, and the CFMT, reported that men were being removed on flights despite these patent vulnerabilities; men on open ACDTs, including some on constant supervision, were removed, and some were even taken to the airport direct from hospital, or bleeding from self-harm injuries or in a state of partial undress, all of which the Board and the CFMT considered inhumane. On one flight, of the cohort of 12 men, eight had open ACDTs and seven of those men had been on constant supervision at Brook House. There also did not seem to be any formal arrangements in place for the receiving authorities to be briefed about the vulnerabilities or needs of these men.
22. The Brook House IMB and the Charter Flight Monitoring Team were so concerned about this situation that they jointly wrote to the Home Office minister for immigration compliance and courts on 2 October 2020, to express their view that circumstances in the centre amounted to inhumane treatment of the population at Brook House,<sup>2</sup> a view which was repeated in evidence submitted by IMBs in November to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into Channel crossings, migration and asylum-seeking routes through the EU.<sup>3</sup> As was made clear in the letter to the minister and in evidence to the committee, the criticisms were not of staff treatment of people in detention, but rather of the concentrated nature of the programme and conditions in Brook House.

<sup>2</sup> <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/imb-prod-storage-1ocod6bqky0vo/uploads/2020/12/Letter-to-Minister-Charter-Flights-EU-Impact.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/14811/pdf/>



## **Violence and violence reduction**

23. Boards reported that the number of violent incidents was down from 2019, but, as noted above, the number of people in detention was greatly reduced, and assaults on staff and detained individuals remained a feature of life in IRCs. Morton Hall saw 26 assaults on others who were detained (65 in 2019) and 16 assaults on staff by those in detention (45 in 2019). At Heathrow, there were 62 assaults on others in detention and 18 assaults on staff whereas 2019 figures were 101 and 47 respectively. The IMB felt this reduction might be a reflection of improved relationships between staff and detained individuals, possibly also attributable to improved ratios of staff to people in detention. The Heathrow IMB reported a poor police response to incidents, but the Morton Hall Board reported that this had improved following an intervention they had made with the local Police and Crime Commissioner.

## **Vulnerable people in detention; safeguarding**

24. The changing profile of the population in some centres, particularly Yarl's Wood and Brook House, presented problems for staff and management in assessing vulnerabilities. Yarl's Wood IMB reported that the large number of men passing through the centre for short periods meant that vulnerable adults might not be properly identified before being released or sent elsewhere in the detention estate. These concerns were echoed by the Brook House Board, as many of the men initially detained at Yarl's Wood were then transferred to Brook House to be removed on charter flights. For example, between September and December, 14 young men were assessed as minors and released from Brook House into local authority care. They had all been previously detained at Yarl's Wood, but not identified as minors there. There were also examples of men whose claims in respect of modern slavery or trafficking or torture were not identified or assessed until arrival at Brook House, and often not until sometime thereafter, even though they had been in Home Office care from arrival in Kent, through Yarl's Wood and the induction processes at Brook House. These failures seem to have been attributable to the rapid moves between facilities and the compressed timelines and processes for removal.
25. In its 2019 report, the Board at Brook House recommended a complete overhaul of the adults at risk (AAR) policy, together with ACDT processes and rule 35 (the process for alerting caseworkers to those whose health is likely to be injuriously affected by continued detention, is suspected of having suicidal intentions, or where there are concerns that they might be a victim of torture). Regrettably, the Home Office has indicated that there will now be no further review, other than reform to bring victims of trafficking within the policy and the introduction of standards for external medical reports, pending development of a new immigration and asylum model.
26. Problems with the operation of the adults at risk policy remain: Morton Hall saw a number of men detained who were AAR Level 3 (i.e. where there was professional evidence that detention is likely to cause harm), and whose release was delayed, even though the decision to release had been taken. There also seems to be a disconnect between ACDT and rule 35: despite the numbers of

ACDTs opened at Brook House between August and December, no reports were made under rule 35(2), that an individual was suspected of having suicidal intentions. In two cases of prolonged detention at Brook House, (six and nine months respectively) the Board saw no evidence that the effect of detention itself was factored into the assessment of the men's vulnerability.

27. Heathrow IMB reported failures in detention gatekeeping that again meant that seriously unwell people were entering the centre, with detention often being a trigger for self-harm, although none was sectioned. It should be noted, however, that two men were sectioned from Dungavel, and one woman from Yarl's Wood. The Board at Heathrow also reported a 23% increase in mental health assessments carried out, which indicated an increased demand but also, perhaps, an increased focus at that centre on ensuring vulnerable people in detention were assessed.
28. At Morton Hall, in the second half of 2020, with a reduced average population of 89, there were at any one time around 25 men deemed to be AAR Level 2.

### **Use of force**

29. At Morton Hall and Yarl's Wood, use of force was greatly reduced from previous years. At Brook House, the number of incidents also fell, but not when expressed as a percentage of the centre population. There was a notable increase in 'prevention of self-harm' being cited as the reason for the use of force, and this is consistent with the increased levels of self-harm in 2020, but is a cause of additional concern. At Heathrow, the Board reported that levels of handcuffing were no longer a cause for concern in 2020.

