



Music In Detention

Submission to the APPG on Refugees/APPG on Migration Inquiry into the use of Immigration Detention

September 2014

Music In Detention (MID) is a small independent charity that has been organising participatory music workshops in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) for nine years. MID has also pioneered the use of music-making to connect detainees to excluded groups in communities close to Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), enabling them to create and exchange music and lyrics with each other, and build mutual understanding.

For further information contact:

John Speyer, Director

Music In Detention, Kings Place Music Base, 90 York Way, London, N1 9AG

Tel: 020 7014 2811 | Mob: 07828 065624

john@musicindetention.org.uk | www.musicindetention.org.uk

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Music In Detention delivers participatory music activities with immigration detainees in IRCs and with excluded groups in the surrounding communities. It aims to improve detainees' wellbeing and develop empathy and understanding in the community.
- 1.2 MID considers that detention is psychologically very damaging and arduous, mainly for systemic reasons. It takes great resilience and inner strength to withstand it.
- 1.3 Activity and education provision varies considerably between IRCs. MID considers that priority should be given to ensuring high quality, flexible and varied provision across the system, which addresses not just skills needs but also the intrinsic psychological effects of detention.
- 1.4 The lack of a time limit on detention increases the uncertainty and the stress of detainees generally. Those held for long periods find detention increasingly difficult to tolerate and have particular needs which may not be met.
- 1.5 The practice of immigration detention works against the development of good social cohesion. The system should be more open to engaging the community, and more nuanced public discourse on immigration is needed.

2 About Music In Detention

- 2.1 Since 2005 Music in Detention (MID) has run participatory music-making workshops for immigration detainees. Experienced and skilled musicians facilitate intensive sessions with detainees, helping them create music together. Since 2007 MID has also pioneered the use of music-making to connect detainees to excluded groups in communities close to Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs), enabling them to co-create and exchange music and lyrics with each other, and build empathy and mutual understanding.
- 2.2 MID currently delivers regular music activities at Yarl's Wood, Haslar, Harmondsworth and Campsfield House IRCs, and in the communities surrounding these centres. In the past there were also regular programmes at Dover and Colnbrook, and occasional projects at Brook House, Tinsley House, Lindholme, Oakington and Dungavel.
- 2.3 In the last three years MID has delivered nearly 350 music workshops in IRCs and worked with over 6000 detainees.
- 2.4 Independent evaluations of MID's short but intensive projects with detainees "facilitated the development of supportive relationships, encouraged the use of strategies for improved emotion regulation and reconnected participants with a more positive view of themselves". Putting them at the centre of the work helps their voices to be heard and shows them they are worthy of respect. Detainees become more resilient against the despair so widespread in detention. Excluded local groups find common cause with another stigmatised group and consider afresh common assumptions and fears about immigration.
- 2.5 MID is working to devolve the management of each of its local programmes to people and organisations who live and work in the area and know the patch, so as

to link MID's work more effectively to other community activities, get more local musicians and volunteers involved, increase the range and volume of music opportunities for detainees and extend the connections between detainees and local people. These partnerships also draw local organisations and service providers into working relationships with IRCs and IRC staff.

- 2.6 MID's Ethics Framework sets out its position on immigration detention as "one of committed neutrality. MID takes a neutral operational stance in relation to the detention system. Its values place detainees, and promoting their wellbeing, at the centre of all its work."
- 2.7 Accordingly MID does not engage directly in debates or lobbying activities on detention policy. It operates at the human level, working to challenge common assumptions about immigration by building empathy for detainees, the most marginalised migrants of all, among groups widely assumed to be hostile to them. MID aims to work with others towards the long-range aim of changing the climate of public opinion. Its long term vision is "a society which treats migrants with dignity and humanity, making detention obsolete."
- 2.8 In 2013 MID was awarded a Special Commendation in the Royal Society for Public Health Arts and Health Awards, which in that year focused on work to improve the health and wellbeing of people in custodial and secure settings. The award citation highlighted MID's innovative, high quality work with immigration detainees and also with local communities, and praised MID's commitment to working 'with' rather than 'for' its participants.
- 2.9 As the above outline demonstrates, MID's knowledge and understanding of immigration detention derive from its experience of providing services in IRCs, its contact with IRC managers and staff, and above all its close engagement with detainees.
- 2.10 This submission therefore concentrates on those areas on which MID is able to comment from its own experience.

3 Impacts of immigration detention on individuals

- 3.1 MID was created to help detainees cope with the experience of detention. Its creative and evaluation activities repeatedly confirm the stress caused by the uncertainty and arbitrariness of being detained.
- 3.2 Music is an expressive medium through which MID engages directly with detainees' thoughts and emotions. MID has a close understanding of how detention affects individual detainees. Its music activities are a response to the psychological environment of detention.
- 3.3 MID considers that immigration detention is psychologically arduous for the following reasons:
 - Insecurity: detainees know neither the duration of their detention nor their subsequent fate. Their present and future are continuously uncertain. Life is on hold.

