



# Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at London Short-Term Holding Facilities

**For reporting year  
1 February 2025 to 31 January 2026**

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## 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, as well as 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 and 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**

As many of the main operational processes in the holding centres have not changed since last year, the account provided here closely mirrors previous reporting.

### **London Heathrow Airport holding rooms**

Each of the four terminals (Terminals 2, 3, 4 and 5) contains a short-term 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 overseas escorted International Returns (IR), 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 across the facilities continue to provide a safe environment for detained individuals, as reported last year. Vulnerable people and minors also continue to be checked on regularly by the detention custody officers (DCOs).
- Again, 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 for unaccompanied minors without a chaperone to have a responsible adult, the Border Force officer monitoring the minor is responsible for the oversight of everyone in the CWA. We would like to see all minors accompanied by a designated 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 were replaced some years ago. However, the same type of furniture remains in the family room, which poses a risk of injury to detained individuals.
- The Board was not informed immediately when a person being removed from the country absconded from the aircraft and put himself and others at risk.

##### **Fair and humane treatment**

- Insufficient numbers of Border Force officers continue to result in occasional long waits in the CWAs.
- As noted in our previous report, 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.
- Asylum seekers (adults and minors) who have been bailed sometimes face long waits for the service provider (contracted to provide transport and accommodation for asylum seekers) to pick them up. Unavailability of accommodation or transport is often given as the cause. The service has improved with the new providers in place.
- 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 reduction in the number of detained people having these long stays. During the reporting period, 3.35% of those detained stayed longer than 24 hours.
- The temperature in the holding rooms 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.

- 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.
- 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 our observations 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**

Some of these questions have been repeated from last year's report where there has been little or no progress to date.

#### ***TO THE MINISTER***

##### **Internet access**

- The Board would like to see access to Wi-Fi for detained people across all the holding rooms so that they can access appropriate information. There seems to be no intention to introduce Wi-Fi following the trial. However, we believe that the trial was flawed in that the availability of the service was poorly promoted and the access to websites was severely limited.

##### **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.

##### **Access to legal advice**

- 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.

#### ***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 holding rooms are not equipped for stays over 24 hours and the Board would like to see a significant reduction in the 3.35% of detained people experiencing these long stays. We would like to see a reduction to pre-pandemic levels of around 1%.
- The temperature problems in the holding rooms 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.
- We would like to see shorter collection waiting times for those seeking asylum and being transferred to asylum accommodation and immigration removal centres.

## 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.
- We would like to see that detained people have access to showers even if the shower in the holding room where they are detained is out of action.
- Ensure that protocols are observed in terms of informing IMB of amber and red incidents.

### 3.3 Progress since the last report

Issues raised	Response given	Progress
<p><b>To the Minister:</b></p> <p>1. 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.</p> <p>2. The Board would like to see the lack of signal in Terminal 2 be urgently addressed, so that a translation device can be used to communicate with detained people.</p> <p>3. Eaton House and London City Airport urgently need a solution for administering personal medication. This issue has been raised for many</p>	<p>1. Partially accepted.</p> <p>2. Accepted.</p> <p>3. Accepted.</p>	<p>1. The trial restarted and Home Office reports little use of the tablets. There is no declared intention to provide Wi-Fi access in the holding rooms.</p> <p>2. This has now been resolved.</p> <p>3. There has been no progress on this issue.</p>

