



Asylum Welcome Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Detention

1. About Asylum Welcome

1.1 Asylum Welcome is an Oxford-based charity that has been running a visitor group for detainees since Campsfield House, the UK's first Immigration Removal Centre, opened in 1993, holding 216 detainees. Over 30 volunteers regularly visit detainees, some have been visiting for over 20 years. The visitors have considerable experience of speaking to detainees, and have seen Campsfield managed by a number of different providers. Asylum Welcome employs a member of staff to co-ordinate both the activities of the visitors and the activities of the office-based volunteers who provide telephone advice and practical assistance to detainees. Asylum Welcome's submission to the inquiry is based on the pooled knowledge and long-term experience of staff, office-based volunteers and volunteer visitors, and includes quotes from recent email correspondence and telephone interviews with visitors.

"Nearly everyone I met suffered from their time in detention. Many were uncertain and troubled, not knowing where they would be the next day or the next year, not knowing whether they would see loved ones again. Most everyone showed signs of depression, including lack of motivation and little desire to get up in the morning. Most earnestly prayed to the god they worshiped." Testimony of an Asylum Welcome visitor

2. Recommendations to the Home Office

Key recommendations:

1. Only use detention as a last resort. Be transparent in the reasons given for detaining an individual. End indefinite detention so that in every case detention is only for a fixed time, which should be as short as possible, without exception.
2. Improve initial screening procedures to consistently identify and support detainees with health problems or who are otherwise vulnerable, and detainees who are refused asylum seekers with a fear of return who are continuing to make representations about their case. Ensure a speedy and effective assessment of HC35 claims for detainees who

are victims of torture or who it is otherwise prohibited to detain, and facilitate their route out of detention as soon as possible.

3. Do not expand Campsfield. If expansion is planned, do not implement this until underlying shortcomings (as described in this paper) are addressed. Seek a means of safeguarding Asylum Welcome's visiting service should the planned expansion go ahead.

Additional recommendations:

1. Address pressures caused by MITIE staff being stretched. Improving staffing levels so that staff members have time to visit detainees in their rooms, and so that detainees feel safe if and when conflicts occur.
2. Ensure that Home Office staff meet at least the same standards of care and professionalism as MITIE staff.
3. Reduce the number of detainees placed in each bedroom.
4. Improve the amount of outdoor recreational space available, the facilities in that space, and the amount of time that detainees can access the space.
5. Introduce smoother and more consistent procedures for detainees to keep their possessions with them or to be promptly reunited with them.
6. Employ multi-lingual staff who speak the same languages as detainees and improve the quality of interpreting services used.
7. Address the numerous complaints raised about the inadequate healthcare provision, so that a more reasonable level of care is provided.
8. Positively encourage communication with the outside world, for example by providing mobile phones that work effectively and providing a reasonable level of phone credit to enable detainees to contact lawyers and family.
9. More effectively facilitate access to good legal advice. Enable detainees to see lawyers speedily and monitor the quality and accessibility of legal advice provided.
10. Facilitate the provision of services by external organizations, including charities, and provide funding to enable those services to continue.
11. Significantly reduce the number of occasions on which detainees are transferred between detention centres.

12. Reinstate access to the assisted voluntary return programme so that detainees can choose to return home safely and in dignity.
13. Ensure that detainees receive support from appropriately trained persons to enable them to complete bail applications.
14. Make arrangements for bail hearings for Campsfield detainees to be heard at a court in Oxford, so that detainees can attend in person.
15. If detainees are released, make prompt arrangements to reinstate the right to work and the provision of accommodation and return to them any confiscated money or other items that are legally theirs.

3. Asylum Welcome's perspective on detention at Campsfield Immigration Removal Centre

3.1 Life inside Campsfield

3.1.1 The running of Campsfield House is currently contracted out to the private company MITIE. In general, visitors and detainees describe MITIE staff as friendly, helpful, well-trained, polite and caring. This is an improvement on the staff of some previous contractors and the approach of the MITIE management appears to have had a positive impact on the atmosphere of the centre.

3.1.2 MITIE staff are busy, however, and some visitors perceive them to be over-stretched. This impacts on their relationship with the detainees: "Many detainees sit all day in their rooms depressed and no-one seeks them out. There have been some good staff at Campsfield and this can make an enormous difference. For example I remember there was a Swedish woman working there who was very sympathetic and used to go and see the detainees in their cells. This was enormously appreciated by the detainees."

