

Report on an unannounced inspection of  
the short-term holding facility at:

**Larne House**

1-2 November 2011

by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

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# Overview

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## **Larne House Short-Term Holding Facility**

Inspected: 1-2 November 2011

### **Inspectors**

Hindpal Singh Bhui

Colin Carroll

Beverley Alden

Rachel Lindsay (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)

Larne House is the newest of the three residential short-term holding facilities (STHFs) in the UK Border Agency's (UKBA) detention estate. The facility opened in July 2011 and can accommodate up to 19 detainees. In the three months before our inspection, 133 detainees (including 24 women) were held for an average of just over three days and seven hours. The majority arrived from Drumkeen House, the UKBA reporting centre in Belfast or from one of Belfast's two airports. On departure from the facility, most detainees were transferred to Dungavel immigration removal centre in Scotland, removed to the Republic of Ireland or granted temporary admission. Five detainees were at the facility during the inspection and one left during it.

In line with UKBA's published policy, the maximum period of detention allowed is five days, or seven if removal directions have already been served. However, in the three months before our inspection, records showed that three detainees had been held for more than seven days, with one held for more than eight days. The facility was effectively managed by helpful Reliance staff, but there were too many risk averse practices. UKBA had a limited presence at the facility. Custody visitors were due to start routine visits but these had not yet begun.

# The healthy custodial establishment

- HE.1 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons is an independent, statutory organisation which reports on the treatment and conditions of those detained in prisons, young offender institutions, immigration detention facilities and police custody.
- HE.2 All inspections carried out by HM Inspectorate of Prisons contribute to the UK's response to its international obligations under the UN Optional Protocol to the 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 monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees. HM Inspectorate of Prisons is one of several bodies making up the NPM in the UK.
- HE.3 The concept of a healthy prison was introduced in this inspectorate's thematic review *Suicide is Everyone's Concern* (1999). The healthy prison criteria have been modified to fit the inspection of short-term holding facilities, both residential and non-residential. The criteria for short-term holding facilities are:
- Safety** – detainees are held in safety and with due regard to the insecurity of their position
- Respect** – detainees are treated with respect for their human dignity and the circumstances of their detention
- Activities** – detainees are able to be occupied while they are in detention
- Preparation for release** – detainees are able to keep in contact with the outside world and are prepared for their release, transfer or removal.
- HE.4 Inspectors kept fully in mind that although these were custodial facilities, detainees were not held because they had been charged with a criminal offence and had not been detained through normal judicial processes.

## Safety

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- HE.5 Escort journey times were usually short, with most detainees arriving from the nearby Drumkeen House short-term holding facility or from nearby police stations. Escort vehicles were appropriately equipped. Detainees were managed sensitively on arrival, but the initial booking-in process was not confidential. A nurse was based at the facility every day and screened all new arrivals in the dedicated health care room. The list of items removed from detainees on arrival was disproportionate to the levels of risk. Hourly welfare checks were conducted and logged 24 hours a day.
- HE.6 Detainees could keep their legal documents and could communicate easily with their legal representatives. Not all necessary legal forms were available and information regarding legal advice and representation was not well displayed. Three detainees had been held for more than seven days which may have been unlawful. Removal directions were not always served confidentially and in an appropriate environment.

- HE.7 Women had separate bedrooms but were otherwise in the same facility as men. Some staff had completed ACDT (assessment, care in detention and teamwork) assessors' training. There was a dedicated room to care for detainees in crisis. Staffing levels were appropriate and there was 24 hour CCTV coverage of many areas.

## Respect

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- HE.8 The facility was in a good state of repair and clean, but had a number of frosted windows and a somewhat claustrophobic atmosphere. Some single rooms were adapted police cells and more forbidding than the others. Basic facility rules were given in an information booklet and house rules were posted on notice boards. There were some risk averse practices, unnecessarily limiting detainees' movements and facilities.
- HE.9 Staff made considerable efforts to be friendly and helpful, and we saw a number of positive interactions between them and detainees. An on-line translation facility was regularly used to communicate with detainees who spoke little English and moderate use was made of professional telephone interpretation. Staff had received diversity training. Detainees had good access to a range of chaplains and there was a dedicated prayer room.
- HE.10 Snacks, cereal, fruit and hot and cold drinks were freely available in the dining area. Staff prepared hot microwavable meals for detainees.