<p>years now, including at Ministerial level.</p> <p><b>To Border Force/Home Office Immigration Enforcement</b></p> <p>4. 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>5. The Board has observed that some minors had extended waits in the CWA. There are no facilities for minors in this area, nor is the environment comparable to that in the family room. The Board would like to see these minors accommodated in the holding room instead.</p> <p>6. The holding rooms are not equipped for stays over 24 hours and the Board would like to see a significant reduction in the 3.5% of detained people experiencing these long stays.</p> <p>7. 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.</p> <p>8. We seek clarity on the mechanism for deciding whether a removal constitutes a complex case in terms of an escorted removal.</p> <p>9. The temperature problems in the holding rooms, both at London Heathrow and London</p>	<p>4. Partially accepted.</p> <p>5. Not accepted.</p> <p>6. Partially accepted.</p> <p>7. Accepted.</p> <p>8. Accepted.</p> <p>9. Partially accepted.</p>	<p>4. The Board continues to be concerned about the extended periods of detention in the controlled waiting areas.</p> <p>5. The Board still remains concerned when minors are detained for long periods in the CWA.</p> <p>6. The Board continues to monitor stays of over 24 hours and raises any concerns in our reports.</p> <p>7. There has been no progress on this issue and it remains a concern for the Board.</p> <p>8. This issue has been resolved.</p> <p>9. There has been no progress this year, but we are hopeful that the</p>
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<p>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.</p> <p>10. 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.</p> <p>11. We would like to see shorter collection times for those seeking asylum and being transferred to asylum accommodation.</p> <p><b>To Mitie Care &amp; Custody:</b></p> <p>12. 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.</p> <p>13. Delays and unavailability of certain languages in The Big Word translation service need to be addressed.</p> <p>14. In previous reports, we have recommended that DCOs should be</p>	<p>10. Accepted.</p> <p>11. There is no indication as to whether this was accepted or not.</p> <p>12. Accepted.</p> <p>13. Accepted.</p> <p>14. Partially accepted</p>	<p>refurbishment of the holding rooms will provide a solution to the problem.</p> <p>10. This issue has now been resolved.</p> <p>11. The Board remains concerned by long waits for collection.</p> <p>12. The Board continues to note occasions when The Big Word should have been used for induction.</p> <p>13. This problem persists at times.</p> <p>14. We continue to observe occasions when residents have not retained information that</p>
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<p>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 room. We again make this recommendation.</p> <p>15. The mattresses in the holding rooms are very thin. We would like Mitie Care &amp; Custody to continue their search for thicker mattresses.</p>	<p>15. Partially accepted.</p>	<p>would have been given on induction.</p> <p>15. There has been no change in the mattresses in use.</p>
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## Evidence sections 4 – 7

### 4. Safety

#### 4.1 Reception

From the Board's observations, all holding rooms in all establishments continue 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, continued to be of a high standard, and searches were conducted sensitively and respectfully.

Some problems persist, however:

**Problems with The Big Word:** This interpretation service continues to be used regularly 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 (detention custody officers) 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:

- The induction form of a detained man noted that The Big Word had not been used for his induction and his IS91 (a formal notice authorising the detention of an individual under Immigration Act powers) indicated that he had a basic understanding of English. This was not the case and he was unable to understand or speak English. The translation tablet was not working and had not been for some time.
- The Big Word had been used for an unaccompanied minor's induction, but when needed again later in the stay, The Big Word advised DCOs that there could be a 24-48 hour wait. The translation tablet was not working. The duty manager agreed that the DCO could use a web-based translation tool via the DCO's phone.
- DCOs requesting a Malay interpreter via The Big Word were advised that the service was only available if booked in advance. DCOs relied on the translation tablet, which only worked intermittently. Mitie confirmed that certain languages, including Malay, are only available by booking 48 hours in advance.

**Discrepancies in recordings:** As with last year, 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, the information on the induction checklists and the MEDS (Mitie escort and detention system). The Board noted the following example:

- Two people in the holding room were recorded as a single male and a single female. The DCOs confirmed that they were married. In response to a query raised by the IMB, Mitie noted that they should have been recorded as a family.

**Detained people continue to be reminded that they do not need to disclose certain information during their induction:** Under 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 detained individual was not reminded that they had the option of not answering the questions about their religion and marital status.
- A male DCO asked a detained woman about her marital status and religion, without mentioning that it was not obligatory to answer.

