



GDWG

*Refugee Tales*



**Report of the Walking Inquiry  
into Immigration Detention**

by Refugee Tales

July 2022

## About the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG) is a charity that supports people during and after detention at Brook House and Tinsley House immigration removal centres at Gatwick Airport.

We work to improve the welfare and wellbeing of people held in detention by offering friendship and support and advocating for fair treatment, and we continue to offer support post-release.

## About Refugee Tales

**Refugee Tales is a GDWG outreach project.**

Through Refugee Tales, we organise walks in solidarity with refugees, those who have sought sanctuary, and people who have experienced immigration detention. In the *Refugee Tales* anthologies, people share their stories about immigration detention to raise awareness of their experiences. To date, four volumes of *Refugee Tales* have been published.

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Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, registered charity in England and Wales No. 1124328.

## Acknowledgements and thanks

We thank our funders The Orange Tree Trust and Comic Relief for their support for the Walking Inquiry.

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TRUST 



We would also like to acknowledge and thank:

- the members of the GDWG Self-Advocacy Group
- the Walking Inquiry Planning Group
- the Walking Inquiry Editorial Panel
- the external experts who contributed videos
- everyone else who has been involved and contributed to the Walking Inquiry

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*Refugee Tales*



# 1 Executive summary

The Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention was initiated by Refugee Tales and the GDWG community to coincide with and complement the Public Inquiry into mistreatment at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, Gatwick.

Our findings have been co-created by our walking community through the 18 months of the Walking Inquiry. We received contributions from people with lived experience of immigration detention, volunteer visitors who provide emotional and practical support to people in detention, and numerous others who joined our walks, talks and deliberations.

At the heart of our Walking Inquiry are **three key principles**:

- The Walking Inquiry's shape and direction are determined by people with lived experience of detention
- Our inquiry is deliberative
- Our deliberations are shaped by the act of walking.

The contributions explore many aspects of immigration detention in the UK, shining a light on its daily realities and complex and enduring impacts.

**Overall, they paint a clear and disturbing picture: that immigration detention is dehumanising, a breach of human rights, and its abuses are systemic.**

The Walking Inquiry considered **six broad questions**:

- What is it like to be detained?
- How are people detained?
- What are the long-term impacts of detention?
- Why are people who have experienced detention not heard?
- How does detention damage society?
- What is our response?



## Our key findings

By their very nature, the findings from our Walking Inquiry are qualitative and richly insightful. They include powerful testimony and reflections on the nature and impacts of immigration detention, including the multiple and enduring harms it causes.

We invite readers to look through this full report and to see the Walking Inquiry contributions on our website: [www.refugeetales.org](http://www.refugeetales.org)

Summarised thematically, our findings are:

- The UK's immigration detention system is a hidden scandal.
- People held in immigration detention are deeply damaged by the experience.
- Being in immigration detention feels like being in prison.
- The **indefinite** nature of detention is particularly damaging to mental health.
- Immigration detention is brutal, dehumanising and deprives people of agency. Its abuses are systemic.
- The damaging impacts last long after release.
- The voices of people who have experienced detention are not heard in our society.
- Immigration detention damages our society, as well as damaging individuals who are detained.
- Immigration detention in the UK is for administrative purposes, not criminal justice.
- Indefinite immigration detention is a breach of human rights. What is needed are kinder, more empathetic policies that enable people to live in the community with support, whilst their cases are decided.
- The UK could and should become a place of welcome, friendship and safety.

## Our recommendations

**We absolutely believe that the UK, like all countries, can and must work towards a future without detention: we therefore call for an end to immigration detention in the UK.**

As urgent first steps towards that future, and in light of the findings presented across our report, we make the following additional recommendations:

- **An immediate 28-day time limit on immigration detention, so that no-one is held indefinitely.**
- **Judicial oversight within 72 hours of every decision to detain someone in immigration detention.**
- **Improvements in the treatment and conditions of people in immigration detention, and in support for people after release from detention.**
- **The right to work for anybody whose case for asylum takes longer than six months.**
- **An approach to asylum grounded not in hostility but in the fundamental principles of human rights.**



future

Welcome

Doors Are Open

EQUALITY

FRIENDS

FOR CHANGE:

Artwork created in Walking Inquiry workshop



## 2 Introduction

This report shares the findings of the Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention, initiated by Refugee Tales to coincide with and complement the Public Inquiry into mistreatment at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, Gatwick.<sup>1</sup> In creating this report, we have drawn on the rich and varied contributions submitted to the Walking Inquiry, from people with lived experience of immigration detention, volunteer visitors who provide emotional and practical support to people in detention, and numerous others who have joined our walks, talks and deliberations.

The findings in this report have been co-created by our walking community through the 18 months of the Walking Inquiry. They provide deep and powerful insights into the nature and impacts of immigration detention, including from many with direct experience. They also set out recommendations for change, to bring an end to the cruel, arbitrary and inhumane practice of immigration detention in the UK.

### Why we initiated the Walking Inquiry

In 2017 a BBC Panorama programme used undercover reporting to reveal mistreatment at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, Gatwick. In response, the government set up a Public Inquiry which began in September 2020 and is expected to report in late 2022. Refugee Tales welcomes the Public Inquiry, but it was set up to investigate what happened at just one centre – Brook House – during the five months between April and August 2017.

We believe that there are many fundamental questions that need to be addressed concerning the nature of immigration detention, the abuses caused by indefinite detention and the long-lasting impacts. We also believe it is vital that the voices of people who have experienced immigration detention – not only in 2017 but at any time – are heard. Refugee Tales therefore initiated our own Walking Inquiry into Immigration

<sup>1</sup> Brook House Inquiry: A public inquiry into the mistreatment of individuals who were detained at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre in 2017. <https://brookhouseinquiry.org.uk/>

Detention, taking place alongside the Brook House Public Inquiry, to address a wide range of issues and bring them to public attention.

## What is distinctive about the Walking Inquiry

Our Walking Inquiry is grounded in the lived experiences of people who have been detained, and the insights of volunteer visitors who visit people in immigration detention. At its heart are three key principles:

- **The Walking Inquiry's shape and direction are determined by people with lived experience of detention:** we contend that the voices and views of people with lived experience of detention are often unheard, but must be central to any meaningful inquiry about immigration detention and associated policy decisions.
- **Our inquiry is deliberative:** bringing people together to deliberate and discuss ideas, consider different perspectives and through this interplay, to generate findings.
- **Our deliberations are shaped by the act of walking:** harnessing the power of walking, talking and thinking together. Understanding is deepened and changed by the process of listening and reflecting with others, and different kinds of exchange are possible when walking alongside each other. Our ability to walk and talk together was challenged during successive lockdowns and Covid restrictions, but our community was endlessly creative and adaptive: walking in small groups or alone at times, staying connected by phone or social media, exchanging letters, and coming together in Zoom gatherings after monthly walks, to share deliberations.

The publication of this report marks the third phase of the Walking Inquiry. The first phase was the process of collectively generating the questions to be considered, and the second phase entailed inviting a wide range of contributions and deliberating the questions. Throughout, we have taken an inclusive and creative approach, inviting all who are interested to take part. We have welcomed new walkers and people joining online discussions, we have encouraged everyone to share their contributions in whatever forms they wish, and we have supported each other with sensitivity whilst bearing witness to testimonies that are deeply disturbing but vital to hear, that speak of the pain and trauma of arbitrary indefinite

detention. A fourth and final phase will be to actively share our findings and recommendations. The next section explains more about the Walking Inquiry and the methodology we have created.

We hope the Walking Inquiry contributes to political and societal change so that the UK ceases to adopt policies of hostility and 'othering' of migrants and refugees, and instead becomes a place of welcome, friendship and safety.







### 3 About the Walking Inquiry

The Walking Inquiry is an experiment. We set out to create our own methodology, building on our history of walking, talking and sharing together on our long five-day walk each summer and our day walks throughout the year.<sup>2</sup> There are four phases to the Walking Inquiry:

#### Phase one (September to December 2020): generating the questions

The first phase involved collectively generating the Walking Inquiry questions. We also explored ways of ensuring an inclusive and creative process for all to take part, and everyone's thoughts on how best to communicate the findings. Through a series of walks (when possible), Zoom gatherings and other online conversations, our walking community generated a long list of over 100 questions. From this we distilled the six overarching questions for the Walking Inquiry to consider:

- What is it like to be detained?
- How are people detained? What are the systems and structures of detention?
- What are the long-term impacts of detention?
- Why are people who have experienced detention not heard?
- How does detention damage society?
- What is our response?

#### Phase two (January 2021 to March 2022): inviting contributions, deliberating the questions

Each month from January to June 2021, we considered one of these questions whilst walking (alone or in small groups) and through discussions

<sup>2</sup> Each summer, Refugee Tales holds a five-day public walk in solidarity with refugees and people seeking asylum, and to raise awareness about indefinite detention. The first walk was in 2015. In July 2020 we walked separately and connected virtually, because of Covid restrictions.

at online gatherings. Before each month's gathering, we shared on our website one or two short, powerful films made by people with lived experience of detention and others with relevant expertise, to broaden understanding and stimulate responses.

We invited responses and contributions in many forms, such as testimony, art, letters, video and poetry. It was very important that people felt able to express their opinions, feelings and insights in whichever ways suited them best. To protect people's sense of safety, people could choose to have their contributions shared anonymously or using just their initials or first name, if preferred. Contributing during Covid restrictions, participants used phones to record and send footage of themselves speaking for our films. Contributions were shared on our webpages. Some contributions – such as exchanges of letters between participants – were also shared live during our online gatherings.

We distributed postcards (below right) with the Walking Inquiry questions and invited people to send back responses.

To further explore different aspects of immigration detention, its impacts and what could be different we held four online creative workshops in February and August 2021, resulting in a series of visual artworks. We held face-to-face discussion-based workshops in November 2021 and March 2022. All the workshops were guided by experienced facilitators. The workshop in March was specifically for members of GDWG's Self-Advocacy Group of people with lived experience of detention.

**'We want people of influence including politicians, policy-makers, faith leaders, the media and the wider public to engage with our findings and deepen their understanding...'**

## Phase three (April to July 2022): collating the findings and publishing our report and recommendations

In phase three we collated and reviewed the contributions, drawing out key themes and insights from the rich body of material to produce the final Walking Inquiry findings. These are shared in Sections 5 to 9 of this report.

