



Independent Family Returns

Independent Family Returns Panel

Annual Report 2024-2025

Chair's Foreword

Families with children who no longer have a legal right to remain in the UK, who have not chosen to depart voluntarily, and who face the prospect of a required or enforced return to their country of origin, face a few potentially difficult and daunting issues.

It is the task of the Independent Family Returns Panel (IFRP) to support and challenge the Home Office in ensuring that the welfare and safeguarding needs of children and families in these circumstances are appropriately met, in line the duties arising from Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. The provision of a family returns process which is humane has an impact on the capacity of families to make a successful and effective return.

Section 14 of the Illegal Migration Act ('the IMA') 2023 disapplied the duty to consult the IFRP where the persons were being removed or detained under the IMA. It did not impact on removal or detention decisions made under other Immigration Acts. However, the then Government, being mindful of the Secretary of State's duty under section 55 Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, to ensure that immigration functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the UK, agreed that consultation with the IFRP remained an effective way of ensuring that the removal and detention of families is carried out safely.

In any event, section 14 of the IMA has not been commenced, and the new Government is now seeking to repeal this section as part of The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill which is currently before Parliament. As a result, the disapplication of the duty has not affected business as usual for the Family Returns Unit in making referrals to the IFRP.

This report gives an independent view of a multi-professional Panel consisting of members who have significant leadership and management experience in their various fields, on how well the welfare and safeguarding needs of families in these circumstances are being catered for. The report also makes recommendations to the Home Office for continuing improvement in relation to this important issue.

I now present my fourth annual report as chair of the Independent Family Returns Panel.

Helen Chamberlain

Chair, Independent Family Returns Panel

Summary of recommendations presented in this report.

- 1. Recommendation 1 - That the Home Office make suitable arrangements with Luton Airport to facilitate the arrangements for a family due to depart the airport. The Home Office should review each case on that basis and if necessary, revert to an evening arrest and early morning flight to limit the time that a family is detained in the coach prior to departure.**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 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 2 below. The Panel comprises professionals with a range of relevant expertise across the professions of social care, education, the police and medical doctors.
- 1.2 The Family Returns process encourages families who are at the end of their legal rights to remain in the UK, to return to their countries of origin voluntarily, and it continues to be the case that a significantly greater proportion of families choose this route. Where families fail to return voluntarily, they are required to return to their country of origin and are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own self-check-in arrangements at the airport. Families who fail to depart in this way are subject to an enforced return, which requires that the family be arrested and be subject to escorted travel arrangements both to the appropriate airport and during the flight. It is with required and enforced returns that the IFRP is concerned.
- 1.3 At the stage when the IFRP is consulted, the relevant Family Engagement Manager will have conducted at least two meetings with the family, will have sought relevant information from partner agencies, and will have developed detailed proposals for the return of the family. The detailed plans which are proposed by the Family Engagement Manager are put to the Panel for its consideration and advice.
- 1.4 The report of the IFRP seeks to provide an independent view of the functioning of required and enforced family returns. This report covers the period April 2024 to March 2025. It provides a data overview and commentary of the high-level trends in the reporting period, provides a summary of visits undertaken by IFRP members, evaluates the impact of the Panel, and summarises recent improvements made in the processes undertaken by the Home Office, from a safeguarding and welfare perspective. It makes recommendations to the Home Office for making the work more effective. A summary of the Home Office response to recommendations made in the previous IFRP report, along with perceptions of the Panel as to how much progress has been made, is also provided.
- 1.5 2024- 2025 was a busy year for the Panel, for two main reasons:
 - The Panel had an increased workload in this reporting year as we see the flow into the family returns process has increased. As shown in section 3 below, the number of statutory referrals to panel increased by approximately 90% from 2023/24 as opposed to 2024/25.
 - A significant selection process - From a large field of applications was undertaken which successfully resulted in the appointment of 3 new members and the re-appointment of 3 Panel members and the Chair. This outcome provided a good mix to the Panel of experienced and new Panel members. An induction programme was undertaken for the new members.