## Activities

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- HE.11 Detainees had access to televisions, internet and games consoles. Foreign language newspapers were out of date and there were no foreign language books. There was an outside exercise area, but it was enclosed on all sides and had a metal grid above it, making for a claustrophobic atmosphere. It was opened on request only rather than being freely accessible.

## Preparation for release

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- HE.12 On departure from the facility, most detainees were transferred to Dungavel immigration removal centre (30%), removed to the Republic of Ireland (25%), granted temporary admission (23%) or transferred to one of Belfast's two airports (16%). Detainees were seen by a nurse on departure. Detainees boarding the ferry to Scotland were routinely placed in handcuffs without an individualised risk assessment. Detainees were allowed visits but these took place without privacy in the reception area.

# Section 1

## Escorts, vans and transfers

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Detainees under escort are treated courteously, provided with refreshment and comfort breaks, and transported safely*

- 1.1 Reliance was contracted by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) to escort detainees in Northern Ireland. In the previous three months, a third of all detainees had arrived from Drumkeen House, a UKBA reporting centre and short-term holding facility (STHF) in Belfast and a quarter from police stations. Of the remainder, 16% came from one of Belfast's two airports, 16% from Belfast docks and the rest from prison, court or hospital. Journey times were relatively short. It took approximately 35 minutes to drive from Drumkeen House to Larne House.
- 1.2 We inspected one vehicle, a people carrier rather than a standard escort van. It was equipped with first aid and welfare boxes, bottled water and a ligature knife. The rear windows were darkened to afford the passenger some privacy. The passenger area of the van was dirty and the seats stained.
- 1.3 On occasion and subject to need, facility staff were detailed to assist escorting. During our inspection a detainee was escorted to the ferry by two escort staff and a Larne House detainee custody officer (DCO). The escort staff undertook the ferry crossing with the detainee, while the DCO returned to the facility with the vehicle (see section on preparation for release). Escort staff were familiar with the requirement for comfort breaks every two and a half hours.

## Arrival and accommodation

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Detainees taken into custody are treated with respect, have the correct documentation, and are held in safe and decent conditions. Family accommodation is suitable.*

- 1.4 The number of new arrivals was moderate. In the previous three months, approximately three detainees had arrived every two days. The 19-bed facility was staffed by seven DCOs on day shifts and five DCOs on night shifts. A detainee custody manager (DCM) was always on duty.
- 1.5 Detainees were dealt with sensitively on arrival and staff made efforts to put them at their ease. They were given a rub down and wand search in one of two private curtained cubicles. However, they were booked in at the reception desk located in front of the waiting and searching areas. The process lacked confidentiality, potentially inhibiting some detainees from disclosing sensitive information.
- 1.6 Health care cover was good. A nurse was based at the facility and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The nurse was employed by Reliance Medical Services and had a dedicated health care room. All new arrivals underwent a health and self-harm risk assessment.
- 1.7 Some measures to prevent self-harm were disproportionate. Detainees were not allowed to keep scarves, shoelaces or other items deemed to present a threat of self-harm. These included toiletries, which were kept locked in an office cupboard by staff, and were accessible

by detainees only on request. This procedure was routine and did not involve an individualised risk assessment.