**Detained people not being reminded of key points during induction:** Board members often note sensitive, clear inductions but, at times, find that residents in 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:

- A very good induction was observed where the DCO was supportive when a detained person became tearful. With consent, the DCO spoke to the detained person's phone contact to further explain the detention situation.
- During a visit, a member spoke to a detained individual who said they would like a pillow and a blanket. This information would have usually been given at the time of induction.
- A detained person had been in the holding room for 11 hours. They had been offered food on arrival but declined and had not been offered food since. The DCOs explained that they had been busy managing the arrival of a large family. They then offered the detained individual food, which they accepted.

### **Vulnerable adults, safeguarding**

The DCOs usually pay particular attention to vulnerable people and open a vulnerable adult warning form (VAWF). The reasons as to why a VAWF might be opened are recorded in the safer detention reports. The Board has observed that protocols regarding vulnerable adults are duly followed.

### **Unaccompanied minors and minors in families**

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

Minors who arrive unaccompanied - 13% of the 668 minors 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, mean that they are detained for several hours. The minors often have to wait to be collected by a social worker.

*Table 1: the number of minors in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms, from February 2025 to January 2026*

Location	Unaccompanied minors	No. in family units	Total no. of minors
LHR TN2	30	197	227
LHR TN3	28	129	157
LHR TN4	21	204	225
LHR TN5	8	48	56
Cayley House (part of LHR TN3)	0	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>581</b>	<b>668</b>
Total for 2024-25	118	1130	1248
Total for 2023-24	183	1431	1614
Total for 2022-23	177	1533	1710

The Board notes, with concern, a number of long stays in the holding rooms for families including minors. 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 was held for 7 hours and 29 minutes before being released on bail to social services. Border Force confirmed that the long wait was owing to ambiguity about the passenger's identity and liaising with social services. Awaiting pick-up contributed to the delay.
- A heavily pregnant woman and her children spent four hours in the CWA before entering the holding room. BF noted that they intended to release the family without admitting them to the holding room. However, they then cited operational pressures and a delay caused by the DCOs being unable to induct them as they were already engaged in an induction and about to change shifts.
- A minor was held in the CWA for 9 hours and 21 minutes. In their response to IMB raising the issue, BF cited extreme operational pressures and their inability to find an adult to accompany him in the holding room. (August 2025 Statistics Report).

### **Use of force**

Reports provided by Mitie Care & Custody show that force was used in the London Heathrow holding rooms and Eaton House on four occasions. An incident at Eaton House was witnessed by a member of the Board during a monitoring visit:

- An escort applied a light guiding hold. The detained person objected and tried to resist. They were advised that it was for their own safety. The detained individual made contact with the doorframe, requiring the escort to steady both themselves and the detained person. A second escort then assisted, and guiding holds were applied to direct the detained person to the transfer van. (15.09.25)

## 5. Fair and humane treatment

### Length of stay in the controlled waiting areas

As noted in our previous report, Border Force aims to have people waiting for a maximum of two hours in the CWA. However, our monitoring visit reports show that many passengers have substantially longer waits. As with our last report, it remains the view of the IMB that there are still insufficient Border Force officers on duty to deal with surges of passengers. The IMB's statistics report, from June 2025, notes the following responses from Border Force:

- A case was temporarily paused due to operational pressures. In the interim, a referral was made to the police, who came to the terminal and conducted their own checks.

The statistics report from July 2025 elicited the following responses:

- There was a further delay due to operational pressures, which led to officers temporarily pausing their enquiries on cases.
- Due to operational demands, there were delays in processing casework.
- The IMB noted that 85 passengers stayed longer than three hours, and 24 passengers stayed longer than five hours. Border Force cited operational demands on the primary control point and stated that all passengers were offered refreshments and water.

Border Force does not provide the IMB with data reports detailing lengths of stay in the CWAs. According to C&C data, on average, 50% of the passengers who stayed in the holding rooms had waited at the CWA for more than three hours.

