



Detainees under escort:
Inspection of escort and removals to

Albania

by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

20–21 December 2023

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Introduction

This removal involved 73 Albanian detainees being taken from London Stansted to Tirana, most of them voluntarily. Inspectors found that too many of them waited in detention for several weeks despite being willing to go, and the information-sharing about vulnerability was not good enough. However, the operation was generally well organised and the improvements in operational practices that we had noted at previous inspections had, with a small number of exceptions, been sustained.

It was encouraging to find that leaders and staff understood, and were continuing to act on, the need to improve staff culture. The progress they had made was reflected in the largely respectful and positive interactions with detainees that we saw. Efforts had been made to reduce total journey times, although some detainees continued to spend too long on coaches before boarding the flight. There was very little use of force and attention was given to helping detainees return to the community in Albania.

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HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

January 2024

Summary of key findings

What needs to improve

During this inspection, we identified five key concerns. Leaders should make sure that all concerns identified here are addressed and that progress is tracked through a plan which sets out how and when the concerns will be resolved. The plan should be provided to HMI Prisons.

Key concerns

1. **Despite wanting to return voluntarily, many people were held in detention for several weeks before their flight.**
2. **Detainees were not always allowed to use toilets with complete privacy.**
3. **The routine opening of personal medical notes without the detainee's consent breached medical confidentiality.**
4. **Information about vulnerability and risk was not clearly communicated to escort staff or paramedics.**
5. **Interpretation was not always used when required and the need for interpreters was poorly assessed at detention centres.**

Progress on recommendations

At our last inspection, we made some recommendations about areas of concern. At this inspection we found that one of the recommendations had been achieved, two had been partially achieved and one had not been achieved.

Notable positive practice

Inspectors found no examples of notable positive practice during this inspection.

The removal in brief

Seventy-three detainees boarded the aircraft at Stansted Airport, together with 129 escort staff, plus two paramedics and two interpreters. They had travelled from the immigration removal centres (IRCs) at Brook House, Colnbrook, Harmondsworth, Tinsley House and Yarl's Wood, as well as from the residential short-term holding facility (STHF) at Swinderby, in Lincolnshire. Fifty were returning voluntarily, 32 of whom were benefiting from the facilitated return scheme (see Glossary). The destination was Tirana, Albania.

The longest journey, from boarding a coach at Swinderby STHF to landing at Tirana, was 10 hours 34 minutes. The escort contractor was Mitie Care and Custody.

Leadership

Leaders had set a positive direction in promoting a decent and respectful approach towards detainees. We found that staff were generally focused on mitigating the stress that many detainees experienced. Mitie Care and Custody leaders had tried to address long-standing problems by issuing 'decency updates' to staff, which addressed matters such as women-specific care and toilet privacy processes, as well as giving some attention to staff mentoring and well-being.

Leaders had improved the overall organisation of the removal operation – for example, by providing additional coaches and staggered staff briefings to allow for more collection slots, thereby reducing detainees' total journey times. The persistence of some long journeys had led leaders to undertake a review into the collection process, to identify further improvements.

Leaders had improved the consistency of information given to detainees through an escort checklist that was used by staff, and key information was reinforced at the initial staff briefings.

Section 1 Safety

Preparation and departure from removal centres

Expected outcomes: Detainees are escorted in safety and due regard is given to individual needs and risks. Removals are conducted in accordance with law. Security and good order are maintained through proportional operational arrangements and force is only used as a last resort.

- 1.1 Most detainees had been transferred to immigration removal centres (IRCs) at least two nights before the flight. In our interviews, most were positive about their treatment at the IRC. We saw detainees being collected by centre staff sensitively and being given time to gather their belongings together before being taken to the discharge area.
- 1.2 Escorting staff were attentive during initial briefings. They were reminded of key issues, such as the need to focus on welfare, the proper use and recording of force, and information they should share with detainees on first meeting them.
- 1.3 At the IRCs, all escort coach commanders were respectful and tried to put detainees at their ease. They introduced themselves to each detainee and addressed them by their name. Detainees were given an opportunity to note any contact numbers they might need during their journey and told that they could use a mobile phone on the coach. They were given an opportunity to use the toilet before they boarded the coaches, but at both Colnbrook and Harmondsworth IRCs, escort staff held the toilet door ajar for some individuals, in some cases by jamming a foot between the door and door frame. This allowed those outside to see inside easily and was both demeaning and unnecessary, especially in light of the fact that a large proportion of detainees were returning voluntarily (see also paragraph 2.4).
- 1.4 Interpreters were available at all centres except Harmondsworth, where use of a telephone interpreting service still allowed effective communication with most detainees leaving on the first coach. However, for no obvious reason, this service was used less for detainees leaving on the second coach from Harmondsworth; one detainee repeated that he did not understand what he was being told on multiple occasions before a telephone interpreter was finally called.
- 1.5 On the flight, two interpreters were present and were kept fully occupied throughout. All IRCs had poorly assessed detainees' proficiency in English. Most of those we interviewed needed interpreting to be properly understood, but very few were recorded as needing the service.
- 1.6 Medication was brought to the departure area where necessary, but centre health care staff were not always available to provide escorting

health care staff with a briefing in person. The escort team paramedics routinely opened medical notes without the detainee's consent, which breached medical confidentiality and was inappropriate.

