



Annual Report of the London Short-Term Holding Facilities

**For reporting year
1 February 2024 to 31 January 2025**

Published June 2025



Contents

Introductory sections 1 – 3		Page
1.	Statutory role of the IMB	3
2.	Description of the holding rooms	4
3.	Key points	5
 Evidence sections 4 – 7		
4.	Safety	12
5.	Fair and humane treatment	16
6.	Health and wellbeing	24
7.	London Heathrow Airport: escorted removals	25
 8. The work of the IMB		
Board data		27
Visit data		27

All IMB annual reports are published on www.imb.org.uk

Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. Statutory role of the IMB

The London Heathrow and City Airports Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) is appointed by the Home Secretary to monitor and report on the welfare of people in short-term holding facilities (STHFs) through observation of their treatment and of the premises in which they are held. The Board also monitors the treatment of people being removed from the UK through London Heathrow Airport on scheduled flights.

The Board conducts its work in line with the Short-Term Holding Facility Rules, which place the day-to-day operations of STHFs on a statutory footing. Part 7 of the Rules sets out the responsibilities of the IMB (referred to in the Rules as the visiting committee). The Board has unrestricted access to every detained individual and all immigration detention facilities, and to most records. Board members have access, at all times, to all parts of the facility and can speak to detained individuals outside of the hearing of officers. They must consider any complaint or request that a detained individual wishes to make to them and make enquiries into the case of any detained individual whose mental or physical health is likely to be injuriously affected by any conditions of detention. The Board must inform the STHF manager about any matter that they consider requires their attention, and report to the Secretary of State any matter of which they consider the Home Office needs to be aware.

The Board's duties also include the production of an annual report covering the treatment of detained individuals, the state and administration of the facility, as well as providing any advice or suggestions it considers appropriate. This report has been produced to fulfil that obligation.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that States designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detained individuals and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMBs are part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

2. Description of the holding rooms

London Heathrow Airport holding rooms

Each of the four terminals (Terminals 2, 3, 4 and 5) contains a shortterm holding facility (STHF). The Home Office contracts the management of the holding rooms to Mitie Care & Custody (C&C).

Under the STHF Rules, detention may be for periods of up to 24 hours and, in exceptional cases, even longer. From the holding room, passengers may be allowed entry to the UK, be granted immigration bail or transferred to an alternative detention setting. If a person is refused entry to the UK and a return flight is available within a reasonable period, they wait in the holding room until they are escorted to the aircraft door for their return flight.

Holding rooms are also used to accommodate people who are required to return to the airport for a further interview by Border Force (BF). They may have returned voluntarily in accordance with their bail conditions after one or more periods of immigration bail or they may have been brought back to the airport from an immigration removal centre (IRC).

There is a further holding room at Cayley House, part of Terminal 3, which is used for people brought to the airport for removal. This is a different type of facility, in that most of the men and women arriving there will have already spent varying periods of time in detention in an IRC and/or prison, and it is anticipated that they will be compliant with their removal.

London City Airport holding room

There are two separate holding rooms, one for adults and another for families and unaccompanied minors. Each room has its own toilet and shower facilities. There are, in principle, no overnight stays, except in exceptional circumstances.

Eaton House holding room

Eaton House is a Home Office (HO) reporting centre in the Borough of Hounslow. There are no overnight stays, as all detained people are taken to IRCs from here. It has two separate holding rooms, one for men and one for women, and search areas, which are separate from the office, which allow for more privacy.

Controlled waiting areas

When Border Force officers stop a passenger arriving at the UK border and need time to follow up inquiries regarding entry into the UK, they first take the person to the controlled waiting area (CWA), a seated section by the immigration desks.

London Heathrow Airport escorted removals

The Board regularly monitors international returns (IRs), during which an individual being removed from the UK is taken by a team of escorts onto a scheduled flight and accompanied to their final destination. Such passengers may have stated that they refuse to go voluntarily, have been assessed as presenting a risk to themselves or others, or are being deported having served a prison sentence for a serious offence. The Board monitors such removals taking place through Heathrow Airport until the passenger is seated in the aircraft.

The Board also occasionally monitors in-country escorted (ICE) removals, during which a person is escorted through the airport to board the aircraft as a regular passenger.

3. Key points

Background to the report

The report refers to the Heathrow Airport holding rooms unless indicated otherwise. All numerical data are provided by Mitie Care & Custody.

3.1 Main findings

Safety

- From the Board's observations, all holding rooms in all facilities can reasonably be said to provide a safe environment for detained individuals. Vulnerable people and children are checked on regularly by the detention custody officers (DCOs).
- There have been occasions when a minor is not accompanied by a responsible adult in the controlled waiting area (CWA). Whilst it is not a requirement, unaccompanied children without a chaperone will be monitored by the Border Force in the CWA. We would like to see all children accompanied by a responsible adult whilst they are in the CWA.
- The child-sized benches with an adult-height table in the main London City Airport holding room have been replaced. The problem persists in the family room, where they pose a risk of injury to detained people.
- The safety of people being removed may be compromised, in the Board's view, if there are insufficient escorts to control a difficult situation.

Fair and humane treatment

- Insufficient numbers of Border Force officers sometimes result in long waits in the CWAs.
- Those held in the CWAs have no, or very limited, privacy, other than in Terminal 4, where a thin partition affords privacy. The CWA at Terminal 2 appears to be too small for the number of people regularly held there.
- The Board has observed that some children had extended waits in the CWA. There are no facilities for children in the CWAs and the Board would like to see them being accommodated in the family holding room instead.
- Asylum seekers (adults and children) who have been bailed sometimes face long waits for Clearsprings (the company contracted to provide transport and accommodation for asylum seekers) to pick them up. Unavailability of accommodation or transport is often given as the cause.
- Not all of those who are detained are offered a translator on arrival into immigration detention. The Board recommends that, where English is not their first language, they should be offered this, regardless of whether or not an officer believes that the level of English is of a sufficient standard.
- Delays and unavailability of certain languages in The Big Word translation service can cause problems for inductions and further communication afterwards.
- The holding rooms are not equipped for stays over 24 hours, but detained people do sometimes have long stays, often overnight, without sufficient mattresses and blankets. The Board would like to see a significant reduction in the number of detained people having these long stays. During the reporting period, 3.5% of those detained stayed longer than 24 hours.
- The temperature in the holding rooms, both at London Heathrow and London City Airport, is sometimes too cold for people sitting in a room for an extended period and DCOs are unable to control it directly. This often causes considerable discomfort for

the detained people who complain of being cold, even when blankets are supplied. Thermometers have been placed in Terminal 3 holding rooms.