2. The role and remit of the Independent Family Returns Panel

2.1 Following the Government announcement to end the detention of children for immigration purposes in December 2010, the 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 refused to depart voluntarily. 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.

2.2 Section 14 of the Illegal Migration Act ('the IMA') 2023 disappplied the duty to consult the IFRP where the persons were being removed or detained under the IMA. It did not impact on removal or detention decisions made under other Immigration Acts. However, the then Government, being mindful of the Secretary of State's duty under section 55 Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, to ensure that immigration functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the UK, agreed that consultation with the IFRP remained an effective way of ensuring that the removal and detention of families is carried out safely.

In any event, section 14 of the IMA has not been commenced, and the new Government is now seeking to repeal this section as part of The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill which is currently before Parliament. As a result, the disapplication of the duty has not affected business as usual for the Family Returns Unit in making referrals to the IFRP.

The IFRP have been working closely with the Home Office Immigration policy team to review ways of working in light of the change in Government.

2.3 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.

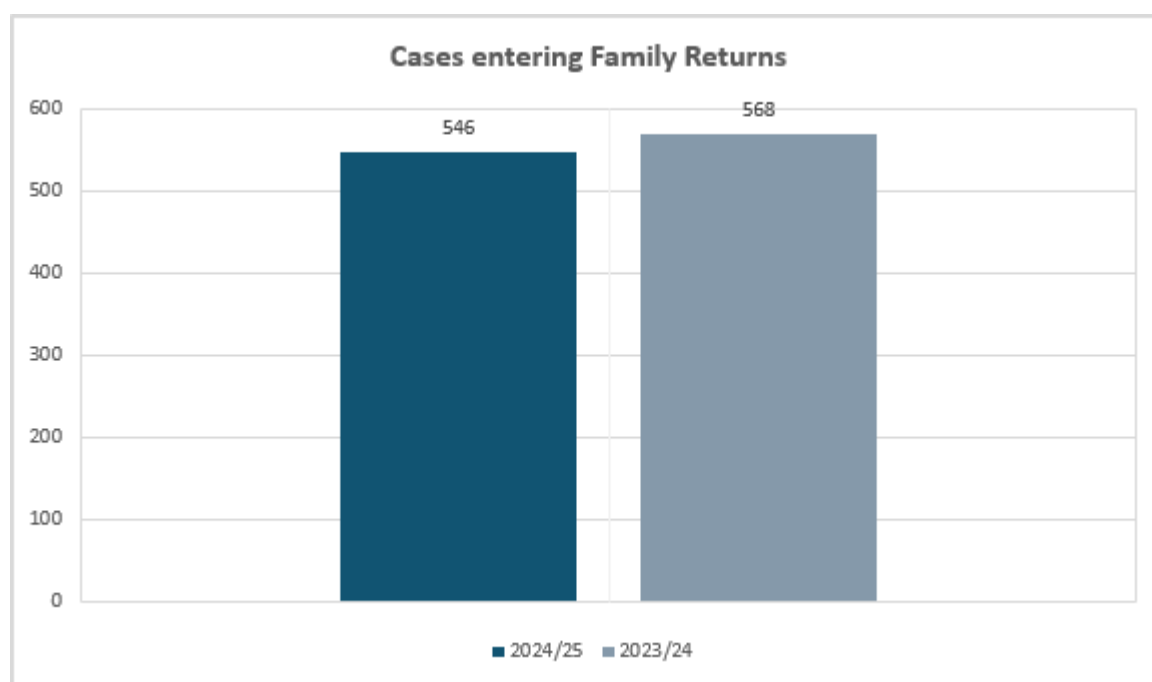
2.4 The IFRP now have access to the data regarding children in families who arrive by small boat and are processed through the Illegal Migration Intake Unit in Kent. The IFRP are assured through reviewing the data that children are detained appropriately whilst the checks are made to their status and the family they have arrived with to ensure that they are safe and are moved to the most appropriate move on accommodation.