### Length of time in the holding rooms

As noted in our previous report, our monitoring visits have shown that one of the greatest concerns for incoming passengers is the length of time that they will be detained in the holding rooms. On a small number of occasions, detention is extended over 24 hours. Of 11,870 adults in the terminal holding rooms, 3.45% had stays over 24 hours (see Table 2). In our previous report, that percentage was 3.5%; 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, to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019-2020, in the number of people with long stays.

*Table 2: the number of adults in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms, plus the length of their detention time, from February 2025 to January 2026*

Location	0 - 8 hours	8 - 12 hours	12 - 18 hours	18 - 24 hours	24+ hours	Total
LHR TN2	1732	564	398	216	91	3001
LHR TN3	1487	447	345	431	294	3004
LHR TN 4	1204	351	272	134	13	1974
LHR TN 5	383	138	113	48	13	695

Total	4806	1500	1128	829	411	8674
Cayley House	2822	349	24	1	0	3196
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>7628</b>	<b>1849</b>	<b>1152</b>	<b>830</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>11870</b>
2024-25	8465	2155	1542	1196	481	13839
2023-24	9790	2654	2120	1292	744	16600
2022-23	7834	2403	1861	1426	874	14398

The Board is particularly concerned about the detention of minors. In our view, the holding rooms are not a suitable environment in which to detain minors for a long period of time.

*Table 3: the number of minors in the Heathrow Airport holding rooms, plus the length of their detention time, from February 2025 to January 2026*

	0 - 8 hours	8 - 12 hours	12 - 18 hours	18 - 24 hours	24+ hours	TOTAL
In family units	516	40	15	6	0	577
Unaccompanied	78	4	1	6	2	91
<b>Total</b>	<b>594</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>668</b>

Minors were also detained in other holding rooms monitored by the Board. A total of ten minors had a stay in a holding room at London City Airport in the reporting year. Four of these were unaccompanied.

A total of 245 adults stayed in London City Airport's holding rooms: 240 people had stays of less than eight hours, while five people stayed 8-18 hours.

A total of 1164 people had a stay in the holding room at Eaton House compared with 894 people in the previous reporting year. A total of 1047 people had stays of less than eight hours, with 117 people staying more than eight 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
2025-2026	7628	1849	1152	830	411	11870
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 of people detained in the holding rooms and a reduction in stays over eight 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 the service provider (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.
- Availability of DCOs to transfer to Cayley House. which means that people may arrive a significant time before their scheduled departure.

Some examples we noted in the April 2025 statistics report:

- In response to an IMB query, Border Force advised that further time in detention at port was required in order to obtain authorisation from the detention gatekeeper and to arrange transport.
- Mitie responded to a query regarding an early transfer to Cayley House, stating that the night crew would have been unable to accommodate the move after 3.30am due to shift parameters.

In response to the May 2025 statistics report:

- Border Force mentioned that there were not enough officers to run all the cases.
- Case progression was impacted by operational pressures.

In the statistics report from July 2025 we received the following response:

- While every effort is made to minimise the amount of time a resident spends at the airport, this is not always achievable. The duration of collections from local detention facilities can be difficult to predict due to a range of operational factors.

Feedback from Mitie for the October 2025 report was as follows:

- Issues have arisen at immigration removal centres (IRCs) where there have been delays for hours, so aim to pick up early. If 'cross-deck' [this is when a detained person is moved from one escort team or vehicle to another part-way through the journey] is involved, it is not possible to state pick up time.

### **Accommodation and food**

All the holding rooms continue to 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 continue to arrive from long-haul flights needing to rest and, in the case of long stays, needing to sleep. There are a number of mattresses in each holding room, but they are thin and limited in 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. As noted in our previous report, 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, there were 12 people in the holding room. Some were resting and sleeping on the floor, as there weren't enough mattresses, and some didn't have blankets, using coats for warmth. (25.02.25)

Mitie was asked why additional mattresses were not sought from other holding rooms and the IMB received what it considers to be a standard response, citing fire regulations. Whilst we fully understand the need for compliance, we remain concerned about the ability to accommodate everyone comfortably when the holding rooms are busy. This should be a key consideration in the holding room refurbishment programme.

