

Manchester Testimony 3

I'm from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I've decided not to give my name but I would like to give oral evidence.

1) Your experiences of living in immigration detention, including the context and duration of your stay;

I entered the UK on the 31st January 2013. I was accommodated in emergency accommodation in Croydon until 11th February 2013, when I was detained. I was in Yarl's Wood for two months and two weeks. I entered the UK to claim asylum. After my initial interview I was informed by the Home Office that my finger prints were registered in Belgium - where I travelled through to get to the UK - and that I would be detained and removed. I didn't understand what "detention" meant. I knew about prison and jail. When the van arrived to take me I knew that it was just like these things.

We [another detainee] travelled in the van for four hours in the dark. There was one female officer and one male. They told us to keep quiet. We thought they were going to kill us. We reached Yarlswood. They sat us down. Then the stress started there. They [officers] banged the door shut. They had many keys. "Open close, open close" [the doors]. They walked so quickly. A nurse came to interview me at midnight. I was tired and upset and so refused. They searched my bag and took my medication off me. They took my money, all except £5 which they left for me. They took my creams. They took away my photographs, of me my mum and my dad, because they didn't trust that we wouldn't try to make documents with them. Then they took me to my room.

It [Yarlswood] was divided in to four areas. You're not allowed to cross in to another area. The conditions were crowded. And you share with people who have committed crimes - this made me fearful. I only came to see asylum.

2) The conditions in immigration detention, including your ability to access services such as legal advice, healthcare, pastoral support;

There were two of us in the room. There was a lock on the door that you could use from the inside but it was no good, the officers would unlock it from the outside. They [officers] didn't knock. They were always checking on you. I'd be naked from the bathroom - men and women saw my body. The beds were uncomfortable and the one blanket that we were given was thin. You could ask for an extra blanket and the nice officers would give it to you, but the bad one's would take them away.

You have to be in your room a lot. Three times a day they did a "row count" which you had to be in your room for. If someone was missing they'd lock all the doors on everyone. It was very distressing.

I would try to go and be alone because I didn't want people to see me going crazy. But they [officers] call you on the tannoy. You think "maybe it's my lawyer" but it was just because they [officers] want you to report to them. Once a month they'd give you a written report on your behaviour. But, the stress means that you might get angry. They didn't see this. If you were difficult they take you down with the dogs, to Macfish [reference to a lower ground section of the centre, where dogs were used to control detainees].

There are only four options in there 1) you're released 2) you remain in there (I met women who had been detained for two years) 3) you're returned to your country of origin 4) maybe you die in there.

You feel like you're finished.

3) Whether there were appropriate mechanisms to deal with any mental, physical or emotional issues you may have experienced prior to or during your time in detention;

There was a lot of self harm; they [detainees] cut themselves with drinks cans or broken cups. Most of them wanted to kill themselves. Officers reported it [self harm / suicide attempt] when they knew. The manager would send up to three officers to supervise them [detainees] - constant surveillance, even in the toilet.

My roommate was a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. She was very distressed. At one point, she didn't eat, sleep or shower for three days. You weren't allowed to take food to your room - if you didn't go to the dining hall then you missed out and they'd [officers] report you. I used to sneak it [food] from the hall and take it to her in the room.

I went to the Yarl's Wood clinic, but the staff there are bad people – not like the ones you see in Salford, St Mary's. They're animals. I'm a nurse, and I know to be a doctor or a nurse you need to have a heart; to be able to show pity. They're trained to be animals and treat people like they're not human. No care or attention. They can't wait to get you out and see the next person.

There was no real treatment, just 'Panadol' for everything. That's all. The nurse wouldn't let you see the packet that the medication came from. You couldn't even read about what you were taking. They won't let you read the name or the side effects. They are treating people as if they're uneducated. They see us not talking because we don't have the power or dismiss us because we're blacks. But they don't know who we were in our home countries.

The stress of seeing the same people, day-in-day-out was too much. I sometimes asked God to make me blind so to not see people.

I shared with a lady who is now in Birmingham. I was afraid of her and we didn't talk. She'd been in Yarl's Wood a year when I arrived. She couldn't talk to anyone. She was angry and stressed and had depression... When I got out I met someone who was a close friend of hers. She told me she had breast cancer and when they were due to operate the guards took her to the hospital. They argued with the doctor they couldn't leave her alone and had to come into the operating theatre. The doctor argued against this and said they could wait outside. The guards insisted so the doctor told them to take her away and she didn't get her operation...

