Home Office

Detention Services Order 04/2012

Visitors and visiting procedures

March 2026

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Document details

Process: To provide instructions to be followed by staff in the Immigration Removal Estate when checking the identity of official, professional, and social visitors and when dealing with children visiting detained individuals.

To provide instructions to be adopted when placing a detained individual on closed visits or when banning a detained individual's visitor(s) from the centre.

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Contains Mandatory Instructions

For Action: Home Office staff and contracted service providers operating in the Immigration Removal Estate.

For Information: N/A

Author and Unit: Akash Shourie, Detention Services

Owner: Michelle Smith, Head of Detention Operations.

Contact Point: Detention Services Orders Team

Processes Affected: Identification of visitors, closed visits and banned visitors and the retention of biometric data.

Assumptions: N/A

Notes: N/A

Instruction

Introduction

1. This Detention Services Order clarifies the procedures to be followed by staff operating in the main gate or visits areas of immigration removal centres (IRC) and pre-departure accommodation (PDA) and residential short-term holding facilities (RSTHFs) when checking the identity of official, professional and social visitors and when dealing with children visiting detained individuals.

2. It explains the procedures to be adopted when placing a detained individual on closed visits or when banning a detained individual's visitor(s) from the centre.

3. It contains instructions to contracted service providers on how to handle data taken from visitors and its retention periods.

4. In this DSO, 'IRC centre manager' refers to the contracted service provider's centre manager.

   Two different Home Office teams operate in IRCs:

   - Detention Services (DS) Compliance team (Compliance team)
   - Detention Engagement team (DET)

   The Compliance team are responsible for all on-site commercial and contract monitoring work. The DETs interact with detained individuals face-to-face on behalf of responsible officers within the IRCs. They focus on communicating and engaging with people detained at IRCs, serving paperwork on behalf of caseworkers and helping them to understand their cases and detention.

   There are no DETs at RSTHFs, or the Gatwick PDA. Some of the functions which are the responsibility of the DET in IRCs, are instead carried out by the contracted service provider and overseen by the International and Returns Services (IRS) Escorting Operations in RSTHFs. In the Gatwick PDA, the role of detained individual engagement is covered by the local Compliance team.

Purpose

5. The purpose of this DSO is to ensure that the correct procedures are followed by IRC staff when allowing visitors into their centres, that safeguarding measures are in place for visiting children and data protection rules are observed when retaining visitor information.

Procedures

6. Centres will make every effort to allow requests for official, professional, and social visits to take place. However, the booking of social or official visits will depend on the centre's operational capacity and availability and will include consideration of any associated individual risk assessment that has been undertaken.

7. In accordance with Detention Centre Rule 57, the prohibition or cancellation of any visit or the banning of visitors attending a centre must be justified and balanced against the need to maintain security and keep detained individuals and visitors safe.

8. Unforeseen incidents such as violent or concerted indiscipline, external protests or critical loss of service may force centres to cancel or rearrange individual visits. In these circumstances, the IRC security manager must notify both the Compliance and DET local managers and the Detention Services Security Team when any pre-booked visit is cancelled for security or safety reasons. A record must be kept by the centre of any visits that are refused, cancelled or rearranged, detailing the reasons for such decisions. The retention period of this log is six months, unless identified as relevant evidential information. Logs identified as evidential information should be retained for 7 years or until the respective legal proceedings have been exhausted – whichever is sooner.

9. The decision to cancel or rearrange any social or official visit must be made on a case-by-case basis and will depend on an individual risk assessment. This decision is independent of any consideration to ban a visitor as set out in paragraphs 50-56.

10. In addition to the general guidance in this DSO there are also specific arrangements for the identification and searching of visitors in PDA, set out in the PDA Operating Standards.

Publication of local rules for visitors and procedures for booking visits

11. All centres are required to publish clear instructions for visitors on how to book social or official visits to individuals in detention. Local procedures such as visiting times, identification requirements, prohibited items or the protection of visitors' information must be available on the centres' website, as a minimum, within the information provided on www.gov.uk, as well as clearly displayed in the visitor's reception and visits area. Should a visitor need the guidance translated or interpreted, staff should endeavour to do so where possible, following the guidance in DSO 02/2022 Interpretation Services and Use of Translation Devices. Visitor information for the IRCs and RSTHFs on GOV.uk is available in a number of languages.

