

Summary of findings of the Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention

by Refugee Tales

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This is a summary of findings from the Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention, initiated by Refugee Tales to coincide with and complement the Public Inquiry¹ into mistreatment at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, Gatwick.

You can see the full Walking Inquiry report, read about our innovative methodology and see the contributions on our website: www.refugeetales.org

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:** 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.

The contributions explore many aspects of immigration detention in the UK, shining a light on its daily realities and complex and enduring impacts – for people who experience detention, but also for their families, friends, people who work in detention centres and our society as a whole.

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

Context

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.'² Indefinite detention is both a breach of human rights and of the rule of law.

In the year to June 2021, the UK detained 24,497 people in immigration detention. Many bodies have called for an end to indefinite immigration detention in the UK, including the British Medical Association, the Bar Council and the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2019. 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.

Most recently, the Brook House Inquiry was told by the Independent Monitoring Board,³ and by Professor Mary Bosworth, Expert to the Inquiry,⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶

Our findings

The Walking Inquiry considered six broad questions:

- 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?

Here are our key findings.

The UK's immigration detention system is a hidden scandal: 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. As one volunteer Visitor notes, it is

quite simply a 'scandal': 'We cannot comprehend how the system does what it does to human beings.'

People held in immigration detention are deeply damaged by the experience: 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.'

Another told us: '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.'

Immigration detention in the UK is for administrative purposes, not criminal justice:

decisions to detain are made by Home Office officials not courts or judges; there is no automatic judicial oversight. Detention is arbitrary, and often people are not told the reason why they are detained. '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 ... 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.' Another contributor 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.

Being in immigration detention feels like being in prison: the buildings are designed like a prison, with locks, bars, wings, landings, nets; the culture and atmosphere are like a prison. Detention in an immigration removal centre is, structurally and experientially, equivalent to criminal incarceration. An individual with lived experience states '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 immigration detention is worse: more isolating, more physically and psychologically damaging, more inhumane.

The indefinite nature of detention is particularly damaging to mental health: testimony of the physical and psychological damage caused by detention often makes the connection with the lack of a time-limit,

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.'* *'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.'* *'You don't even know what your fate is.'*

Immigration detention is brutal, dehumanising and deprives people of agency. Its abuses are systemic: people recount: 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'*); 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'*); limited access to outdoor space and natural light; poor ventilation and lack of fresh air. Beds are so hard and mattresses so thin that sleep is difficult, and painful for some. Contributors spoke of *'counting in cells'* where 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.

The damaging impacts last long after release: qualities that mark the immediate effects of immigration detention in the UK are also the qualities of its long-term impacts, as by its very nature the current system is invested in maintaining hostility and precarity over the long term. Many with lived experience of detention can quickly list its lasting effects: *'depression, low self-esteem, continuous stress, fear, poor health'*. Even after release, 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.'* 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.

For those with lived experience, *'detention never leaves you'* – one person recounts that once they had left detention they *'still felt detained, feeling unable to leave their room for days.'* It felt like they were *'just watching'* their *'life slip past'* when they *'should be planning their future.'* Another, 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.'*

The voices of people who have experienced detention are not heard in our society: 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. One person with lived experience of detention states it plainly: *'the thing the Home Office is most afraid of is the truth.'* The silencing of people during and after detention is systematic: they are separated from family, friends and communities; deprived of phones and cameras; isolated in hidden-away buildings; routinely disbelieved and made to feel perpetually unsafe and uncertain of who they can trust, and even after release know they may be arbitrarily re-detained or summarily moved by the Home Office to another part of the country.

Immigration detention damages our society, as well as damaging individuals who are detained: 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 operates. As one participant puts it, a society which *'turns a blind eye to uncomfortable truths'* is one that is *'bad for all'*. Another suggests that *'How we treat the most vulnerable in our society is a real marker of how civilised, of how decent we are – and I think detention is a stain on that reputation.'*

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: Contributors repeatedly note the need for better mental health support, decent accommodation, help in learning English 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.'* Community-based alternatives to detention are possible, and research has found them to be more humane, more effective and less expensive than detention.

The UK could and should become a place of welcome, friendship and safety: 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. One contributor says *'Look at all the gifts and talents migrants bring to this country. Welcome, celebrate and enjoy differences.'* Another adds *'our culture is enhanced by being inclusive.'* Many Walking Inquiry contributors attest to the value of walking and talking, sharing and listening, within community; grassroots community supporters

offering the welcome that is institutionally absent. '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* ... which led me to know all these kind, generous and very friendly people.'

Conclusions 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.'

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.

Endnotes

- 1 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/>
- 2 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- 3 Brook House Inquiry Closing Statement on Behalf of the Independent Monitoring Board, 29 April 2022. <https://brookhouseinquiry.org.uk/>
- 4 Brook House Inquiry Supplementary Report of Professor Mary Bosworth, 9 February 2022. <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/brookhouse-prod-storage-15trcu6wv3q1/uploads/2022/04/INQ000123-Professor-Bosworth-supplementary-report-9-February-2022.pdf>
- 5 'Serious self-harm incidents surge 2000% in detention centre holding Channel asylum seekers', *The Independent*, 16 November 2020.
- 6 Figures are from the charity INQUEST 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>

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.**

Further information

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. **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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