

Parliamentary inquiry into the use of immigration detention in the UK

1. I have been a visitor to the **Immigration Removal Centres at Gatwick** for nearly 19 years under the guidance of **Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group**. This has meant that I have made weekly visits to a single detainee at a time over those 19 years.
2. *What are your views on the current conditions within UK immigration detention centres, including detainees' access to advice and services?*

I think that the access to **legal help** is poor. I believe that many of those who are trying to fulfil their remit to provide such advice are simply overwhelmed by the numbers of cases that they are expected to take on, with a consequent inability to provide timely and useful advice. Detainees, I have visited, appear to have a reasonable case but the lack of an active legal representative means they have been removed from the UK.

I have visited detainees who even to my lay eyes were plainly mentally unstable. (This has on occasion been corroborated by the visits staff at the centre). However, access to appropriate **mental health** services took too long and their condition deteriorated in detention. (It is well documented that detention is detrimental to mental health.)
3. *There is currently no time limit on immigration detention – in your view what are the impacts (if any) of this?*

The lack of a **time limit** to detention is a source of constant concern to every single detainee I have ever visited. Some who have served a prison sentence prior to being detained find it particularly difficult and inexplicable. Its effect is injurious to mental health and has the further result of institutionalising detainees, sucking hope from them and adjusting their belief in our system of justice.
4. *What are the impacts of immigration detention on individuals, family and social networks, and wider communities?*

Detention isolates and, I believe, causes **breakdown in many relationships**. Detainees have told me that their partners and friends are unwilling to keep in contact through visiting because they fear authority, even when their own status is secure, and also because the expense of travelling to Gatwick from further, outer suburbs of London or from other cities is too much for those on limited incomes. (The free transport service from Gatwick airport is a good but very small step in helping resolve this.) Some detainees are ashamed of their detention as if they were serving a punishment sentence and are reluctant to let others visit. Others again, have very few contacts in this country and as a result are severely isolated in detention.
5. *Are the current arrangements for authorizing detention appropriate?*

Detention is often seen as **arbitrary** to those detained and I have seen, on a number of occasions, a long sequence of monthly report using the phrase “shortly” to indicate how soon the detainee will be removed. Some caseworkers do not write enough on files to justify their decision to detain and this fuels the belief that they are fulfilling a quota. I have visited detainees who have been released on bail by the court only to be re-detained within two or three weeks on the grounds that they are to be removed and then remained at the centre for further months. It is reasonable to surmise that staff at UK Visas and Immigration are overwhelmed by the number of cases they have before them.

John Barrett, Reigate (These opinions are my own and may not reflect the views of GDWG.)

A visitor with **Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group** which is a registered charity that provides emotional and practical support, through its volunteer visitors, to asylum seekers and immigration detainees held at Tinsley House and Brook House removal centres, near Gatwick Airport.

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