- 2.5 The IFRP continues to meet every quarter to review and discuss the Home Office data on removals and the Border Force data focusing on children detained at ports. This also gives the Panel the opportunity to discuss with the Home Office the policies on removal and to question the scenarios where children arrive and are detained, the reasons for their detention and whether they were removed or allowed to remain at that point.
- 2.6 The Panel Chair has engaged with the Home Office whilst they conduct a full review of all arm's length bodies (ALBs) with a presumption that they will be closed, merged or have functions brought back into Departments unless their separate existence can be strongly justified. The Panel Chair ensured the role of the Panel was communicated, that it was enshrined in legislation and provides an independent advice role to the Home Office.

3. Family returns data and analysis

Families entering the Family Returns Process

- 3.1 Most families entering the Family Returns Process leave the country voluntarily. The work of the Panel is thus linked to the overall trends and figures associated with family removals. Family Returns Panel considers only the small minority of families who are being considered for a required or ensured return. Data is provided here about the total number of families entering the returns process, as a context for the work of the Panel. As shown in the graph below, there has been a small fall in the number of cases entering the Family Returns Process.

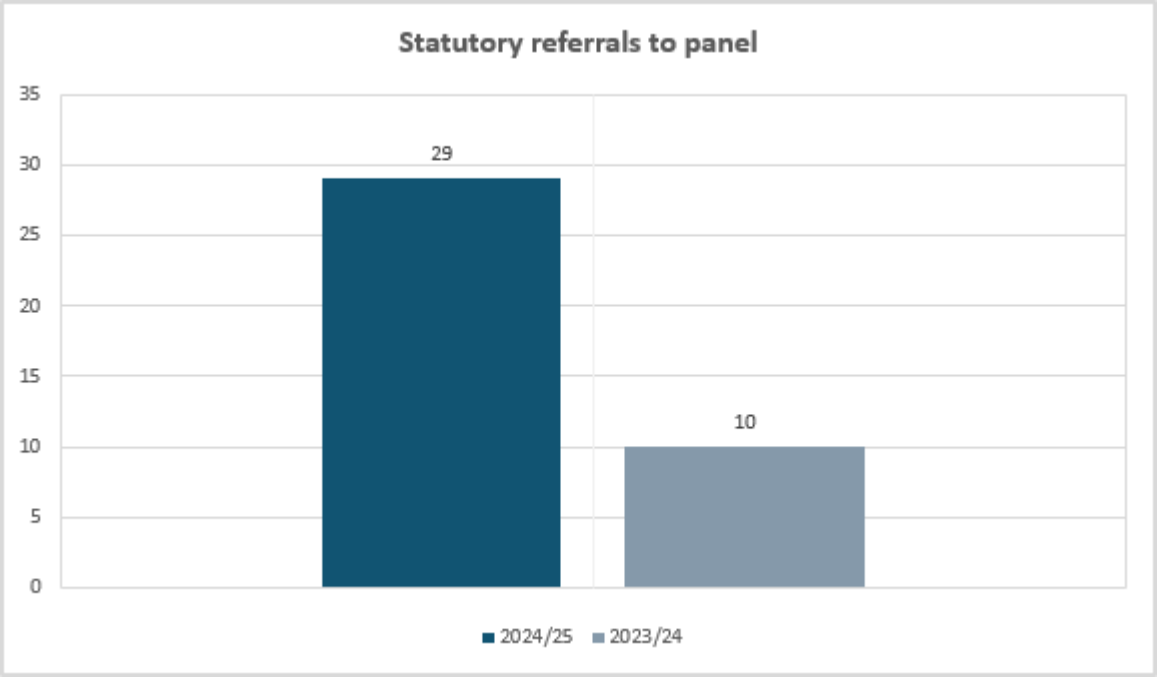


Note: The data provided in this report originates from locally held Management Information (MI) from Immigration Enforcement's Family Returns Unit, and is different to the previously published 'transparency data' which uses System MI.