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:

- Terminal 2 had no blankets or pillow cases to offer people. Two sleeping residents had neither blankets or pillows. DCOs advised that they had been without blankets for six days.
- When an IMB member spoke to a detained individual in the holding room, they mentioned that they did not have a mattress or blankets as they were all in use by the family in the family room.

### **London City Airport benches and table**

The family room still has an adult-height table and child-sized benches. This has been the case since 2020.

### **Showers and toilet seats**

There is no shower in Terminal 5. As noted previously, this will be remedied by the refurbishment, which began in summer 2025.

The showers in terminals 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 they are very small. Terminal 2 shower has been out of action since 25 May 2024. Terminal 4 shower has been unavailable since 1 November 2025. Residents are not always able to use alternative facilities.

Reports from our monitoring visits noted the following:

- Legionella affecting the Terminal 2 shower supply has been ongoing, despite various treatments. Some residents have been unable to shower due to this and the lack of DCO availability to facilitate the use of showers in other terminals. (26.07.25)

Cayley House has experienced issues relating to drainage during the reporting year and this has impacted the experience of the residents.

- The female shower cubicle had a damp/mouldy smell. Mitie advised that this appears to relate to ongoing drainage issues affecting the building.

## **Heating**

The temperature in the holding rooms is sometimes too cold or too hot and DCOs are unable to control it directly.

As recommended in our previous report, 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 the type of food 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:

- There was a good supply of food but Terminal 5 had no fresh fruit and Terminal 4 only offered apples.
- It was noted that two of the meals had approaching expiry dates. The DCOs were alerted to this and the packs were put in the bin.

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 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. Previously, they could provide the number of the payphone in the holding room where they could be contacted or the number of a Mitie C&C loan phone. The payphones ceased operating in October 2025. Each holding room has around 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 monitoring notes at the time:

- The payphones in the holding rooms have been disconnected. DCOs advised that people in the holding room could make calls from the phone in the office. They could use loan phones. The loan phone record was scrutinised and it was noted that there had been no phones loaned out in October and November.

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**

Again, during our monitoring visits, we 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:

- In one example, a Border Force officer liaised with a detained person whose bags had gone missing and arranged for them to be given a 'destitute pack' so they could change their clothes; the BF officer also allowed them to charge their phone before they were bailed, pending re-interview.

Unfortunately, we also observed occasions where less-than-good practice was evident:

- A Border Force officer made inappropriate and unprofessional remarks while a family was preparing to leave the holding room, repeatedly urging them to hurry and commenting on their attitude. The officer showed images of the intended destination to a DCO and made remarks expressing personal interest in the amenities. This incident was reported to a senior Border Force official who acknowledged the concern and agreed to follow it up. Border Force has since confirmed that the official followed it up with the officers involved.

### **Detention custody officers**

As noted on our previous report, detained individuals have frequently 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:

- DCOs supported an unaccompanied minor to meet their cultural and religious needs, providing access to appropriate food through consultation with the relevant faith support and allowing the individual to access religious items in their luggage.
- A detained person said that, despite border entry refusal, they felt they had been welcomed and treated well by everyone, including the cleaners.

In previous 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 detained individual had been in the holding room for 11 hours and had not eaten. He had not been reminded by DCOs that he could ask for food.

### **Equality and diversity**

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.
- A summary analysis of the profile of the stays of minors.
- A summary analysis and anonymised details of persons detained relating to vulnerable detained persons.

## **Access to information**

Mitie C&C continues to provide information for detained individuals in 22 different official languages, both in paper and visual formats. 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 Home Office trial of Wi-Fi in the holding rooms, for access by detained persons, was carried out during the year. The evaluation showed that little use had been made of the opportunity, but the Board remains concerned that residents were not always informed of the facility and that the access was limited to very few sites.