### **Substance abuse**

30. There has been continued progress in preventing psychotic substances coming into centres, through the use in particular of itemiser machines to detect substances in incoming mail. The restriction on social visits, and the use of reverse cohorting during Covid-19 are both thought to have had an effect, but, as the Heathrow Board acknowledged, there were nevertheless drugs in the centre and they continued to have a negative effect on the environment for people in detention and staff, contributing to violent incidents and pressures on staff.

## **Fair and humane treatment**

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

31. The treatment of those removed on charter flights is dealt with separately (paragraph 80).
32. Movements across the immigration detention estate were severely restricted by Covid-19, with reporting centres closed for several months and removal flights not taking place. When flights did resume, they were often cancelled at the last minute, causing considerable stress and anxiety to those who were scheduled to travel. Some Boards reported an improvement in the performance of the escort contractor, but specific journeys caused concern: at Dungavel, the Board found that detained individuals often arrived very late at night from Edinburgh airport, only to be taken back to the airport early in the morning for assessment. Morton Hall IMB reported that a proportion of transfers from other IRCs took place at night. The Board at Heathrow highlighted the detention of women in the Colnbrook Sahara unit: the capacity of the female unit at Yarl's Wood being greatly reduced, women were held instead in the Colnbrook unit, which is unsuitable for stays of anything more than seven days. The Board reported that a number of women were held there in excess of this, including one woman who, during the last five days of her detention, spent nights at Dungavel, in the Manchester residential facility and at Colnbrook.

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

33. In general, Boards reported fewer concerns about accommodation than in previous years. Accommodation at Dungavel had recently undergone refurbishment, and the reduced numbers at Heathrow presented an opportunity for some improvements. The demands of Covid-19 meant increased cleaning routines in all centres, although at Heathrow the Board reported that standards of cleanliness could be variable, depending on the number of people in detention, and that the healthcare inpatient facility was not as clean as it should have been, a problem that has now been resolved. The Board at Heathrow also reported that heating and ventilation continued to present significant challenges, and although instances of bed bugs had dramatically declined, there were still ongoing problems with mice.

### **Separation**

34. Some centres saw a reduction in the use of separation units in 2020, as a reflection of reduced numbers and changing populations. A positive development at Dungavel was the introduction of a supported living facility. This was used for men who were unsuitable for the relatively relaxed regime at Dungavel, who previously would have been held in the separation unit pending transfer to another IRC. In Morton Hall, the use of separation fell in line with the fall in the population, and the Board was generally satisfied with the use of the care and separation unit

(CSU).

35. However, in two centres, Brook House and Heathrow IRC, the use of separation powers increased per head of population: for example at Brook House, rule 40 separation was implemented 160 times during 2020, compared with 187 times in 2019, even though the population in 2020 was less than half that in 2019. Figures for rule 40 during the first part of 2020 were considerably distorted by its simultaneous use on 45 individuals to manage removals for a charter flight to Jamaica in February. This included people not scheduled to fly and those who were on the charter but had not given any indication that they would resist removal. While understanding the desire of both the Home Office and G4S to ensure that removals for the charter were conducted with the minimum of disruption, the Board questioned whether this pre-emptive use of rule 40 was justified. Both G4S and the Home Office acknowledged that there had been difficulties in communication and planning for that charter.
36. At Heathrow IRC the use of rule 40 also increased in relative terms during 2020. The Board reported no significant concerns about the reasons for its use, other than in cases where people with severe mental health problems were housed in the CSU, a problem that they have highlighted for the past three years.

### **Staff relationships with those in detention**

37. Boards reported generally good relationships between staff and people in detention, particularly as the ratio of staff to people in detention improved over 2020. At Morton Hall, which was run by the Prison Service, all men, as in prisons, had a key worker detailed to have a meaningful conversation with them at least once a month. In reality they were described by the Board as being on hand pretty much continually in the unit office. At Heathrow, the staff are very diverse, and officers took pride in finding a colleague who could speak the language or dialect of most people in detention, and hence give more support.
38. There was a change of contractor at Brook House from May, when Serco took over from G4S. This can be disruptive, but the Board reported that the change did not have a negative impact on those detained there. There was a substantial and welcome increase in staffing numbers, which led to a significant proportion of inexperienced officers, but the Board did not in general note inappropriate behaviour or difficulties for those detained. Though relationships between staff and people in detention appeared generally positive, on occasion the Board witnessed staff expressing what appeared to be desensitised comments or disbelief, for example referring to self-harm or food refusal as techniques for avoiding removal. In light of the historic problems with staff culture at Brook House, the Board stressed the importance of management challenging these attitudes.