12. Contracted service provider staff and sub-contracted staff must seek permission from the IRC Centre Director if they wish to visit any detained individual in an IRC or a prisoner held within a HM Prison. Full details of the request must be shared with the DS Counter Corruption & Investigation Unit via

DSCounterCorruption@homeoffice.gov.uk a minimum of 24 hours prior to any approved visit taking place.

13. The list of prohibited items[1] which visitors may not bring into the facility must be displayed in appropriate locations where visitors and detained individuals can view them clearly. The list should also be displayed in pictorial format so that it is accessible to those with limited English.

Identification of visitors

14. All visitors must provide proof of identification before being allowed access into the centre or visits hall. A failure to provide adequate identification will result in refusal of entry. The onus is on those seeking to gain entry to demonstrate that they satisfy the conditions below. Any decision to refuse entry should be made by contracted service provider staff at duty manager level as a minimum.

15. For security reasons, centres may also require visitors to provide information before being granted access to the visits area. Any information collected from visitors needs to be compliant with the latest UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK **GDPR**) requirements and should not include biometric data.

16. **Social visitors** (personal visitors to detained individuals) must provide **one** of the following:

- A passport (current or if expired within 5 years of expiry date). This can include foreign passports and travel documents recognised by HM Government.
- European Community identity card.
- Photographic driving licence.

Or **two** of the following:

- Birth certificate
- Marriage certificate
- Rail or bus pass with photograph
- Employer's ID card or NUS student card
- Young person's proof of age card
- Trade union membership card
- Senior citizen travel pass issued by a local authority

[1] Social visits | Gatwick IRC (serco.com)
Mitie list can vary and is available on request via this link

- Home Office ARC card (asylum support application registration card)
- A printed and current Universal Credit Statement showing proof of receipt of benefits

Note: Due to the nature of the centres and their population, once individuals are released from detention they may wish to visit the centre in the future. Often the documents prescribed above are not available to them due to their pending immigration cases. If the centre staff can verify the identity of the individual by way of archived data and if he or she can produce a release order containing photographic evidence, e.g. Bail 201, their identity is considered confirmed and access to visits should be granted.

17. **Home Office officials, other government officials** or official visitors invited by the Secretary of State in such capacity when accompanied by a Home Office official, must provide an ID card containing a photograph (such as an Immigration Enforcement warrant card, or recognised pass to a government building).

18. **IMB members and HMIP inspectors** have a statutory right of access to an immigration removal centre. They must provide their IMB or HMIP ID card bearing a photograph.

19. **Representatives of non-governmental organisations** (NGOs) are treated as social visitors for the purposes of this DSO.

20. As an exception, and only with the specific and express agreement from the Home Office, representatives of NGOs may undertake visits beyond the main visit area to enable scheduled support sessions and/or services to be accessible to a wider range of detained individuals. Each individual NGO representative undertaking visits beyond the main visits area must hold a valid Enhanced DBS certificate.

21. Any request by an NGO representative to make a visit beyond the main visits area must be made in writing to the contracted service provider's Centre Manager, who will consider the feasibility of the request and make a recommendation for consideration by the Head of Detention Operations. If the request is approved in principle, each representative from the relevant NGO must submit a copy of their Enhanced DBS certificate to the Home Office Certification Team at dsctdutymanagers@homeoffice.gov.uk who will record the relevant information and advise local Compliance team of the final approval for visits beyond the main visit area.

22. The time and schedule for NGO support sessions and/or services must be agreed locally with the contracted service provider's Centre Manager or their delegate and will only be agreed if operationally feasible to facilitate. The contracted service provider Centre Manager or their delegate, may cancel the support session and/or services where the safety and security of the centre, staff, detained individuals or visitors is considered to be at risk. As much notice as possible should be provided for any such cancellation.