## Phase four (July 2022 onwards): sharing our findings

From July 2022 onwards, we are actively publicising the findings of the Walking Inquiry to the wider world. In addition to publishing our report, we are using the contributions to create a travelling exhibition, and will continue to share contributions and invite further responses via our website. We want people of influence including politicians, policy-makers, faith leaders, the media and the wider public to engage with our findings and deepen their understanding of the nature and impacts of immigration detention. Our work to raise awareness of the findings and recommendations with people of influence will be led by the GDWG Self-Advocacy Group.





**Brook House Immigration Removal Centre in Gatwick, West Sussex**

# 4 Context: a brief overview of immigration detention in the UK

## The UK's immigration removal centres

Immigration detention entails detaining people whose right to live in the UK is being questioned by the Home Office. People who are detained cannot leave and have limited freedom of movement within the centres where they are held.

There are currently nine immigration removal centres in the UK, including short term holding facilities.<sup>3</sup> Since September 2021, all have been run by one of two private companies: Mitie and Serco.<sup>4</sup> They are:

- Brook House, Gatwick, West Sussex
- Colnbrook, Heathrow, Middlesex
- Derwentside, County Durham
- Dungavel House, South Lanarkshire, Scotland
- Harmondsworth, Heathrow, Middlesex
- Larne House short term holding facility, Antrim, Northern Ireland
- Manchester short term holding facility, Manchester Airport
- Tinsley House, Gatwick, West Sussex<sup>5</sup>
- Yarl's Wood, Bedfordshire.

In addition, some people are held in immigration detention in holding rooms at ports, airports and reporting centres, and in prisons.

A recent development is the Government's use of former military sites as accommodation for people seeking asylum – not for detention purposes but as 'contingency' accommodation. Currently Napier Barracks in Folkestone is used in this way, and from autumn 2020 to March 2021, so was Penally Camp in Wales. The Chief Inspector of Borders and

Immigration and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons found both to be run-down, dirty and unsuitable.

In June 2021 the High Court ruled that housing asylum seekers at Napier Barracks was 'unlawful' and conditions there were filthy, decrepit, detention-like and did not meet minimum legal standards. The government says Napier Barracks may be used to pilot new models for 'reception centres' for people seeking asylum.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the government intends to start using the former RAF base at the Yorkshire village of Linton-on-Ouse, as an 'asylum reception centre' for up to 1,500 people.<sup>7</sup>

## Numbers of people held in immigration detention in the UK

Home Office guidance<sup>8</sup> says 'Detention must be used sparingly, and for the shortest period necessary' but in practice this is not followed.

In 2019, more than 24,000 people were detained in the UK's immigration removal centres. In 2020 this number fell to around 15,000, largely due to Covid-19. In the year ending June 2021, according to Home Office statistics, 24,497 people were detained.<sup>9</sup>

## Who is detained and the reasons for detention

The Home Office decides who should and should not be detained. It is important to be aware that in the UK, immigration detention is for administrative purposes, not criminal justice.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/immigration-removal-centre>

<sup>4</sup> The Migration Observatory, *Immigration Detention in the UK*, 16 September 2021

<sup>5</sup> At time of writing, June 2022, Tinsley House is being used as a short term holding facility

<sup>6</sup> House of Lords briefing, *The use of Napier Barracks to house asylum seekers: regret motion*, 5 April 2022

<sup>7</sup> Home Office in the media blog, Factsheet: Lynton Asylum Accommodation, 14 April 2022. <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2022/04/14/factsheet-linton-asylum-accommodation/>

<sup>8</sup> Home Office, *Detention: General instructions, version 2.0*, 14 January 2022. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1046288/Detention\\_General\\_instructions.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1046288/Detention_General_instructions.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Home Office, *Immigration statistics, year ending December 2021*, updated 3 March 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2021>

People of all genders can be detained. Most of those detained are men. Women are detained at Derwentside which opened in 2021, replacing Yarl's Wood as the main immigration removal centre for women. Small numbers of women can also be detained at Yarl's Wood, Colnbrook, Dungavel, Manchester and Larne House.<sup>10</sup> Many people who are detained have claimed asylum in the UK and are waiting for their application to be processed. Others have had their application for asylum refused, overstayed on a visa or 'breached' their immigration conditions, for example by missing an appointment to report to the Home Office. Some are foreign nationals who have completed a prison sentence, and are then detained awaiting deportation. Not everyone is recently arrived in the UK; some long-term UK residents, including members of the 'Windrush generation', have been held in immigration detention. Detained people may have families and children in the UK.

In the UK, there is no automatic judicial oversight of the decisions taken by Home Office officials to detain – people can be detained for months on end for administrative reasons, without scrutiny by a judge or court.

## Length of detention

When someone is taken into immigration detention, they have no way of knowing whether they will be held for days, weeks, months or even years. In 2019, 128 people leaving immigration detention had been held for over a year; in 2020 this was the case for 108 people.<sup>11</sup> The longest Refugee Tales knows someone to have been detained for administrative purposes is nine years.

In practice, most are held for shorter periods, but without knowing how long their detention will last – in 2019 just over 18,000 people were held for 28 days or fewer, and in 2020 just under 12,000 people for 28 days or fewer.<sup>12</sup> Over half of all those detained are released back into the community. Even after release, a person can be re-detained without warning; this can happen repeatedly, in each case without a time limit.

<sup>10</sup> The Migration Observatory, *Immigration Detention in the UK*, 16 September 2021

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Pregnant women and families with children can be held for up to 72 hours, or up to seven days if extended by a government minister.

## The cost of detention

The human and financial costs of immigration detention are enormous: detention is not only a waste of human life, it is also a waste of money. It costs, on average, more than £36,000 to detain someone for a year.<sup>13</sup> The UK immigration detention system cost over £95 million in the year ending March 2021. In the same year, there were 330 proven cases of wrongful detention, for which a total of £9.3 million was paid in compensation.<sup>14</sup>

## Alternatives to detention

Only in the last two decades has immigration detention in the UK become normalised as part of the 'Hostile Environment' policy. Previously it was something to be used in exceptional circumstances; in 1993, there were just 250 places across the UK detention estate.<sup>15</sup>

Alternatives to detention are possible: well-designed community-based approaches enable people going through the immigration system to understand and explore their options, with tailored support from trained staff. Evaluation of a government-funded pilot scheme for women asylum seekers in Newcastle found the women taking part experienced more stability, and better health and wellbeing outcomes whilst supported in the community than they had when in detention. The scheme was found to be more humane and significantly less expensive than detention.<sup>16,17</sup> Other research suggests that compliance with immigration decisions is higher with such tailored case-management approaches, even when

<sup>13</sup> A briefing from Oxford University's Migration Observatory, *Immigration Detention in the UK*, 16 September 2021 gives an average cost of £99 per day to hold one person in immigration detention. £99×365=£36,135. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>

<sup>14</sup> The Migration Observatory, *Immigration Detention in the UK*, 16 September 2021

<sup>15</sup> Bail for Immigration Detainees, *Nothing good comes from detention: Voices from Detention*, April 2019. [https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/biduk/redactor2\\_assets/files/803/Voices\\_from\\_Detention\\_Website.pdf](https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/biduk/redactor2_assets/files/803/Voices_from_Detention_Website.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, *An evaluation of 'Action Access', an Alternatives to Detention Pilot*, January 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/61e1709b4>

<sup>17</sup> Action Foundation press release, 24 January 2022. <https://actionfoundation.org.uk/report-on-action-foundations-groundbreaking-pilot-project-shows-there-is-a-humane-alternative-to-detention/>

these are negative decisions for the person involved.<sup>18</sup> Community-based alternatives to detention are more humane, more effective and more cost effective.

## Indefinite detention

The United Kingdom is the only country in Western Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says 'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.'<sup>19</sup> Indefinite detention is both a breach of human rights and of the rule of law.

In 2015, a cross-party report on indefinite detention concluded categorically that detention should be time-limited.<sup>20</sup> In 2017, both the British Medical Association<sup>21</sup> and the Bar Council<sup>22</sup> issued reports calling for an end to indefinite immigration detention. In 2019 the Home Affairs Select Committee report on Immigration Detention called for a 28-day time limit.<sup>23</sup> The committee found that detention is used too often, people are detained for the wrong reasons and vulnerable people, such as victims of torture, are being detained even when they should not be.

In 2021, the UK's National Preventive Mechanism, made up of 21 independent monitoring and inspection bodies whose role is to prevent ill treatment in all forms of detention, urged the government to seriously consider establishing a statutory time limit for immigration detention,

following the same recommendation being made by the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture.<sup>24</sup>

Most recently, the Brook House Inquiry was told by the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB)<sup>25</sup> and by Professor Mary Bosworth, who served as Expert to the Inquiry<sup>26</sup> that a time-limit for immigration detention should be introduced.