- 1.8 Property was tagged and securely stored in a luggage room. Friends and relatives could bring additional property to the facility. After being shown their accommodation, detainees were offered a hot meal and a shower. Hourly welfare checks were undertaken 24 hours a day and logged by reception.
- 1.9 Staff offered new arrivals a free five-minute telephone call. No detainees arrived during our inspection so we did not observe this ourselves. Detainees were also able to use mobile phones without cameras or recording equipment and could borrow dummy mobile phones into which they could insert their own SIM cards. There were two payphones with privacy hoods.
- 1.10 The facility comprised a reception, staff offices, a health care room, two interview rooms, 10 bedrooms, an association room, an exercise yard, a dining room and a prayer room. It was clean and in a good state of repair. Many windows were close to the ceiling and all were frosted, which created an unnecessarily claustrophobic atmosphere. Bedrooms were single, two, three or four-person occupancy. Most single rooms had originally been police cells. Efforts had been made to soften them, but they still felt like cells, and were small and dimly lit. These rooms were not occupied during our inspection and staff said they would not use them if other rooms were available, unless sharing was inappropriate. Wardrobes were open fronted which meant property could not be stored securely in them. Bedroom, toilet and shower room doors could be locked from the inside while remaining accessible to staff who carried a master key. Detainees were not given privacy keys. The temperature in each room could be controlled by staff from a central computer. There was a toilet for people with disabilities and a female only shower room.
- 1.11 Twenty-four women had been detained in the previous three months. If a large number were held at one time, they were accommodated on a corridor with rooms holding men. Otherwise, they were grouped together in three rooms on one corridor. However, this corridor could not be locked off because of fire regulations and male detainees could walk through the area to get to the dining room. They also used the same association and dining rooms (see bullying section).

## Recommendations

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- 1.12 Reception interviews should be conducted in private.
- 1.13 Detainees' clothing and toiletries should not be removed unless an individualised risk assessment indicates otherwise.
- 1.14 Bedrooms should be equipped with lockable cupboards.
- 1.15 Men and women should be held separately.

## Positive relationships

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Those detained are treated respectfully by all staff, who have proper regard for the uncertainty of their situation and their personal circumstances.*

- 1.16 We observed positive and respectful interactions between staff and detainees, which contributed to a generally relaxed atmosphere. DCOs were visible throughout the accommodation areas. Staff in the association room interacted well with detainees, sometimes



playing games with them. Staff made efforts to reassure worried or distressed detainees: in one case a DCO spent some time talking to a detainee who had become upset after the issue of removal directions (see casework section), and in another a DCO patiently answered questions from a detainee who was to be transferred to Scotland. Staff wore name badges, though some were not fully legible. In the previous two months, professional telephone interpreters had been used on 37 occasions. Staff also used an online translation website to communicate with detainees, though this was not as reliable as professional telephone interpretation.

## Legal rights

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Detainees are able to obtain expert legal advice and representation from within the facility. They can understand and retain legal documents. They can communicate with legal representatives without difficulty to progress their cases efficiently.*

- 1.17 Detainees were able to retain their legal documents and those spoken to had copies of their written reasons for detention (IS91R). Bail application forms (B1) were not readily available in hard copy, although electronic copies could be downloaded from the internet and printed in the association room. There were no copies of the Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) handbook on bail, or bail accommodation and support application forms (Section 4). Some useful legal websites were blocked, including that for BID.
- 1.18 Detainees could communicate easily with their legal representatives by telephone, fax and email. DCOs faxed detainees' documents free of charge from a fax machine in the office. We observed staff confirming to a detainee that her documents had been sent to her legal representative and giving her the fax transmission receipt. Detainees had access to online email accounts.
- 1.19 Legal representatives were able to visit and use the interview rooms to conduct interviews in private. We spoke to one legal representative who confirmed that he was able to book visits and access the facility easily. Lawyers normally had to give 24 hours' notice, but staff were flexible should the visitor have the relevant identification with them. Chairs in the interview rooms were bolted to the floor, which was uninviting. Laptops could be brought in. Telephones in the interview rooms were equipped with a speaker phone function for conducting interviews using a telephone interpreter.
- 1.20 A helpful multilingual poster giving contact details of the Northern Ireland Law Centre, the Law and Migrant Rights Centre and the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities was displayed in the reception area, but not in the main facility, and DCOs we asked did not have up-to-date knowledge of sources of immigration advice. A helpful multilingual notice signposted victims of trafficking to the Northern Ireland Law Centre.

## Recommendations

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- 1.21 Hard copies of bail application forms (B1), bail accommodation and support application forms (Section 4), and Bail for Immigration Detainees' handbook on bail should be freely available in different languages.
- 1.22 Detainees should only be interviewed on chairs bolted to the floor after individualised risk assessment.