Referrals to the Panel

- 3.2 Referrals to the Panel increased markedly in this reporting year. This was due to several factors including a new case progression model, recruitment of further Family Engagement Managers

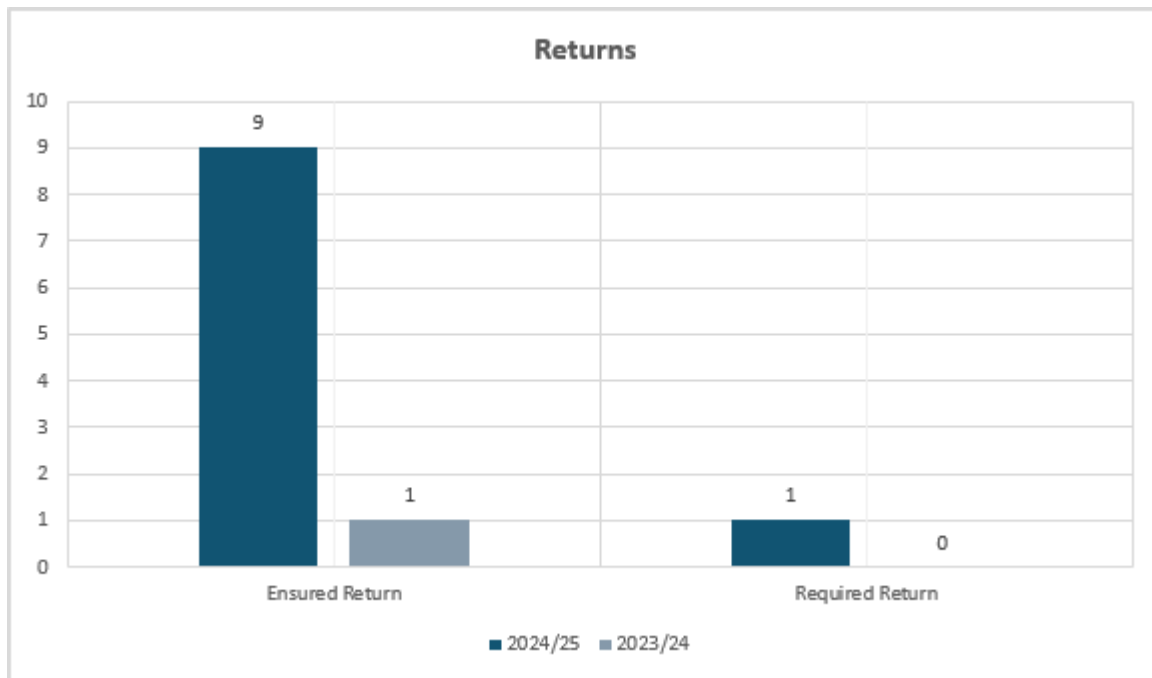
and the transfer of the previously mentioned voluntary departure work, allowing Family Engagement Managers to focus on those families choosing not to depart voluntarily. Third country cases refer to families who came to the UK via another European country and under rules of the Dublin Convention, are being considered for return to this ‘third country’ for the hearing of their asylum claim.



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Conclusions from the Family Returns Process

3.3 Historically, voluntary returns made up the largest category of returns from the Family Returns Process. The transfer of this area of work to the Voluntary Returns Service, beginning mid-2018 and completed by the end of 2018, meant that the overall numbers of families returned via the Family Returns Process was significantly lower than the previous reporting years. All other types of return are in line with expectations.



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Cancelled Arrests / Failed Returns

- 3.4 For 2024/25 there were 28 families who had return plans agreed by the IFRP. Of those, 11 were removed (39.3%), 11 were cancelled pre arrest (39.3%), and 6 failed at or post arrest (21.4%)

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There are numerous barriers that can lead to an arrest being cancelled or a return failing, including (but not limited to); loss of contact, litigation, submission of an application (charged or otherwise), safeguarding and/or disruption by family members.

Pre-departure accommodation usage

- 3.5 The use of Pre-Departure Accommodation for families being removed from the UK is only recommended as part of a return plan as a last resort or where it is used as a contingency to a same-day removal that has failed. PDA closed in January 2024 as part of a wider programme of works across the Immigration estate to increase bed space and capacity. It was scheduled to re-open in Spring 2025 however this is now delayed to later in 2025.