- Fear and shame: these are also pervasive, for example shame at being unable support families and children, fear for one's physical safety or life chances following removal.
- Arbitrariness: detainees resent being "in prison" as a result of executive decision rather than court process, when they have committed no crimes or have served their time for them.

- 3.4 The contrast with prison is instructive. Prison embodies the concept of action and consequence. Most prisoners arguably know why they are in prison, and when they will get out. In addition the policy of reducing reoffending makes their own development (eg in skills or agency) relevant to the system and can provide purpose and direction. In detention the policy driver is removal, the key concept foreignness. Time is for waiting. It's about where people are from, not in essence what they have done. It is a profound challenge to identity and sense of self.
- 3.5 MID's experience is confirmed by numerous HMIP reports¹. We have heard senior HMIP officials speak of IRCs as "places of despair" and of individuals, encountered in prison and then detention inspections, who had "gone to pieces" in detention.
- 3.6 Research studies² also confirm that detention is psychologically difficult and often causes severe mental health problems. Particularly telling is the finding³ that 83% of detainees suffered depression and 22% had considered suicide.
- 3.7 These negative impacts evidently relate to the detention system as a whole, not to conditions in individual IRCs. In MID's experience it is the system which dominates detainees' responses to their situation.
- 3.8 PhD research into the psychological impact of MID's work with detainees⁴ included the following discussion of its context:

Participants were keen to talk about their experiences of detention. They described a stressful environment that was extremely difficult to tolerate. What was prominent in these discussions was dissatisfaction about the route by which they had found themselves in their current situation. There was a sense of injustice at not having committed a crime or having already served their sentence, but nonetheless finding themselves detained.

This place lots of stress, lots of people have much problem. People think about your country, your family, lots of things. Because the people don't think about the good situation, just bad bad bad situation. Because people meant to be in this place just for immigration. They didn't anything. They said this come for too much stress for your heart when you didn't anything wrong, and I'm in prison because I didn't do anything wrong, just for illegal [immigration].

¹ Random examples: Colnbrook Feb 2013, p5; Yarl's Wood Jun 2013, p5.

² Robjant, Hassan and Katona, *Mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers: systematic review*, British Journal of Psychiatry (2009).

³ Bosworth & Kellezi, *Quality of Life in Detention*, Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, 2012

⁴ James Underhill, *The Psychological Impact of Music Workshops on Immigration Detainees*, D.Clin.Psy Thesis, University College London.

Participants equated detention with prison, despite acknowledging that it was intended to be something different. They reasoned that the restrictions imposed upon them, which they perceived as excessive, justified this analogy.

You know we are not in jail? This is supposed to be something else. But the officers they behave in the same way, like we are in jail: we have to get locked up at a certain time... and that's not right.

Participants often remarked on the uncertainty of their situation. They were mistrustful of the Home Office and unclear as to its decision-making process. They said that this created a sense of threat of deportation that was a constant. Many had stories about fellow detainees whose cases had dramatically and unexpectedly changed for the better or worse: they departed the IRC abruptly, their futures unclear. As a consequence, participants felt that they were being dehumanised: they were regarded not as human, but as numbers for whom the immigration authorities had little regard.

4 Conditions within detention centres, including access to services

- 4.1 According to Detention Centre Rules, “All detained persons shall be provided with an opportunity to participate in activities to meet, as far as possible, their recreational and intellectual needs and the relief of boredom”. All IRCs provide activity programmes.
- 4.2 However MID’s experience indicates that the range, volume and quality of this provision varies considerably. MID has visited all of the UK’s IRCs in the course of its work, and has seen examples of accredited FE provision, vocational training and creative arts, as well as programmes mainly consisting of leisure activities, with only a small quantity of low-level skills training.
- 4.3 MID’s experience also suggests there has been some debate within the detention system about the justification or need for purposeful activity. One view we have encountered is that impending removal makes the development of individual potential unnecessary. The design of Brook House IRC with hardly any activity space (it was difficult to find anywhere to run a music activity there) appears to reflect such a view. A contrasting view, which MID supports, is that a decent regime takes the needs of detainees seriously in their own right, and not just for the sake of order and control.
- 4.4 Amongst the wealth of positive feedback to MID from detainees and IRC staff, one recurring theme is the value of activity which does more than pass the time. Facilities such as television, the gym, pool table and internet are of course useful, but MID’s workshops engage the individual more fully and lift the atmosphere, as these examples of feedback from detainees illustrate:

People go mental here because they have nothing to do. Doing music stops your brain being stuck. It's a big deal in your head.

Music is more important than shop, internet, gym. After food and air and drink, is music next. Music is the food of the soul.

Music removes all your stress, you forget about everything. We have the internet and the library but this is totally different from a normal day.

We are just frustrated here, you know. Today we forgot, at this moment with the music we forgot all. Sometimes it is very hard.