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.

We noted an occasion when a detained individual wanted to send a message to their a relative using a web-based service; however, due to a lack of Wi-Fi, they were unable to do so. The individual did not want to call them on the phone, as they felt this might cause unnecessary concern for their relative.

## **Access for wheelchair users**

All the holding rooms at the Heathrow Airport terminals continue to be wheelchair accessible. However, it is still the case that 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 person became distressed about their onward return destination and wanted to seek legal advice about whether they could return to a different location.

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, from our observations, in practice, those who are detained have very little prospect of accessing timely legal advice.

## **Faith and religious affairs**

All holding rooms continue to 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 still 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

## **Complaints**

Basic complaint-handling processes continue to be in place, in terms of collection from complaint boxes and the logging of these. Complaints are allocated to relevant agencies, mostly BF and Mitie Care & Custody (detention services.) Response times often exceed 20 days. The Board would like to see quicker response times. There has been a marked increase in complaints received about services we monitor, compared with last year.

As noted in our previous report, Mitie and Border Force agreed to our request to ensure that, where a complaint includes elements requiring input from more than one agency, the responding agency would clarify which aspects it has addressed and which will be responded to by another agency. We are pleased to note that Border Force has adopted this approach in its responses. However, we have been unable to monitor whether this practice has been applied to Mitie-related complaints due to the limited sharing of these complaints by the escorting operations team.

## **Detention services-related complaints**

Detention services' complaints are usually shared with the Board by the escorting operations team on a monthly basis. Basic summary details of 13 such complaints were shared with the Board this year. These details related to theme and service area, with the complaints relating to property, treatment, welfare and accommodation.

We are concerned that the escorting operations team only shared full complaints and response copies with the Board for one in the 13 complaints, owing to wider caution around complainant consent. This has constrained the Board's ability to monitor the quality and approach of detention services complaints. The Board is pleased to note that the escorting operations team has recently committed to fuller sharing of the complaints received and the responses going forward.

## **Border Force-related complaints**

Border Force has shared complaints received and responses with the IMB periodically and have committed to doing this in a more regular cycle going forward.

A total of 26 such complaints have been shared with the Board this year. The main themes emerging were disputed grounds for a refusal decision; poor interview processes; time held in detention pending decision or return flight; restricting passengers' phone access, pending entry decisions; and the perceived failure to keep family members informed.

In general, Border Force complaint responses appear comprehensive, reasonable and balanced. Although most complaints were not upheld, other responses showed a willingness to acknowledge areas of weaker practice. Examples include:

- the agency acknowledged that a 34-hour detention in the terminal holding room might have been avoided if an overnight IRC stay had been arranged in time.
- the agency acknowledged that a young adult was potentially given insufficient information about their ability to make phone calls while detained.
- the agency acknowledged that more details of a passenger's income and plans should have been requested prior to a refusal decision.

The Board is keen to learn how the agency will be learning from such complaints to improve front line practice.