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Recently the Home Office has started to use Luton airport as a departure airport, this airport apparently does not have suitable holding facilities for families. Whilst most cases have involved evening arrests and early morning departure this has not presented with an issue, but the IFRP have seen a case whereby there was an early morning arrest and the family due to arrive at Luton a few hours later and around five hours prior to their departure and the Home Office planned for the family to remain on the coach for that time. Whilst the coach may have facilities for hot and cold food and a toilet, the IFRP were concerned at the length of time the family was expected to remain on the coach during the day and how that would affect their welfare.

Recommendation 1 – That the Home Office make suitable arrangements with Luton Airport to facilitate the arrangements for a family due to depart the airport. The Home Office should review each case on that basis and if necessary, revert to an evening arrest and early morning flight to limit the time that a family is detained in the coach prior to departure.

4. Evaluation of the work of the Panel

- 4.1 Panel members have evaluated the work of the Panel in relation to its strengths, its impact and the areas of work which it needs to develop and improve. The outcomes of this evaluation are provided below.

Strengths of the Panel's work

- 4.2 The Panel provides a specific input to a larger process which is managed by the Family Returns Unit of the Home Office. To carry out its remit, the Panel must collaborate with various Home Office staff across operational and policy roles. Panel members identify the following as key strengths of the Panel's operations:
- The membership of the Panel provides a broad range and depth of multi-professional expertise.
 - Decision-making is achieved by consensus.
 - The Panel rigorously focuses on the safeguarding and welfare needs of the children within the families under consideration.
 - In discussion of families the Panel's relentless focus is upon risk in the proposed return plan and the mitigation of this risk.
 - Panel members conduct an ongoing programme of visits to observe how the system works with families and to discuss work with staff whose responsibility it is to organise the return arrangements. This enables individual cases to be considered in context of up-to-date knowledge of the broader system.

The Panel's impact

- 4.3 The Panel has continued to provide advice which has secured children's safeguarding and welfare needs. The impact of the Panel is considered below in relation to individual cases, in relation to the Panel's contribution to systemic improvement within the Family Returns system, and in relation to international recognition of its work. The Panel also makes an impact through

the formal provision of recommendations in its annual reports. A brief evaluation of progress by the Home Office on the latter is provided in section 5 of this report.

Examples of the difference made by the Panel to families' return plans.

4.4 The Panel has had influence on the return plans of families in a range of ways: the following examples from 2024-2025 give an indication of these.

- In cases of potential specific vulnerability, the Panel has encouraged the Home Office to work with families to seek to secure **initiative-taking referral**, ahead of return, to specific support organisations in the country of return.
- **Various** other advice was given for changes to be made to return plans, including, for example:
 - A medical member of the Panel picked up in the medical notes of one family that the father was working as a builder and left the house early each day – this enabled the Panel to recommend an alteration of the arrest time.
 - In one case the Panel made recommendations with regard to the possibility for a family split if this became necessary, advising that a split in this case should not take place, except in very specific circumstances where it was believed one parent was more protective and capable of looking after the children.
 - In a case where the family who resided with a relative who had police firearms markers and intelligence to support that he was supplying class A drugs, the IFRP recommended a Police firearms risk assessment be carried out in order that all risks were identified and contingencies were put in place to safeguard not only the family but the ICE team arresting officers at the scene,
- The Panel has recommended that **some removals be postponed**:

It is extremely rare that the IFRP would recommend a postponement of removal, and it would only be done in exceptional circumstances where a child's safeguarding needs would be at risk –

 - where a mother and daughter were returning, and the mother was not effectively cooperating with health services which meant that the child's safeguarding and welfare needs may not be met on return to their home country until a diagnosis had been provided and the mother was able to take documentation to their return country to share with doctors.
 - The Panel picked up on the existence of a serious illness of a parent which required an operation, the Panel recommended a deferral of the removal until the operation was carried out and treatment started. The family remained in the removals process and returned to Panel some months later.

System enhancements from Panel members' informal feedback

4.5 The ongoing programme of visits to various elements of the work of the Family Returns Unit (see appendix for list of visits undertaken in the reporting year) provides an opportunity for Panel members to provide feedback to managers. In addition to formal feedback through the recommendations of its annual reports (and progress made on these is reported in section 5 below), the Panel also provides informal feedback to managers, which is designed to support the continuous improvement of the service. Given below are some examples of the impact of informal feedback by Panel members which has led to system improvement.