They think we're going to run away or do something nasty. There's no trust. Imagine someone with cancer who had the chance to have an operation and it was taken away. She once even tried to commit suicide. They just put her on suicide watch... To use the toilet or bath the door has to be open. Whatever you do there's no privacy. Even in the night the officer will still be sitting in your room looking at you... Now she's in Birmingham but she missed out on her operation, and she has to go and sign every month even though she's really ill.

4) Any longer-term impacts of detention on you, your family and/or your wider community;

My lawyer called me one morning and that same day I was released. My head was empty. I was still new to the country. They [Home Office] told me to go to my partner in Manchester. I didn't know anything about who could help me with asylum support. They should tell you that you're not going to be alone [without support]. I felt like a dog they'd shooed away.

Being detained made me feel bad about Britain. My first impression was that everyone is racist. That everyone hates black people. I still feel this.

I still sign at Dallas Court [reporting centre] once a week. I'm afraid every time that I go. When I'm not detained I feel like it's a new year. I sometimes think "who am I only be detained once?" when there are some people I know who have been detained five times or more.

They released me from Yarl's Wood like a dog who isn't wanted anymore. But what is the difference between being released or in Yarl's Wood? I'm like a homeless street woman. I can't go to school, I can't go to work, I can't touch anything... I can surely do something to help people. I can do something to help the country.

I ask myself 'is it because I'm black?'. I start to hate my own skin. It's [being an asylum seeker] like you have Ebola and people think you're going to contaminate everything you touch.

5) Any other information about detention that you would like to share;

I've heard the officers are paid a bonus of £3,000 for successful deportations. This means they are determined to deport you, no matter what. People are beaten or injected if they protest. Then they wake up in their home country. It's better to protest at the airport where people can see... Sometimes the officers take your phone and switch it off so you can't call your solicitor.... Imagine your salary is only small. You will never give up that bonus, so the officer does everything in their power. It's normally just men who escort the women because they're stronger.

I knew a Nigerian in Yarl's Wood who was deported, and we stayed in touch on Whatsapp. When she got home she had to go straight to the hospital. Her arm was broken and so were her ribs.

Another lady I heard of from Uganda died because of the beating they gave her. This was just a week before I entered Yarl's Wood and it made me very afraid. We went to look it up on the internet and it was all there... From Yarl's Wood to the airport she was beaten and she didn't make it home. It's so wicked when you hear on the news about how the president of Uganda speaks about lesbians being killed. She shouldn't have been sent back there.

All the staff, everyone, is trained to be terrible. There was one officer. She's the devil of Yarl's Wood. She sets the tone. All the other staff have to be bad if they're working with her.

6) How far does the current detention system support the needs of vulnerable detainees, including pregnant women, detainees with a disability and young adults?

There were lots of elderly people in detention. There was one elderly lady who had a fall. She used a frame to walk with, but it would take her a long time. She needed an officer to open the lift for her, sometimes they wouldn't come. If she couldn't get to the dinner hall she would go the whole day without eating.

Another lady, who now has her papers, had a stroke. She told me 'I couldn't handle what immigration was doing to me and it gave me a stroke.' She was taken to Yarl's Wood. She's an old woman and was paralyzed down half her body. They had a room for disabled people. There wasn't any specialist nursing care, just officers.

I saw three pregnant women detained.

7) What are the wider consequences of the current immigration detention system, including any financial and/or social implications?

It doesn't make sense, using their gas, eating their food - it's too much [financially]. Why can't they decide [asylum applications] quickly, allow people to work, pay their taxes and look after the poor with this money? It [Britain] is losing out by detaining people...

The Government is paying for everything, sometimes for years. But at the end of it, instead of giving someone papers and allowing them to be useful you are detained... This money could be used for so much else: for cancer treatment, for helping orphans.

I believe they will never close Yarl's Wood because it's a weapon for some of the British people. So if you close it, it means you'll have to love black people and start treating them with respect.

David Cameron talks about the problem but doesn't do anything. It's the lead up to the election... today they're [the main parties] are enemies, but really they're the same. When it comes to putting black people down they're twins. People not born in this country are just numbers to them... After enough years in this country... after they ask you for your Home Office number enough times... you forget your own name.

8) I wish...

I hadn't come to the UK.