- 1.23 Contact details of local immigration advisers should be widely and prominently displayed.

## Casework

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Detention is carried out on the basis of individual reasons that are clearly communicated.*

*Detention is for the minimum period necessary*

- 1.24 In the three months prior to our inspection, 133 detainees had been held, one on two occasions. The average length of detention was three days, seven hours and 37 minutes. Nineteen detainees had been held for more than five days and three for more than seven days, which was in contravention of published UKBA policy and potentially unlawful. The longest recorded period of detention was eight days, three hours and 17 minutes.
- 1.25 Authority to detain (IS91) forms had been issued for all detainees held during our inspection. The IS91s were completed correctly, including the risk assessments. Where there were no known risks, the relevant section had been updated to confirm that the assessment had been completed.
- 1.26 Removal directions were not always served in private. We witnessed a detainee becoming upset when removal directions were served on him by a DCO in the dining room. While no other detainees were present, there was nothing to prevent another detainee walking in and seeing him.
- 1.27 There was no regular oversight of the facility by UKBA to ensure cases were being progressed (see section on facility rules).

## Recommendations

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- 1.28 Detainees should not be held in residential short-term holding facilities for longer than the published maximum periods.
- 1.29 Removal directions should be served in private.

## Duty of care

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*Expected outcomes:*

*The centre exercises a duty of care to protect detainees from risk of harm*

## Bullying

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- 1.30 Male and female detainees were held in the same facility and could be located on the same corridor. There were appropriate levels of female staff on duty and female detainees could lock their room doors from the inside. The locks could be overridden by a DCO from the outside, but not by another detainee. However, co-location potentially exposed women to intimidation (see arrival and accommodation section).
- 1.31 Staff were aware of tensions that could exist between different religious and cultural groups. They had not witnessed any inappropriate interactions, but described appropriate interventions should they occur.

## Suicide and self-harm

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- 1.32 Five DCOs had completed the four-day ACDT assessors' training to support those at risk of self-harm. Plans were in place for the other DCOs to have the same training. ACDT booklets were available but none had been used since the facility opened. DCOs carried ligature knives and knew how to respond to incidents of self-harm.
- 1.33 A detainee banged her head against a wall three times a few weeks before the inspection and had been placed on constant watch. The following day she was removed to a police station. An ACDT had not been opened for this detainee and an in-house Reliance 'suicide and self-harm warning' form had been opened instead. Many of the details on the form were similar to an ACDT booklet, but unlike ACDT booklets, they were not universally recognised throughout the immigration detention estate, so that staff from other contractors might not immediately recognise the form.
- 1.34 One bedroom had been designated for use by detainees who were in crisis or struggling to cope. It was similar to the other rooms and had an intercom linked to reception. Another room was to be used for refractory detainees or those posing a safety risk to the facility but was not yet in operation. It was to be governed under rules 40 and 42 of the detention centre rules. It was a bare room, very similar to a police cell, containing a plinth with a plastic mattress and no toilet or running water.

## Recommendation

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- 1.35 ACDT booklets, rather than in-house Reliance 'suicide and self-harm warning' forms, should be opened when a detainee is at risk of self-harm.

## Childcare and child protection

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Children are detained only in exceptional circumstances and for the minimum time.. Children's rights and needs for care and protection are respected and met in full*

- 1.36 Children were not held at the facility. Should a detainee claim they were under 18, DCOs would refer the matter to immigration officers at Drumkeen House, the UKBA operations centre in Northern Ireland. Escorting staff had been appropriately vetted to work with children.