Safeguarding adults and personal safety

Expected outcomes: Detainees are escorted in safety with due regard for their vulnerability. Security and good order are maintained through proportionate operational arrangements and force is only used as a last resort.

- 1.7 Searching at all IRCs was proportionate and respectful, and conducted with reasonable privacy. There was very little use of force. Guiding holds (see Glossary) were used twice while detainees were boarding the aircraft, and justified in both cases for reasons of safety.
- 1.8 Information about vulnerability and risk was not consistently recorded, and what was available was not always communicated clearly to escort staff or paramedics. Staff were generally unaware of identified adults at risk or detainees who were waiting for a Rule 35 outcome (see Glossary). Recording of risk and health information in person escort records (PERs; see Glossary) was often poor.
- 1.9 A waist restraint belt was used for one detainee, and was justified on the basis of the assessed risk; he told staff on collection that he did not wish to leave the country and was overheard saying that he would fight staff. In the event, he offered no resistance and was compliant throughout. Despite this, the belt remained in place for about 40 minutes after the plane had taken off, without any obvious remaining justification. In the interim period, he was guided through the plane to attend the chief immigration officer (CIO) surgery (see paragraph 1.13) in view of other detainees. He was not seen by paramedics once his restraint had been removed.
- 1.10 The records from the previous three charter flight removals to Albania indicated that waist restraint belts had been used on five occasions. It was not always clear who made the decision to authorise the use of the belt, or that the individuals involved were told the purpose of the belt. In three cases, the belts had been removed before or very shortly after take-off, but in two cases these had remained on for too long – 22 and 44 minutes, respectively – with no recorded justification.

Legal rights

Expected outcomes: Detainees can exercise their legal rights. Removals are conducted in accordance with law.

- 1.11 Several detainees had their removal cancelled, including two after arrival at the airport, as a result of legal interventions. Most detainees told us that they had not consulted a solicitor, having opted for a

voluntary return. Some were frustrated that they had had to wait in detention for more than a month before a flight was arranged, despite accepting removal at the earliest stage.

- 1.12 All detainees had access to a mobile phone on the coach and plane, which they could use to contact legal representatives, family or friends.
- 1.13 Home Office staff were present at two of the centres before departure and they monitored the operation throughout. Detainees were told that they would have access to a CIO on the flight. We observed the CIO's surgery, which was held with an interpreter. The CIO was flanked by two security staff and two other escorts were nearby, which made for a reasonably relaxed approach, without the atmosphere of intimidation that we have sometimes seen during these surgeries.
- 1.14 Some escort staff on the flight inappropriately issued formal Home Office letters to detainees, with the help of interpreters; this was a Home Office task and escort staff were not in a position to address any queries if they were raised.

Section 2 Respect

Physical conditions and property

Expected outcomes: Detainees are escorted in decent physical conditions and individual needs are addressed. Detainees are treated with humanity and respect.

- 2.1 Property was handled efficiently and private cash was returned to detainees before they left the centre. At Swinderby residential short-term holding facility (STHF), staff were proactive in locating detainees' money before they left the departure area.
- 2.2 Escort staff allowed detainees to change into warmer clothing if they wished to do so before boarding the coach. Centre staff at Brook House offered all detainees a jacket in case they did not have one.
- 2.3 Food, drink and nicotine replacement products were offered regularly on the coaches and on the flight. On the plane, blankets and pillows were not routinely offered or available when requested.
- 2.4 Staff were told that toilet doors on the coach and plane did not need to be held open when detainees were using them unless there was an evidenced risk of barricade or disruptive behaviour; despite this, some staff continued to use the wedge for voluntary returners without an individual risk assessment (see also paragraph 1.3).
- 2.5 The longest time from boarding a coach to entering the aircraft was five hours and 51 minutes. This was an improvement on our observations during many previous inspections, but some detainees still spent too long – up to two hours – sitting on a coach before leaving the IRC (see also section on leadership).

Respectful treatment

Expected outcomes: Detainees are treated with respect by all staff. Effective complaints procedures are in place for detainees. There is understanding of detainees' diverse cultural backgrounds. Detainees' health care needs are met.

- 2.6 Staff addressed detainees by their name, and we observed many having friendly conversations on the coaches and during the flight. PERs were mostly well completed during the journey, clearly recording the detainees' mood, actions and interactions with escort staff.
- 2.7 Staff were told in the briefings to offer detainees distraction activities, but we did not see any in use. There was no in-flight entertainment, but as the removal took place overnight, many detainees slept.

