



Home Office

# Detention Services Order 19/2012 - Safeguarding Children Policy

April 2026



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# Document Details

**Process:** Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children under the age of 18.

**Implementation Date:** May 2016 (reissued April 2026)

**Review Date:** April 2028

**Version:** 2.0

## Contains Mandatory Instructions

**For Action:** All Home Office staff and contracted service providers (CSPs) operating in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), Gatwick pre-departure accommodation (PDA) and Short-Term Holding Facilities (residential and non-residential), Escorting Contract Monitoring Team (ECMT) (International and Returns Services Command) staff and escort supplier staff.

**For Information:** Home Office responsible caseworkers

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**Processes Affected:** Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children under the age of 18.

**Assumptions:** All staff and CSPs will have the necessary knowledge to follow these instructions

**Notes:** None.

## Introduction

1. This DSO provides operational guidance for all Home Office staff and contracted service providers operating in IRCs, PDA, Short-term Holding Facilities (residential and non-residential) and Escorting Staff on the duty of care and management of children. This DSO does **not** apply to Residential Holding Rooms (RHRs). “Children” means persons under the age of 18.
2. Two different Home Office teams operate in IRCs:
  - Immigration Enforcement Compliance team (Compliance team)
  - Immigration Enforcement 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 within the IRCs, on behalf of responsible officers, such as caseworkers. They focus on communicating and engaging with people detained at IRCs, helping them to understand their cases and reasons for detention.

3. There are no DETs at Residential Short-Term Holding Facilities (RSTHFs), Short-Term Holding Facilities (STHFs) or the Gatwick PDA. Functions which are the responsibility of the DET in RSTHFs are conducted by the contracted service provider and overseen by the IRS Escorting Operations Team. In the Gatwick PDA the role of engagement with detained individuals is covered by the local Compliance Team.
4. Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 requires the Secretary of State to ensure that specific functions are discharged having due regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the United Kingdom (UK). Due regard has also been given to the ‘Every Child Matters’ statutory guidance issued under section 55(3) of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. This statutory guidance sets out the main ways in which the Home Office gives effect to its section 55 duty, which are:
  - staff must be alert to potential indicators of abuse or neglect, be alert to risks which abusers may pose to children, and be ready and able to share relevant information with other public bodies with a responsibility towards children in order to safeguard a child;
  - staff who have face to face contact with children must be able to conduct business in a child sensitive manner, and staff with roles involving regular contact with children, such as interviewing children, must receive appropriate training for their role; and

- staff must have regard to section 55 in development of policies and processes.
  - Staff must be alert to age disputes raised in detention or if there is a reason to doubt the individual's claimed age and must refer to the specific [DSO 02/2019 - Care and management of Post Detention Age claims](#) in order to safeguard a child
5. The specific functions covered by the section 55 duty include immigration, asylum and nationality functions of the Secretary of State; functions conferred by virtue of the immigration acts on an immigration officer; as well as general customs functions, and customs functions conferred upon designated customs officials. Contractors must deliver services with due consideration for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Detention under Immigration Act powers is an "immigration" function and therefore covered by the duty.
  6. The duty to have regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children with whom they come into contact during the course of their duties also applies to HM Prison and Probation Service staff carrying out these duties on behalf of the Home Office.
  7. Staff working in the immigration removal estate (including escorting) may have contact with children in the following circumstances:
    - in Gatwick PDA, where they may be held with at least one accompanying adult family member as a last resort under the final stage of the family returns process;
    - when accompanied or unaccompanied children are held at a STHF;
    - when families with children are under escort;
    - when children visit the immigration removal estate; and when children are detained in the belief that they are adults, but it subsequently emerges, on the basis of new evidence, that they may be children. Please see [DSO 02/2019 - Care and management of Post Detention Age claims](#)
  8. Where the detention of children is considered necessary, the section 55 duty applies to **all** immigration detention facilities and escorting arrangements. Staff dealing with adults under this safeguarding policy are required nevertheless to have regard to the duty and make suitable arrangements proportionate to the level of contact with children (see [section 2](#) below).
  9. Unaccompanied children must not be detained in IRCs. In non-residential short-term holding facilities (NRSTHFs) (holding rooms), both unaccompanied children and family groups can be detained in holding rooms at the border, though

unaccompanied children should only be detained for the very shortest period possible and with appropriate safeguarding arrangements made for them. In residential short-term holding facilities (RSTHFs), unaccompanied children or family groups in residential STHFs can be detained. The PDA holds families detained pending return under the Family Returns Process. Unaccompanied children cannot be detained at the PDA.