- Although agreed, toilet seats in holding rooms at Heathrow have still not been installed in Terminal 5.
- In previous reports, we have recommended that DCOs are reminded to engage regularly with detained people during their long periods of detention because they may not remember everything they have been told during their induction. This year, again, we observed detained people who would have benefited from a reminder of what was available to them.
- Lack of internet access still causes problems with translation devices and prevents passengers who struggle to communicate verbally to interact with their environment. This is a particular problem in Terminal 2. The promised internet trial started during the year but has now stalled.
- The quality and tone of responses to questions raised in our monitoring reports are variable and we are concerned that agencies may be missing opportunities to learn from complaints and improve practices.

Health and wellbeing

- People detained at London City Airport and Eaton House still do not have access to their own prescribed or over-the-counter medication.

3.2 Recommendations

TO THE MINISTER

Internet access

- The Board would like to see access to Wi-Fi for detained people across all the holding rooms. The trial started late in the year and has been halted. We are pleased to note that there is the intention to restart the trial.
- The Board would like the lack of signal in Terminal 2 to be urgently addressed, so that a translation device can be used to communicate with detained people.

Access to medication

- Eaton House and London City Airport urgently need a workable solution for administering personal medication. This issue has been raised for many years now, including at Ministerial level.

TO THE UK BORDER FORCE/HOME OFFICE IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

- The Board recommends that more officers be deployed at peak times to avoid unnecessarily extended periods of detention in the controlled waiting areas and the holding rooms.
- The Board has observed that some children had extended waits in the CWA. There are no facilities for children in this area, nor is the environment comparable to that in the family room. The Board would like to see these children accommodated in the holding room instead.
- The holding rooms are not equipped for stays over 24 hours and the Board would like to a significant reduction in the 3.5% of detained people experiencing these long stays.
- We would like a review of the purpose of the lists of legal advice providers so that those who are detained do not have unrealistic expectations.
- We seek clarity on the mechanism for deciding whether a removal constitutes a complex case in terms of an escorted removal.

- The temperature problems in the holding rooms, both at London Heathrow and London City Airport, need to be resolved. The Board would like to see DCOs be given some form of control, either by being able to directly adjust the temperature or by asking someone to adjust the temperature at their request. The temperature problem in London City Airport was also raised in last year's report.
- The Board has been asking for toilet seats to be installed in all terminal holding rooms for the last few years and we would like to see this issue finally resolved.
- We would like to see shorter collection waiting times for those seeking asylum and being transferred to asylum accommodation.

TO MITIE CARE & CUSTODY

- We repeat the recommendation that the detention contractor should ensure that DCOs use The Big Word interpretation service for inducting non-English-speaking passengers and that they should not assume that passengers with a limited grasp of English really understand what they are being told.
- Delays and unavailability of certain languages in The Big Word translation service need to be addressed.
- In previous reports, we have recommended that DCOs should be reminded to engage regularly with detained people during their long periods of detention, because they do not remember everything they have been told during their induction. This year, again, we observed people who would have benefited from a reminder of what is available to them in the holding rooms. We, again, make this recommendation.
- The mattresses in the holding rooms are very thin. We would like Mitie Care & Custody to continue their search for thicker mattresses.

3.3 Progress since the last report

Issues raised	Response given	Progress
<p>To the Minister:</p> <p>1. The holding rooms are not equipped for stays of over 24 hours and the Board would like to see the current 4.4% of people experiencing long stays go down to pre-pandemic levels of 1%.</p> <p>2. The Board is of the opinion that a review of the complaints process is required to guarantee transparency of the process.</p> <p>3. One person, or a team, should be made responsible for sending out a consolidated reply that incorporates all replies from agencies to the complainant.</p> <p>4. A more compassionate and personal reply to the complaints made would be welcomed</p> <p>5. The Board would like to see the promised improvements to the Terminal 5 family room and the showers for the main holding room delivered as soon as possible.</p> <p>6. As reference in last year's report, the maintenance of showers in all terminals should be prioritised so that they remain functioning at all times.</p> <p>7. The temperature problems in the holding rooms at both London</p>	<p>1. Not accepted.</p> <p>2. Not accepted.</p> <p>3. Not accepted.</p> <p>4. Accepted.</p> <p>5. Accepted.</p> <p>6. Accepted.</p> <p>7. Partially accepted.</p>	<p>1. The number of stays over 24 hours is still an issue of concern, although the Board is pleased to note the reduction in the number of stays over 24 hours.</p> <p>2. Recent changes to the way in which agencies respond to complainants is welcomed.</p> <p>3. See point 2.</p> <p>4. See point 2.</p> <p>5. The Board is pleased to see plans for the refurbishment of all the holding rooms and looks forward to the work starting in the summer of 2025.</p> <p>6. Showers remain an issue, but we are hopeful this will be resolved by the refurbishment.</p> <p>7. This is still an issue at times. The refurbishment may support an</p>