### **Equality and diversity**

39. IRCs in general hold people from a wide range of nationalities, but in 2020 the Board at Brook House reported that the men were mainly Iranians, Iraqis, Sudanese, Yemeni, Kuwaiti and Syrian – nationalities not usually seen in the

centre. This put pressure on interpreting services, particularly Arabic and Farsi. The Board was impressed by how Serco staff with relevant language skills were used to interpret, and felt that having officers translate, rather than using a telephone service, was helpful in settling people in detention.

40. In another positive development, Boards at Heathrow and Dungavel noted work to support LGBTQ+ individuals, with staff wearing rainbow lanyards to indicate that they would provide support to them, and noticeboards promoting confidential helplines. Morton Hall and Yarl's Wood IMBs noted the work of the equality action team in promoting equality in those centres.

### **Faith and religious affairs**

41. The right to practise religion is an important part of life in detention, and in normal times the provision in IRCs is good, catering to a wide range of faiths. As happened in the community, that right to practise was severely curtailed by Covid-19, but the picture was inconsistent across the estate and between faith groups. At Morton Hall, the multi-faith centre closed in March and did not re-open during the year, even though places of worship were open in the community and in other, privately-run, IRCs. The managing chaplain and the imam visited the units and individual men, but faith leaders from the smaller faith groups, including Sikhs and Hindus, did not visit in person, making themselves available by phone instead.
42. By contrast, at Heathrow IRC, although the religious facilities were not used as heavily as they ordinarily would have been, as the centres adhered to strict social distancing guidelines and protocols, they remained open to all worshippers of different faiths, and were managed in a respectful and orderly manner. During strict lockdown, Friday prayers were not conducted, but most ministers of religion were generally available, with the exception of the Jewish, Buddhist and Rastafarian volunteers. At Brook House the picture was slightly different, with faith services not held at all for four months from late March. Services then resumed with distancing and other limits, consistent with those in the wider community. For the Muslim population, there was some innovation aimed at maximising participation in Friday prayers: they were held outdoors in warmer months and then, as the weather changed later in the year, the three imams each went to different wings.
43. At Tinsley House, refurbishment of the multi-faith space had taken place in 2019 to provide an exclusive space for non-Muslim worshippers, and this was welcomed by those individuals while the centre was open. In addition, the new contractor reversed the decision to reduce free association time, which the Board had previously criticised as affecting the ability of some people in detention to practise their religion.

### **Complaints**

44. The number of complaints made by people in detention during 2020 fell in line with the reduced numbers, and possibly as a reflection of a population that was not as familiar with the IRCs' systems as previous cohorts had been. Boards still did not have sight of complaints about healthcare, even though that was one of

the aspects of detention that was raised most frequently with them. Generally, Boards found that complaints were taken seriously by contractors, but there were still concerns about some aspects of the overall process, and it remained difficult to monitor how well and how fairly they were handled. Feedback from the complainants was not usually forthcoming given the often lengthy timescales of investigation and reporting back involved, which often meant that the complainant had long since left the IRC before the outcome of the complaint was known. The success rate of complaints being upheld also remained proportionately low.

### **Property**

45. The two main problems with property in 2020 were, first, as in many previous years, that the property belonging to ex-prisoners was not transferred with them to the IRC from prison. Whilst most property arrived eventually, it is distressing for people in detention to be separated from their belongings, with the additional worry that they might be removed from the country before it arrived, and the problem should be capable of resolution. Second, many of the men detained at Dover arrived without their property, including mobile phones which had been confiscated, which was distressing as they had their families' and other important contacts' phone numbers stored on them. Welfare officers at IRCs helped with these problems. Detained individuals were also advised to contact a Home Office phone number or email address to arrange to get their property back, but they complained that neither route elicited a response – a complaint that the Brook House Board confirmed was accurate.

## Health and wellbeing

### Healthcare: general

46. Overall, good quality of care was maintained in the IRCs throughout the year. There was a high standard of infection control, as discussed above, with good stocks of PPE, isolation and testing regimes, and procedures for identifying and protecting people vulnerable to Covid-19.
47. As in the community, healthcare provision was affected by Covid-19, but Boards reported that the general healthcare needs were largely met. Services were adapted, with, for example, the introduction of nurse triage and initial phone consultations with GPs replacing drop-in surgeries. Nurses also went on to the residential units to see patients and medication was delivered to the units. In fact, there was, at least in the first half of the year, reduced pressure on the service because of the reduced population, with same day appointments available at Yarl's Wood, for example, for most of the year. Externally-provided clinics, such as dentistry and opticians, were suspended for parts of the year, as were some of the preventive and longer-term health services such as wellman clinics and smoking cessation services.
48. Pressure on services, however, increased in the second half of the year with the rise in population and, in some IRCs, a rapid throughput of people. At Brook House in particular, the already heavy demands on staff from Covid-19 were significantly increased from July with the arrival of large numbers of very vulnerable individuals, and the increased levels of stress and anxiety experienced by these men (see above). Many arrived without medical records, and there was a huge increase in demand for rule 35 appointments, leading to long delays and backlogs. The Board felt that the department managed to meet the needs of the population but acknowledged that it was under enormous strain.
49. Heathrow IRC also experienced an increased demand for rule 35 appointments, resulting at times in complaints about waiting times for these appointments, and complaints that detention was maintained even after a positive rule 35 report. At Yarl's Wood, some rule 32 (the STHF equivalent of rule 35) booked appointments were missed as the individuals concerned had left the centre before the appointment. Where this happened, healthcare recorded it on an IS91 form, indicating increased risk factors for the individuals. The Board also noted that the release rate following rule 35 assessments was much higher than in previous years – 78 detained individuals being released out of a total of 134 assessments, compared with 70 releases out of 328 in 2019 – indicating the vulnerability of the population of people in detention, but the Board remained concerned about some men being released into the community without their mental health vulnerabilities being communicated to local agencies, and without their health records being sent to GPs.
50. In terms of mental health, detained individuals undergo a medical screening on arrival at the IRC with a duty nurse, at which a new or long-standing mental health