23. **Medical practitioners** must provide an ID card issued by their Primary Care Trust or equivalent. Independent medical practitioners may provide identification as per the requirements for social visitors at paragraph 14. In addition, establishments have the right to check that independent medical practitioners are registered with the General Medical Council (GMC) and/or the General Dental Council and our expectation is that they hold indemnity insurance cover as required by the GMC and/or GDC. It is possible to check a medical practitioner's status at the GMC website: http://www.gmc-uk.org/doctors/register/LRMP.asp and to check a dentist's status at the GDC website: http://www.gdc-uk.org/Pages/SearchRegisters.aspx.

Legal representatives

24. Legal representatives wishing to visit detained individuals must make an appointment with the IRC through the designated phone number on the CSP's website where appointments can be scheduled. On arrival, legal representatives must provide:

- Any photographic ID, as described in paragraph 16;
- Identity card issued by their firm or chambers, or business card;
- Be able to identify the detained individual(s) to be visited by providing name, date of birth and/or the Home Office case identification number.

25. Legal visits are subject to operational availability and legal representatives should give centres as much notice as possible when booking an appointment. Bookings can be made using the following link – https://www.gov.uk/immigration-removalhttps://www.gov.uk/immigration-removal-centrecentre. Legal advisers will not be allowed to conduct a legal visit without an appointment. If a legal visit was not booked in advance and no legal visit appointments are available on arrival at the centre, legal representatives may be offered the opportunity to conduct a visit with the detained individual as a social visitor – subject to the identification requirements for social visits and compliance with the prohibited items list, including in relation to mobile IT.

26. Under exceptional circumstances, such as an impending transfer or removal, where requests for visiting out of hours are made by legal representatives, attempts must be made to accommodate these. Where these requests are not accepted, or an out of hours visit is cancelled or rearranged for security or safety reasons, the procedures set out in paragraphs 9 and 10 must be followed.

27. When the requirements set out in paragraph 21 are met, legal representatives will conduct the visit within the area reserved for legal appointments, regardless of whether the legal representative is currently representing the detained individual.

28. Legal visits will only be accommodated when arranged and agreed with the detained individual. If a legal visit, whether pre-booked or requested on arrival, is refused by the detained individual, this action must be recorded and investigated by the centre's security team. Centres must ensure that the detained individual is

aware of alternative legal services available and the reasons for the refusal must be detailed in a Security Information Report (SIR).

29. All legal representatives must complete a Section 84 form (Annex A) in full on their arrival at the IRC which is to be sent by the IRC to the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner via email to intelligence@OISC.gov.uk. If a Section 84 form is not completed legibly and in full, legal representatives may be refused entry. This will also need to be completed when legal visits are conducted over skype. The CSPs must request the form is completed and sent back prior to the visit.

30. In accordance with DSO 11/2014 Security information reports, any suspicions staff may have relating to a detained individual being defrauded must be detailed in a SIR and sent to InternalInvestigationsReferrals@homeoffice.gov.uk.

Independent healthcare professionals (External Medical Reports)

31. In preparation for a medical examination to be conducted on a detained individual, the member of the public (whether this be the healthcare professional, legal representative(s), or another) arranging this visit should request the release of medical records pertaining to the person in detention (providing there is evidence that the detained individual has consented). Contact information to obtain records, and appointments for medical practitioners can be found at https://www.gov.uk/immigration-removal-centre.

32. Visiting healthcare professionals are expected to report any health related or safeguarding concerns arising from the assessment directly with the IRC healthcare team. This is of particular importance where there is a concern that detention may harm the individual. Contact details for the relevant healthcare team can be found at https://www.gov.uk/immigration-removal-centre. Centre staff should also ensure these contact details are readily accessible and visible for visiting healthcare professionals, where they need to report such concerns following an assessment on the day of their visit.

    Guidance for healthcare professionals on how to book an examination room at an IRC and detail on the facilities available can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/medical-visits-for-people-in-immigration-removal-centres

Children visiting detained individuals

33. Visitors under the age of 18 are allowed to visit detained individuals if they have a close relationship with the detained individual, such as the detained individual is their parent, sibling, stepparent, parent's partner, have another close family relationship or are a family friend. A record must be kept of the child's name and date of birth and relationship to the detained individual being visited and to the accompanying adult.