<p>Heathrow and London City need to be resolved.</p> <p>8. A solution needs to be found to give people waiting in the CWAs more privacy, and the CWA in Terminal 2 needs to be enlarged.</p> <p>9. The Board has been asking for a replacement of the child-sized benches at City Airport.</p> <p>10. The provision of toilet seats in all terminal holding rooms has been raised over the last few years and we would like to see the issue finally resolved.</p> <p>11. The Board would like to see a quick completion of the Wi-Fi trial in the holding rooms, so a decision can be made on how to introduce internet access.</p> <p>12. Eaton House and City Airport urgently need a workable solution for administering personal medication.</p> <p>13. Delays and the unavailability of languages in The Big Word translation service need to be addressed.</p> <p>14. Better co-ordination between establishments is required to ensure that payments for the facilitated returns scheme are being made.</p>	<p>8. Accepted</p> <p>9. Partially accepted.</p> <p>10. Accepted.</p> <p>11. Accepted.</p> <p>12. Accepted</p> <p>13. Accepted.</p> <p>14. Accepted.</p>	<p>improvement in this situation.</p> <p>8. No progress on this</p> <p>9. Benches have been replaced in the main holding room, but the problem persists in the family room.</p> <p>10. The toilets in Terminal 5 remain without seats.</p> <p>11. The trial started late in the reporting year and has been paused until fire-safe boxes are available.</p> <p>12. No progress.</p> <p>13. Delays are still experienced at times.</p> <p>14. There are still occasional issues with this.</p>
---	--	---

<p>To Border Force:</p> <p>15. The Board recommends that more officers be deployed at peak times to avoid unnecessarily extended periods of detention in the controlled waiting areas.</p> <p>16. We hope that Border Force has permanently addressed the situation where officers caused distress to detained people when conversing with each other in a language other than English, unknown to the detained person.</p> <p>17. The Board has observed that some children had extended waits in the CWA. The facilities in the CWA do not compare with the environment of a family holding room and the Board would like to see these children accommodated in a family holding room instead.</p> <p>To Mitie Care & Custody:</p> <p>18. We repeat the recommendation that the detention contractor should ensure that detention custody officers (DCOs) use The Big Word for interpretation service for inducting non-English speaking passengers and that they should not assume that passengers with a limited grasp of English really understand what they are being told.</p>	<p>15. Partially accepted.</p> <p>16. Accepted.</p> <p>17. Not accepted.</p> <p>18. Accepted.</p>	<p>15. This issue remains a concern for the Board.</p> <p>16. The Board has not witnessed any such incidents this year.</p> <p>17. This remains a concern for the Board.</p> <p>18. This has continued to be an issue this year.</p>
---	---	--

<p>19. During inductions, detained people should be reminded that they have a right not to disclose certain information, such as marital status and religion, in line with Rule 21 of STHF rules.</p>	<p>19. Not accepted.</p>	<p>19. The Board is pleased to see that the new induction form notes that residents do not need to disclose the information. Despite this, we have witnessed inductions where residents are not reminded.</p>
<p>20. In past reports we have recommended that DCOs should be reminded to engage regularly with people during their long periods of detention, because people do not remember everything they have been told during an induction. This year again, we observed people who would have benefitted from a reminder of what is available in the holding rooms.</p>	<p>20. Accepted.</p>	<p>20. This has been an issue on some occasions.</p>
<p>21. The Board would like to see C&C staff trained to deal with wheelchair users, to ensure that detained people with disabilities have equal access to the facilities in the holding rooms.</p> <p>To Clearsprings:</p>	<p>21. Not accepted.</p>	<p>21. The Board accepts that there may be concerns that the person is unable to care for themselves. We will continue to monitor the situation.</p>
<p>22. We would like to see shorter collection times for those seeking asylum.</p>	<p>22. Accepted.</p>	<p>22. This has continued to be an issue this year.</p>

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

Reception

From the Board's observations, all holding rooms in all establishments can reasonably be said to provide a safe environment for detained individuals. In almost all areas of the holding rooms, apart from the toilet and shower areas, detention custody officers (DCOs) are able to keep detained people under observation, either directly or through closed-circuit television (CCTV).

For passengers being brought by Border Force officers into a holding room for the first time, detention can come as quite a shock, so a good induction is important. The Board is pleased to report that the majority of inductions observed by the Board, even under difficult circumstances, were of a high standard, and searches were conducted sensitively and respectfully.

Some problems persist, however:

Problems with The Big Word: This interpretation service is regularly used but is not without its problems. Sometimes, long delays are experienced when attempting to access the service. Some languages are not available at all. In those circumstances, DCOs have to show initiative and will sometimes use translation tablets or ask colleagues or other detained people to translate, although this may be at the risk of misinterpretation and the wrong information being relayed. There is not always a suitable solution for the absence of a translator. Here are a few examples of translation issues:

- Translation was needed for a person who spoke Hebrew, but it was not available. DCOs explained that an appointment for translation must be booked in advance which, of course, is not possible in an STHF situation. (12.04.24)
- When questioned about how an induction was conducted, a DCO explained that he had asked the daughter of the detained person to translate for her mother over the phone. Care & Custody recognised that this was unacceptable practice. (20.10.24)
- On another occasion, neither The Big Word nor a translation tablet was used for a detained individual's interview, and he could speak very little English, only Malay. 'Good understanding' was noted on his induction sheet. The DCOs explained that an interpreter was not available on The Big Word when he arrived, and Malay was not available on the translation tablet. (16.01.25)

Discrepancies in recordings: Most of the induction checklists seen by the Board during monitoring visits were fully completed. However, in some cases, there was a discrepancy between the IS91s (formal notices authorising the detention of an individual under Immigration Act powers), the information on the induction checklists, and the MEDS (Mitie escort and detention system). The Board noted the following examples:

- A data log was incomplete, with a number of departure times missing, so it was impossible to assess lengths of stay. DCOs on duty attributed the error to the previous shift and did not indicate that they would be entering the missing data. (03.12.24)

Detained people were not reminded that they do not need to disclose certain information during their induction: Under rule 21 of the short-term holding facility (STHF) rules, detained people do not have to disclose their marital status or their religion. We are

pleased to see that the induction form reminds DCOs of this but, during the course of the year, we noted the following examples:

- A woman with a baby and her husband were inducted using an Arabic interpreter via The Big Word. The first question asked about their religion. The DCOs did not remind them that they were not obliged to answer the question (03.12.24)
- A man said he was concerned about declaring his religion, as he believed that declaring that it was Islam might affect the decisions of Border Force. (15.05.24)

Detained people not being reminded of key points during induction: Board members sometimes find that residents of the holding room are not aware of what they can or cannot do. They may have not been told during an induction. We have noted the following examples:

- An induction was carried out using an Arabic interpreter via The Big Word. The detained person refused a phone call but was not told that he could make a phone call later if he wished. (03.12.24)
- A Board member spoke to six people in the holding room who were not aware that they could access their luggage to get extra clothes to stay warm overnight. (04.10.24)

Vulnerable adults, safeguarding

The DCOs usually pay particular attention to vulnerable people and open a vulnerable adult warning form (VAWF). However, there are occasions when vulnerable people experience difficulties whilst detained. The Board observed the following situations:

- A couple in their late sixties had been checked by a medic, who noted that prolonged detention could be detrimental to their health conditions. Border Force officers had called an ambulance. The hospital said that they were not in need of emergency care and should be seen by a GP. The medic was still of the view that they should be treated at a hospital, as both had diabetes and the woman's blood pressure was very high. They were bailed an hour later. (13.05.24)
- A woman who had recently given birth needed to express milk. She required access to an electrical socket in order to use an electric pump, although she had not made staff aware of this. There was nowhere she could sit near a socket with any privacy, so she decided to use a hand pump. She informed the Board members that she felt very exposed. The response from Mitie Care & Custody noted that it would have been sensible for Border Force to be contacted to ask if they could provide a private interview room. (04.01.25)

Unaccompanied children and children in families

All unaccompanied children and families with a member under the age of 18 are accommodated in the family room. The DCO must check on each child every 15 minutes and record the notes on MEDS, the electronic records system. They should also record the child's activities, such as eating a meal, playing with toys, watching a DVD or sleeping.

The Board is concerned about the capacity to accommodate families when more than one family is present. The Board noted the following example:

- Three families were held during the course of one evening. The Board questioned how they were all accommodated in the family room. We received a generic reply, noting that the families were looked after according to the policy. (03.05.24)

The Board did not find this reply helpful and we remain concerned about how multiple families are accommodated comfortably overnight.

Board members have observed children being inducted into the holding rooms in a friendly and sensitive manner by the DCOs. They search children using a wand (a handheld device used to detect metal objects) rather than giving them a body search.

Unaccompanied children and children in families

Children who arrive unaccompanied - 9% of the 1248 children at Heathrow Airport, (see Table 1) - are a priority for Border Force. Often, the complexity of their situation, involving safeguarding issues and/or concerns that they may be victims of trafficking, may mean that they are detained for several hours. The children often have to wait to be collected by a social worker.

Table 1: the number of children in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms, from February 2024 to January 2025

Location	Unaccompanied children	No. in family units	Total no. of children
London Heathrow Terminal 2	36	534	570
LHR TN3	36	217	253
LHR TN4	27	228	254
LHR TN5	18	146	164
Cayley House (part of LHR TN3)	1	6	7
Total	118	1130	1248
Total for 2023-24	183	1431	1614
Total for 2022-23	177	1533	1710

During monitoring visits, Board members review the data from the previous days and note any good practice and concerns about minors. We often see good practice in this area, including the following:

- A purported 'family', consisting of a female child and an adult male, was detained. The child spent 5 hours 33 minutes in the controlled waiting area (CWA) and the adult spent 8 hours 33 minutes in the CWA. Border Force informed us that safeguarding concerns were raised from the initial point of arrival, and considerable time was spent doing welfare checks. The adult male was not related to the minor and they were separated whilst further inquiries were conducted. The child was accompanied at all times by a responsible adult. (11.08.24)

The Board notes, with concern, a number of long stays in the holding rooms for families including children:

- An unaccompanied male minor (aged 17) spent 15 hours 20 minutes in the holding room before being bailed. Border Force informed us that the passenger was referred to social services overnight, but they would not take him until the morning. This accounted for the long stay. (10.09.24)

- An unaccompanied 15-year-old male minor had a total stay of 28 hours and 40 minutes in the holding room. Border Force informed us that the passenger sought and was refused entry in one capacity: he was due to be removed but refused to go to his flight. Overnight detention was correctly sought to facilitate this removal. He subsequently claimed asylum, which required additional processes and paperwork to be completed. They also had to speak to children's services to make a referral for accommodation, as the passenger did not have anyone in the UK he could go to. It would inevitably take them time to find him suitable accommodation. (21.06.24)

Of particular concern, however, are the long stays in the CWAs, where unaccompanied minors are not necessarily allocated a responsible adult.

During the course of the reporting year, the Board noted the following:

- An unaccompanied minor male aged 17 spent 4 hours 44 minutes in the CWA. We were informed that the delay was due to the time taken to find a responsible adult to accompany them. (07.08.24)

Whilst minors are not accepted into the holding rooms without a responsible adult present, this is not the case in the CWAs. Delays in finding a responsible adult may extend the period that a child spends unaccompanied in a CWA instead of being moved to the more welcoming environment of the family room.

There have been a number of occasions when Board members have asked about the presence of a responsible adult for an unaccompanied minor. We are informed by Border Force that whilst it is not a requirement to provide a responsible adult to accompany a child whilst in CWA, a child will be chaperoned or monitored by Border Force staff. Border Force notes that they rely on the goodwill and resources of third parties such as airlines and the airport operator/sub-contractors. When the Board has been able to observe, CWAs are always staffed and the CWA officer will also oversee the detention of a child. In the Board's view, an unaccompanied child should have a dedicated adult at all times.

Use of force

Reports provided by Mitie Care & Custody show that force was used in the London Heathrow holding rooms and Eaton House on eight occasions up until the end of December 2024. None of these incidents was witnessed by Board members.

5. Fair and humane treatment

Length of stay in the controlled waiting areas

Border Force aims to have people waiting for a maximum of two hours in the CWA, although there is no time limit. However, our monitoring visit reports show that many passengers have substantially longer waits. It remains the view of the IMB that there are still insufficient Border Force officers on duty to deal with surges of passengers, as the examples below show:

- Limited resource was cited as the reason why a family with three children, aged 14, 11 and 4, had a wait of 4 hours 18 minutes in the CWA. (03.08.24)
- One of our reports noted long stays of 5 hours 30 minutes and 8 hours 22 minutes. Border Force noted that industrial action and lack of trained staff for certain functions contributed to the delays. (03 May 2024)
- Another report details 16 people held in the CWAs for between 4 and 6 hours. The response from Border Force identifies a lack of adequately trained staff, large amounts of casework already underway and pressures on the Primary control point. (20.12.24)

Border Force does not provide us with data reports detailing lengths of stay in the CWAs.