issue can be raised. The information is passed to the GP, who can arrange mental health support if needed. Some Boards, such as Yarl's Wood and Morton Hall, noted good levels of mental health provision, with the provision at Yarl's Wood being increased by two additional full-time posts. At other centres, notably Brook House, the service was extremely stretched from July, dealing with the situation described in paragraphs 19 to 21 above, and the Board there was disappointed that no additional funding was made available to meet these demands. As noted in paragraph 48 above, despite the reduced populations, demand for mental health services remained high. In all centres, the provision was adapted so that some contact was made by phone, but face-to-face appointments took place as required; unfortunately, group activities and visits from external organisations were suspended.

### **Exercise, time out of rooms, activities**

51. There was a varied picture across the estate. As described above, at Heathrow and Brook House IRCs, units were treated as households for the purposes of Covid-19 social distancing. Free association between units was curtailed, but men were able to access activities with others on their units at set times. This arrangement enabled activities such as education and fitness to continue. At Yarl's Wood, the gym and exercise facilities were closed only in April and November, while activities, including arts and crafts, the library, cinema and hair salon, were closed for much of the year. Education remained open. At Dungavel, activities and education remained open, with booking systems in place to restrict numbers and maintain social distancing. By contrast, at Morton Hall, the gym and education facilities remained closed for longer, even when such facilities were open in the community and in other IRCs. Staff tried to continue some provision, with remote learning packs and so on, but this was no real substitute for face-to-face activities and education.



## **Preparation for return or release**

### **Family and other contact**

52. Regimes in all IRCs were restricted in order to reduce the spread of Covid-19. In all centres, social and legal visits stopped with the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. All those in detention were given an extra £10 phone credit, and Skype was available, and well-used, for social and legal visits. The lifting of restrictions on visits varied by establishment: at Heathrow IRC, for example, visits were permitted from July through to October and for part of December, but at Morton Hall, visits did not resume for the rest of the year.

### **Case management and access to legal advice**

53. Covid-19 also had an effect on how case management was delivered and legal advice accessed. Home Office detainee engagement teams (DETs) operated in all centres, with each detained person allotted a designated personal engagement officer. This improved communication and the delivery of information to people in detention. However, the practice of local DETs during Covid-19 varied. At Morton Hall, while the initial DET interview was conducted by phone, face-to-face interviews resumed after the new arrival had undergone a 14-day quarantine period. However, at Heathrow and at Yarl's Wood, DET interviews continued to be by telephone. The Yarl's Wood Board commented that the quality and amount of information being provided to those detained had improved, but the Heathrow Board was concerned about sensitive and difficult information being imparted over the phone, which it felt added to stress and anxiety. The Brook House Board had similar concerns about occasions when DET paperwork for removal directions had to be delivered by Serco staff.
54. Asylum assessments people in detention in the Yarl's Wood STHF were also conducted by phone, which the Board felt increased the risks highlighted above (paragraph 24) that minors or those with vulnerabilities might not be picked up. In terms of legal advice, the free surgeries which operated in all the centres stopped with Covid-19, and Brook House IMB said that there were difficulties for people in detention in maintaining access to their solicitors.

### **Length of detention**

55. There is still no legal time limit for immigration detention, and while the general trend has been for people to be held for shorter periods in detention, with fewer people held in 2020 for the lengthy periods seen in previous years, there were still too many held for unacceptably long periods with no apparent prospect of removal, and this became more pronounced during the course of the year. At Morton Hall, for example, in February, 66% of the population stayed less than four weeks. By June, only 25% of the population had been there less than four weeks. By December, the five people with the longest stays at Morton Hall had spent between 249 and 750 days in detention. The longest-staying individual at Heathrow had been in detention for 683 days. These long-staying cases tend to be ex-prisoners, and both Boards recommended that greater efforts should be made to remove

them directly from prison on completion of their sentence.