34. No visitor under the age of 18 years old is allowed to visit a detained individual unless they are accompanied by an adult with whom they have a close relationship as described above.

35. Children visiting detained individuals are subject to the same identification checks as adult social visitors as per paragraph 16. If a child is accompanied by one or both parents, any photographic ID can be used to verify the child's identity when used in conjunction with their birth certificate. Centres must make this requirement clear when publishing the requirements to all visitors.

36. No detained individual with a known history of being a risk to children will be allowed an open visit, as per paragraph 39, by anyone under the age of 18 years old.

37. If a visitor is unaccompanied and produces identification which does not confirm the visitor is over 18 years of age, or centre staff are unsure about the validity of the identification, the visitor must be refused entry. Any decision to refuse entry should be made at duty manager level as a minimum. Contracted service providers must report any such incident to the Home Office compliance team and to the Detention Services Security Team (DSST).

38. If centre staff have any concerns regarding the welfare of any visitor under 18 years of age encountered trying to visit a detained individual, they should always refer the information to their local social services for advice and information.

39. This instruction does not override centres' MAPPA responsibilities or safeguarding duty to children detained as part of a family group.

Detained individuals who pose a risk to children

40. Centre staff must carefully manage the supervision of detained individuals who pose a risk to visitors, especially those with accompanying children. Each situation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis but in these circumstances, it may be necessary for detained individuals who pose a risk to children to be placed on 'closed visits'. 'Closed visits' should only take place with the knowledge and consent of the Duty Manager. Any decision to apply closed visits must be documented with an individual risk assessment to justify the decision. Detained individuals who have closed visits should receive documentation explaining the process. Detained individuals have the right to appeal this decision in writing with the centre manager, with each case being reviewed once a month (see paragraphs 42-49).

Bringing laptops into establishments

41. Home Office officials, other government officials, IMB members, legal representatives and medical practitioners may bring a laptop into an establishment for the conduct of their work. This facility is dependant of approval and review from the centre's Security Manager or deputy and may be withdrawn from an individual if misused. A log must be kept by the centre's security department of visitors' mobile

IT accepted into the IRC or RSTHF, this measure is dependent on the centre's ways of working, and may also depend on which entrance they use to enter the facility . The centre's Security manager is responsible for ensuring that the correct measures for their facility are adhered to.

42. Photo and video facilities must not be used inside an IRC or RSTHF. DSO 05/2018 Mobile phones and cameras in immigration removal centres provides further information on this matter and circumstances in which cameras may be taken inside an establishment. Visiting medical practitioners may bring a mobile phone (without internet access) and a camera into a centre if necessary for the conduct of their work.

Closed visits

43. A 'closed visit' is one which takes place behind glass, with no possibility of physical contact between the detained individual and visitor(s).

44. Detained individuals are only placed on closed visits when they are proved or reasonably suspected of involvement in smuggling prohibited items (such as drugs and tobacco products) through visits or are considered to pose a reasonable risk of involvement or are considered to pose a threat to other detained individuals' visitors including children as stated in paragraph 39 above. Decisions to apply closed visits must be taken on an individual basis. A closed visit should be offered before a visit is refused following a drug detection dog giving a positive indication for a visitor. The resident will receive notification of a closed visit, but the visitor will not.

45. Closed visits must not be applied as a punishment; they are an administrative and safeguarding measure.

46. Closed visits must be applied for a specified period of time rather than for a specific number of visits. The period of time for which closed visits may need to be applied will vary from case to case, and each case must be considered on its individual circumstances, with a documented risk assessment to justify the decision. However, a period of up to one month may normally be appropriate in the first instance. IRC centre managers can, if appropriate, specify a shorter or, if it can be justified, longer period in an individual case. The specified period for closed visits can be extended if **further** evidence of risk is received during the initial/previous period of closed visits. Closed visits must not be applied for an indefinite period.

