

Written evidence submitted by Newport and District Refugee Support Group (N&DRSG), a South Wales, based organisation, set up in 1999. The organisation has run a drop-in for asylum seekers and refugees for many years and provides support teaching people English, accessing local services and supporting people's emotional needs. It has also helped to campaign for people to get asylum in the UK, if people want this support from the wider community.

Our evidence is summarised as follows:

- A summary of our views on detention
- Case study: Emily Mei Yeh
  - i. Emily became severely ill after being detained
  - ii. Emily's mental health deteriorated severely
  - iii. Emily was assaulted by detention centre staff
- Case study: Osama
  - i. Osama's mental health deteriorated severely
  - ii. His right to adequate and fair legal representation was deeply flawed
- Case study: Nashwan
  - i. Organising a fair case from an IRC
- Experiences of others
- Quotes from other asylum seekers we know
- Differences in Detention Centres in the UK
- An alternative to detention
- Reporting
- Conclusion

1. We are Helen Al Magrani and Peter Simpson, part of the above organisation, and we support asylum seekers in our communities and continue to support them if they are detained. Helen has been working with migrants since 2005, Peter since 2009.
2. Our reasons for submitting evidence is because we have seen first-hand the detrimental effect detention has on people's lives and we would like to see alternatives to this process.

***Helen Al Magrani would like to be invited to give evidence at oral evidence sessions.***

3. It is always better to be in a community than in detention. In the community, asylum seekers can make friends within their own country's community, the wider asylum community, with support workers and with the population generally, which is every human being's basic need.
4. Asylum seekers are not criminals, and should not be treated as such.
5. In the community, anyone has the ability to visit with their legal representative with ease, get appropriate healthcare, allow their children to attend school, life can almost maintain a veil of normality. Cases can be worked on in a relaxed way and not in the stressful, overcrowded environment of an immigration removal centre or detention centre.
6. **We have recently campaigned for some of our friends, and give**

**evidence about their situations below:**

**7. Case study: Emily Mei Yeh**

8. Emily Mei Yeh, now 34, from Taiwan, detained in Newport Central Police Station, Colnbrook House and Yarl's Wood; December 10<sup>th</sup> 2013 - 18<sup>th</sup> January 2014. She was forcibly removed from the UK on this date.
9. Emily is a forthright assertive young woman, with brilliant intelligence and fluent English, and was a much loved and highly regarded member of our local community as she did a lot of charity and community work. Her detention affected everyone who knew her well in Newport. At the start of her detention, at Newport Central Police Station, she remained forthright and determined but became ill through the sudden stress and trauma that the unexpected situation brought.
10. We did our best to support her, and this love and concern was able to assist her mentally for the frightening journey away from Newport to Colnbrook Detention Centre, and subsequently to Yarl's Wood, and without this we imagined that she would have only have become more ill and possibly unable physically to leave Newport without a heavy-handed approach to force her to do so. We recognise that through our work with Emily and her long detention, her physical and mental well-being could have deteriorated a lot more than it did.
11. During her time in Yarl's Wood, we remained in constant communication, with both Emily and her legal team. She was able to call us in the middle of the night, or whenever she wanted to. At times she became very anxious and vented anger at her desperate situation on those supporting her, which was very out of character. There were days that she said that she wanted to die, and became suicidal. She went quiet and would not call for several days at a time. Her bail hearing, and times when other people were removed, were particular flashpoints of trauma.
12. She found that access to Doctors was appalling and that basically she had no practical access to decent healthcare, as there were long lists to see a doctor, and she eventually saw one, the lack of care and concern that they showed was incredible, as they always seemed to rush through appointments with her and others, and the advice and healthcare that they offered, was incredibly poor.
13. She became more ill than she had in Newport, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, collapsed for a second time, and then was subsequently abused and assaulted by staff, who were derogatory, demeaning and insulting, as they did not know that she could understand English, as well as being physically abusive, and even pushing her off her seat. We have written about this on a blog that we helped to keep at the time. You can read about this one incident at: <http://mymuststay.wordpress.com/2013/12/26/incident-at-yarls-wood-full-statement/>
14. We wouldn't hesitate to suggest that her psychological condition deteriorated rapidly during her time detained in the UK. There were strong fluctuations as

she called dozens of times throughout the day and night, as she felt the need to rely heavily on us to help her get through this situation, to other times when there was prolonged periods of silence. She had a frightening experience, around the New Year, that some tablets she was given, after being told that they were paracetamol, made her feel unusually sedated. This, at the time, was left off our blog on Emily's experience, as it was felt to be too sensitive.

15. What frightens us is how much this would have been for Emily without the constant support that she knew that she could rely on from the outside. Our experience of the support that Emily and others that we know need while in detention centres, makes us concerned for the mental health of many asylum seekers caught up the in fast-track system.

