Introduction

This report covers inspections of the detention facilities at Tug Haven and Kent Intake Unit (KIU) in Dover, and Frontier House in Folkestone. The facilities mainly held people who had arrived from France on small boats after undertaking sea crossings from France. Several hundred people arrived at Tug Haven during the inspection and most went directly to immigration removal centres (IRCs) or hotel or hostel accommodation. The Home Office did not keep data on the length of time people spent at Tug Haven, but about 2,000 people, including over 700 unaccompanied children, had been held at KIU or Frontier House in the previous three months for an average of more than 26 hours. The longest detained person was held for over four days and the longest detained child had been held for over 90 hours.

Our last inspection in September 2020 found that these facilities were badly equipped to meet their purpose. Detainees were experiencing unacceptably poor conditions and important safeguarding processes had broken down. Poor contingency planning meant that there was not an effective response to the fluctuating numbers of arrivals. Following that inspection, we were assured by the Home Office that rapid action would be taken to improve both strategic planning and the conditions in which detainees were held. However, despite some limited progress, detainees, including large numbers of unaccompanied children, continued to experience very poor treatment and conditions.

A new marquee at Tug Haven now gave arriving migrants better cover from the elements and there was enough dry clothing and food. However, many people, including families with young children, spent over 24 hours in tents with no sleeping facilities.

The main holding room at KIU remained inadequate. The facility could comfortably hold a small number of people for a few hours but was wholly unsuitable for its intended capacity of 56 people, who could be held for several days. Detainees were confined to a permanently lit room without access to fresh air or even the chance to look outside because of the frosted windows. We observed 40 people in the holding room, barely able to move and unable to rest properly after exhausting journeys. Records showed that others had recently been held there for three to four days. There was only one shower at KIU, and detainees were not always told that it was available.

While KIU was now intended to hold only unaccompanied minors or people whose age was disputed, adult men, women, families and unaccompanied children were regularly held together in the same facility and had resulted in significant safeguarding concerns. For example, during our inspection, an adult male ex-offender considered to pose a medium risk of harm to the public was held together with unrelated children.

Detention staff reported that the poor conditions in the crowded facility and extended detention had led to a great deal of distress and frustration among detainees. Detainees did not have access to their own phones and had generally inadequate phone access to contact family, friends or lawyers after arrival.

It was positive that KIU now had sufficient social workers and 24-hour health care. However, the social workers were contracted for age-dispute cases only and their skills were underused in an environment where safeguarding was an ongoing concern for many other children and some vulnerable adults.

Overall, despite some improvements from a very low base, we found conditions that were at times completely unsatisfactory, and ongoing weaknesses in Home Office governance and systems of accountability and safeguarding. A new replacement facility at the Western Jet Foil was not due to be fully operational until June-July 2022 despite an initial plan for it to be open by the end of August 2021. Home Office leaders also told us of appropriate plans for an improved new KIU facility and up to a thousand triage places in accommodation at different sites around Dover, which could be used flexibly to meet needs. However, these facilities were not due to open until spring/summer 2022.

It is unclear why there had been such delays following the assurances that we were given by the Home Office after our last inspection. Leaders told us of difficulties in coordinating the various partners whose cooperation was required, but this was not a sufficient explanation for why, one year later, we still found people being held for even longer in conditions that were so inadequate.

Name Redacted
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
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