3.1.3 Detainees report to visitors that Home Office staff at Campsfield are less easy to communicate with compared to MITIE staff. One aspect of this is the perception that Home Office staff enforce certain rules without always being able to explain to the detainee what is the purpose or legal basis of that rule.

3.1.4 The average length of detention in Campsfield is currently approximately 28 days. This is a reduction from the average of a few years ago, but belies a considerable range of timeframes. Asylum Welcome has supported detainees who are in Campsfield for just a few days as well as those detained many months or even years. Detention decisions should honour policy commitments to detain people for the minimum time possible.

3.1.5 One challenge raised by the shorter stay of some detainees, is that there is a higher proportion of detainees in Campsfield who are new to the centre, disoriented and unsure of who to turn to for help. This makes it even more important that there are sufficient staff and support services available.

3.1.6 Detainees report that conflicts between individual detainees or groups of detainees are not unusual, and the situation is not helped by the pressures on staffing levels. Some detainees speak of not feeling safe.

3.1.7 In recent months the Home Office has significantly increased the maximum number of people held in Campsfield. This has been achieved by increasing the number of beds rather than any new build, meaning that bedrooms are more crowded – most contain 4 beds in bunks. This adds to tensions and stress since it is cramped and noisy; it makes sleeping difficult and privacy impossible, contributing to people's stress.

3.1.8 Detainees appreciate access to some recreational facilities and the opportunity to work within Campsfield, but outdoor recreational space is limited, especially considering the numbers of detainees. Home Office plans to expand the centre involve building on the outdoor space that exists. Detainees complain that there is not enough training or education on offer and some comment that permission to work in the kitchen can be withheld arbitrarily and pays far less than the minimum wage.

3.1.9 People often arrive at Campsfield without their possessions, so they lack practical essentials, personal mementoes and crucially, the paperwork relating to their case for remaining in the U.K. Ensuring that detainees retain or are reunited with their possessions appears to be unnecessarily difficult. Asylum Welcome is often asked to help arrange and pay (from its own charitable funds) for transportation of possessions from previous lodgings but cannot afford to do so. It is unclear to us whose responsibility it is to resolve this common problem.

3.1.10 The countries of origin of Campsfield detainees are within a limited range – the majority come from places such as China, Afghanistan and the Indian sub-continent. Language barriers are a problem and staff often rely on other detainees to act as informal interpreters, which raises issues around confidentiality. A telephone interpretation line is sometimes used but the quality of the interpreting tends to be criticized. Given that the range of languages used by detainees is limited, more could be done to ensure multi-lingual staff or good quality interpretation.

3.1.11 The greatest concern expressed by visitors is the quality of healthcare provided. Every visitor who provided information for this submission raised complaints about healthcare services in Campsfield. The points raised are as follows:

- weaknesses in the initial screening procedure so that detainees with health problems or who are otherwise vulnerable, and torture sufferers, are not identified
- detainees feeling that they are not believed if they say they have health problems

- detainees who state they have serious medical conditions receiving no treatment or not being given their medication on time
- detainees being put on waiting lists for services or assessments and then being transferred or removed before receiving the appropriate treatment
- failure to provide transport to external medical appointments so those appointments are missed
- no facility for external organisations to make direct contact with the health centre by fax or email
- insufficient access to counselling and other mental health provision for those suffering from anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress
- and several people mentioned distribution of paracetamol as a panacea even in cases where detainees have clear mental health needs

3.1.12 One of the most serious criticisms raised about the health service is the approach to those detainees who claim to be victims of torture. - HC35 forms (presenting evidence that a person has been tortured or for other medical reasons should not be in detention) are submitted by Campsfield's health service to the Home Office, but we have gained the impression that the health service do not follow up on the results of their submissions to request that the Home Office provides a timely response and a proper assessment of the evidence submitted.

3.1.13 Asylum Welcome is grateful for a positive working relationship with the staff of the Campsfield Welfare office. It is clear, however, that the welfare office is limited in what it can provide for detainees and there are unmet needs.

3.2 Communicating with the outside world

3.2.1 Visitors give a clear picture of the isolation of detainees: "There is very little opportunity for detainees to communicate with the outside world." Another said: "In Campsfield there is no system, scheme to facilitate their interaction with the outside world." This contributes to the detainees' feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness.