People who are detained indefinitely do not have a release date to count down to; they can only count up. This has a devastating impact on mental health. Many people enter detention having already experienced trauma. Even for those who have not previously had poor mental health, detention is an isolating and anxiety-inducing experience. In August and September 2020, at Brook House there were 80 incidents of self-harm requiring medical attention and 161 hunger strikes.<sup>27</sup> There are no definitive statistics from government on the number of people who die in immigration detention each year. However, figures from the charity INQUEST show that over the past ten years, 2012 to 2021, there have been at least 31 deaths of people in immigration detention in England and Wales, 16 of which were self-inflicted.<sup>28</sup>

**This section provides context, facts and figures. The rest of the report shares our Walking Inquiry findings about the nature and impacts of immigration detention, created through the process of walking, talking and thinking together as we explored the Walking Inquiry questions.**

<sup>18</sup> Detention Forum, A Supportive Environment (or Alternatives to Detention) A policy paper, April 2021. <http://detentionforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Policy-paper-a-supportive-environment-April-21.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

<sup>20</sup> *The Report of the Inquiry into the Use of Immigration Detention in the United Kingdom: a joint inquiry by the APPG on Refugees and the APPG on Migration, 2015.* <https://detentioninquiry.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/immigration-detention-inquiry-report.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> British Medical Association, *Locked up, locked out: health and human rights in immigration detention*, 2017. <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/1862/bma-locked-up-locked-out-immigration-detention-report-2017.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> The Bar Council, *Injustice in Immigration Detention*, 30 November 2017. <https://www.barcouncil.org.uk/resource/injustice-in-immigration-detention.html>

<sup>23</sup> *Immigration Detention*, report of House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, HC913, 21 March 2019. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/913/91302.htm>

<sup>24</sup> *United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture's report to the UK Government: UK National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) response*, June 2021. <https://www.nationalpreventivemechanism.org.uk/>

<sup>25</sup> *Brook House Inquiry Closing Statement on Behalf of the Independent Monitoring Board*, 29 April 2022. <https://brookhouseinquiry.org.uk/documents-and-publications/corporate-documents/>

<sup>26</sup> *Brook House Inquiry Supplementary Report of Professor Mary Bosworth*, 9 February 2022. <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/brookhouse-prod-storage-15trcu6ww3q1/uploads/2022/04/INQ000123-Professor-Bosworth-supplementary-report-9-February-2022.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> 'Serious self-harm incidents surge 2000% in detention centre holding Channel asylum seekers', *The Independent*, 16 November 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Figures are from the INQUEST website and refer to deaths in immigration removal centres and people being kept in immigration detention in prison: <https://www.inquest.org.uk/deaths-of-immigration-detainees>



Artwork created in Walking Inquiry workshop



# 5 What is it like to be detained?

## I felt like I had lost all hope

Our first question simply asked: *what is it like to be detained?* Both individuals with lived experience of detention and long-time supporters – who visited them in removal centres or spent time with them on our regular walks and monthly gatherings – express disbelief, shock, horror and embarrassment at the UK detention system, and the deprivations of liberty it imposes. As one volunteer Visitor notes, it is quite simply a ‘scandal’: *‘We cannot comprehend how the system does what it does to human beings.’*

For those who have been detained, we most commonly hear of fear, confusion, and terror, where they had hoped to have at last found a safe haven. A— who has lived experience of detention, refers to *‘human rights, dignity, respectful treatment’* as *‘what all want,’* and recalls *‘the sense, upon arrival, that this is the good place,’* only to come to the sad realisation that *‘there is no good place.’* Another person declares: *‘I’m a migrant running from a war ... Enough ... [the migrant] comes here to search for safety and for a stable life.’*

Instead of safety and stability, what asylum seekers find is imprisonment, isolation and administrative torment. Take the testimony of one individual, held for a month at Brook House:

*‘It was very difficult and painful for me. I really felt like I was suffocating. It seemed time had stopped. Time was no longer passing for me. Imagine ... It was a horrible time, full of stress and fear ... and time isn’t passing. Time is frozen. This feeling was suffocating me.’*

***‘I didn’t commit any crimes. I am just an asylum seeker ... Being imprisoned made the pain I experienced on the way 100 times worse.’***

*‘And this was after I had suffered so much on the way, after all the trials and challenges I had faced. I came with the expectation that I had reached a safe country, a place where humans and human life is valued. So when I came and they took me to the detention centre ... I felt like I had lost all hope.’*

*‘Many asylum seekers, like me, are at the end of their tether when they reach here. They just need somewhere peaceful. They can’t deal with paperwork, police, officials, to be taken here and there ... They are exhausted. They have dealt with so much mentally and psychologically.’*

*‘I didn’t commit any crimes. I am just an asylum seeker ... Being imprisoned made the pain I experienced on the way 100 times worse.’*

The result of experiences like this, which appear endemic to the current system, is hopelessness: a hopelessness, in part, originating in not knowing when you will be released, or even why you are being detained, or why immigration removal centres are so much like prisons. As Mary, a long-time Visitor, attests, expressing her own hopelessness and frustration, *‘It is nearly a quarter of a century since I first started visiting detainees at Gatwick and I wonder why so little has changed.’* She concludes: *‘I frequently feel low about the prospects for those seeking a safe home in this country.’*

## I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy

*‘I suffered each and every day,’* an individual with lived experience reports, *‘It is horrible to stay in a detention centre.’* Another adds that *‘detention in the UK is just a frustration. Your freedom is taken away and you are banged up ... same as prison.’* After three years in detention, another attests that *‘it’s easier to find your way in, it’s hard to find your way out.’* Others describe:

- *‘a heavy atmosphere that consumes you’*
- *‘if you are a detainee, you feel like you are a criminal’*
- *‘racism is the most common thing’*

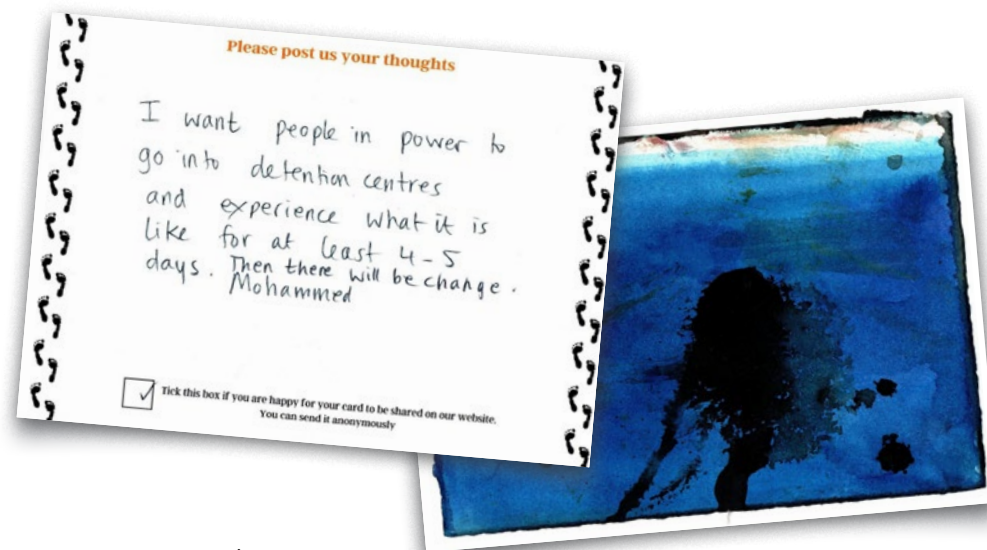
Author Harsha Walia reported to the Walking Inquiry that the ‘internalization of the idea that certain people belong and others don’t,’ which characterises the ‘hostile environment’, is ‘fundamentally racist,’ based upon discriminatory assumptions about ‘the other.’ Such discrimination is reported to the Walking Inquiry by people with experience of detention. One comments that the worst bigotry, and worst examples of racist language he witnessed during detention were aimed at those people who spoke and understood the least English: centre staff appeared to mock and enjoy ‘a laugh amongst themselves’ at their expense.

Testimony of the physical and psychological damage caused by detention, often taking the form of frequently reported instances of self-harm, is all too common. Often this is connected to the lack of a time-limit on detention, which is singled out as particularly dehumanising:

- ‘Keeping someone in detention make situation worse ... some people try to harm themselves because they don’t know when they will get released.’
- ‘In detention you don’t know when your time there will end, [whereas in prison generally] you know when the sentence will end.’
- ‘When I was in detention I had bad things going on in my head. I do self-harm because I don’t know when I’m coming out.’
- ‘I just felt so degraded and not human.’
- ‘You don’t even know what your fate is.’

One individual describes their eight months in Brook House as: ‘a horrible experience, it messed me up mentally, physically, and emotionally. You know, just because you don’t know what happening day in and day out ... I always contemplate suicide because I feel less of a human being ... I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.’ ‘They just treat us like animal,’ another adds, ‘like we are not human ... It is barbaric to treat human being like an animal.’ Yet another: ‘From my experience I suffer from anxiety, depression. You lose yourself, you don’t even know yourself anymore.’

The proximity of Brook House to the airport induces a particular anxiety. Referring to immigration removal in the UK as ‘mind games,’ one individual



states: ‘I was in detention in Gatwick near the airport, so whenever the airplanes would lift off and land, I could hear it. I would get very stressed out because ... they could issue me a ticket to be removed at any moment.’ This individual also refers to not being able to ‘understand anything that was going on’ when dealing with the Home Office; ‘there was no effort to understand me, only to deport me.’

## Still falling

Again and again, the experience of detention is one of dashed hopes, emotional exhaustion, and lasting physical and psychological impacts. As another long-time Visitor, Ann, attests: ‘Whilst visiting ... one cannot fail to notice how hope and expectation leave the detainee. On arrival although a little confused they feel they will be treated fairly, and it will only be a matter of time before they are released. Reality dawns and they realise the system is weighted against them, they see many who have been there longer than them ... They lose hope, become dejected.’

Once released from detention, one is still, in essence, detained: people seeking asylum have no control over where they are housed; they are often arbitrarily moved around the country, severing any connections to support that they may have had opportunity to establish; they have to regularly travel long distances to sign-in at reporting centres, and when signing,

'Being damaged in the nation  
you came to seek refuge in ...  
My weeping is not for myself  
but for Europeans and the  
hope of human rights'



*It isn't like  
anything  
I can imagine  
a free fall  
tumble through  
space without  
end without  
end not knowing  
that's the thing  
all uncertain  
I can't imagine  
hasn't happened  
to me so I walk  
by the side  
of a friend  
who has been  
in free fall  
that wasn't free  
and I listen  
and the wind  
pushes past us  
and my friend says  
just listen  
just listen  
we are outside  
our feet are  
on the ground  
but I am still  
falling.*

