

Submission of Evidence to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Immigration Detention.

1. My name is Bernard Thurlow. I am a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) with responsibility for co-ordinating work with Asylum Seekers in the R.C. Diocese of Leeds. I am also Chair of Trustees of St. Monica's Housing, a Company set up four years ago by the SVP, in partnership with Leeds Justice and Peace.

2. St. Monica's provides free accommodation and food for eight female, destitute asylum seekers in two properties leased from Catholic Care in the Leeds Diocese. Since we opened in 2010 we have had 32 women, mostly from African countries, living in our two houses. Of those 32 residents three have had direct experience of detention.

3. Whenever someone is detained the atmosphere in the house changes dramatically. It is the news that everyone fears and the stress levels rocket. Most detentions occur when the person goes to sign on at the Immigration Centre in Leeds. Consequently, when the date to sign approaches you can see and feel the tension within the residents.

4. To make it worse, all correspondence from the Centre relating to signing has the words " you are liable to be detained " printed at the top of the page. This is one of the methods used by the Immigration Service to frighten asylum seekers. Another common method is to threaten to detain a person by telling them they should go back to their own country or be removed forcibly.

5. This threat is used constantly to frighten and intimidate asylum seekers even if they have an ongoing case. One resident described this drip, drip of stress as a form of mental torture that wears you down eventually.

6. About 3 years ago a case worker at Pafras, a Drop in Centre for refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds, published a piece of research which showed high levels of anxiety and depression among those using the Centre with some of them developing serious mental health problems needing hospital treatment.

7. This is confirmed by an organization called Solace, in Leeds, which has a team of well qualified counsellors and therapists offering treatment to asylum seekers who have been traumatized by torture and ill treatment in their own countries and in Detention Centres in the UK.

8. One of the worst cases I have experienced concerned Rose, a kidney transplant patient who was a resident at St Monica's from January 2012 until March 2013. She was detained three times and was subjected to cruel and degrading treatment in transit to Yarls Wood and in Colnbrooke Detention Centre.

9. The SVP, alongside her friends and parishioners from her Church, fought for four years to stop Rose from being returned to Nigeria where she would never be able to afford the medication to keep her alive. Finally in September 2013 she won her case at the High Court in London.

10. Rose has submitted her own evidence to the Inquiry. She sums up her feelings about detention as follows : " Detention made me suffer from mental health problems, depression, anxiety, fear, insomnia and mental torture. Detention does more harm than good to the detainees."

11. I have been working with asylum seekers in Leeds for almost ten years. Detention is a crude and cruel way of treating those who arrive in our country, often fleeing from violence and/or persecution. They come to exercise their legal right to ask for asylum and end up being treated as criminals.

12. We have over five hundred Members of Parliament who have the power to influence the way we treat asylum seekers. Most of them are good and decent men and women, and yet they continue to pass cruel and draconian laws that subject thousands of their fellow human beings to a life where they are less than human, despised and abandoned.

13. Until our law makers stop being obsessed with seeing immigrants as vote losers or winners, nothing will change. Maybe if they followed their consciences and injected some humanity into their thinking, then things might change.

Bernard Thurlow

29 September 2014