16. We are still in touch with Emily around 5 days out of 7, and constantly told that she would never have survived in there without us and the support that we gave and are thanked over and over again.

### 17. **Case study: Osama**

18. Osama, now 31, from Libya, detained in Cardiff Bay Police Station, Campsfield House and Brook House; 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2013 - 17<sup>th</sup> April 2014. He was forcibly removed from the UK on this date.

19. Osama is a strong, independent, outgoing, very amicable and highly intelligent young man. He was a well-liked student at his college and volunteered at Oxfam, as well as regularly attending his local mosque. He seemed to be coping well at first in detention and was jovial and making jokes, but it soon became clear that was not well in his mind. He would start to communicate by email with us that he couldn't cope and then would also go silent and not be in touch with any of his friends. He had good mental health until he went to an IRC, but after some weeks he would just suddenly start singing to us down the phone, even though he had never been known to sing much at all before.

20. As the desperate plight of his situation started to hit home, this all became more frequent. The fear of being sent home was overwhelming him overtly and certainly made worse by being in a confined space, like the space itself was becoming the manifestation of his fate in a physical form and the just seemingly endless days in detention were taking their toll. Things became even worse when he was detained in isolation, just before being transferred to Colnbrook. The effect this had on his mental health was frightening for those supporting him. During this time he would only be allowed 5 minutes on the phone each time, and even though we had prepared what we could say in these 5 minutes he would beg us to stay on the phone for every second so that he could continue to hear to our voices before they returned him to his isolated cell, such is the detrimental effect of the isolation on his psychological well-being.

21. Detainees' rights to adequate and fair legal representation are deeply flawed within Campsfield and other detention centres. Even something as simple as access to the fax machine can be problematic with long queues and

machines not operating correctly at crucial times when there are vital legal deadlines. The system is stretched to breaking point as the numbers on waiting lists to see legal representatives are making it a struggle to access legal help.

22. One solicitor attends each day and has to see 10 clients with only 20mins allowed for each appointment. If the asylum seeker has no, or a low level of English, and has not managed to find or befriend someone from their country with a good level of English, this vital first appointment is often a wasted only chance to obtain legal representation, especially if the asylum seeker's papers are not present for the 20 minute interview either. If the solicitor is unable to help the detainee or the detainee has no faith in that solicitor the chance of them seeing another solicitor during their time in detention is severely restricted which can lead to people being removed without an opportunity for their case to be heard fairly.

23. If an asylum seeker does not have a solicitor before they arrive at a detention centre, they cannot get an out of area solicitor unless paying huge legal costs which are beyond the reach of the vast majority of asylum seekers.

#### **24. Case study: Nashwan**

25. Nashwan, Home Office, Newport Road, Campsfield House. Detained while signing on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> January 2014. He was forcibly removed from the UK on this date.

26. Nashwan is an out-going person and was a beloved part of his community in Cardiff where he had over a hundred friends. In detention he rapidly became withdrawn, only wanting to speak to a few of us, and then only when it was necessary.

27. Trying to support Nashwan with his legal case highlighted to us the problems asylum seekers face in detention, building their case from within such an environment. Their papers are often left in accommodation, with friends or with solicitors who can no longer act for them. Getting hold of the papers without the asylum seeker involved can often be problematic and a long drawn out process when time can be severely limited due to the often imminent prospect of removal. Former solicitors often take their time in releasing files and can make this difficult. Friends may not be able to locate papers in the detainees room, and without help from supporters on the outside, it can be one of the most isolating and disempowering experience in people's lives, as effectively people have to start from the beginning to build their claim for asylum.

28. The desperate situation people then face, further adds to mental health problems.

29. Nashwan suffered in the detention centre, and began to lose all hope and sing spontaneously down the phone to his friends and supporters, which was a more than unusual. We can remember that we were all incredibly concerned to witness this change in Nashwan as it was taking place.

### **30.Experiences of others:**

31. 'A' Eritrean asylum seeker from Newport became ill and couldn't cope after just five days in detention.
32. 'A', Darfuri torture victim, dispersed to Newport, subsequently detained, his mental health suffered so badly he stopped eating and sleeping. It took 3 weeks after his torture was verified by Medical Justice before he was released. He is still suffering to this day.
33. We currently have one close friend who is detained in Campsfield. He is a lively, outgoing member of our community here in Newport – the life and soul of everywhere he goes. Yet, since his detention no one has heard anything from him – us and all of his many friends have tried to contact him every day but with no replies. This is completely out of character and worries us deeply.