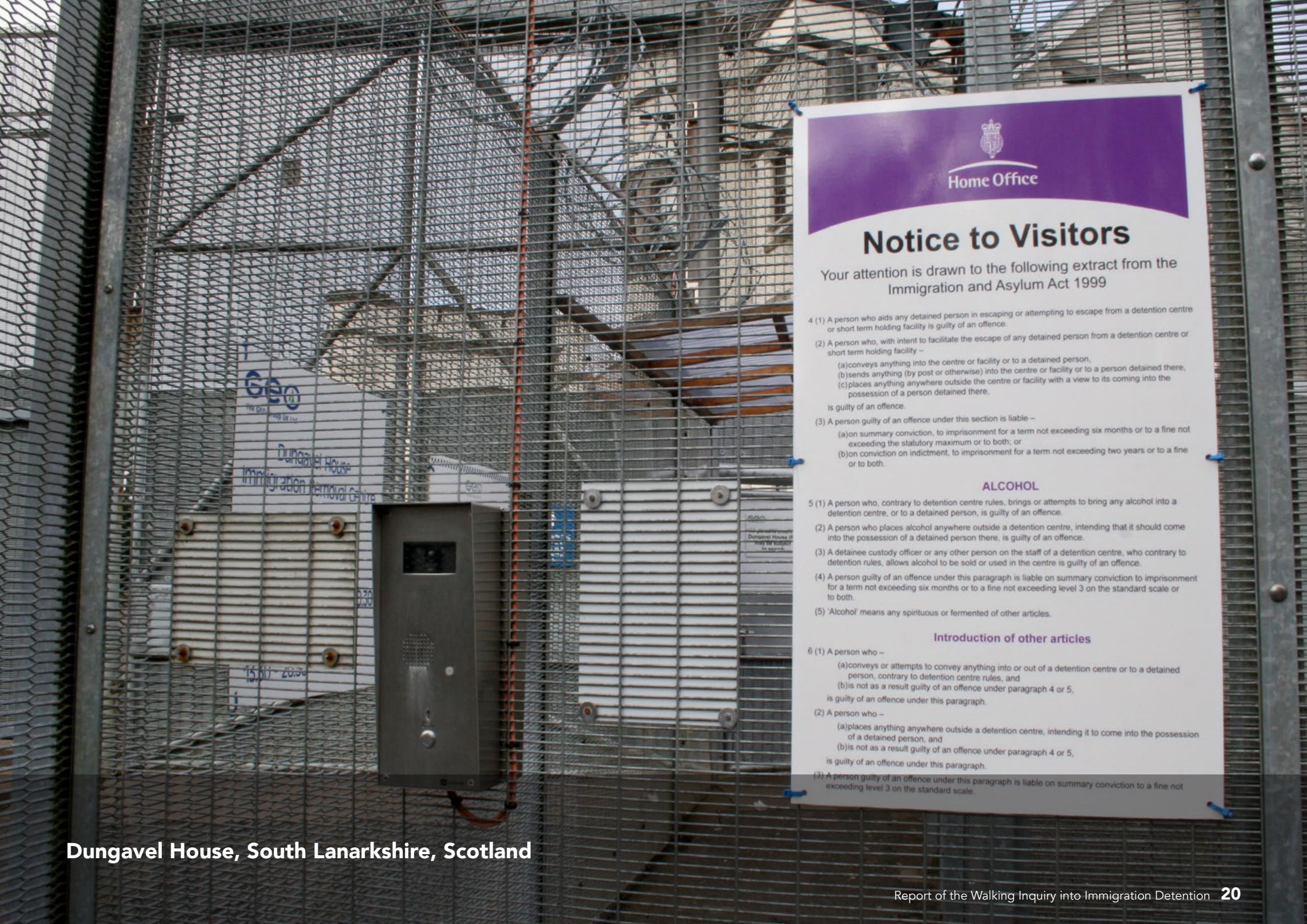
live in fear of being re-detained (a not-uncommon result); and they receive minimal and inadequate financial support (currently £40.85 per week), and are not allowed to work in order to support themselves. The entire process, inside and outside the removal centre, is utterly draining; as one supporter observes, having spent considerable time walking with people with lived experience of detention, their 'memories are visceral, the time in detention seared into their bodies.' Another supporter renders a similar impression in the form of a poem (shown left).

Those with lived experience of immigration detention, despite their frequent references to 'depression, frustration, stress, self-harm [and] anxiety,' nonetheless also speak of 'resilience' and note that they are not seeking charity. They sometimes express the ideals that drove them into exile and to British shores, such as the claim that 'no one is illegal.' Certainly, they return repeatedly to the lingering hope, and frustrated expectation, that the UK might yet reveal itself a place of refuge and a beacon of rights. It is such frustrated expectation that compounds existing anxieties and estrangements and leads to moral outrage. Y—, who has lived experience of detention, reports: 'I do not know who I am anymore ... I have been damaged ... The atmosphere in the removal prisons was Hell ... Being damaged in the nation you came to seek refuge in ... I can recall growing up with the picture of the Queen in my pocket for protection and identity. My weeping is not for myself but for Europeans and the hope of human rights.'

Another notes: 'we already fled people like you who persecuted us.' And yet another makes an appeal shared by so many with lived experience of detention: 'Please do your best to close this place, because it is really a negative, dark and bad place that is not worthy of Britain. These places are not surprising if they are in dictatorial countries, but the existence of such places in Britain ... with kind people, is very surprising and worrying.'

### ▶ Watch our Walking Inquiry film

What is it like to be detained? A film made for the Walking Inquiry by people with lived experience of immigration detention (3m:52s). Jan 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldgAg1m401g>



Geo  
Dungavel House  
Immigration Removal Centre



# Notice to Visitors

Your attention is drawn to the following extract from the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

- 4 (1) A person who aids any detained person in escaping or attempting to escape from a detention centre or short term holding facility is guilty of an offence.
- (2) A person who, with intent to facilitate the escape of any detained person from a detention centre or short term holding facility –
  - (a) conveys anything into the centre or facility or to a detained person,
  - (b) sends anything (by post or otherwise) into the centre or facility or to a person detained there,
  - (c) places anything anywhere outside the centre or facility with a view to its coming into the possession of a person detained there,
 is guilty of an offence.
- (3) A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable –
  - (a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or to both; or
  - (b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to a fine or to both.

### ALCOHOL

- 5 (1) A person who, contrary to detention centre rules, brings or attempts to bring any alcohol into a detention centre, or to a detained person, is guilty of an offence.
- (2) A person who places alcohol anywhere outside a detention centre, intending that it should come into the possession of a detained person there, is guilty of an offence.
- (3) A detainee custody officer or any other person on the staff of a detention centre, who contrary to detention rules, allows alcohol to be sold or used in the centre is guilty of an offence.
- (4) A person guilty of an offence under this paragraph is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale or to both.
- (5) 'Alcohol' means any spirituous or fermented of other articles.

### Introduction of other articles

- 6 (1) A person who –
  - (a) conveys or attempts to convey anything into or out of a detention centre or to a detained person, contrary to detention centre rules, and
  - (b) is not as a result guilty of an offence under paragraph 4 or 5,
 is guilty of an offence under this paragraph.
- (2) A person who –
  - (a) places anything anywhere outside a detention centre, intending it to come into the possession of a detained person, and
  - (b) is not as a result guilty of an offence under paragraph 4 or 5,
 is guilty of an offence under this paragraph.
- (3) A person guilty of an offence under this paragraph is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale.

Dungavel House, South Lanarkshire, Scotland

# 6 How are people detained? What are the systems and structures of detention?

## Kidnapped by the state

That detention in an immigration removal centre is, structurally and experientially, equivalent to criminal incarceration, is readily apparent. The buildings are designed like a prison, with locks, bars, wings, landings, nets; the culture and atmosphere are like a prison. An individual with lived experience plainly states that *'detention centre is basically just place for punishment for the asylum seekers,'* and a Visitor concurs: *'A detention centre is a prison basically.'* Some who have experienced both even maintain that it is worse: more isolating, more physically and psychologically damaging, more inhumane.

People with lived experience of detention report, to name a few of the hardships: lights in their rooms being on 24 hours a day, making sleep difficult or impossible; isolation in their cell 23 to 24 hours in a day (*'same as in the country I left,'* one person comments); bare rooms with no windows and the toilet near the bed with no toilet door and therefore no privacy; terrible food with little nutritional value and sometimes undercooked (*'the chicken was raw, you could smell the blood'*); and limited access to outdoor space and natural light. Poor ventilation and lack of fresh air are notable. Beds are so hard and mattresses so thin that sleep is difficult, and painful for some with health problems. Contributors spoke of *'counting in cells'* whereby several times each day everyone was told to return to their rooms, locked in and counted. Concerns about health are often disbelieved, attempts to access health care downplayed, and requests for medication rebuffed. People in detention experience a lack of control over virtually every aspect of their conditions and environment; over and over again the system deprives them of agency.

Commenting on the architecture of detention centres, a person with lived experience comments *'everything about the physical structure tells you*

*that you are in a prison'* and describes the *'physical space'* of the removal centre as the embodiment of *'mental torture.'* As one supporter suggests, the person seeking asylum cannot help but feel as though they have been *'kidnapped by the state'* in which they sought refuge.

Academic Dr. Lucy Williams, speaking to the Walking Inquiry, notes that *'the UK detains over 20,000 people every year, and about 1,000 at any one time. These are people who are students, workers, children, victims of trafficking and violence, who may have been living in the UK for many years. They're us, just without the paperwork.'* The UK's immigration removal centres, Lucy Williams concludes, *'are effectively prisons'* in which people who are detained *'are isolated and physically separated from help, and from friends.'* Isolated in these centres, detained people experience problems accessing legal help. If and when they are released, it is often to destitution: *'in effect,'* Lucy Williams notes, at this point *'they will be detained in the community.'* She further notes that the UK system is managed for-profit by private companies, and that detained people are subject to economic exploitation: *'The system works by isolating people in prison-like detention centres, monitoring and controlling people by refusing them the means to work and live in the community, processing people for the benefit of profit-making companies.'* Many also express concerns that the private companies running detention centres aim to maximise profits and drive down costs, resulting in centres being understaffed and employees provided with insufficient training.

Contributors observe that the prison-like architecture and culture of detention centres is detrimental to the wellbeing of staff as well as people who are detained. The impact of such a brutal environment should not be underestimated, it is perceived as abusive. Contributors comment that staff may *'dissociate'* from what they see and experience, thus increasing the chances that they will act in ways that dehumanise people.



Lucy Williams also notes the weaponisation of time in immigration detention: *'every day is just one of a potentially long stretch in a prison where you could be held for weeks, months or years.'* Whether it is an intended effect or not, the result of the indefiniteness of detention is depletion and despair. Adding to the disorienting experience of detention is the widely reported practice of moving detained people from one removal centre to another. This sometimes occurs in the dead of night, without notice, with the detained person having no idea where they are going.

Detention is arbitrary, and often people are not told the reason why they have been detained. As one participant in the Walking Inquiry notes, *'The process of detaining someone is bureaucratic rather than judicial,'* and is often excruciatingly slow. Contributors point out that detention is a political decision, and a policy the government could easily change, should it wish. As it stands, the bureaucratic arbitrariness of detention brings unwanted reminders of past and present authoritarian regimes to mind.