56. Boards also looked at the number of people released from detention each year, compared with those removed from the country, since the purpose of detention is to facilitate removal. Boards remain concerned that people should not be unnecessarily exposed to the damaging effects of detention. At Brook House, the average percentage of those released from detention, rather than being removed, was 53% over the whole year, but from August to December this increased to 72% of all those leaving the centre, which raises questions about the necessity of their detention, given that removal was the purpose of bringing them to Brook House.

### **Planning for removal or release**

57. For those being removed under the Dublin Convention, the Brook House Board reported a complete absence of meaningful information about what would happen to them, leading to anxiety and distress. There also did not seem to be any formal arrangements in place for briefing the receiving authorities about the vulnerabilities or needs of people removed to EU countries. In early September, 28 people started refusing food after hearing from former detained individuals removed to Spain that they had been left at the airport without any assistance from the Spanish authorities. Some were apparently destitute. The next charter flight to Spain was cancelled after a court injunction granting a stay on removal for those on the flight.
58. When people in detention were granted bail, Boards reported continuing difficulties for the Home Office and the National Probation Service in finding and checking suitable bail addresses, leading to considerable delays in release, which the Board at Brook House described as a major source of frustration for people in detention. In some cases, the grant of bail lapsed because it was conditional on suitable accommodation being found within 28 days. This resulted in men having to make repeat bail applications, adding to stress and anxiety. In March, the Morton Hall Board expressed concern at a three-month delay in releasing an individual who had a Level 3 AAR classification. In other cases, releases of Level 3 adults at risk, or those whose release had been agreed after a rule 35 assessment, were delayed. One man granted bail from Brook House in March was still waiting for accommodation in August when he was transferred to another IRC.
59. From Dungavel, most people are transferred to other IRCs. If, unusually, they are bailed, the Board noted good practice on release: they were given their paperwork and tickets, and enough food and sanitiser for two days. If they did not own a mobile phone, they were permitted to keep the phone issued to them on arrival, to which £20 was credited.

## Short-term holding facilities: IMB findings

### Effect of Covid-19 on the operation of STHFs including port holding rooms and reporting centres

60. IMBs operating in STHFs cover a range of facilities including holding rooms at ports and airports, two residential STHFs (Larne House in Northern Ireland and MAN 302 at Manchester airport), and a number of reporting centres where people who are subject to immigration control are required to report to the Home Office regularly, and may be detained on reporting in order to facilitate their removal. There have been issues about obtaining airside passes for IMB members at some airports, for example Manchester, which has prevented Boards from being able to carry out their statutory role. Following lengthy discussions with the Home Office and Civil Aviation Authority, this appears to be close to resolution.
61. Numbers of people in detention dropped dramatically across all facilities except Dover, and reporting centres and some terminal holding rooms were closed for several months. Across the facilities monitored by the London Heathrow and City airports Board and the North and Midlands Board, for example, there was a reduction of more than 50% in the number of those in detention, and at those monitored by the Glasgow and Edinburgh airport Board, numbers fell by 76% compared with 2019.
62. The picture was very different at Dover, where the purpose of the holding rooms at the Kent Intake Unit (KIU) on the Dover Eastern docks and Frontier House at Folkestone is to detain migrants who have attempted to gain entry into the UK without detection, most commonly in small boats, in road vehicles or via the Channel Tunnel. The number of people detained in these holding rooms rose to more than 10,000 in 2020, with people arriving in sudden large numbers rather than a steady flow. There were seasonal fluctuations in numbers, but the winters of 2019 and 2020 saw more migrants arriving than in previous winters. The detention facilities at Dover operate in a unique and challenging context, which has attracted growing public attention.
63. The Dover Board has the statutory right to monitor the holding rooms of the KIU and at Frontier House. However, during 2019 and 2020, most migrants arriving in small boats across the Channel were initially held at a temporary facility at the Dover Western docks, known as the Tug Haven, before being transferred to other locations, such as IRCs, KIU or Frontier House. As this was not formally designated as an STHF, the IMB has no statutory monitoring rights, and during 2019 and 2020 was not granted access by the Home Office to monitor the Tug Haven. Since June 2021, some limited access has been negotiated.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/imb-prod-storage-1ocod6bqky0vo/uploads/2021/10/IMB-Dover-Annual-Report-2019-2020-FINAL-VERSION-including-annex-on-Tug-Haven-for-circulation-2021-10-01.pdf>