Length of time in the holding rooms

Our monitoring visits have shown that one of the greatest concerns for incoming passengers is the length of time they will be detained in the holding rooms. On a small number of occasions, detention is extended over 24 hours. Of 13,389 adults in the terminal holding rooms, 3.5% had stays over 24 hours (see Table 2). In our previous report, that percentage was 4.4%; in the pre-pandemic year of 2019-2020, it was only 1% (see Table 4). The holding rooms are not equipped for stays over 24 hours, with no natural light, access to fresh air or facilities to sleep comfortably. The Board would like to see a drop in the number of people with long stays to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019-2020.

Table 2: the number of adults in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms, plus the length of their detention time, from February 2024 to January 2025

Location	0 - 8 hours	8 - 12 hours	12 - 18 hours	18 - 24 hours	24+ hours	Total
LHR TN2	2515	759	522	360	103	4259
LHR TN3	1265	440	344	462	234	2709
LHR TN 4	1250	400	396	194	39	2279
LHR TN 5	912	344	253	170	98	1777
Total	5942	1943	1515	1150	474	11024
Cayley House	2523	212	27	46	7	2815
Grand total	8465	2155	1542	1196	481	13839
2023-24	9790	2654	2120	1292	744	16600
2022-23	7834	2403	1861	1426	874	14398

Of particular concern is the detention of children. The holding rooms are not a suitable environment in which to detain children for a long period of time.

Table 3: the number of children in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms, plus the length of their detention time, from February 2024 to January 2025

Location	0 - 8 hours	8 - 12 hours	12 - 18 hours	18 - 24 hours	24+ hours	TOTAL
In family units	937	159	29	1	5	1131
Unaccompanied	84	16	11	6	1	118
Total	1021	175	40	7	6	1249

Children were also detained in other holding rooms monitored by the Board. A total of nine children had a stay in a holding room at London City Airport in the reporting year. None of these was unaccompanied. A total of 197 adults stayed in London City Airport's holding rooms: 194 people had stays of less than 8 hours, while 3 people stayed 8-18 hours. A total of 894 people had a stay in the holding room at Eaton House compared with 739 people in the previous reporting year. A total of 836 people had stays of less than 8 hours, with 56 people staying more than over 8 hours.

Table 4: the total number of adults in the Heathrow Airport terminal holding rooms, plus their length of stay, for four consecutive reporting years

Report year	0-8 hours	8-12 hours	12-18 hours	18-24 hours	24+ hours	Total
2024-2025	8465	2155	1542	1196	481	13839
2023-2024	7938	2615	2112	1289	744	14698
2022-2023	6635	2327	1842	1420	865	13089
2021-2022	6133	1513	944	863	276	9729

The Board is pleased to note the reduction in the number people detained in the holding rooms and a reduction in stays over 8 hours.

Enquiries from Board members reveal a variety of reasons for long stays:

- Obfuscation or late asylum claims.
- Awaiting an interpreter.
- Shortage of Border Force staff.
- Long waits for collection by Clearsprings (the company contracted to provide transport and accommodation for asylum seekers). We note that, in many asylum cases, delays are the result of the unavailability of transport and/or accommodation.

Some examples we noted:

- A family with two children, aged 11 and 17, had a stay of 12 hours 5 minutes. Border Force informed us that their paperwork was complete 7 hours and 20 minutes before Clearsprings arrived to collect them. (07.08.24)

Accommodation and food

All the holding rooms appear to be in good decorative repair. They have rows of standard airport seating and fixed tables, with seats for eating meals. However, the rooms are windowless, with no natural light or fresh air.

Those held in the CWAs have no, or very limited, privacy and are visible to other passengers awaiting their turn to approach the Immigration desks, except in Terminal 4, where the frosted-glass partition affords some privacy. The CWA at Terminal 2 appears to be too small and is often crowded.

Mattresses and blankets

Passengers arriving from long-haul flights, unsurprisingly, need to rest and, in cases of long stays, need to sleep. There are a number of mattresses in each holding room, but they are thin and there are a limited number. Anyone wanting to rest or needing to sleep has to lie across the extremely uncomfortable upright seats or on one of the very few recliner chairs. The Board remains concerned about the number and quality of the mattresses. They are thinner than those previously used and there are not enough for all those who want them when holding rooms are busy.

- In one example, a report noted that there were 32 people on the log, with 12 people in the holding room overnight. We questioned how they were accommodated comfortably with so few mattresses. The response from Mitie Care and Custody was generic and merely pointed out that the number of mattresses is restricted. (14.07.24)

We are informed that thicker mattresses, which do not meet the fire standards for environments such as the holding rooms, are not suitable. We would recommend that Mitie Care & Custody continues to search for more comfortable mattresses.

The blankets provided are very thin and hardly protect against the cold. With the low temperatures sometimes experienced in the holding rooms, they do not seem to be thick enough. During the course of the reporting year, we noticed occasions when there were insufficient blankets for detained individuals.

- Some of those who were detained complained to the Board that they had not been given any pillows or blankets and had to sleep on bare mattresses overnight. The DCOs told us that they often have no supply of blankets and pillows. The response to our report indicated an order has been placed for more pillows and blankets. (04.10.24)

London City Airport benches and table

The family room still has an adult-height table and child-sized benches.

Showers and toilet seats

There is no shower in Terminal 5. This will be remedied by the refurbishment due to start in summer 2025.

The showers in Terminals 2 and 3 were frequently out of order during the reporting period. There is no feasible option of using the hand basins in the toilet cubicles to wash as since they are very small.