### What does this say about our society?

Embarrassment, shock and shame are some of the words used by visitors of people in immigration detention and other participants in this Walking Inquiry to express what they feel as they try to come to grips with the reality of indefinite immigration detention in the UK. One individual says it is *'embarrassing to be British when we are so unwelcoming.'* Another participant, Steph, speaks of:

*'the shocking UNwelcome we provide people in the UK on top of the challenges that people have endured trying to reach the country. It highlighted the conscious political power involved in keeping such structures in place and perpetuating such a hostile environment in a country that thinks of itself as progressive.'*

*'It is people in British society that let this happen,'* another participant adds, while another individual expresses *'shame ... that we live in a country that allows detention to happen in this way.'*

Sue notes that there are no immigration removal centres in North Wales where she lives, but she felt compelled to take part in the Walking Inquiry because she could not allow detention to be tolerated in her name.

An exchange of letters between Barbara and Andy, two participants in the Walking Inquiry, reveals how deep these feelings of social betrayal run. Barbara, writing of the *'barbaric current use of indefinite immigration detention,'* reflects on the *'impact'* of such a system on herself and her correspondent *'as British-born citizens of a country whose claims of support for the democratic values of fairness, the rule of law, and upholding of human rights – imperfect though we recognised them to be – we had once wholeheartedly bought into and believed in.'* She goes on to produce the following series of bullet points:

- *'I was shocked and ashamed to learn that our own government locked people up indefinitely and with no judicial oversight of the decision to do so.'*
- *'I was shocked and ashamed to hear stories from ex-detainees and visitors of the abusive treatment too frequently meted out to already traumatised people inside those immigration removal centres – the kind of abusive treatment ... exposed by the Panorama programme.'*
- *'I was shocked and ashamed to realise that private companies are making profits out of human misery.'*
- *'I still remain shocked and ashamed that our country – which often claims to have such a proud history of providing welcome to those fleeing conflict and persecution (how hollow those words!) – continues to inflict so much additional suffering on those seeking safety and sanctuary here.'*

Andy, also expressing shock and shame *'about the conditions of refugees and seekers of asylum in the UK,'* enumerates his own concerns over:

- *'The lack of judicial oversight, and difficulties of getting access to legal representation, including problems of losing legal representation after arbitrarily moving around to different IRCs at random.'*
- *'The financial costs of detention.'*
- *'The painfully and inhumanely slow, cumbersome and opaque Home Office processes to hear or settle asylum claims.'*
- *'The arbitrary nature of dawn raids, removal flights, etc.'*

- *'The human effects on mental and physical health for people just wanting to settle down into the safety of family life and make a contribution to our society.'*

Andy, expressing further dismay over how the *'conditions of a person's bail can effectively be the same as actually being in detention,'* and the pernicious *'continuous fear of re-detention'* and the lack of an *'opportunity to work,'* concludes that the most distressing thing he has learned is *'the way detention destroys a person mentally.'*

The impact of current immigration detention practices on society writ large can be characterised as a generalisation of atmospheric hostility. In light of her own ancestors being uprooted by 20th century events in Europe, Eva, a participant in the Walking Inquiry, notes: *'Once again the official language surrounding migration, immigration, the search for asylum and refuge by so many, is hostile and this hostility permeates the public consciousness.'*

## What could be different?

In considering how people are detained in the UK, we also asked participants to reflect on what could be different about this system. A letter exchange between Pious, who has lived experience of detention in the UK, and Katrine, a support worker from Denmark, provides the example of international differences. Responding to a question about the system in Denmark, Katrine replies: *'We do have similar issues, though the system here looks different. When a person is waiting for his asylum case to be processed he will stay at an arrival centre managed by the Red Cross.'* If an asylum case is rejected, she continued, the individual is removed to a *'deportation centre'* managed *'by the Danish Prison Centres.'* Finally, she notes that *'many people in Denmark are very concerned about the conditions at those centres and their effects on mental health.'*

Another participant in the inquiry raises the issues of how public funds are being wasted in the current UK system. In commenting on the exorbitant financial costs of detention, they reflect: *'Imagine if only a half of the [cost of keeping someone in detention]<sup>29</sup> per person per year could be given instead as a wage for asylum-seekers and refugees ... to support and look*

<sup>29</sup> Currently £36,000 per year.

after themselves.’ Such possibilities were identified as being both more humane and more financially responsible, leading some to reflect that there is little need for immigration detention at all: it is a ‘*solution that doesn’t solve a problem.*’

What is needed, contributors to the Inquiry repeatedly note, is mental health support, support in language acquisition, and, ultimately, simple human kindness. One participant remarks that ‘*the lasting impact of detention was not even being considered by the government.*’ Another suggests that ‘*hostilities towards migrants and asylum seekers could be deeply reduced once someone understood the realities of detention, and the realities of life for the people who experience it,*’ calling for ‘*more empathy ... in policy decisions.*’ Finally, in another exchange of letters, JB, an individual with lived experience of detention, suggests that, once shown warmth and welcomed, ‘*I made friends who I now take as brothers and sisters.*’ ‘*Sharing my experience,*’ JB continues, ‘*has helped me to understand more about myself.*’

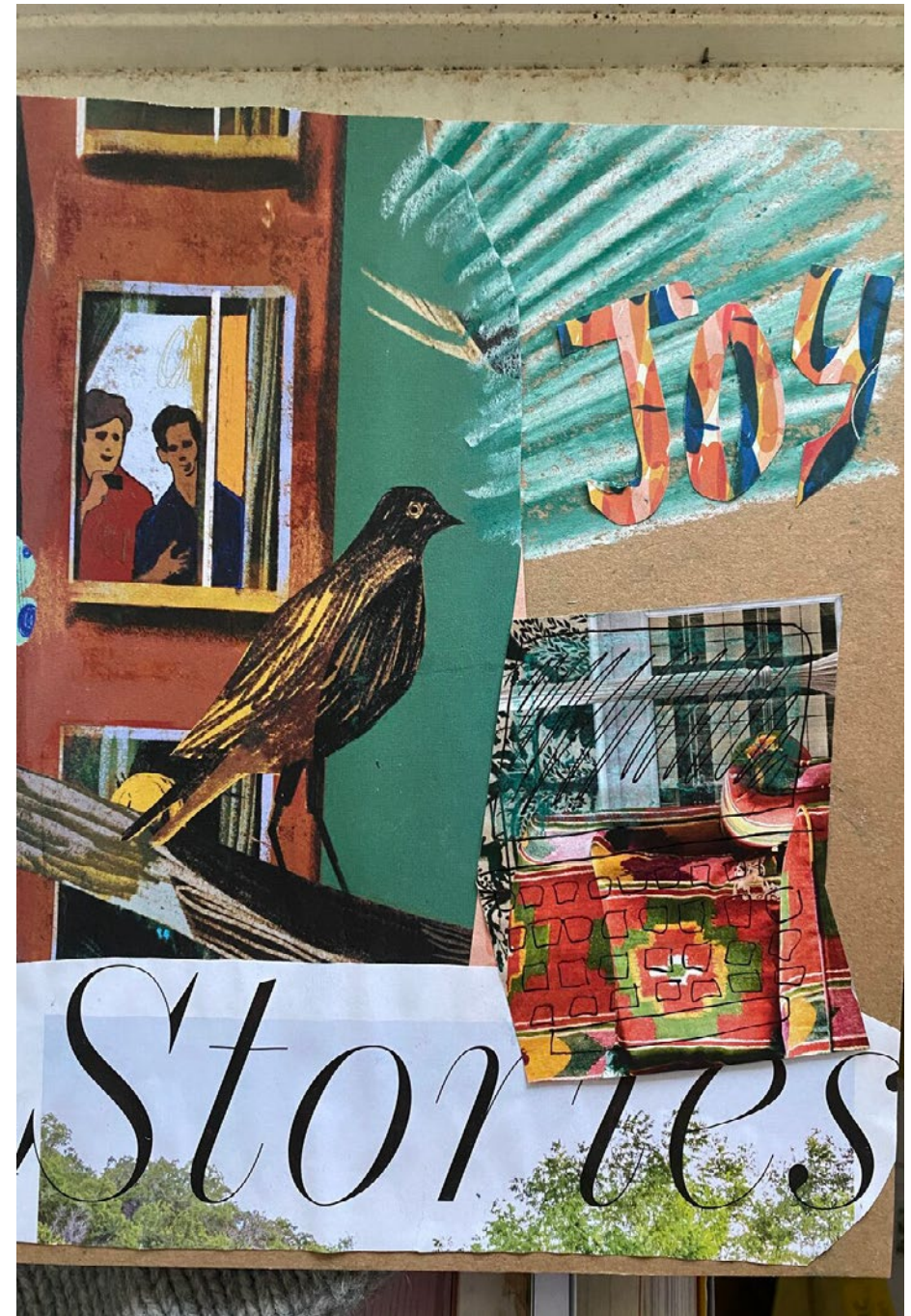
What is being imagined here is a more transparent, empathetic system, one which takes human rights and the value of human life into account.

As some with lived experience of detention explain, even labels like refugee and asylum seeker have negative connotations for them, and can make them feel like they were seeking little more than charity. What they want is to be treated as the independent individuals that they are, with respect and choices made available to them, and the opportunity to contribute to society.