## Safety

### Covid-19 safety

64. In contrast to the situation in IRCs, IMBs monitoring airport holding rooms raised serious concerns about Covid-19 safety in those facilities. The Home Office published Covid-19 safety guidance for IRCs and residential STHFs, but not for non-residential STHFs. IMB concerns increased significantly later in the year when the number of flights and hence of people in detention started to rise. Airport holding rooms are enclosed environments with no natural ventilation, holding people who have arrived on flights from all over the world. The London Heathrow and City airports Board reported their concerns when they recommenced in-person visits to the holding rooms in Terminals 2 and 5 in June (Terminals 3 and 4 were closed for most of the year). They found: officers not wearing masks, even though masks were obligatory in the rest of the airport; no provision for social distancing among those in detention, for example by seat blocking; staff not social distancing. The IMB's concerns increased throughout the summer as numbers of passengers and people being detained also increased, the holding rooms became more crowded, and people from countries on the UK quarantine list were being held with people who did not have to quarantine. For example, on one visit in early November, there were 22 people being held in the Terminal 2 holding room, of whom 18 were from Brazil, a country with a very high rate of Covid-19 infection. Some of those detained were sent to IRCs, some were put on turnaround flights, and some were released into the community.
65. In November 2020, the London Heathrow and City airports Board wrote to senior managers at the Home Office, Border Force and Mitie Care & Custody (the contractor responsible for the holding rooms) expressing their concerns. They considered that those detained in the holding rooms were being exposed to a lower standard of infection control and care than they would have received in the public areas of the airport. Border Force referred the IMB to the Home Office. The Home Office responded orally via a senior manager at a meeting of the IRC Chairs' Forum in January 2021. The Board's experience was that the situation did not improve following this letter, particularly around the wearing of face masks, despite the Home Office issuing instructions at this late stage that they were to be worn in the holding rooms.
66. The Glasgow and Edinburgh IMB reported similar concerns about Covid-19 safety in the airport holding rooms. They highlighted the very late instruction about mask-wearing, together with a reluctance on the part of the authorities to provide wall-mounted hand sanitising dispensers at entrances to holding rooms. Bizarrely, although the contractor had provided hand-held thermometers in all holding rooms, officers were instructed by the Home Office not to use them because they had not been adequately trained in their use.
67. At the Dover facilities, whilst Covid-19 safety measures were taken, at busy times the number of people in the holding rooms meant that social distancing was not realistic, and during 2020 there was no proactive or widespread testing, although this improved during early 2021.

## **Reception and induction**

68. The London Heathrow and City airports Board reported that the quality of inductions at Heathrow had improved significantly over the past two years, with officers dealing patiently and courteously with people who might be in a state of shock about being detained. However, there was a concern that officers might be assuming that passengers with a smattering of English understood what they were being told about their detention, and as a result not using telephone interpretation services frequently enough. The Board also recommended that Border Force deploy more officers at peak times, to avoid unnecessarily long periods of detention in the controlled waiting areas and in the holding rooms, noting that waiting periods in the controlled waiting areas, normally less than an hour, were sometimes as long as two to three hours.
69. At Dover, the Board found that people in detention frequently reported confusion about where they were and what would happen to them next. Inductions were generally thorough, but after a long and difficult journey it could be difficult for people to process everything, particularly as most of the written information provided to them was in English. When there was a large influx of people at Frontier House, the induction area could become very crowded, leading to some inductions being conducted more briefly at times of pressure. The over-crowding also led to a lack of privacy in the induction area: questions about medical matters, for example, could be overheard by others. Those detained also had to wait in vans or in a separate part of the facility called the Atrium before they could be admitted to the holding room.

## **Vulnerable individuals; safeguarding**

70. The IMB's most serious concerns about safeguarding arose at Dover. The holding room at Frontier House, Folkestone, has no separate space for children and families, and at the Kent Intake Unit there were instances where unaccompanied children were held in a small space with adults they did not know. As noted above, the Board became concerned about the ability of the holding rooms to cope with sudden influxes of large numbers of people, and the impact this could have on matters such as assessing healthcare needs and vulnerabilities. The Board was particularly concerned about the effectiveness of age assessments, as IMB colleagues reported the arrival of minors, who had been through Dover, at IRCs. The safeguarding of vulnerable adults, and particularly those who may have been trafficked, was generally dealt with appropriately by trained staff, but when the holding rooms were busy the pressure on staff and the chances of vulnerabilities being missed also increased.
71. The position of unaccompanied minors arriving at Dover was a cause of extreme concern. In 2020, 696 unaccompanied minors were recorded as being detained in the Dover holding rooms, an increase of almost 100% over the previous year. Their cases were prioritised in order to keep their stays as short as possible, before they were handed into the care of social services, but the situation grew progressively more challenging. Kent County Council, which has the primary responsibility for these children, on occasion announced that it could take no more, which meant that

the children had to wait in the holding rooms or in the Atrium until social workers from other local authorities could make arrangements for their care. The average length of stay for children at the start of 2020 was just over five hours; by September it had risen to over 42 hours.

## **Fair and humane treatment**

### **Escorts, transfers and transports**

72. At Dover there were some delays in onward transport to IRCs, leading to longer stays in the holding rooms or in the Atrium. There were increasingly complex arrangements for moving people between the holding rooms, local hotels, IRCs and other intake units. The Board commented that people being transferred to other parts of the IDE often seemed unclear about where they were going or what was happening to them.
73. A particular and continuing problem at Edinburgh airport is the fact that the holding room is in Terminal 1, whilst the majority of passengers who end up being detained arrive into Terminal 2. This impacted on the efficiency of the detention process and led to some people being walked for 20-25 minutes through the public areas of the airport to Terminal 1, a process which has implications for the dignity of people in detention.