3.2.2 It is essential that detainees have access to good quality and timely legal advice, however this is often problematic. Detainees who already have lawyers often complain that they cannot get a response from their lawyer. Although legal aid immigration firms visit detainees on a rota system at Campsfield, it seems to be increasingly difficult for detainees to see a lawyer promptly. Waiting times of 2-3 weeks mean some detainees who have requested an appointment are unable to see a lawyer before their removal date. Detainees have been told they may only see one lawyer on the rota – so if a detainee is not happy with the service or if the lawyer does not agree to take on their case it is difficult to access an alternative.

3.2.3 Inability to secure the services of a legal advisor can mean that detainees who have grounds for protection or other rights to remain in the UK are unable to exercise

these rights. Visitors report that detainees who are isolated from legal advisors turn to each other for advice, which risks the circulation of misinformation about their rights. There is also evidence that well-intentioned staff at Campsfield are providing erroneous legal advice: “One client had recently been given Judicial Review forms by Welfare and told by them he needed to fill them in when this wasn't the correct action at that stage of his case - he should be making a claim for Leave to Remain.”

3.2.4 Mobile phones are a lifeline for detainees. On arrival at Campsfield, people are given mobile phones but in order to use them detainees need funds for phone credit. Asylum Welcome supports detainees by funding the Welfare Office to put credit on the phones of detainees and without this support some detainees would be unable to make phone calls. Concern about their ability to make calls to family or legal advisors is a significant source of anxiety for detainees. In addition, volunteers working in the Asylum Welcome office who are in regular phone contact with detainees report extreme difficulty in speaking to detainees on mobile phones – there appear to be problems with network coverage/reception.

3.2.5 Detainees also raise concerns about internet access and restrictions on the use of fax machines. Both are essential for detainees to obtain and send documents and evidence to legal advisors, as well as to maintain contact with friends and families.

3.2.6 Volunteers in the Asylum Welcome office frequently takes phone calls from distressed relatives of detainees, especially ones who are in other parts of the U.K. Visitors hear the detainees perspective on this separation: “Visiting by family and friend is often difficult due to geographical or financial constraints.” Another said: “It is important that families are helped to visit. It is vital to keep up family relationships – otherwise it is isolating for both sides, and that is especially unfair on the partner, who may have every right to be in the UK.” Asylum Welcome has sometimes used its funds to buy train tickets for relatives to visit detainees in Campsfield, but this is not something we can afford to do regularly.

3.2.7 Asylum Welcome is concerned about the impact of reduced funding for voluntary organizations on their ability to make contact with and provide services to detainees. In the last year, two organisations have stopped providing Campsfield detainees with essential services: the charity Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) has closed its Oxford office, meaning that many detainees have to apply for bail alone, and the charity Refugee Action no longer receives Home Office funding to help detainees to access the Assisted Voluntary Return programme, so their service in Campsfield has ended.

3.2.8 It is notable that to date Asylum Welcome has received no comments from detainees or visitors about the work of members of the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB). IMB members are supposed to be a frequent presence in Campsfield and approachable for detainees who wish to raise concerns.

3.2.9 Visitors have no complaints about their own experiences in Campsfield. One said: “There are more relaxed arrangements for visiting compared to years ago.” There is a concern about whether enough is done to let detainees know about the visiting service. Visitors stress the importance of the visiting service. For example in the comment: “Visitors can quickly become the person who knows the detainees better than anyone else.” The commitment and empathy of visitors are remarkable, and underline the important contribution that the service makes to the welfare of detainees: “I have been visiting for 20 years. The detainees are all somebody’s children, I just think ‘it could be my son’ if this happened to him, who would visit him?”

3.3 Leaving Campsfield

3.3.1 The indefinite time frame of detention is one of the most disturbing aspects of detention, with detainees often unfavourably comparing detention to prison. People enter Campsfield with no idea of when they will leave. Asylum Welcome visitors said: “Needless to say that detainees find indefinite periods of detention unfair and it equates, to some extent, to a form of cruel treatment. The Home Office exercises a discretionary power to detain in a wide range of circumstances which in essence is never explained or understood by detainees. Several detainees have complained that it is very difficult to cope with the uncertainty of the length of their detention. This is coupled with the uncertainty of the length and result of their immigration case.” Another said: “What is still worrying is detention for inexplicable reasons and detention for indeterminate lengths of time. It is an arbitrary system causing anguish and mental stress.”

3.3.2 A high proportion of detainees seen by Asylum Welcome have been transferred to Campsfield from another detention centre, or are transferred to another centre shortly after arrival at Campsfield. The purpose of these frequent transfers is unclear and they have detrimental impacts on detainees and their families, including maintaining links with legal representatives: “Being moved around makes it harder for family and friends to visit. There is no need to inconvenience people in this way.”