When holding room showers are unavailable, C&C can escort detained individuals to Cayley House for a shower. However, this can only happen when C&C has sufficient vans and

escorts available. On occasion, the female shower in Cayley House has been out of order at the same time as the showers in both Terminals 2 and 3. We are informed that if women wanted to shower, they would be able to use the male showers, with their privacy protected by DCOs. The Board is of the view that this is not an acceptable solution as it may be a cause of anxiety for some women.

The toilets in Terminal 5 are just metal bowls, and the Board would like to see that all have a proper toilet seat attached. We appreciate that this will be addressed in the refurbishment, but we would like to see seats installed as a matter of urgency, prior to the refurbishment programme.

Heating

The temperature in the holding rooms, both at London Heathrow Airport and London City Airport, is sometimes too cold or too hot and DCOs are unable to control it directly. This often causes discomfort for the detained people. This is noted in our reports:

- Board notes taken on a visit noted that the holding room was very cold. There were two people present in the room. The first was wrapped in a number of blankets and told the IMB member that he still felt cold. The second said he was very cold, although he had a blanket. (07.08.24)
- The DCOs reported that the holding rooms frequently get very hot. Engineers came to check, agreeing that it was too hot but said there was nothing they could do. (15.05.24)

The Board would like to see the DCOs at both London Heathrow Airport and London City Airport be given some form of control, either by being able to directly adjust the temperature or by asking someone to adjust the temperature at their request.

Food and drink

The water fountains have not been in use since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and have yet to be restored; instead, cartons of water and cartons of fruit juice are provided. Hot drinks are available from a machine.

There are pictures on the walls showing what food is provided. People can help themselves to snacks and fresh fruit. A good selection of microwaveable meals is available; these include vegetarian, halal, kosher, vegan and gluten-free meals.

There are some exceptions:

- In general, there is an adequate and varied supply of food but, in the latter part of the reporting year, we noted a lack of choice, particularly for those who require halal-prepared food. (30.01.24)
- Fresh fruit is not always available in the holding rooms. (29.02.24/20.10.24/ 23.10.24)

In the controlled waiting areas, the Board is concerned that there appears to be no clear and regularly observed protocols for offering food and drink at reasonable pre-defined periods. We no longer visit the CWAs on a regular basis as the trial period has ended, so are unable to comment on whether this is still the case.

Access to phones

Detained individuals are not allowed to use their smartphones, as they feature cameras. They are allowed to make a five-minute phone call in the office area to family or friends, in the UK or abroad, to give them either the number of the payphone in the holding room or the

number of a Mitie C&C loan phone. Each holding room has roughly 10 loan phones available.

Detained people do not always remember what they are told at their induction, in that, they are entitled to make a phone call. Here is an example from our notes at the time:

- When the Board was trying to speak to a man in the holding room, it became clear to us that he was not aware he could make a phone call, as his phone was taken away from him. The DCOs were asked if he had made a phone call, so they checked on MEDS (Mitie escort and detention system) and said that the man had declined a call. The detained man was walking around the payphone and it looked like he was trying to understand how it worked. This clearly indicated to the Board member that he wanted to make a phone call. The DCOs then let him get a phone number from his mobile phone and use the loan phone. (16.01.25)

We have asked that DCOs are aware that they may need to remind detained people of their right to make a call as, often, they cannot take in all the information they are given at the time of their induction.

Staff relations with those in detention

Border Force officers

The Board observed Border Force officers interacting with those in detention as they escorted them to and from the holding rooms or gave them information. They seemed to generally treat people with respect and consideration, even when faced with anger, reluctance or distress:

- Our notes show that, on one occasion, a detained person said she was being treated well but that she had a terrible headache, so the Board member informed the DCOs. A female DCO went into the room, and while they were talking, the young woman started crying. The female DCO sat down and spent a few minutes talking to her, then called for a paramedic immediately. At that moment, a Border Force (BF) officer came into the room. The female DCO told the BF officer about the young woman being sensitive and asked whether someone from BF could talk to her. The BF officer was very accommodating and said he would arrange for the relevant BF officer to come over swiftly. (20.10.24)

Detention custody officers

Frequently, detained individuals have told us that they have been treated kindly and respectfully and have all they need. We have observed some very good practice from DCOs interacting with those detained, and we have noted these in our reports for feedback to the staff. Here is an example:

- There were five people in the holding room playing cards. There was a very positive atmosphere. The Board member saw exemplary care. DCOs were proactive in looking after the detained people and were facilitating various requests. We commend the excellent levels of genuine care and attention they give the residents. (22.02.24)

At other times, we have witnessed less than good practice, as described below:

- On one occasion, there appeared to be some tension between the detained woman and the female DCO. The DCO escorted her to the holding room and said: 'If there is anything you want to complain about, there are the complaint forms. I am the only one who is going to look after you while you are here.' The Board member overheard the DCO saying to her male colleague: 'Did you hear the attitude? I've been extremely

polite and nice. When you go for interviews, show *them* [Border Force] the attitude, not me.' (26.03.24)

In past reports, we have recommended that DCOs are reminded to engage regularly with people during their long periods of detention, because they do not remember everything they have been told during their induction and, therefore, are not always aware that they can ask for food, a shower, an extra phone call or what will happen to them. This year, again, we observed people who would have benefited from a reminder. Here are some examples:

- A student was awaiting a turnaround flight. He seemed anxious and concerned about what would happen to him. He seemed unaware that he was being booked on a return flight. The DCOs advised that he had been informed. As the man appeared to have forgotten or not understood, the DCO agreed to go over this with him again. (20.04.24)
- A man was seated near the prayer room. An IMB member asked whether he had used the prayer room and he said that he was not aware of it and joined the member to see what was inside the room. (20.10.24)

Equality and diversity

Since September 2024, the Board has received monthly safer detention reports, which provide:

- a summary analysis of the age, gender and country of origin of detained individuals;
- anonymised details of persons detained over 24 hours; and
- a summary analysis of the profile of child stays.
- summary analysis and anonymised details of persons detained relating to vulnerable detained persons

Access to information

Mitie C&C provides information for detained individuals in 20 different official languages, both in paper and video formats. Cut-out photos are displayed on the walls in all the holding rooms, showing available items, such as blankets, pillows, wash-kits, prayer books and prayer mats, as well as meals that are on offer.