### **Accommodation and clothing**

74. All non-residential STHFs are basically waiting rooms, unsuitable for stays of more than a few hours. Very few have any natural light and none have fresh air ventilation; some but not all have showers; some have fold-out mattresses, blankets and pillows available for those who want to rest, but these are not proper sleeping facilities even though people are sometimes detained overnight. Extended stay accommodation has been developed at both Heathrow and Birmingham airports, to avoid those who are being removed on turnaround flights being sent for very short stays in IRCs. As a result, more individuals were being held for over 24 hours at Heathrow airport, but the facilities consisted of no more than mattresses on the floor.
75. Some, but not all, airports have separate family rooms, but these are not always large enough: the family room at Heathrow Terminal 5, for example, is particularly small and cramped, with families having to walk through the main holding rooms to use the toilets. At Dover the family room is also too small, with the result that children were often held in the main holding room with adults to whom they were not related.
76. There were concerns about inadequate segregation of men and women in some facilities, and at Eaton House reporting centre – where the proposed relocation of the very small holding room has been halted – the Board was concerned about the lack of privacy, with the toilets opening straight out into the holding room, and the absence of a shower, given that people were sometimes detained after sleeping rough. At Dover there is a shower in the KIU but not at Frontier House; the Board reported that people who had endured long journeys without washing facilities, and who may be cold and wet, might have to wait a long time for a shower. Many arrived in wet clothing: there were plentiful supplies of fresh clothing in the holding rooms, but as noted above, people often had to wait long periods to be admitted into those rooms.

77. The number of people through the holding rooms at Dover in 2020 put the facilities there under enormous strain. Frontier House – which is particularly unsuitable for stays of more than a couple of hours – has capacity for 42 people and KIU has capacity for 58. The Board recommended that both facilities be replaced with much larger and more suitable facilities, with provision for the many people who arrive cold, wet and confused.



## Health and wellbeing

78. With the exception of Dover, there are no medical staff on duty at the non-residential STHFs. Staff have to call paramedics from the airports or 111 in cases of medical emergency. However, people held in the holding rooms have to surrender all prescription medicine that they have in their possession; it is not returned to them until they are released, or, if transferred to an IRC, when the GP at the centre is able to issue a prescription. For some people, the shock of detention can aggravate existing medical conditions and not having access to their usual medication causes additional anxiety and potential risk. This is therefore a serious problem which IMBs first identified four years ago and have been raising at senior levels in the Home Office ever since, but there is still no workable solution in place.

## **Preparation for return or release**

### **Family and other contact; access to legal advice**

79. There are now information sheets in some holding rooms giving contact details for solicitors and legal advice centres. However, there is no wifi in any of the holding rooms, so it can be very difficult for those in detention to contact their families or legal advisers, or sometimes to access important information stored electronically for their Border Force interview.

### **Length of detention**

80. Although the number of those held in STHFs during 2020 greatly reduced, the average length of stay increased in some facilities. Across the airports monitored by the North and Midlands Board, the average length of stay was seven hours 21 minutes, up from six hours 15 minutes in 2019. At the reporting centres, the average stay increased to five hours 26 minutes from four hours 48 minutes. The London Heathrow and City airports Board also found that periods of detention were, overall, a little longer. The majority of people (61%) were held for less than eight hours, but 4% stayed for longer than the statutory limit of 24 hours. The Board followed up all cases where people were detained for longer than 12 hours: the reasons could be many and various but in 2020 the delays were often due to the reduced availability of turnaround return flights.

## Findings of the Charter Flight Monitoring Team (CFMT)

81. Enforced removals were suspended in March 2020; charter flights resumed at the end of April with voluntary repatriations. Enforced removals followed later in the year with flights, inter alia, to West Africa, Jamaica and Pakistan. The concentrated programme of charter flights to EU countries under the Dublin Convention, which took place between August and December, has been described above in paragraph 19. The CFMT travelled on and monitored two flights in February; thereafter they did not fly but monitored aspects of the operations.
82. The CFMT's concerns about the removal of vulnerable men, and specifically those who had recently self-harmed or who were on an open ACDT, on the Dublin Convention flights are set out in paragraphs 21 and 22 above. The CFMT also, again, found that people being returned on Dublin Convention flights appeared ill-prepared for their removal to the member state responsible for dealing with their asylum applications. The CFMT's access to records on the use of force and restraint was limited by Covid-19, and also by the inadequacy of recorded information, but the evidence it has seen points, once again, to a greater use of restraint on Dublin Convention returnees than on others; in addition, the team was concerned that men on these flights who made a simple statement of reluctance were put into a waist restraint belt even though they had offered no physical resistance when transferred into the escorts' custody.
83. There were examples, again, of people spending unacceptably long periods confined on coaches; this was partly because departure airports at some distance from the discharging IRCs were being used. But in one example quoted by the team, a man spent nine hours 35 minutes on a coach, including three hours outside the IRC and two hours 20 minutes at the airport.
84. Two positive developments noted by the team in 2020 were that, during the last five months of 2020, there was contemporaneous oversight by the Home Office of all aspects of the charter removal process, as well as reviews of use of force documentation. There was also evidence that escorts were giving many returnees – other than Dublin Convention returnees – important information more consistently than had been observed in previous years.
85. In terms of Covid-19 safety, escorts wore face masks during the collections that the CFMT observed from 30 June onwards and returnees were likewise encouraged to wear them; they were also temperature-tested on collection from the IRC. The CFMT reported that social distancing was not observed during any of the collections they monitored during Covid-19, although it is accepted that this is impossible when someone is being searched or restrained. The situation was not helped by the confined nature of the collection areas at some IRCs.