3.3.3 Sometimes planned transfers result in detainees being returned to Campsfield: “A number of detainees have told me they do not understand why they are taken from Campsfield, driven around the UK for a period of 48 hours and then returned to Campsfield.”

3.3.4 Detainees report being pressured to agree to return to their country of origin. Visitors raised concerns about: “Pressure to co-operate with removal procedures against client's wishes.”

3.3.5 Detainees are often removed from the UK with no information, support, possessions or money. They may arrive at an airport hundreds of miles from their home town. Asylum Welcome is sometimes asked by the Campsfield Welfare Office to give

funds to people facing removal to pay for a train ticket in their own country. Asylum Welcome is a small charity and cannot afford to meet this need. It is unclear what responsibility the Home Office has to prepare people for removal. This problem seems to have worsened since the ending of detainees' access to the Assisted Voluntary Return programme, which provides some financial assistance on return. Asylum Welcome believes access to this service should be reinstated.

3.3.6 Detainees can apply for bail, but doing so has become more difficult, as there is less access to expert help since the local office of the charity Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) has closed. Our visitors find that detainees are having to complete bail forms themselves or even that: "One client had had his Bail Application filled in by one of the welfare staff. This seems inappropriate and meant he had not seen a solicitor." While the helpful attitude of the welfare staff is appreciated, they are not trained to complete such forms.

3.3.7 Logistical difficulties can arise because Campsfield bail hearings are held at Newport. Detainees attend their bail hearings via video link, so they cannot speak directly to their lawyers and they are dehumanized, making a sympathetic hearing less likely. Asylum Welcome is contacted by relatives struggling to attend hearings in order to stand bail, as a result of the cost of peak time travel (they must be at the hearing centre before 10am), or due to work or school commitments. A visitor commented: "It causes unnecessary difficulties that bail hearings are held in Newport when there is a court in this area that could handle them."

3.3.8 Detainees who are released can struggle to readjust to life in the community. It is common for those who previously had been granted the right to work to have had this right removed by the Home Office, and to have lost their accommodation. It can also be a challenge getting staff to return people's possessions or money: "Several detainees have complained that on release they are not returned the currency they had in their possession at the time that they were detained by the Police. They are told that the Police confiscate these possessions and justify not returning these at the time of the detainee's release or removal as these monies are illicit gains. There is no inquiry as to the source of these monies."

3.4 The human impact

3.4.1 Detention has a significant and lasting impact on people's wellbeing, even in a relatively well-managed centre such as Campsfield. Key factors are the uncertainty of how long detention will last and what will happen next; restricted access to essential services and to the outside world; the feeling of being treated as a criminal when you have committed no crime; and little support to deal with feelings of stress and depression. "Nearly everyone I met suffered from their time in detention. Many were uncertain and troubled, not knowing where they would be the next day or the next year, not knowing whether they would see loved ones again. Most everyone showed

signs of depression, including lack of motivation and little desire to get up in the morning. Most earnestly prayed to the god they worshiped.”

3.5 Comments about the proposed expansion plans for Campsfield

3.5.1 The Home Office has signalled its intention to more than double the size of Campsfield and the planning application will be submitted soon. Asylum Welcome is very concerned because it does not believe that the case has been made to justify any expansion in the detention estate. Asylum Welcome also believes that the concerns set out in this submission – for example that staff are over-stretched; there is not enough recreational space; there are delays in getting an appointment with a lawyer and that the health service is inadequate – mean that it would be detrimental to the welfare of detainees for any increase in numbers to take place before underlying problems are resolved: “I would raise concerns about the proposed more than doubling of the number of detainees. There isn’t the space nor facilities for such numbers. And I imagine the playing fields will be sacrificed for new build, which would be a disaster too. The increase will change the whole nature of the place. The reason that Campsfield has tended to be seen as one of the ‘better’ IRCs is precisely due to the smaller size of the place.”

3.5.2 Apart from the wider concerns about the impact of an expanded centre on the welfare of detainees, Asylum Welfare is concerned about the impact on its ability to visit detainees. Asylum Welcome runs its visitor service with a part-time staff post and a group of volunteers. Offering a service to over 200 detainees is a struggle, offering a service to 600 will be impossible at our current level of funding. As such, it is likely that the expanded centre will lose the compassion, the contact with the outside world, and the practical tasks undertaken for detainees, which our service offers.

Asylum Welcome
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Asylum Welcome

working with refugees and asylum seekers

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