## Diversity

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*Expected outcomes:*

*There is understanding of the diverse backgrounds of detainees and different cultural norms. Detainees are not discriminated against on the basis of their race, nationality, gender, religion, disability or sexual orientation, and there is positive promotion and understanding of diversity*

- 1.37 Staff had all received equality training as part of their initial training course. The facility had appropriate adaptations for disabled people such as an outside ramp, although no detainees with an identified disability had been accommodated at the facility. There was a toilet for people with disabilities (see also arrival and accommodation section).
- 1.38 A carpeted prayer room was kept unlocked and accessible at all times. It had a number of prayer mats, and a compass was available on request. There was a copy of the Qur'an and two Bibles. Staff did not take their shoes off when entering the room, which some may have

found disrespectful. A chaplaincy service, providing for the mainstream religions, visited regularly. Staff had contact numbers for chaplains of other faiths such as Jehovah's Witnesses. Staff we spoke to were aware of the requirements of Ramadan. During this period, fasting times had been displayed. Details of fasting detainees were noted on the information board in the staff office.

## Housekeeping point

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- 1.39 Shoes should be removed when entering the prayer room unless in an emergency.

## Activities

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*Expected outcomes:*

*The facility encourages activities to preserve and promote the mental and physical well being of detainees.*

- 1.40 The small association room was equipped with a television and games console. Foreign language newspapers were limited and out of date. There were no foreign language books. Detainees accessed the internet from two computers in the association room, which were easily accessible. A detainee feedback survey (available in English only) was kept in the room, but staff were not aware of anyone having completed one.
- 1.41 The small and unappealing exercise yard could only be accessed on request and with officer supervision, though it was a secure area. As the yard was overlooked by offices of the neighbouring police station, smoking was only permitted out of office hours. The yard lacked seating, offered no views and was covered by a metal grid.

## Recommendations

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- 1.42 Detainees should have access to books and newspapers in a range of foreign languages.
- 1.43 Detainees should have free access to the exercise yard, which should have some seating.

## Facility rules

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Detainees are able to feel secure in a predictable and ordered environment*

- 1.44 An information booklet providing basic facility rules was available in 11 languages and helpful basic house rules were posted on notice boards. All areas other than the bedrooms and bathrooms were covered by 24 hour CCTV cameras. DCOs received a week of training in control and restraint techniques as part of their initial training course, and annual refresher training. There had been no reported use of force incidents at the facility in the previous three months. The two reports for that period both related to incidents of disruptive behaviour by detainees being interviewed at Belfast docks. The DCOs' paperwork was legible, in good order and suggested that force was used as a last resort and for the minimum amount of time necessary.
- 1.45 An independent custody visitors' group had been established by the Northern Ireland Policing Board to check on the welfare of detainees, but, at the time of inspection, the group had yet to

visit the facility. UKBA monitoring of the facility was irregular at one visit every two to four weeks.

## Recommendation

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- 1.46 UKBA should attend the facility regularly.

## Complaints

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*Expected outcomes:*

*There is a published complaints procedure; compliant forms are freely available.*

- 1.47 There were two complaints boxes, one in the waiting area and one in the association room. Beside each box were complaints forms in English and 14 other languages. Child friendly forms were available despite the fact that children were not held at the facility. As there was no regular UKBA oversight of the facility, the boxes were emptied by a detainee custody manager on a daily basis. The emptying of the boxes was recorded but not the number of complaints, though staff thought there had been approximately four complaints since the facility opened, all relating to the temperature in the association room. A fan had been placed in the room to assist with ventilation.

## Services

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Services available to detainees allow them to live in a decent environment in which their normal everyday needs are met freely and without discrimination.*

- 1.48 Crisps, biscuits, cereal and fruit were freely available in the dining room along with hot and cold drinks. Microwave meals, including vegetarian, Halal and kosher meals, were also available. The range catered for a variety of nationalities. A record was kept of when detainees ate. Although there were set meal times, staff were flexible about these.
- 1.49 Women's sanitary products were available in the toilet. Toiletry bags containing basic hygiene items, clothing packs and towels were issued to detainees who needed them. Extra blankets were available on request.