## The IMB year

IMB members are unpaid public appointees whose role is to monitor fairness and respect for people in custody, both in prisons and in immigration detention. IMBs are part of the UK's National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), set up under the United Nations Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT). IMBs monitor all places of immigration detention: immigration removal centres and short-term holding facilities (listed in the Annex). In addition, the Charter Flight Monitoring Team, drawn from IDE and prison IMB members, monitors the removal of detained individuals on charter flights.

### *The work of IMBs*

From March 2020, the Covid-19 emergency meant that visits were reduced, particularly during the first national lockdown, in order to protect people in detention, staff and members. Some Boards were unable to make any in-person visits, while others conducted shorter and less frequent visits. To maintain monitoring contact, Boards adapted their practices, with more information being provided by secure email and increased phone contact with the establishment. An 0800 number and email address were introduced for people in detention to contact the IMB.

During 2020, **90** IMB members carried out **887 visits** to establishments in the immigration detention estate and dealt with **403** individual applications from people in detention.

Pre-Covid, a face-to-face IDE study day was held, which included workshops on monitoring separation, the adults at risk policy and a workshop with the experts-by-experience group Freed Voices. Soon after the start of the pandemic, the IMB **training programme** was revised and relaunched to provide modular remote training via Zoom for the mandatory new members' and Board leaders' courses, which were attended by relevant IDE members. Mandatory bespoke IDE webinars were also held on monitoring during Covid-19, mental health awareness, monitoring vulnerable people in separation units and reporting abuse. There were **five recruitment campaigns**, resulting in 11 new members.

A new **National Monitoring Framework** was published, which sets out the purpose and principles of monitoring and its impact on outcomes for both prisoners and people in immigration detention. There were also new **monitoring toolkits** on safety (specific to the IDE), equality and diversity, and segregation/separation. A revised **IDE annual report template** was also launched.

IMBs across prisons and the immigration detention estate were supported by a full-time equivalent secretariat staff of **20** by the end of 2020.

## Annex: Locations monitored

### Immigration removal centres

- Brook House, Gatwick Airport
- Tinsley House and Gatwick pre-departure accommodation<sup>5</sup>
- Dungavel, Lanarkshire
- Morton Hall, Lincolnshire<sup>6</sup>
- Yarl's Wood, Bedfordshire
- Heathrow, Harmondsworth

### Short-term holding facilities

Board	STHF
Dover IMB	Kent Intake Unit
	Frontier House
North and Midlands IMB	Birmingham and Manchester airports, including the Manchester airport residential facility (MAN302)
	Holyhead port
	Reporting centres: Waterside Court (Leeds), Capital Building (Liverpool), Loughborough, Dallas Court (Salford), Vulcan House (Sheffield), Sandford House (Solihull)
Glasgow and Edinburgh IMB	Glasgow and Edinburgh airports
	Larne residential STHF
	Reporting centres: Festival Court (Glasgow), Drumkeen House (Belfast)
London Heathrow and City Airports IMB	Heathrow and London City airports
	Reporting centres: Becket House (London), Eaton House (Hounslow)
Gatwick, Stansted and Luton Airports IMB	Gatwick, Stansted and Luton airports
	Lunar House, Croydon

### Charter Flight Monitoring Team

Destinations of monitored flights: Jamaica and Pakistan (both in February 2020).

Monitored collection: Romania (June 2020).

Monitored up to the point of boarding: Germany and France (August 2020), and Germany and Lithuania (September 2020).

Monitored muster and collection of Dublin Convention cohort at Brook House: France, Spain and Poland (October 2020); and Germany, Denmark and Romania (November 2020).

Monitored muster and a few collections from IRCs: Jamaica (December 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Brook House IMB and Tinsley House IMB merged to become Gatwick IRC IMB in January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Morton Hall IRC is in the process of converting to a prison exclusively holding foreign national men. This is expected to be finalised by September 2021.