### **34.Quotes from other asylum seekers we know:**

35. "All you can do is rely on God"  
'N', a Cameroonian asylum seeker in Newport, previously detained, subsequently released.
36. "I was ok until I was detained, but when I was detained, all the trauma from my previous life came out and now I am ill."  
'I', a Cameroonian asylum seeker in Newport, previously detained, subsequently released.
37. "They don't respect human rights, there's no human rights here."  
'O', a Libyan asylum seeker from Cardiff, subsequently removed.

### **38.Differences in Detention Centres in the UK**

39. I have experience of visiting detainees in both Campsfield House and Brooke House Immigration Removal Centres. The difference between the two is startling. Asylum seekers who compare the two say that the food, rooms, facilities and privacy standards (showers etc) are far better in Campsfield, likening it to a palace compared to other IRCs.
40. Campsfield seems to operate a much better system where the staff are polite, friendly and helpful, as if they are fully aware of the stress and despair caused by detention to asylum seekers and their friends, supporters and families. Visiting is made easy – you only need phone them the day before, and even on the same day to arrange a visit. The phone is always answered in a timely manner. Visits are 3.5 hours and it is very easy to arrange a double visit, making the journey from Newport well worthwhile as I get to spend 7 hours with a friend. On arrival at the detention centre, I am treated with dignity and respect and the process of passing through security to the visiting room is speedy and efficient.
41. If I call to enquire about someone detained, they do all they can to assist and

give me the information required.

42. Brook House is shockingly unhelpful to those that experience it. The phone is hardly ever answered. The staff are generally rude and discourteous and unhelpful. It is generally not allowed to book a double visit, even for a family member, unless the detainee is being removed the next day and then the process is problematic. One must leave the visiting room for over an hour in the middle of the visit and pass through the laborious security procedures again to be allowed back in for the second visiting period – this does not happen at Campsfield. A visit that is due to start at 2pm does not. One does not begin to pass through the 8 security doors until 2pm and I am never in the visiting room before 2.25pm. In the visiting room we are told where to sit. We cannot sit together and we are listened to at close quarter. We can take nothing in the visiting room – not even pen or paper and refreshments must be inconveniently bought outside the visiting room and brought in. The detainee is made to feel like the visit is a burden and the staff will often move a detainee from one cell to another during a visit. There is little regard for the distance we may have travelled for the visit or how precious our time is with our friend.

#### **43. An alternative to detention**

44. It is always better to be in the community than in detention. In the community, asylum seekers can make friends within their own country's community, the wider asylum community and with support workers and the public generally. They are human beings, not criminals, and should not be treated as such.

45. In the community, they can visit with their legal representatives with ease, see a doctor if they need to, children can attend school, life can almost maintain a veil of normality. Cases can be worked on in a relaxed way and not in the stressful, overcrowded environment of a detention centre.

#### **46. Reporting**

47. Reporting is a viable alternative to detention, only made worse for asylum seekers by the fear of detention.

48. The impact on reporting on the mental health of asylum seekers in the community can be quite significant. Reporting could be used as a viable option to detaining people at great cost to the health of innocent people and great financial cost to the British tax payer. However, because reporting carries with it the very real possibility and threat of being detained, this can impact deeply on the well-being of asylum seekers, their families, their fellow asylum seekers and friends.

49. Everyone dreads signing and everyone knows they are more risk of being detained the more frequent their reporting events are spaced.

50. For example, an asylum seeker with a two weekly reporting event knows she is more likely to be detained than, say, an asylum seeker on a four weekly cycle.

51. In my own experience, I am married to an asylum seeker who is required to report every two weeks. We spend the last three days of each fortnight dreading Wednesday morning. Tuesdays evenings are never very good and a feeling of doom comes over us and every sentence seems to end with 'maybe I have a problem tomorrow', or, 'if everything is okay we will go tomorrow night'. We cannot plan anything for the rest of the week and we do not even want to do that much grocery shopping. It impacts on every point and aspect of our lives. Driving to the reporting centre is always tense and I sit outside and wait for him. I cannot do this on my own, I have to have a friend with me. The relief I feel when I see my husband again, after reporting, is incredible. But I must admit that I do not completely calm down for several hours after, and I am not the one who is reporting. Then there are the texts to family and friends to let them know he is ok.

52. It is not the reporting itself that is a problem here. It is the prospect of detention, an uncertain future, and being forcibly separated even though we are married that causes us so much stress, anxiety and tension.

### **53. CONCLUSION**

54. Immigration Removal Centres are like prisons for people who have committed no crime...

55. No improvement can make them ok.

56. They should be closed – this is a fair and civilised democratic society and this system does not reflect the true ideals of the UK and how we like to portray ourselves in the world.

57. Reporting can be used to keep track of asylum seekers and a system of voluntary return that is easier to access and use with greater incentives attached would probably work much better, be less of a burden on the public purse and would result in much less trauma and mental health problems for asylum seekers detained, their friends, supports and families.