- 4.5 MID considers that all IRCs should provide plentiful, purposeful activities which help detainees think beyond their problems, express themselves, develop skills, notice and develop their strengths, imagine a better future, build relationships with each other and interact positively with IRC staff.
- 4.6 MID acknowledges the challenges involved in providing activity and education programmes for a largely transient and very heterogenous population. Accredited courses, for example, work for some detainees but not all. This is not a request to replicate prison programmes in IRCs. As MID's work shows, creative activity which builds resilience and agency can play a valuable role alongside more traditional education provision. What is needed is high quality, flexible and varied provision which addresses not just skills needs but also the intrinsic psychological effects of detention.
- 4.7 The variation between activity and education provision in different IRCs suggests that the contractual requirements set by the Home Office leave IRCs considerable room for manoeuvre. MID suggests that a more demanding service specification, not dictating content but focused on impacts and quality, together with a firm commitment to activity and education programmes which engage detainees intellectually, creatively, practically and emotionally, would help improve outcomes in this area.

5 No time limit on immigration detention

- 5.1 As outlined at 3.3, insecurity and uncertainty are defining features of detention. Although relatively small numbers of people are detained for over a year, the fact that there is no time limit contributes to the stress and anxiety experienced by detainees generally. MID considers that detention's indeterminate term is a significant factor in the psychological ordeal of immigration detention. Each day can be the day a detainee is released, or removed, or just another day in detention, with no end in sight.
- 5.2 Participants in music activities have included a number of people in detention for over a year. MID's experience is that long periods spent in detention become increasingly difficult to tolerate. As one detainee said, "It's hard to stay positive in a negative environment", and the longer one stays in it, the harder it gets. Depression becomes more common.⁵ In addition these cases are often ones which for one reason or another have ground to a halt, thus undermining hope for any outcome at all, let alone one which would be positive for the individual. The question arises, how would someone in this position have confidence that he or she would ever emerge from detention?
- 5.3 People undergoing long term detention have different needs to those held for short periods. A positive focus is all the more needed, to prevent psychological

⁵ This is confirmed by Bosworth & Kellezi (2012), p24.

disintegration and use the time which stretches ahead productively. MID's impression is that IRCs find it difficult to meet such needs because they are geared to the more transient pattern to which the majority conform.

- 5.4 In addition, it seems that detainees are routinely moved between IRCs. For example, one detainee told us he had been in five IRCs in a period of 18 months. In these circumstances relationships which more resilient or fortunate detainees may succeed in building up during extended periods in one IRC are not allowed to offset the stress of long term indefinite detention.

6 Wider consequences, including social implications

- 6.1 MID works not just in IRCs but in the surrounding communities. IRCs, like other closed institutions, are generally "out of sight and out of mind". MID helps local people to think and learn about these establishments, usually for the first time, and builds supportive relationships between detainees and excluded groups in the local community. This benefits detainees (*"We put them on the right path...what we can do for someone else...I did something good to help someone out there."*) It is also widely recognised that it is healthy to open up a closed institution.
- 6.2 Social cohesion is an issue in all the communities MID works in. There are tensions between new migrant communities and white British and/or settled migrant communities, elements of Islamophobia, and broader, more abstract fears about immigration in general. MID's work is welcomed by schools, local authorities and service providers because it provides a practical, positive way to help their students and service users reflect on these delicate and highly charged issues.
- 6.3 MID's community projects repeatedly demonstrate the capacity for empathy and understanding among disadvantaged groups who are widely assumed to be hostile to migrants. By working at the human level MID can enable detainees and excluded groups to support each other, and involve IRCs in work which supports both detainees and community cohesion.
- 6.4 Our experience of the willingness of so many disparate groups to engage with detainees, hear them and respond to them creatively and sympathetically leads us to question the real public mandate for the ways in which detention is currently used. What we have learned is that people who have a chance to "meet" detainees through their music often then ask why they are detained and are not necessarily satisfied with the answers. We wonder how much public support there would be for detention if this opportunity was extended to many more.
- 6.5 Immigration detention is part of the system of immigration enforcement, which is widely understood to be a response to public hostility and fear. There is an obvious tension between the policy driver of removal and enforcement and the policy driver of good community relations. The negative tone of public discourse encourages fear and thus undermines efforts to build cohesive communities.
- 6.6 For example, a large minority of detainees, after undergoing executive detention for the purpose of immigration enforcement, are then released into the UK

community, where their prior experiences may not be conducive to the social cohesion local authorities and other agencies seek to foster.

- 6.7 MID has also found that the readiness of the Home Office and some IRCs to get involved in community engagement work is limited. For example, there is anxiety about proposals for communications work to accompany MID projects, and requests for responsible journalistic access are refused. MID acknowledges the risks of negative coverage, but considers that these are better managed than avoided. This would help increase public awareness about this part of public service delivery, and develop a more nuanced discourse about the issues to which immigration detention is only one response.

John Speyer
Director, Music In Detention
September 2014