



Independent Family Returns

**Independent Family Returns Panel
(IFRP)**

Interim Report 2020-22

Chair's Forward

The Independent Family Returns Panel (IFRP) provides advice to the Home Office on the safeguarding and welfare needs of families with children who face an ensured return to their country of origin, as part of the family returns process. This enables the Home Office to ensure that the welfare and safeguarding needs of such families are appropriately catered for. The formal remit of the IFRP is given in section 3 below. The panel comprises professionals with a range of relevant expertise across the professions of Social Care, Education, Police, and Medical Doctors.

The IFRP makes recommendations to the Home Office on the best method of returning individual families to their home country, ensuring the specific welfare needs of the children and family as a whole are met, where families have no right to remain in the UK and have not departed voluntarily or via a self-check process, and so become subject to an enforced return process. Section 54A of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 as inserted by the Immigration Act 2014 requires the Secretary of State to consult the IFRP (a) in each family returns case, on how best to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children of the family, and (b) in each case where the Secretary of State proposes to detain a family in pre-departure accommodation, on the suitability of so doing, having particular regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children of the family.

It is important to highlight that the Panel have no decision-making responsibility in respect of whether a family is returned, the decision has already been taken. The Panel's role is to ensure that the return considers the best interests of children and the welfare of a family in that return process.

The panel has an additional, non-statutory role, relating to the occasional need to hold families with children at the border while enquiries are made as to whether they may be admitted and/or while they await a return flight. The family is held for the shortest possible time, usually in a holding room at the port of entry and where possible, families are held separately from other passengers. If a family is to be held overnight or for longer than 24 hours,

they are normally removed to designated family accommodation in an immigration centre. The panel maintains an overview of the handling of families who are denied entry to the UK at the border, to ensure that detention in such cases is kept to a minimum and that assurances are provided regarding any potential safeguarding and welfare concerns.

In March 2022 the panel held its first family returns meeting post the COVID-19 lockdown and working arrangements marking a return to us being able to sit as a Panel again to discuss cases.

Panel members continued to support the Family Returns Unit working to develop the family welfare form which is used to support the panel making in its safeguarding determinations and further working with the unit to identify and consolidate areas of return support provision available to families in their home country.

We continue to work with the Home Office Family Returns Unit to support the reintroduction of panel meetings.

I now present an update report as Chair of the Independent Family Returns Panel.

Helen Chamberlain

Chair, Independent Family Returns Panel

Introduction

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic and its impact upon business as usual it is the Independent Family Returns Panel (IFRP) intention to offer this interim report on its work in 2020-22.

The role and remit of the Independent Family Returns Panel

Following the Government announcement to end the detention of children for immigration purposes in December 2010, the Independent Family Returns Panel (IFRP) was established in March 2011. The purpose of the Panel is to provide advice on the welfare and safeguarding aspects of the removal arrangements made for families who are no longer legally entitled to reside in the UK and have failed to depart the UK voluntarily.

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The formal remit of the IFRP is to make independent recommendations to the Home Office on the best method of returning individual families to their home country. This is to ensure that the specific welfare and safeguarding needs of the children and family are fully considered and met when families face the prospect of a required or ensured return.

The IFRP is comprised of professionals with a range of relevant expertise from the disciplines of Social Care, Education, Police and Medical Doctors who offer significant experience on how to meet safeguarding of families in these circumstances.

It is important to highlight that the IFRP has no decision-making responsibility in respect of whether a family is returned, that decision has already been taken. The IFRP's role is to ensure that the return considers the best interest of children and the welfare of a family in that return process.

The IFRP has an additional, non-statutory role, relating to the occasional need to hold families with children at the border while enquiries are made as to whether they may be admitted and/or while they await a return flight. The family is held for the shortest possible time, usually in a holding room at the port of entry and where possible, families are held separately from other passengers. If a family is to be held overnight or for longer than 24 hours, they are normally removed to designated family accommodation in an immigration centre. The panel maintains an overview of the handling of families who are denied entry to the UK at the border, to ensure that detention in such cases is kept to a minimum.

Annual Report 2019-20

IFRP produced an annual report making recommendations to the Home Office for continuing improvement in relation to these important issues. A summary of the recommendations can be found in Annex A. The last annual report for 2019-20 has recently been published along with the Home Office response. Both reports are available to view online:

[Independent Family Returns Panel: annual report 2019 to 2020](#)

[Response to the Independent Family Returns Panel Report 2019 to 2020](#)

Interim IFRP Work 2020-22

In March 2020 the IFRP held its last formal family returns panel prior to the United Kingdom entering lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic. As a panel, we continued to meet regularly to ensure we maintained our understanding of the updates on the pandemic and their impacts on the returns process issued through the Home Office Family Returns Unit (FRU).