- **Family Welfare Form:** the Panel was heavily involved in advising and suggesting improvements to the Family Welfare Form, which sets out the circumstances of the family, to be considered by the Panel. This included the addition of detail as to the origin of information being relied upon to assist families returning to their home countries.
- **Challenge by Family Engagement Managers:** The Panel has given feedback about how the interaction between Family Engagement Managers and families enables families to remain effectively engaged with the returns process. During the reporting year there were more examples of Family Engagement Managers appropriately and successfully challenging families to remain appropriately engaged with the process.
- The standardisation of minutes provided by the FEM subsequent to a Panel to cover the comments and recommendations made by the Panel. This should not be a verbatim account of all conversation but include a resume of the pertinent discussion points and follow on actions.

Improvements to be made by the Panel:

4.6 Panel members agreed that the following areas of work are priority areas for improvement in its work during 2024-2025:

- Ensure the visits programme includes a more systematic observation of arrests.

5. Previous recommendations of the Panel 2023-2024

5.1 The Panel's previous report was an interim report as business within family returns was getting back to a semblance of order and Panels were few, as such there were no previous recommendations.

6. Recent improvements in the family returns process for those subject to an enforced return

6.1 Given the Panel's statutory role is to make recommendations to the Home Office on the best method of returning individual families to their home country ensuring the welfare needs of specific children and families subject to an enforced return process, in undertaking this work Panel members become aware of general patterns in the effectiveness of the family returns

process. Panel members are therefore well placed to comment on improvements and areas for development of systems to support the return of families who may be subject to enforced return, and so to contribute to the continuous improvement of the service. Given below are some comments on the perceived recent improvements in the service. These are followed, in section 7, by the Panel's formal recommendations to address issues which require improvement.

6.2 Based on their experience of ongoing work with the Family Returns Unit, the Panel would like to acknowledge the following perceived recent improvements in the work of the unit:

- Significant improvements in workflow and number of cases coming to the Panel were made in 2024-2025.
- Improvements were made in evaluation and analysis by Family Engagement Managers, as evidenced by the improving quality of completed Family Welfare forms provided to the Panel. An example of this would be the provision of more detailed notes on observations of children's behaviour during family returns interviews.
- Despite increasing difficulties in securing bookings with airlines, the system has remained resilient in this respect and appropriate flights have been secured for planning returns.
- Planning for support for families in their country of origin has improved, as evidenced on the Family Welfare Forms considered by the Panel. For example, tailored information to support return to a number of countries is now routinely provided to families.

7. Recommendations to the Home Office

7.1 The Panel makes the following formal recommendations to the Home Office for to address issues which, in the judgement of the Panel, require further improvement.

Recommendation 1 - That the Home Office make suitable arrangements with Luton Airport to facilitate the arrangements for a family due to depart the airport. The Home Office should review each case on that basis and if necessary, revert to an evening arrest and early morning flight to limit the time that a family is detained in the coach prior to departure.

8. The detention of children for over 20 hours at ports

8.1 The monitoring of the detention of children for over 20 hours at ports is a non-statutory aspect of the Panel's work. An issue over the reliability of data became known in the previous review period. Border Force officials have made appropriate progress in addressing this issue and a new, more comprehensive, data set has been made available to the Panel.

8.2 From the data seen by the Panel, no significant concerns have been highlighted about the inappropriate detention of children. Evidence presented to the Panel suggests that in the unusual situations where children need to be detained at ports for longer than 20 hours, the

Border Force bring due awareness to the way in which it deals with such challenging and sensitive cases.

Appendix 1 Visits and observations by Panel members

- 4 Panel members visited Family Returns Unit main offices in Leeds to observe work processes and have discussions with a range of staff.
- 2 Panel members observed an Immigration Tribunal in London (other observations are planned).
- The Chair visited the Kent intake Unit and Dover and the facilities at Manston.
- There is a planned visit by the Chair to the newly refurbished PDA, there will be further visits made by Panel members subsequently.