## 6. Health and wellbeing

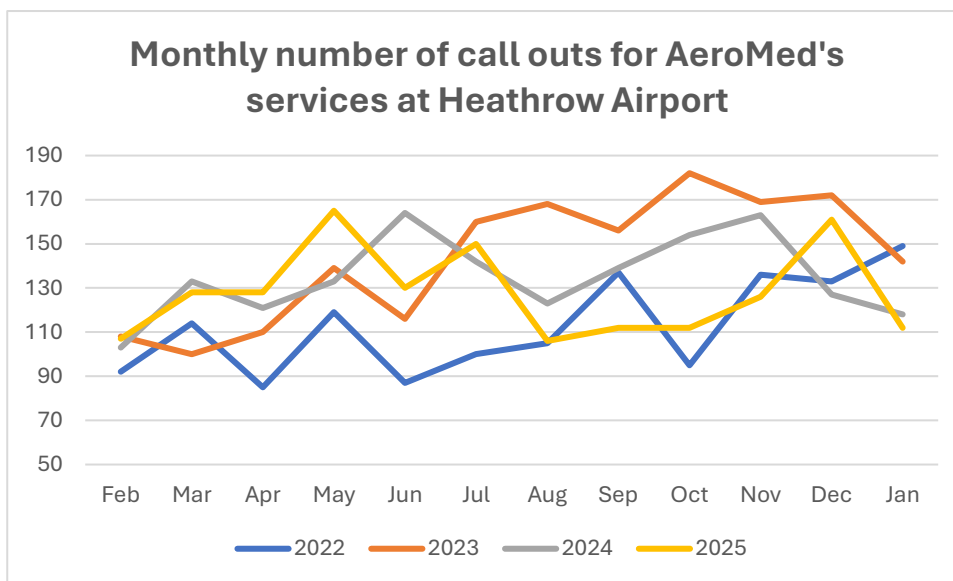
### Access to medical assistance

Aeromed provides a 24/7 paramedic presence, operating from Cayley House. The paramedics support medical needs across the Heathrow Airport holding rooms and CWAs. As noted in our previous report and from our continued observation, this appear to be working well, with our records highlighting the following examples:

- A detained individual told the DCOs that they had been struck with an object in the past. The paramedic at Cayley House took their blood pressure and offered medication. The paramedic reassured the detained person that they were fit to fly.
- During induction, a detained person indicated that they had high blood pressure and required medication. The paramedic was called, arrived promptly and checked their blood pressure. He confirmed that he could administer their medication.

The Board receives monthly updates on Aeromed (see Figure 1). During the reporting period, 37 people were taken to hospital. However, the majority of those who required Aeromed's services did so for the administration of their own medication.

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



**Figure 1:** Aeromed's call-outs for Heathrow Airport

## **7. London Heathrow Airport: escorted removals**

### **Safety**

#### **Use of force**

During the reporting year, the Board continued to observe 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.

#### **Fair and humane treatment**

We have raised concerns about the access to water during removals. No water is available after the van departs from Wilson James. This issue was raised with Mitie in the Board meetings in June and December 2025.

#### **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 monitoring visit notes include the following:

- The escort team appeared to have developed a good rapport with a detained individual, talking to them when they wanted to engage but also allowing them to rest.
- The detained person was a nervous passenger but the lead escort explained the next steps in the removal and the escorts provided reassurance.

### **Healthcare**

As in our previous report, we continue to note that many removals include a paramedic 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 detained individual became breathless and the paramedic became involved, asking whether they needed water or medication.

### **Case management**

Administrative delays or mistakes have resulted in some removals being either cancelled or at risk of cancellation at the last minute.

- Yarl's Wood did not know that a detained person was being removed and the lead escort was unable to contact them on the morning of the removal. This meant that the person was not informed in advance, which added to their distress.
- The detained individual was returned to the IRC because their documents were not the originals.
- The detained person had arrived for their flight but their passport had not been included with the documentation. Managers were unable to secure a travel document in time for the flight and the individual was returned to detention.

There is, at times, a difference in understanding between the lead escort and the person being removed about whether an FRS payment will be made. This can cause upset and disappointment for the person being removed.

- In one example we noted, the detained person was expecting an FRS payment; however, the lead escort informed them that this was not the case. The individual then indicated that they would resist boarding.

## 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 overseas escorted (OSE) removal 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. The Board remains concerned about the length of time taken by agencies to provide responses to these reports.

### Board data

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of active Board members at the start of the reporting period	7
Number of active members at the end of the reporting period	8
Total number of Board meetings in the reporting period	12

<b>VISIT DATA</b>	<b>Actual visits</b>
London Heathrow Airport	
Holding rooms	50
Removals	39
London City Airport	10
Eaton House	12
<b>Total number of monitoring visits</b>	<b>111</b>



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