### ▶ Watch our Walking Inquiry films

*How are people detained?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by people with lived experience of detention and GDWG volunteer visitors. (11m:19s) Feb 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4bruwy9Gbk>

*How are people detained? The systems and structures of detention.* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Dr Lucy Williams. (4.17 mins) Feb 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZSJB-cL3U0>





Detention leads to

DEPRESSION

FRUSTRATION

STRESS

Self Harm  
Low mood

ANXIOUS



Artwork created in Walking Inquiry workshop

# 7 What are the long-term impacts of detention?

## It's difficult to become a person again

Those qualities that mark the immediate effects of immigration detention in the UK, as noted above, are also the qualities of its long-term impacts, as by its very nature the current system is one invested in maintaining hostility and precarity over the long term. Thus, many with lived experience of detention can quickly list its lasting deleterious effects: *'depression, low self-esteem, continuous stress, fear, poor health.'* Even if they are released, there is continuing fear of possible deportation or re-detention, and there are sometimes onerous bail conditions, *'so it's not finished,'* as one individual reports, *'I still haven't got freedom.'*

Another sums up their experience: *'They have tortured me physically, mentally, and even spiritually.'* Pious, who has lived experience of detention, asserts that *'to torture someone mentally is worse than [physical violence]; it's difficult to become a person again.'* As a supporter in conversation with Pious comments: *'you carry it [the experience] with you your whole life – it's like you are being punished and punished and punished again.'*

For those with lived experience, *'detention never leaves you'* – one person reporting that once they had left detention they *'still felt detained, feeling unable to leave their room for days.'* Another person spoke of how their experience of detention *'still haunts'* them and that they do not feel that they have left detention, despite their release into the community. It felt like they were *'just watching'* their *'life slip past'* when they *'should be planning their future.'*

Souleyman, speaking of the requirement for regular reporting to the Home Office, notes that the night before going to report, no one sleeps well: *'They have nightmare, because what's going to happen? I'm not coming home. That's what most people think of.'* He continues, *'when you panic all the time, in the end you are going to get paranoid.'* R—, who has lived experience from a young age, comments on the lasting impact: *'I grew up more in detention than I grew up outside. They put that fear in you so*

*you can't just get rid of it by a switch. To always relive that memory is the toughest part.'*

The psychologists agree with the testimony of people who have experienced detention. Theresa MacIntyre provided crisis psychological support at Tinsley House Immigration Removal Centre for many years, and spoke to the Walking Inquiry in March 2021.<sup>30</sup> She cites Stephen Shaw's 2018 second report on the welfare in detention of vulnerable persons:<sup>31</sup> *'All people in immigration detention are vulnerable or potentially vulnerable.'* Theresa MacIntyre goes on to tell us:

*'Even the most resilient of people can be worn down over time ... They enter detention from situations where they may have been tortured, there's been violence, extreme deprivation, multiple losses. They will be suffering, sometimes, from experiences on the journey, and they may arrive ... with symptoms of the full-blown psychological disorder of post-traumatic stress disorder.'*

Over the long-term and left untreated, MacIntyre says, people will *'suffer from depression, anxiety, phobias'* and many other disabling symptoms. In detention there is *'poor provision of health and psychological services. There's lack of support ... lack of legal help, and lack of cultural support ... and certainly a lack ... of meaningful and distracting activity, and an overall lack of control of what happens to them.'* Theresa MacIntyre refers to *'the trauma of indefinite detention'* – a trauma that is all too often added on top of pre-existing traumas – noting *'that they never know what's going to happen to them, or when, and certainly indefinite detention does contribute to the severity of distress.'* There is nothing ambiguous about MacIntyre's conclusion: *'Many of those who leave detention will be damaged by it, and the damage will be lasting.'* As Indre Lechimiakyte,

<sup>30</sup> We are very sad to note that Theresa MacIntyre died in July 2021. We remember her with huge gratitude and respect.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Shaw, *Welfare in detention of vulnerable persons: progress report, an independent report commissioned by the government*, 24 July 2018

of the charity Samphire, reports to the Walking Inquiry: *'I have seen so many lives damaged, and even destroyed, by immigration detention ... One thing is clear: former immigration detainees are vulnerable and need additional support.'*

## It doesn't stop after detention

Again and again, we hear of the lasting impacts of detention, which are in part characterised by the lack of a division between detention in a removal centre and detention *'in the community'* after release (but before the resolution of a case). These impacts include insomnia and nightmares, the impossibility of planning for the future, the sense of life simply slipping past, the lack of access to employment, and the limited financial support provided by the Home Office. It is, as one supporter notes, a waste for the country and a waste for the detained person.

Members of the Crawley/Horsham GDWG Visitors Group characterise the blurring of the lines between detention inside and outside the removal centre as being *'caught in a limbo state.'* *'To talk about post-detention is almost a deception'* they add. *'From their mind, detention doesn't end until someone has given them permission to stay here.'* One member of the group attests that *'someone I visit can't tell the impact of detention without the support of a therapist ... and this is [after] years.'* The Crawley/Horsham GDWG Visitors Group focuses on the loss of trust and the wider social impacts this can have. The *'dragging out of decisions,'* they suggest, is an attempt to wear down detained people, and so encourage them to give up on their attempt to find asylum in the UK. *'Destitution'* and the *'lack of agency'* also contribute to this systemic issue, with the result, for the detained person, being a lasting *'lack of trust in the system':* frustrated and indefinitely delayed, the person experiencing detention is inevitably left with *'no faith in the government.'*

The Visitors' work, which often involves years-long relationships with those they are supporting, brings them a deep understanding of the lasting impacts of detention:

***'I have seen so many lives damaged, and even destroyed, by immigration detention ... One thing is clear: former immigration detainees are vulnerable and need additional support.'***

*'It seems like you can never wake up and say this is a good day because there is always a worry and there is always uncertainty. You can put it to the back of your mind if you go for a walk or something, but that worry and uncertainty can't go.'*

*'People who have been detained lose trust, they don't trust anyone any more. It's really hard for people to trust or believe in anything. It's almost a feeling of **what have I lived for if they can take it away from me in an instant.** There is a sense of fracturing and broken hope.'*

Uncertainty, broken trust, resentment, the loss of faith in a government's intentions and practices – these are the legacies of indefinite immigration detention in the UK.

## People just want to get on with their lives

The Walking Inquiry also asked what forms of support could be offered to people caught in the extended *'limbo'* of immigration detention. Indre Lechimiakyte, of Samphire, suggests that the best coping mechanism *'is being part of a community.'* *'People just want to get on with their lives,'* Lechimiakyte reports. *'People released from detention live in constant fear of re-detention. Each reporting event causes them increased levels of anxiety.'*

A participant with lived experience offers some straightforward advice:

*'Don't behave as though you know what is best for people who have experienced detention – but do empower them to take control again.'*

*'Don't expect those who have experienced detention to educate you on their struggles – but do amplify whatever you learn from them.'*

Contributors to the Walking Inquiry explain what would help them build relationships and lead happy, productive lives in their local communities after detention: decent accommodation; language support including help learning English; opportunities for training and education; access to healthcare and especially high-quality mental health support, and volunteer

mentors who could help someone settle into a new place. These might be people from the same country, culture, faith group or local community as the person who has left detention. The ban on being allowed to work and earn a living whilst waiting for asylum applications to be decided is experienced as particularly disempowering and damaging.

Many contributors to the Walking Inquiry – both those with lived experience of detention and their visitors and supporters – attest to the value of walking and talking, sharing and listening, within community as a means of coping with the long term effects of detention: *'Being able to share your story,'* one supporter observes, capturing a sentiment shared by many, and share it *'with someone who genuinely wants to listen can have a great healing power.'* What often transpires is that grassroots community supporters wind up offering the welcome that is institutionally, one might even say programmatically, absent.

In an exchange of letters presented to the Walking Inquiry, Mohammed, who has lived experience of detention, writes to his friend Emma, a walker and supporter:

*'When we walk together we just chat and walk, it makes me feel really fresh and forget everything in my mind. I'm really, really happy that I met you through Refugee Tales. I also have to say thanks to Helen, who introduced me to Refugee Tales, which led me to know all these kind, generous and very friendly people.'*

Emma responds:

*'You once said to me that walking is like a medicine for you. I feel exactly the same. It's a medicine for me too. If I am feeling low, I tell myself to get out and walk and feel the air on my face. It always makes me feel better and helps me to sort out my thoughts. On my own, or with others.'*

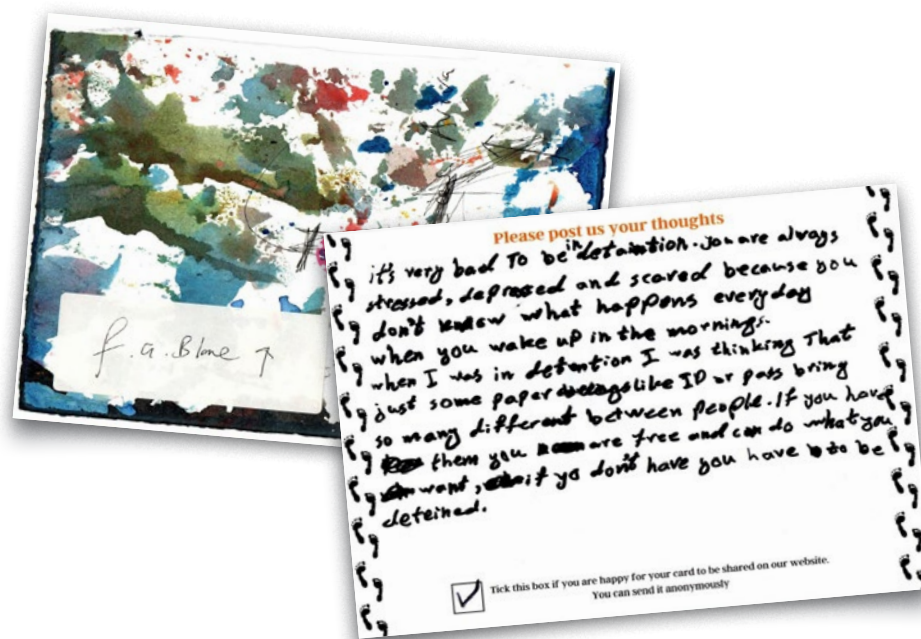
Two conclusions can be drawn from the Inquiry's collective exploration of the lasting impacts of detention. First, that *'the long-term impacts of detention cannot and should not be separated from any understanding of detention overall.'* And second, the sense that the long-term impacts of detention are not being factored into policy decisions, as *'there is no structural support for people as they leave detention.'* As long-time Visitor Mary summarises, the desire of many in the community is:

*'To say to anyone who will listen that you cannot lock people up indefinitely without affect. The long lasting mental and physical damage to individuals and families, the waste of potential, the abuse of international law, all this has to be debated and shown for what it is, a scandal.'*

### ▶ Watch our Walking Inquiry films

What are the long-term impacts of detention? A film made for the Walking Inquiry by people with lived experience of detention and GDWG volunteer visitors (11m:14s). March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9PWKHmHpFY>

What are the long-term impacts of detention? A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Theresa MacIntyre (Psychologist), Shaun Owen (Post-Detention Caseworker, Samphire) and Indre Lechtimiakyte (Legal and Migrant Support Manager, Samphire) (11.17 mins). March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPJlyjA41vI>