Access to Wi-Fi and the internet

Those in detention have no direct access to the internet (supervised or unsupervised) to access personal information. A complaint received from a detained person in June 2024 questioned why restricted internet services were unavailable. The Board finds this unsatisfactory and notes that it may limit the abilities of those with health problems to access medical apps. This was brought to our attention in the following report:

- A woman with diabetes had a monitoring device on her arm that was connected to an app. She needed data, or Wi-Fi, in order to receive alarms. She indicated that if the alarm on her phone went off, she would need to take action within six minutes. As she was not allowed to keep her phone with her, the DCOs found an alternative solution. There is no Wi-Fi in the holding rooms, but the woman had a spare SIM with enough data and was able to leave the phone with the DCOs, who could alert her in the event of an alarm. (23.08.24)

We have not, as yet, received information about how such situations will be resolved. The Board repeats the recommendation, highlighted in our previous report, that, even if it takes place under the supervision of the DCOs, detained individuals should have internet access to be able to get personal information.

A Home Office trial of Wi-Fi in the holding rooms for access by detained persons was halted due to flooding in Terminal 3. At the time of writing, in February 2025, the trial had not recommenced.

Wi-Fi for DCO use in Terminal 2 is patchy, making the use of tablets and translation devices difficult, therefore impeding communication with detained individuals.

Access for wheelchair users

All the holding rooms at the Heathrow Airport terminals are wheelchair accessible. However, non-independent wheelchair users could be denied access to the holding rooms if they are not accompanied by a carer. The reason given is that C&C staff are not trained to lift and carry a disabled person from and to a wheelchair. Border Force has the option to bail people if they are unable to be admitted to the holding room.

Access to legal advice

Legal advice sheets listing the contact details of local immigration advisers are provided in all holding rooms next to the payphones. These are collated and updated by the Home Office from information on the websites of the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) and the Law Society. However, we have noted times when detained people are unable to access support from the numbers available, such as the following example:

- A detained man told the Board that he had not found the holding room immigration legal advice resources to be helpful, as he had not been able to get through to an adviser from the phone numbers available. (03.07.24)

The Board's audit of the phone numbers, carried out in July 2024, confirmed that only one of the 10 numbers could provide legal advice to those who had been detained. In January 2025, only four out of 10 services answered calls, with only one potentially providing legal advice that day but with high costs attached and a requirement to email documents.

The provision of the legal advice sheets appears to meet the basics of STHF rules' requirement for detained persons to be made aware of their right to access legal advice. However, in practice, those who are detained have very little prospect of accessing timely legal advice.

Faith and religious affairs

All holding rooms have either a separate multi-faith room or at least a cupboard containing prayer mats, a qibla compass (which shows the direction Muslims must face when praying) and a selection of sacred books relevant to many faiths. Religious texts are stored in separate files, avoiding religious texts being mixed.

Toys and activities for children

All the holding rooms have toys for younger children and DVDs and games for older children, plus reading books, colouring books, pens and crayons. The DCOs are responsible for keeping these clean and in good order. During the course of the year, we noted a reduction in the quantity of toys available (15.5.24/14.07.24/20.10.24/ 30.10.24) and the cleanliness and tidiness of these items (19.09.24)

Complaints

Basic complaint-handling processes are in place, in terms of collection from complaint boxes and the logging of these. Complaints are allocated to relevant agencies, mostly BF and C&C. Response times are variable, sometimes exceeding 20 days. The Board would like to see responses within 15 days.

We have previously expressed concern about disjointed complaint responses, where the matters raised relate to more than one agency. C&C and BF have now both agreed to the London STHF IMB's request to ensure that, where their agency is responding to a complaint that includes aspects requiring a response from a different agency, their response will include a summary of which parts of the complaint they have addressed and which parts would be addressed by another agency.

Detention services-related complaints

Detention services' complaints are shared with the Board by the escorting contract Monitoring Team (ECMT) on a monthly basis. Seven such complaints were received and shared with the Board this year (with the complainants' consent). Some of the complaints related to:

- Missing or damaged personal property.
- A lack of internet access and beds in holding rooms.
- Restricted phone access.

Some detention services' complaint responses do not adequately address the main issues raised, focusing instead on more narrow elements. For example, a person being escorted for removal complained about alleged damage to their phone during the bag security check process. The complaint focused on whether the escorts had caused any damage rather than whether or not the phone was damaged and by whom.

Border Force-related complaints

Border Force did not have arrangements to share complaints received with the IMB for most of the year. However, they have met our request to share these from now on and are confirming processes for this. As such, we cannot comment on the quality or timeliness of complaint responses.

6. Health and wellbeing

Access to medical assistance

As of 1 February 2022, Aeromed has been contracted to provide a 24/7 paramedic presence, working from Cayley House. The paramedics assist with any medical issues in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms and CWAs. The appointment of the Aeromed medic has been widely welcomed, and it appears to be working well, with our notes showing the following example:

- A man had been given a vulnerable adult warning form (VAWF), because he suffered from depression and anxiety. MEDS (Mitie escort and detention system) showed that he was checked on regularly by the DCOs and that an Aeromed medic attended to supervise him taking his medication. (09.01.25)

The Board receives monthly updates on Aeromed (see figure 2). In total, 28 people were taken to hospital. The majority of people requiring Aeromed's services did this for administration of their own medicine.