IFRP members continued to support the FRU, working closely with them in several project areas. Panel members offered advice on the updating of the Family Welfare Form (FWF). This document is a multi-purpose document and is the basis upon which operational decisions are made for each family. The FWF is the key document in the referral of families to the IFRP. It documents evidence of child welfare concerns and medical issues which are crucial for consideration by the IFRP.

A further project area for the IFRP was working closely with the FRU on returns support provisions available to families on return to their home country. The IFRP welcomed the opportunity to be involved in consolidating and improving areas of returns support provision, particularly as this was a recommendation previously made by IFRP. This work has given the IFRP confidence in the standard of returns support available to families.

The IFRP continued to meet quarterly with the FRU, Border Force, Home Office Sponsorship Unit and the Office of Children's Commissioner. The Panel were updated on the work that the FRU conducted during this period and how the family engagement managers were maintaining contact with families. Managers were also reviewing any cases where children had been detained at port for over 18 hours while a decision was made on their admissibility to the UK. As part of this process, we identified any safeguarding concerns for arriving children in their current circumstances. These were reviewed by Border Force staff and fed back to the Panel.

Panel Members

Due to the public appointment tenure process, the panel saw the departure of two of our longest serving panel members, Bernard Phillips and Dr Stephanie Green. We are indebted to their support and contribution over the many years they sat as panel members and wish them all the very best.

Another panel member, Emmanuella Jones, also departed for a full-time role. We wish her all the best and thank her for her contributions, specifically in her work to ensure return support provision was considered more carefully. She also ensured that we collaborated with overseas countries to ensure appropriate support for families, specifically lone females returning to their home countries with children.

We conducted a recruitment process for new panel members due to these changes, and, after a very thorough recruitment process, we are very pleased that four new panel members have been appointed. There will be a further recruitment process for one more panel member in 2022-23, which will ensure a full panel of eight members and myself as chair.

Forward Look

The Home Office has approved the IFRP working with the Black on Board scheme run by Olmec. This scheme supports mentoring black and minority ethnic candidates to achieve their potential in obtaining board positions in the United Kingdom.

As IFRP chair, I was pleased to be invited to attend a training event to support the scheme leadership module and explain the work of the IFRP. We now look forward to welcoming a representative of the scheme to work alongside the panel.

Annex A

Summary of recommendations presented in the 2019/20 Annual Report

1. It is recommended that the Home Office work with the Ministry of Justice, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) and the Law Society to ensure that solicitors and legal advisors are better regulated. This will ensure that unethical practice or breach of their professional code is minimised. Advice by some legal advisors, in some cases, promoting last minute claims to families where there are unrealistic prospects of successful appeal have long term negative effects on the well - being of children and their families.
2. It is recommended that the Government urgently agrees arrangements with EU member states, following the end of the transition period, in relation to the Dublin Convention. In considering the welfare and safeguarding of children in families who would have been placed in the returns process under the Dublin Convention, to have their asylum applications appropriately considered.
3. The Panel recommends specific activity be carried out through the Home Office and the newly formed Foreign, Commonwealth and Development office (formerly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development) to provide assurance as to the reception and ongoing support for those families entering other Countries from the UK, as part of a Dublin or replacement Dublin return.
4. The Panel recommends that where there are third- party contracts with companies whose employees have direct contact with families during the returns process, that there is appropriate safeguarding training and for the HO to assure itself that this training is relevant, appropriate and tests out assumptions and bias.

5. The Panel recommends that the Home Office review the arrangements regarding returns support, specifically seeking assurance regarding the various agencies and charities that families are signposted to, and the efficacy of those arrangements, with particular attention paid to the plans for families identified as vulnerable e.g. single mothers, and children with special educational needs, who will need targeted support, and what that may look like.

6. The Panel recommends the presence of an interpreter at family welfare conferences and the arrests / onward transport of families where English is not the first or second language of a parent/carer in the family.

7. The Panel recommends that the Home Office invest in conference spider- phones in modern communications technology, such as visual teleconferencing to allow better communication in what are difficult conversations in family conferences and family departure meetings.