NO ONE IS ILLEGAL  
FREEDOM



Artwork created in Walking Inquiry workshop

# 8 Why are people who have experienced detention not heard?

## Afraid of the truth

The consensus of experts speaking to the Inquiry and of its many diverse participants is that the voices of people who have experienced detention quite simply are not heard – not by the general public, who are often completely unaware of the fact of indefinite immigration detention, nor (fundamentally and structurally) by the administrative system in which their lives have been caught up. R—, who has lived experience of detention, states it plainly: *'The thing the Home Office is most afraid of is the truth.'* R—'s words are all the more alarming when one considers the fact that it is upon the 'truth' of the detained person's story that their entire case likely depends. If the system is set up to prioritise the removal of immigrants seeking asylum, then it has already decided the matter of the 'truth', and thus the merit, of their claim. As Pious reports, *'As a detainee, you are never being believed. Neither in the court, nor in the Home Office ... whatever you say, they do not believe you.'*

As the Walking Inquiry was reminded time and time again – and as the Refugee Tales project reveals – when the detained person is heard, when they are able to tell their own story in their own words, it is compelling, to say the least. This is because the detained person's claim demonstrably arises from no mere whim or caprice; they have taken their difficult and desperate journey because, typically, it is a matter of life and death that they do so. To truly hear the story of a person seeking asylum is harrowing, humbling, and convincing. This is why it is crucial that the voices of the people who have experienced detention be heard, and this, again, is why, as the Brighton GDWG Visitors Group reports to the Inquiry, *'at a fundamental level, their silence is embedded in the system,'* because their removal is dependent upon their not being heard.

***'As a detainee, you are never being believed. Neither in the court, nor in the Home Office ... whatever you say, they do not believe you.'***

The Brighton GDWG Visitors Group, referring to *'a culture of silencing,'* lists the various forms this takes:

- *'People in detention do not have access to [their mobile phones or] social media.'*
- *'They are often detained away from their family and friends – so their isolation is even more marked.'*
- *'No cameras or recording devices are allowed in.'*
- *'There is no physical evidence of the detention system – the buildings are hidden away.'*

Furthermore, the Brighton GDWG Visitors Group reports, *'the people themselves are silenced, and this may continue long after they are released. They may have no way to speak out'* – because of a potentially limited facility with the English language, out of fears *'that they won't be believed,'* because of the chilling effects of trauma and the difficulty of talking about painful experiences, and because of *'the understandable desire to not revisit these experiences.'*

One individual with lived experience of detention reports going on an eight-day hunger strike specifically because they were not being heard. Fear and insecurity are thus major contributing factors to the silencing of those who have experienced detention: *'they also feel vulnerable – in case they are detained again, or because they may be subject to racist abuse. They may feel it best to keep their heads down.'* This is widely reported, with volunteer Visitor Tom referring to the *'fear that information they share may be being passed on to the Home Office,'* and Professor David Herd noting *'the fact that it isn't possible to know who, in detention, it is possible to speak to with any expectation of safety.'*

The Brighton GDWG Visitors Group concludes: 'We – Visitors – need to bear witness. We know that even when we visit, people struggle to communicate with us. They wonder what they are allowed to say. They struggle to find the language. They wonder, will their truth be believed?'

## People's stories are being systematically excluded

David Herd, professor and co-editor of the four volumes of *Refugee Tales*, describes the systemic nature of the silencing of people with experience of detention:

*'Whatever else it might be ... the Hostile Environment is a complex apparatus for preventing people from being heard, at the core of which is immigration detention. To detain a person is to separate them from their networks of community and support. At the moment a person is detained ... all normal channels of communication will be broken.'*

*'To detain a person, in other words, is to stop them being heard. It is to break a person's lines of communication with the outside world ... The fact that in the UK such detention is fundamentally arbitrary – that it begins without due process and that it has no defined point of release – intensifies such a break.'*

In his presentation to the Inquiry, David Herd goes on to explain the practice of 'dispersal':

*'At any moment while in detention a person might be relocated to another part of the detention estate. Or consider the fact that, after they have been released, a person might at any moment be re-detained. Or that while living with the prospect of re-detention a person might find themselves moved from one part of the country to another in a process the Home Office calls dispersal.'*

Herd explains that interviews conducted between the Home Office and people experiencing detention are often purposefully obtuse and confrontational, and the proceedings of Immigration Tribunal hearings, whether considering bail or deportation, are not written into the record, so that the voice of the individual seeking asylum is institutionally erased: not only is the detained person not heard, it is as though they never spoke at all. Thus he concludes:





*'It is not an accident that people who have experienced detention are not heard. It is a consequence of a complicated apparatus of policies, rules and practices, at the centre of which is detention on the basis of a person's nation and race. If we were to generalise we might say that people's stories are being systemically excluded.'*

Finally, David Herd comments on what he takes to be the rationale for such systematic exclusion:

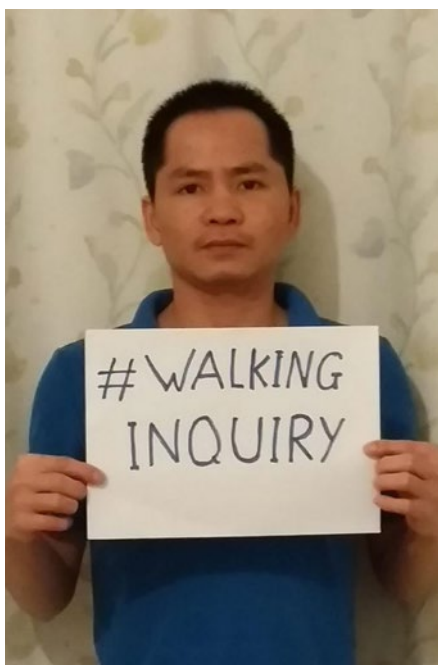
*'People who are detained are prevented from being heard because if they were properly heard it would not be possible to detain them, because only when people are silenced is it possible to disregard their most basic rights.'*

Needless to say, this reflects poorly on both the methods and the ambitions of the UK immigration removal system: there must be some understanding in the Home Office that they are contravening basic human rights, if they go to such lengths to avoid hearing any claim that would in fact present a case based upon the recognition of such rights.

### **It's really important that everyone knows what is happening**

In addition to systemic silencing by which the public is prevented from hearing the voices of those with lived experience of detention, and the difficulties those with lived experience encounter in making themselves heard (be they matters of language, trauma, fear, etc.), the Inquiry also heard of issues related to the unreceptiveness of the UK public. As one participant puts it, a certain sense of 'Good Old Britishness' contributes to the suppression of *'the nation's guilty little secret,'* and belies *'a strong unwillingness to believe.'* The logic would appear to be that the British justice system must be good (it's British, after all), so can't possibly be involved in wrong doing. Another participant notes the simple fact that the *'majority of people do not know about detention or its indefinite nature,'* and Visitor Jamie concludes *'We need to inform the public on what is happening in their name.'*

An exchange of letters presented to the Walking Inquiry highlights the need to hear the stories of individuals with lived experience of detention. Mohammed, who has lived experience, writes:





*'I think detention centres are not for human beings. The way they treat you. When you ask why they are keeping you there, they don't even have an answer. So why are they keeping people there? It is really important for people who are responsible for the country, to know all of this is happening. Are they aware of it or not? If they are aware, then why are they doing this? If they are not, they need to know exactly what is happening. In detention centres, you have time. Lunchtime or dinnertime. Then you just go back to your cell. Why don't they let visitors see your room? They are hiding, they don't want anyone to know. That is really unacceptable. It's really important that everyone knows what is happening. When more people know about detention, then it will change.'*

Emma, a supporter, responds:

*'I completely agree with you that it is as if the whole broken detention system is something that has been kept hidden. Like a dirty secret. Why? Because it's shameful. Detention is, as you say, simply unacceptable.'*

Expressions of shame, outrage, disbelief, and the sense of the importance of revealing the hidden are frequently heard by the Walking Inquiry. One participant writes: *'Do you not know? Do you not see? Do you not care?'* This address – whether to the public or to government officials – is based in the idea, commonly expressed to the Inquiry, that to see the detention system in its full reality is to be opposed to the detention system: one cannot truly know it and not reject it. As Mohammed writes, *'I want people in power to go into detention centres and experience what it is like for at least 4-5 days. Then there will be change.'*

The detention system's habit of obscuring itself and refusing communication and connection is captured in another story. Cally, in a letter exchange with Nelica, writes about a walk taken when people were finally allowed to meet in small groups, after many months of lockdown:

*'On the first occasion when we could finally have been a group of six [walkers], we were reduced to five when at the last moment a member of our party was abruptly and with almost no notice moved out of London – such is the harsh and unkind reality for many of our fellow walkers.'*

And yet the Inquiry hears again and again of the commitment to maintaining connections and revealing what is hidden. A postcard

**'We're going to get there – not for us, but for our kids ... our kids, that we are bringing up in this country, are still under threat. Do we want them to experience that same lifestyle that we have endured?'**

sent by Marie encourages the community as it *'hears the call of the lonely traveller,'* and *'brings the injustice and the inhumanity of the asylum system to the hearing of people who, thus far, have been deaf.'* Expressions of resilience come from those with lived experience of detention. R—, for one, offers a clarion call for freedom and futurity that the detention system seeks to silence:

*'We're going to get there – not for us, but for our kids ... our kids, that we are bringing up in this country, are still under threat. Do we want them to experience that same lifestyle that we have endured?'*

### ▶ Watch our Walking Inquiry films

*Why are people who have experienced detention not heard?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by people with lived experience of detention and GDWG volunteer visitors (12m:51s). April 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmgduKk3waM>

*Why are people who have experienced detention not heard?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Professor David Herd (9m:58s). April 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StHRvgjxyA8>

*Why are people who have experienced detention not heard?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Colin Yeo (barrister and author of *Welcome to Britain: Fixing our Broken Immigration System*) (6m:41s). April 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j51Gfx92xV8>



## 9 How does detention damage society?

### It is being done in our name

The very **hiddenness** of the detention system – its lack of transparency and its systematic production of silence and invisibility – is a key part of how it harms the society in which it is allowed to operate. As one participant puts it, a society which ‘turns a blind eye to uncomfortable truths’ is one that is ‘bad for all.’