47. If a decision is made to place a detained individual on closed visits, the Compliance manager(s) must be notified. The reason(s) for placing a detained individual on closed visits must be reviewed at least every month by the local contracted service provider's security manager and notified to the Compliance manager(s) must be notified, to assess whether there is a continuing need for closed visits.

48. Individual centres are responsible for putting in place monitoring arrangements for administering closed visits. Contracted Service Provider staff must check the closed visits documented risk assessment daily for accuracy, to ensure only properly

justified and authorised closed visits occur. In addition, a log is kept of all the closed and banned visitors, who are subject to a regular review every three months. The closed visits log is held on the CSP's CMS IT System which means that the data remains accessible on the system as long as the resident's data is held on the system. Regarding the banned visitors log, the data is deleted after the last visit or after six months, whichever comes first.

49. Centres should be able to demonstrate that in deciding to apply closed visits they have taken into account all the individual circumstances of the case and have acted proportionately. In applying closed visits, centres should consider:

- Analysis and the use of intelligence.
- Incidents on visits.
- Behaviour of visitor.
- CCTV evidence or possession of drugs on a post-visit search.
- Finds from room searches.
- Time served foreign national offender (TSFNO) index offence and criminal record.

50. Detained individuals can appeal a closed visits decision to the Home Office's Head of Detention Operations in Detention Services. Detained individuals can do this is writing to the contracted service provider's Security Manager who will maintain a record of this appeal and submit this along with a summary of the incident to the onsite compliance team for onward conveyance to the Head of Detention Operations.

Banning of visitors

51. Detained individuals' visitors may be banned if their presence impacts on ensuring safety and security or the prevention of crime, for example, if a visitor has facilitated an (attempted) escape or been aggressive or abusive towards staff. A ban of the visitor would be applied only in exceptional circumstances.

52. Detained individuals' visitor(s) can only be banned for smuggling prohibited items if:

- they are found to be engaging in the activity, such as being caught in possession of a prohibited item during a search,
- they are seen passing a prohibited item to a detained individual who is found to be in possession of the same item on leaving the visiting area,
- a detained individual is found in possession of a prohibited item and either the detained individual or the visitor admits that this visitor supplied it.

53. As set out in the Detention Centre Rules (Rule 54), any prohibited item conveyed, thrown, or deposited in centres by a visitor can be confiscated by a manager. Centres must make known to visitors the list of prohibited items when publishing the visiting rules.

54. The ban and its length should be recommended by the IRC centre manager but must be approved by either the Home Office's Head of Detention Operations, or in their absence, the Delivery Manager of the Compliance Team for the IRC or RSTHF. If an extension to the ban is considered appropriate, this must be reviewed by the IRC centre manager and authorised by the Home Office Head of Detention Operations, or the Delivery Manager for the IRC or RSTHF in their absence. Details of the ban must be confirmed in writing to the visitor and should include information of the appeal process.

55. The details of any banned visitors must be submitted to the Detention Services Security Team on the weekly security returns. The security return must include the reasons for the ban, duration of the ban including any review dates, and the details of the detained individual being visited.

56. Bans of visitors who are not social visitors (legal representatives and medical practitioners) are at the discretion of the IRC centre manager but must be approved by the Home Office Deputy Director of Detention Services. In these circumstances, the security departments in the other IRCs should be informed, in addition to the relevant professional body.

57. For the ban to be lawful, this power must be exercised in a reasonable manner. The IRC centre manager must take into consideration the following circumstances when recommending whether to impose a ban:

    - if a ban would cause harm to the rights of the detained individual's child or children to have access to a parent (UN Convention on Rights of a Child, Article 9 (3));

    - if a ban would cause harm to the detained individual's or visitor's right to a family life (protected by the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 8), and any other relevant circumstances.

Handling and retention of data

58. All centres have to ensure that all data collected from visitors is secured and managed appropriately in accordance with the legislative framework for data protection. In order to streamline the re-entry of regular social visitors contracted service providers may take and retain their photographs, but this does not extend to taking biometric data from visitors.