## Preparation for release

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*Expected outcomes:*

*Detainees are able to maintain contact with family, friends, support groups, legal representatives and advisers, are given adequate notice of their release, transfer or removal, and are able to recover property. Families with children and others with special needs are not detained without items essential to their welfare.*

- 1.50 On departure from the facility, in the previous three months most detainees had been taken to Dungavel immigration removal centre in Scotland (30%) which entailed a two-hour ferry crossing and one and a half-hour road journey. Others were removed to the Republic of Ireland under third country provisions (25%), granted temporary admission (23%) or taken to an airport (16%). One detainee was taken to court and the remaining six records were unclear.
- 1.51 Detainees leaving the facility were seen by the nurse, given a rub-down search and asked to confirm in writing that they had received their stored luggage and valuables.

- 1.52 We observed a detainee being collected from the facility by escorts for a ferry crossing to Scotland. Staff were polite and respectful, and the process orderly. They shook hands, introduced themselves, and explained in detail what was happening. The escort said: 'I have to explain that when we get to the boat, I have to put handcuffs on you for approximately one minute'. The detainee was escorted in the people carrier described in the section on escorts, vehicles and transfers. We travelled with the detainee from the facility to the docks with three escorts. The detainee was handcuffed and taken from the van to the commercial drivers' lounge via a lift. The handcuffs were removed once in the lounge which was routine practice irrespective of risk. The vehicle then left the boat. On arrival in Scotland, the practice was for a new escort crew to board in a vehicle and receive the detainee in handcuffs at the entrance to the lift down on the vehicle deck. To give detainees some privacy, they boarded the ferry before, and disembarked after, regular passengers.
- 1.53 Detainees had good access to means of communication to advise family, friends and legal representatives of their transfer. They were issued with a credit card-sized card with contact details and a map of where they were being taken to.
- 1.54 Detainees were allowed visitors, although visits took place in the waiting area in front of reception, which did not afford privacy. Staff told us that visitors were not allowed to use the interview rooms as these were located in the main part of the facility. Given the low-risk nature of the population, this was disproportionate.

## Recommendations

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- 1.55 Handcuffs should only be applied during transfer if justified by an individual risk assessment.
- 1.56 Detainees should be able to meet visitors in the interview rooms.

## Section 2: Recommendations and good practice

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Recommendations	To the UK Border Agency
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<b>Legal rights and casework</b>
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|-----|---|
| 2.1 | Detainees should only be interviewed on chairs bolted to the floor after individualised risk assessment. (1.22) |
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<b>Facility rules</b>
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| 2.2 | UKBA should attend the facility regularly. (1.46) |
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Recommendations	To UKBA and the facility contractor
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<b>Arrival and accommodation</b>
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| 2.3 | Men and women should be held separately. (1.15) |
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<b>Legal rights and casework</b>
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| 2.4 | Detainees should not be held in residential short-term holding facilities for longer than the published maximum periods. (1.28) |
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Recommendations	To the facility contractor
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<b>Arrival and accommodation</b>
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|-----|---|
| 2.5 | Reception interviews should be conducted in private. (1.12)   |
| 2.6 | Detainees' clothing and toiletries should not be removed unless an individualised risk assessment indicates otherwise. (1.13) |
| 2.7 | Bedrooms should be equipped with lockable cupboards. (1.14)   |

<b>Legal rights and casework</b>
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| 2.8 | Hard copies of bail application forms (B1), bail accommodation and support application forms (Section 4), and Bail for Immigration Detainees' handbook on bail should be freely available in different languages. (1.21) |
| 2.9 | Contact details of local immigration advisers should be widely and prominently displayed. (1.23)   |

- 2.10 Removal directions should be served in private. (1.29)

### **Duty of care**

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- 2.11 ACDT booklets, rather than in-house Reliance 'suicide and self-harm warning' forms, should be opened when a detainee is at risk of self-harm. (1.35)

### **Activities**

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- 2.12 Detainees should have access to books and newspapers in a range of foreign languages. (1.42)
- 2.13 Detainees should have free access to the exercise yard, which should have some seating. (1.43)

### **Preparation for release**

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- 2.14 Handcuffs should only be applied during transfer if justified by an individual risk assessment. (1.55)
- 2.15 Detainees should be able to meet visitors in the interview rooms. (1.56)

### **Housekeeping point**

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### **Diversity**

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- 2.16 Shoes should be removed when entering the prayer room unless in an emergency. (1.39)