A common comment here is that the system is ‘no good for anybody’ (as one individual says): the harm the system causes people who are detained is connected to and inseparable from the harm it causes the wider society – largely due to questions of complicity and moral degradation. As another participant says, paraphrasing Frederick Douglass: ‘When you put a chain round another man’s neck the other end’s round your own.’

Jonathan Ellis, Project Director at Detention Forum, in addressing the Inquiry, argues that ‘to deprive anyone of their liberty is an incredibly serious thing ... How we treat the most vulnerable in our society is a real marker of how we are – of how civilised, of how decent we are – and I think detention is a stain on that reputation.’

Ellis goes on to note that ‘it damages us because it is being done in our name – without always our knowledge and our support,’ concluding that indefinite immigration detention is ‘inhumane and unjust.’

A troubling conclusion lies behind comments: that the system of fear and anti-immigrant feeling is deliberately designed – part and parcel of the creation of a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants. The trouble with the attempt to create such a hostile environment is that it is impossible to contain or curtail hostility when you programmatically seek to create it: it is too easily generalised.

Such a realisation shapes Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg’s comments to the Inquiry. Rabbi Wittenberg begins by recalling his grandfather’s deportation to and detention at Dachau in 1938, drawing a troubling comparison between his own family’s experiences and those of contemporary people detained in the UK:

*‘Summary detention, in our society, is shocking. It takes the most vulnerable, and suddenly – sometimes without warning, without cause and without knowing when it will end – silos them in silence ... But this has an effect not just on them, but on the whole of society ... [It] makes us collusive, in a system which we should not approve of ... I do not want to be counted in to seeing others around me as less human than I am.’*

*‘It creates a kind of tiered humanity, just like Nazism did,’* he continues. *‘I don’t want to be a part of such a divisive system in which some people’s humanity is considered greater than that of others, and some people are protected by the operation of ... a reasonably transparent law, while others are subject to the suddenness of who knows quite what.’*

The problem, as Jonathan Wittenberg identifies it, is with establishing inequality and a two tiered system of those with rights, and those without, at the heart of the social compact. Nothing runs more directly counter to democratic principle than such a structurally divisive system, and nothing, in the long run, is more socially corrosive.

### Humanity has no borders

Harsha Walia, author of *Border & Rule*, reinforces this point in her comments to the Inquiry. Immigration detention, Harsha Walia maintains, is part of a larger apparatus for ‘creating categories of us and them ... who belongs and who doesn’t,’ and it is further part of processes maintaining

**‘Summary detention... is shocking. It takes the most vulnerable, and suddenly – sometimes without warning, without cause and without knowing when it will end – silos them in silence’**

these distinctions by 'literally removing' certain individuals 'from our communities and from our society.'

*'Structural immobilisation and control of people that we think don't belong, that we think should be cast away, that we think are undeserving ... I think it damages us because it feeds into this idea of who gets to live where and under what conditions and the dehumanisation that we allow ... To justify detention we have to buy into, at some degree, this idea that human beings can even be illegal ... [It] harms us because we internalise this idea that certain people belong and others don't.'*

Detention, in Harsha Walia's words, 'maintains the fundamental inequality about who has a right to life, and under what conditions.' 'There is no them and us,' she concludes. 'Humanity has no borders.'

As one Walking Inquiry participant states, echoing Harsha Walia's comments, 'indefinite detention is damaging our lives and society; dividing us by segregating groups, for little reason, at public expense,' suggesting that it is 'diminishing all.'

To further understand how this is so, we return to the foundational questions of the pernicious nature of the system itself and its equally troubling secrecy. Colin Yeo, an immigration and asylum barrister, read an extract from his book *Welcome to Britain: Fixing Our Broken Immigration System*,<sup>32</sup> to the Walking Inquiry. Yeo invokes the first Shaw Report, commissioned by then Home Secretary Theresa May:<sup>33</sup>

*'...following several cases in which the courts had found that detainees had been subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment. Amongst other things, Shaw found that the mechanisms supposed to protect vulnerable detainees were ineffective and that there was a culture of disbelief amongst healthcare staff.'*

Colin Yeo notes that 'a record 17 migrants died in immigration detention in 2017.' One of them, Carlington Spencer, suffered a stroke 'but was denied

<sup>32</sup> *Welcome to Britain: Fixing Our Broken Immigration System*, Colin Yeo, Biteback Publishing, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> *Review into the Welfare in Detention of Vulnerable Persons: A report to the Home Office by Stephen Shaw*, CM 9186, January 2016. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/490782/52532\\_Shaw\\_Review\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/490782/52532_Shaw_Review_Accessible.pdf)

*potentially life-saving emergency care because detention staff wrongly presumed that he had taken illegal drugs.'* Detained persons are neither believed when it comes to making their cases, nor are they believed once they are in detention and suffering under those harsh conditions.

A government willing to impose such conditions, and to turn a blind eye to their consequences, and a society either wilfully or structurally blind to the fact, is one in deep peril. Colin Yeo's conclusions are telling:

*'To make this system work, the officials at the Home Office who are responsible for decisions to detain or release are kept separate from those whose lives they govern. They are, as academic Mary Bosworth writes, sequestered from the potentially destabilising effects of facing up to those they wish to remove ... The distant decision-makers are made to seem remote, unknowable and ineffable with an almost God-like power over the lives of detainees ... One of Shaw's recommendations ... was that caseworkers making decisions should actually meet those they decide to detain. The recommendation was rejected by the Home Office.'*

## Detention broke my heart

The many diverse voices of the Walking Inquiry – including those who have lived experience of detention and their visitors, supporters, and fellow walkers – provide a chorus of condemnation of the current immigration detention system and its effects on the wider society in the UK. Here are a few of their voices:

- *'Detention is inhuman, immoral and damages lives.'*
- *'It makes us complicit in a deeply damaging system and undermines our common humanity.'*
- *'It brutalises, corrodes, spreads negativity, closes down possibilities and holds us back.'*
- *'It divides us into those who belong, and those who supposedly don't belong, so it makes for a divisive, unequal society.'*
- *'Indefinite detention implies that UK society is comfortable with placing less value on certain people's lives.'*
- *'Detention is a human rights abuse.'*

**'It is nothing less than a violent and brutal assault on a vulnerable person ... and it reflects very badly on us as a society, as a country, as fellow human beings. We should feel ashamed.'**

- 'People running the system become brutalised.'
- 'It is nothing less than a violent and brutal assault on a vulnerable person ... and it reflects very badly on us as a society, as a country, as fellow human beings. We should feel ashamed.'
- 'The whole of society is damaged when support is withdrawn from those with pressing humanitarian needs.'
- 'We cannot call ourselves a moral country if we are willing to treat people seeking sanctuary from harm in such a way that will destroy their lives.'
- 'We throw away so many skills and good people who would enrich our society.'
- 'Detention ... has broken my heart'
- 'Detention will never have any positive impact. Therefore, detention centres should close down.'

For this community, there is no question that indefinite immigration detention must be opposed, and its 'horror absorbed in kindness' (as one participant puts it). Considering the question: *what is our response?* many contributors speak of their determination to keep talking about these issues, keep sharing stories, keep visiting people in detention and keep walking together as acts of solidarity – all ways of demonstrating the possibilities of friendship and welcome.

As Ann, a Visitor, says, 'Look at all the gifts and talents migrants bring to this country. Welcome, celebrate and enjoy differences.' Another supporter adds: 'Our culture is enhanced by being inclusive.' Finally, yet another participant channels the collective voice of this community: 'We refuse to be a part of this dehumanising system.'

A postcard poem sent by CS captures the spirit of this mobile Inquiry into indefinite immigration detention, so we conclude with these words of walking and healing:

*feeling safe, suddenly,  
for the first time in months  
here  
in solidarity  
walking  
breathing  
talking  
step by step, back to life*

### ▶ Watch our Walking Inquiry films

*How does detention damage society?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg (3m:3s). May 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9JJ3cS5Vka>

*How does detention damage society?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Jonathan Ellis (Project Director, Detention Forum) (3m:1s). May 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuzM5rQFUyc>

*How does detention damage society?* A film made for the Walking Inquiry by Stephen Collis and Harsha Walia (writer and activist) (9m:29s). May 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqBjmS1Ur64>





# 10 Conclusion and recommendations

*'I don't want anyone to go through what I went through. Even one hour in detention is too much. End immigration detention.'*

As participants in the Refugee Tales Walking Inquiry we urge attention to the findings of this report and call on policy makers to recognise the human fact that immigration detention is a broken system.

We write as a community that includes many people with lived experience of detention and many with long experience of visiting and supporting those who have been detained. We present the findings of The Walking Inquiry not as researchers or people with a professional interest, but as human beings with first-hand experience of the damage detention does to individual lives, and as people who have witnessed that damage over many years. From this experience, we observe that the UK's policy of immigration detention is driven by a programme of intentional hostility, and that indefinite detention is integral to that hostile approach. In its arbitrary, indefinite, isolating and repetitive nature, depriving individuals of personal agency or even the knowledge of what may happen to them next, detention breaks spirits and traumatises lives.

As we have documented across the many findings presented here, the processes of detention are punitive and cruel at the level of daily practice. In its indefinite nature, detention is a profound shock to those compelled to experience it. The clear measure of that shock is the level of harm and self-harm observed across the UK detention estate, already well evidenced and further documented here.

We firmly believe, because experience tells us, that such cruelty and harm are inevitable results of a detention system driven by a policy of hostility towards those who are detained. We therefore also believe that immigration detention cannot be merely tweaked or reformed. Instead we urge that in light of the manifest abuses at Brook House in the period April to August 2017 – abuses that, as our Walking Inquiry shows, are endemic to the system and process as a whole – that the UK adopt an approach to immigration and asylum that reflects the fundamental principles of human rights.

**We absolutely believe that the UK, like all countries, can and must work towards a future without detention: we therefore call for an end to immigration detention in the UK.**

As urgent first steps towards that future, and in light of the findings presented across this report, we make the following additional recommendations:

- **An immediate 28-day time limit on immigration detention, so that no-one is held indefinitely.**
- **Judicial oversight within 72 hours of every decision to detain someone in immigration detention.**
- **Improvements in the treatment and conditions of people in immigration detention, and in support for people after release from detention.**
- **The right to work for anybody whose case for asylum takes longer than six months.**
- **An approach to asylum grounded not in hostility but in the fundamental principles of human rights.**



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