## **Discharging the section 55 duty across the immigration removal estate (including pre-departure accommodation and during escort)**

10. This guidance outlines arrangements in place which ensures staff are mindful of and can effectively respond to any safeguarding and welfare needs, arising as a result of children staying in the PDA or while under escort. These are arrangements include ensuring:

- effective protection from abuse and/or neglect;
- monitoring and reducing any negative impact of their stay on parenting ability;
- normalising children's stay as far as possible; and
- clarifying and helping the children prepare for onward arrangements.

11. All immigration detention facilities have a duty to:

- a) safeguard and promote the welfare of the children with whom staff have routine contact – when in contact with those children, whether or not the children are detained, e.g., visiting children;
- b) ensure that no unreasonable obstacles are placed in the way of contact being maintained between detained individuals and their children outside the facility; and
- c) minimise the risks of harm to children in the community by detained individuals who have been identified as presenting such a risk, which could occur during any form of contact with a child, including telephone calls, email exchanges and visits.

(Note: CSP Centre Managers should take care to follow the requirements of DSO 04/2012 concerning visits).

12. The PDA and the escorting supplier must implement a safeguarding children's policy, which should be consistent with the template at Annex A. The template includes requirements concerning the Safeguarding Children Manager and links

with Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Child Protection Committees in Scotland and Northern Ireland) and should be adapted to meet the functions of the detention facility/escort supplier, as necessary.

13. IRCs must implement a safeguarding policy, which should be consistent with the template at Annex A1. The template should be adapted to meet the functions of each of these centres as necessary.

## **Discharging the section 55 duty in centres holding families with children**

14. The duty to have regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children applies equally to all Home Office staff, both Compliance and DETs, the CSP's staff and the staff of any partner organisation with direct involvement in the operation of the centre. Robust links must be maintained between the CSP Centre Manager and suitably senior (no lower than Area Manager level) officials in Compliance, and between the Compliance Team (HEO or above) and a designated member of the CSP's management team, to ensure that the approach of both is compatible in terms of both strategy and day to day operations. The responsibility for implementing all elements of the safeguarding policy and ensuring the CSP's fulfilment of the section 55 duty, rests with the CSP Centre Manager or welfare/support provider in centres holding families with children.

## **Children separated from their parent(s)/guardian(s) and unaccompanied children**

15. Staff may encounter children who have been separated from their parent(s)/guardian(s) in a range of different circumstances. This may include the following (this list is not exhaustive):
  - Where the sole parent/guardian with whom the child/children was/were held is unwell and is admitted to hospital
  - Where it is discovered that the child/children are not related to the accompanying adult(s) as claimed.
  - Where the child/children are temporarily separated from the parent/guardian while they are held as a family unit - for example, while the parent/guardian is interviewed.
  - Where a person previously treated as an adult provides evidence that they are under the age of 18 or is accepted as such following a local authority age assessment.

- Where unaccompanied children are held in a non-residential STHF, pending transfer into local authority care.

16. Where children are encountered following separation under the circumstances outlined in paragraph 16 1) or 2) above, the CSP should take the following actions:

- Allocate an officer to the child/children to ensure that their immediate welfare needs are met.
- Refer the case to the local authority (see section 3 of Home Office guidance on making safeguarding referrals).
- Complete a risk assessment to enable an appropriate support plan to be initiated. This should, as a minimum, seek to identify:
  - suitable accommodation for the safeguarding of the child/children;
  - key staff to provide interim care;
  - health concerns, including contingencies for breast-fed children;
  - special needs, including disabilities or learning;
  - access to regime and activities;
  - process for maintaining open communication with parent/guardian, if appropriate;
  - potential length of separation;
  - family in the community who may be able to provide interim guardianship;
  - process for ensuring ongoing monitoring;
  - next steps and a review date.
- Agree completed support plans in consultation with the local authority social work team, having consulted the child where practicable and appropriate, to ensure that they understand and are as satisfied as possible with the safeguarding arrangements in place.
- Notify the Border Force/IE/UKVI caseworker to ensure early consideration of immigration bail for family or child/children where appropriate, or to clarify parental responsibility if family relationship status is in question.
- Notify the Independent Monitoring Board.
- Open a safeguarding record/log to document all actions and monitoring observations.