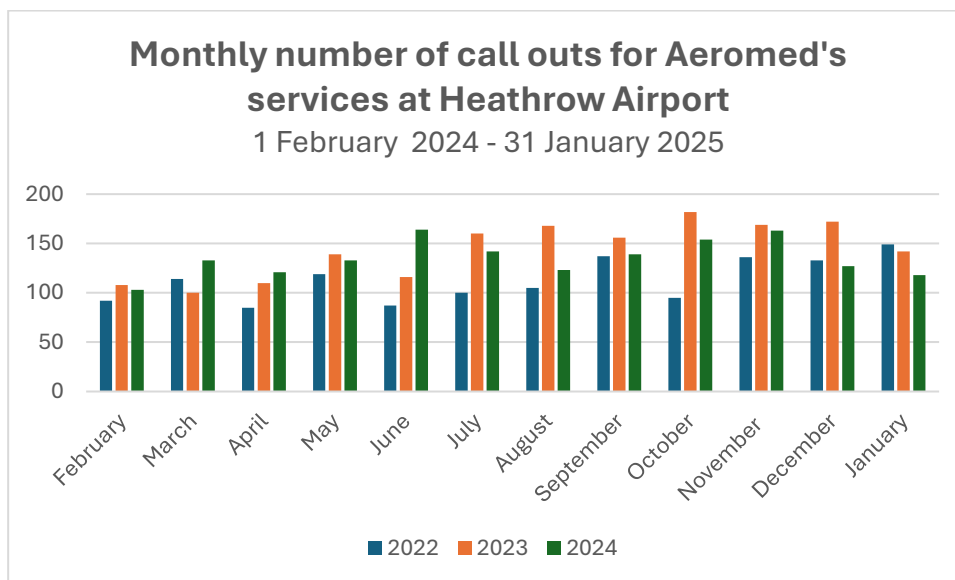


Figure 2: *Aeromed's callouts for Heathrow Airport*

London City Airport and Eaton House have no access to a service such as Aeromed and rely on calling an ambulance service instead.

7. London Heathrow Airport: escorted removals

Safety

Use of force

During the course of the reporting year, the Board observed the removal of some detained individuals that included the use of restraints. The calm and compassionate approach of the escort team usually enabled either minimal force or de-escalated a challenging situation.

Below are some examples we observed:

- The person being removed became very agitated and started to scream and shout. The team attempted to restrain him and an escort attempted to apply handcuffs but was unsuccessful. The man was brought back to the van, where the escorts spent the next few minutes trying to calm him down. In spite of the difficult situation, the escorts maintained a calm and compassionate approach. (29.03.24)

There are occasions, however, when a removal provides an even greater level of challenge. One removal the Board witnessed raised a number of concerns:

- The man fell to his knees on the tarmac. It was raining heavily and the tarmac was very wet with large puddles. He was asked to comply in boarding the plane, but he did not and a huge struggle ensued. The situation was very volatile, with this large man and the escorts, who were smaller in stature, rolling in the puddles. Once he was under control, it was noted that his clothing was wet through and his elbow grazed and bleeding. His T-shirt was pulled up, exposing his back and side, which appeared very bruised. It was confirmed by the medic that this was because of the use of force. (03.05.24)

The Board is of the view that the use of force could have been minimised if the composition of the team had been given more consideration, as it was known from the time of his collection from the immigration removal centre (IRC) that the detained person would be unlikely to co-operate with boarding the plane. We are not clear about how a decision is made in terms of the criteria for denoting a 'complex case.'

Fair and humane treatment

Family removal

We are informed in advance of any proposed family removals and try to ensure that a member of the Board is available to monitor the situation (although family removals from Heathrow Airport are scarce). Below is an example, observed by the Board, of the care shown to all members of the family:

- The potentially difficult and distressing removal of a mother and her two children, aged 8 and 14, was carried out calmly and with great sensitivity. This was helped by the number of escorts who were deployed to support the family. This included an additional escort who would not travel with them on the plane but was there to support the process prior to departure. The mother was very distressed during the whole time the Board member was present. She was very well supported by a dedicated escort who was clear and calm in her approach. The children each had a dedicated escort and they were assiduous in helping to distract them and shield them from their mother's distress. This was particularly true, as the mother was carried on to the plane using a waist-restraint belt. (16.04.24)

Relationships between staff and detained individuals

A significant majority of removals went very smoothly because the detained individuals seemed content to be going home. This was often the case when a foreign national prisoner was returning to their home country. Even when people were less willing and compliant, the Board witnessed good interactions between them and their escorts. Typical comments in our notes include the following:

- This appeared to be a very well-managed removal. Escorts responded to the needs of the person and communicated clearly about next steps. (12.03.24)
- The escorts appeared to have a good rapport with the person being removed, explaining next steps and enabling him to contact his family (02.07.24)

Healthcare

We are pleased to note that many removals include a medic in the escorting team. This is particularly important when force is used and when the person has a declared medical condition. The Board recorded the following observation on one occasion:

- The medic was close by and reminded them to be careful of his head. (03.05.24)

Case management

Administrative delays or mistakes have resulted in some removals being either cancelled or at risk of cancellation at the last minute. We have noted examples such as when a driver was unfamiliar with the route to the plane, causing very hurried boarding, which is not ideal in such situations.

There is, at times, a difference in understanding between the lead escort and the person being removed about whether or not a 'destitute payment' will be made. Our reports indicate that escorts do their best to ensure that the person being removed is given what they need, but this can sometimes seem a little ad hoc.

- The lead escort said that he would be giving the detained person a destitute payment, but then realised he had no British currency and there was no cash point nearby. He checked his pockets and found he had cash in euros and Canadian dollars. (20.10.24)

We have noted concerns about the distress caused by missing luggage (22.07.24) and a person who was awaiting a response to Rule 35 (which ensures that particularly vulnerable individuals who are detained are brought to the attention of those with direct responsibility for authorising, maintaining and reviewing detention) was still pending (20.10.24). To date, we have not received responses from the Home Office regarding these issues but note that such circumstances add to the level of anxiety of the people being removed.

8. The work of the IMB

On most weeks, a Board member made an unannounced visit to the holding rooms at Heathrow Airport to monitor the facilities and talk to people in detention. In addition, an international return was observed at least every two weeks, and London City Airport and Eaton House were visited once a month.

Reports were written after each monitoring visit and circulated to the Home Office, Border Force and Mitie Care & Custody. We are concerned by the length of time it has taken to get responses from agencies to our reports.

Board data

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	9
Number of members at the end of the reporting period	9
Total number of Board meetings in the reporting period	12

VISIT DATA	Actual visits
London Heathrow Airport	
Holding rooms	53
Removals	40
London City Airport	10
Eaton House	9
Total number of monitoring visits	112



This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at imb@justice.gov.uk