- 2.8 Detainees received a Home Office complaint form before leaving the centre. Four written complaints were made to the CIO during the operation, which the detainees were able to submit in their own language. The responses were not available at the time of writing.
- 2.9 Paramedics were at each site during collection and two travelled on the flight. Medical notes, in a resealed envelope, were handed to the escorting officer when a detainee boarded the coach. These notes were returned to detainees once the plane landed in Tirana, if they wanted them.

Section 3 Preparation for reintegration

Expected outcomes: Detainees are prepared for their arrival and early days in the destination country. Any unacceptable behaviour in destination countries is appropriately challenged.

- 3.1 Detainees had all previously been informed of the date they would be returning to Albania, but not the exact departure or arrival times, making it difficult for some to make firm plans for their arrival. We observed many people using mobile phones throughout the removal operation, and some were able to call family in Albania.
- 3.2 At the IRC or STHF, all detainees were given a useful 'Returning to Albania' leaflet, in Albanian, which contained details of an organisation (IRARA), which could provide a range of support on arrival there, including with short-term accommodation and transport.
- 3.3 Some detainees were removed under the facilitated return scheme (see Glossary), which provided some financial assistance to help with their reintegration in Albania. These detainees were given cash cards early in the flight, to reassure them that their eligibility for the scheme was understood by staff.
- 3.4 In Tirana, police were present for the arrival of the aircraft. A handover was conducted by the CIO, after which the detainees disembarked the flight onto a transit bus. There were no incidents during disembarkation.

Section 4 Progress on recommendations from the last inspection

Recommendations from the last inspection

The following is a list of all the recommendations made in the report of our last inspection of an overseas escort (Albania, 22–23 February 2023).

Safety

Key concerns

Detainees were not fully informed of the details of their removal. Most detainees did not know what time they would be collected or when they would arrive at their destination.

Not achieved

Respect

Key concerns

Detainees spent up to seven hours on coaches. This added to the stresses on the more vulnerable of them.

Partially achieved

Although some staff referred to detainees by their names, many still used their manifest numbers only.

Achieved

Interpretation was not used sufficiently. Not all centres had interpreters on site, and they were not always used appropriately.

Partially achieved

Appendix I About our inspections and reports

All inspections carried out by HM Inspectorate of Prisons contribute to the UK's response to its international obligations under the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT). OPCAT requires that all places of detention are visited regularly by independent bodies – known as the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) – which monitors the treatment of and conditions for detainees. Escorts are included in this remit. HM Inspectorate of Prisons is one of several bodies making up the NPM in the UK.

All Inspectorate of Prisons reports carry a summary of the conditions and treatment of detainees, based on the tests of a healthy establishment that were first introduced in this Inspectorate's thematic review *Suicide is everyone's concern*, published in 1999. For inspections of escorts and removals the tests are:

- Safety
- Respect
- Preparation for reintegration

Our assessments might result in identification of **areas of concern**. Key concerns identify the areas where there are significant weaknesses in the treatment of and conditions for detainees. To be addressed they will require a change in practice and/or new or redirected resources. Priority concerns are those that inspectors believe are the most urgent and important and which should be attended to immediately. Key concerns and priority concerns are summarised at the beginning of inspection reports and the body of the report sets out the issues in more detail.

We also provide examples of **notable positive practice** in our reports. These list innovative work or practice that leads to particularly good outcomes from which other providers may be able to learn. Inspectors look for evidence of good outcomes for detainees; original, creative or particularly effective approaches to problem-solving or achieving the desired goal; and how other providers could learn from or replicate the practice.

This report

This report outlines the priority and key concerns identified during the inspection. There then follow three sections each containing a detailed account of our findings against our *Expectations for immigration detention. Criteria for assessing the conditions for and treatment of immigration detainees* (Version 4, 2018) (available on our website at <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/our-expectations/immigration-detention-expectations/>). Section 5 lists the recommendations from the previous inspection and our assessment of whether they have been achieved.

Inspection team

This inspection was carried out by:

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Natalie Heeks	Inspector
Esra Sari	Inspector
Fiona Shearlaw	Inspector
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Appendix II Glossary

We try to make our reports as clear as possible, and this short glossary should help to explain some of the specialist terms you may find. If you need an explanation of any other terms, please see the longer glossary, available on our website at: <http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprison/about-our-inspections/>

Facilitated return scheme (FRS)

Early removal scheme for foreign national offenders (FNOs) to their country of origin. The FRS provides some financial support for reintegration.

Guiding hold

Where an officer takes hold of a detainee's arm to guide them when walking. This is recorded as a use of force.

Person escort record

The key document for ensuring that information about detainees' risk and health issues is communicated to escort staff, and that their mood, actions and interactions with escort staff are recorded during removal.

Rule 35

Rule 35 of the Detention Centre Rules requires notification to Home Office Immigration and Enforcement if a detainee's health is likely to be injuriously affected by detention, including if they may have been the victim of torture.

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