59. Visitors must be made aware in advance that providing this data is a requirement for being granted access to the centre. Details of the reasons for these requirements and local policy for handling of personal information must be available to visitors, alongside the instructions for booking a visit and a contact point must be

provided for all Information Security queries. Signs detailing this policy need to be visible in all visitors' areas.

60. Contracted service provider staff must ensure data collected from visitors, such as visitor records are accurately completed for each detained individual that they visit, including the company the visitor is representing (if appropriate). When requested, Home Office teams should be provided information from these records within 72 hours of the request.

61. Visitors will only be granted access to a centre once they provide the details required by local policies. They must be informed of how this data will be stored, processed and for how long it will be retained. Visitors must also be made aware of how to request a copy of their information and how to submit a Subject Access Request. An example of notice to be given to visitors is provided in Annex B.

62. All personal data from visitors must be permanently deleted 6 months after their last visit to a resident. This must be detailed in the centre's visiting instructions as detailed in paragraph 12.

63. Where a CSP operator has the capability to pre-book visits and the person who arranged a visit does not actually visit as planned, the visitor's personal data must be permanently deleted 6 months after the date of their most recent pre-booked visit, whether they attended or not.

Self-audit

64. An annual self-audit of this DSO is required by contracted service providers to ensure that the processes are being followed. This audit should be made available to the Home Office on request.

65. Compliance teams must also conduct annual audits against their responsibilities stated within this DSO for the same purpose.

Annex A: Section 84 Form

Office of Immigration Services Commissioner - **name of IRC**

PLEASE COMPLETE THIS FORM IN BLOCK CAPITALS

Name of Adviser/Solicitor ……
Company details including full address, phone number (landline and mobile) and e-mail
.....……

.....……

Name of Detained Individual(sincluding date of birth and Home Office Reference:

1. ……
2. ……
3. ……
4. ……

Section 84 Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 – Declaration

No person may provide immigration advice or immigration services unless he or she is a qualified person.

 I declare that I am a qualified person under section 84 of the Immigration & Asylum Act 1999

I am *(**tick relevant box and provide additional information as requested**)*

 Regulated by OISC. **Regulation number** ……

 Authorised to practice by a designated professional body or designated qualifying regulator. **Please specify** (provide Name of Professional Body or Designated Qualifying Regulator):

……

 regulated with or authorised by EEA body responsible for regulation of the provisions of Legal Advice in the EEA in line with Section 84(2)(c) – **Please specify**:

……

 employed or Supervised by a person registered in line with Section 84(2)(e) - **Please specify** (provide person and company name, full address and phone number):

……

……

 within a category of person specified in an order made by the Secretary of State under Section 84(4)(d) of the immigration & Asylum Act 1999

Signature …….

Print name ……

Date…….. Time ……..

Please note: All visitors must comply with IRC Rules whilst on site

Annex B: Visitors Notice

When we ask you for personal information, we ensure that:

- You know we need that information for security reasons so that we can verify your identity and fulfil other legal requirements.
- We only ask for what we need and don't collect too much or irrelevant information.
- We protect it and make sure nobody has access to it who shouldn't.
- We only share it with other organizations when it is lawful to do so.
- We only keep your information for a maximum of 6 months after your last visit.
- We have a process in place so that you can request to see what personal data we hold for you:

    1. You can submit any queries including requesting a copy of the information we hold about you to: SubjectAccessRequest@homeoffice.gov.uk

    2. You can ask an officer in the visits hall on how to submit a Subject Access Request.

Revision History

Review date	Reviewed by	Review outcome	Next review
June 2016	E Jarvis	General update and reformat	June 2018
March 2019	S Ali	Update to visitor identification requirements and inclusion of instructions for the handling of data and retention periods.	March 2021
May 2021	K Teefey	Updated guidance for independent healthcare professionals and booking procedures. Updated guidance on Closed Visits appeals process Inclusion of Annex A & B forms within the DSO	May 2022
July 2022	S Ali	Updated MLR standards requirements	July 2024
September 2025	A. Shourie	Standard content and terminology changes Clarifications on the use of closed visits Clarification of approvals processes Clarification on visitor log retention periods	September 2027

March 2026	J.Hayson	Clarification on retention period for cancelled visits.	September 2027