- Ensure that regular, informative and age-appropriate discussions take place with the child/children, including discussions about proposed arrangements where the child has sufficient understanding. Ensure that parent(s)/guardian(s) are informed of the arrangements made.
- Ensure continual management and monitoring of the situation through to a successful outcome, which might be (re-)unification with parent(s)/guardian(s) or a community placement for the child/children, either with foster parents or family members.
- Ensure that onward arrangements are appropriate e.g., social services' agreement with community placement and chaperoning of children to the location at which they will be staying.

17. Where children are encountered following separation in the circumstances outlined in paragraph 15 3) above, the detention facility should take the following actions:

- Where there are existing crèche or similar facilities at the place of detention, aim to obtain care for the child/children in these facilities in the first instance.
- In the absence of crèche/similar facilities, an appointed child liaison officer, or a nominated officer with suitable childcare qualifications where possible, to look after the child/children during the period of separation, and identify a suitable location in which to accommodate the child/children.
- Keep changes to a child liaison officer or nominated officer to a minimum during the period of separation to ensure continuity of care, and to minimise any distress to the child/children.
- As far as is possible, minimise the period of separation and keep the child/children informed of the whereabouts of their parent/guardian.
- Ensure, subject to age and level of understanding, that the child is informed of the reason for the separation, how long it is likely to last and what is going to happen to the family unit next.
- An individual first encountered as an adult who later claims to be, or presents evidence that they are, a child, should be treated as outlined under the Detention General Instructions and DSO 14/2012.
- Where children are encountered in the circumstances under paragraph 16 (5) above, arrangements should be made to meet their welfare needs during the brief period the children remain in the holding room, pending collection by local authority children's services. The process for first encounter and welfare interview guidance regarding unaccompanied seeking children can be found in the Processing Children's Asylum Claims document.

## Removal of Children to an Area of Safety

18. There may be circumstances in which it may be necessary to separate a child from other families in the centre in order to ensure the safety of that child and other children in the establishment. The decision to separate the child must be taken with due regard to the section 55 duty and the child must not be placed in accommodation designated for removal from association or temporary confinement. This would not mean that the child will be separated from their own family. The child in question with their entire family unit will be relocated to an area of safety.
19. Centres holding families with children must make a decision on where to place the child, with at least one of the parents/guardians in attendance at all times, when such a need arises. This should be based on the individual circumstances of the child the child's family and the centre at that time.
20. Where there is more than one child in the family group, but only one parent/guardian, the entire family unit must be located to the area of safety.
21. Alternatives may include transfer to another establishment or social services, if the incident warranting separation is sufficiently serious.

## Self-Audit

22. 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.
23. The compliance team must also conduct annual audits against their responsibilities stated within this DSO.

## Revision History

Review date	Reviewed by	Review outcome	Next review
05/2016	Sheri Yusuf	Rationalisation of contents, including deletion of original: Annex A: Appendix 1; Annex B; and Annex B: Appendix 1. Addition of new Annex A1 (more proportionate safeguarding children policy template for non-children IRCs).	05/2018
08/2018	Jose Domingos	Amended to include the roll out of PDT teams and individual responsibilities	08/2020

11/2019	Shadia Ali	Amended to include the roll out of DET teams and individual responsibilities	11/2020
04/2026	Akash Shourie	<p>Standardised changes affected throughout the document.</p> <p>Minor wording changes and Self Audit requirements added.</p> <p>Clarity around the process change as Yarl's Wood no longer has a RSTHF.</p> <p>Clarification on UKVI title, although there is a change it is internal so does not need to be reflected in this DSO</p> <p>Clarification of section 55 duty across the estate</p> <p>Paragraph 8 amended as pertaining to detention of children to show that children are not detained in the IRCs</p>	04/2028