

Manchester Testimony 5 - Written evidence submitted by Sarah

I don't want to give my real name as I am scared, I'll call myself Sarah. I was detained twice in 2014 and think I will be detained again as I was given no reason on release. Detention makes you feel dehumanised, you forget about your life, you think the next day you will die. If you complain of illness they don't listen, they say it's a pretence, that you are detained because you are a liar. If you talk to others for support, they think you are planning a riot. The high levels of security are costly and unnecessary, used to intimidate us. I am not in support of detention centres in any circumstances. It is a destruction of humanity. There should be a new system that doesn't treat asylum seekers as criminals.

The first time I was detained I went to report to Dallas Court as usual and they told me I was detained because my application for asylum had been refused and that I had to leave the country. I had received a refusal and my solicitor had prepared a fresh claim, but I was detained before she had a chance to submit it. I was locked in a small room with a toilet and a desk, and all my property was taken from me except my phone. The guards were hard on me. I was taken to Pennine House for two nights. That place was so scary, with no windows or doors, you couldn't see whether it was night or day. I was then taken to Yarl's Wood and kept there for 2 weeks. I was released but with no explanation given.

I started signing again. My solicitor put in the fresh claim and I was waiting for a decision when I was detained for the second time. They showed me the refusal document but wouldn't acknowledge that I had a new application in, for which neither me nor my solicitor had received determination. I was detained again for a week. When I was released I again wasn't given any reason, they just asked for my release address, leaving me very afraid I will be detained again. I think it is going to be routine for them to detain me every few months. It makes me feel like my dignity has been denied.

They put you in a cell, isolated in a room, confined there, not able to walk around. It makes you feel like a prisoner. There is the highest security - three prison guards for one person. This causes lots of insecurity, fear, tension. Also, it's a waste of money. Why have three guards, one at the door, two at the desk watching your every move? Sitting, watching, listening to you on the phone. It is very difficult to get access to the internet and everything is watched. On two occasions there were male guards, which is not appropriate. Being alone in the cell there is no privacy, the guards can see whatever you are doing through a glass window. I don't see why, given that there's CCTV everywhere and I am locked in. I wouldn't do anything malicious, I have been searched, yet every action is watched. It is intimidation. There is a deliberate intention to make us feel scared, then they feel like they have won, made us weak.

Detention is a prison estate. Every door is metal, with a lock and key and signs saying, 'lock it, prove it'. No one can escape. This isn't detention, it is prison. Rooms are designed for two people. If you get together in a group of four or five they treat you as if you are planning to start a riot. We didn't want to cause trouble, just wanting support, to talk to people, to get through life in detention.

I have experience of interpreters. Where people say one thing and the interpreters misunderstand or misinterpret what had been said. Most people in detention have minimal English so it is hard for them to access the services.

In healthcare the nurses are rude and make you feel dehumanised. I was made to open my mouth to see if I had swallowed my tablets. If you complain of illness they don't listen, they say it's

a pretence, that you only want to advance your case. This is why people die in detention, they are not being cared for. When you need medication the guards say; 'You are detained here because you are liars'. It makes me think the Home office have been discussing our cases with the guards. It brings a mental state where I feel exposed. Even when I say something I know I will not be believed. It makes me feel bad. How can hundreds of people be liars?

There was a lady who was disabled with a bad back. She needed a zimmer frame to walk and was in a lot of pain. The nurses just said she was an attention seeker. Medical problems aren't addressed, the only thing you get given is paracetamol. You get illnesses you never had before – high blood pressure, depression, the fear of getting sent back to the country you fled from.

I was feeling so depressed because the whole environment is not good, it makes you feel sick and unpleasant. It makes you sad. You forget about your life, you think the next day you will die. You don't see the sun. I wasn't allowed to go outside at all during the two week detention period.

I told them I was depressed and was given an appointment to see a counsellor. She said; 'You have talked to lots of people, you don't need more counselling as there's nothing we can talk about now that you haven't talked about before'. When you have an interview there's always someone listening in, prompting the questioner through an ear-piece. Even in the counselling session this happened so you can't speak in confidence. Being detained aggravated my depression. I was on tablets before but now I feel I couldn't manage without them, and am having counselling. They also gave me the wrong medication when I left.

I was tortured. The first time I was detained I told them about my experience of torture but they didn't acknowledge it. They didn't listen to me. They said there was no proof, that I was lying.

Disabled people shouldn't be detained. No-one should. Vulnerable people are the old, the ill, those with long-term illnesses, high blood pressure. But being detained makes you vulnerable. Makes health problems get worse.

There's also verbal and physical abuse. One woman was harassed, she fell over and broke her back. They use handcuffs on us, I heard women talking about having been beaten by the guards. It was common, not just a few people.

There's a way they manipulate people in detention, they make people work, to keep them busy. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work in the community, why should they be allowed to work in detention? You get paid 50p or £1 per hour, well below the minimum wage. This is an exploitation of our humanity, it is dehumanising. The canteen is very expensive, much more expensive than shops outside, so what can we buy with that? If they are going to let us work, why not take people into the community to do proper jobs, proper wages, and return to detention in the evening.

When I was released they suspended my housing and NASS payments. I was worried to go back to the house as they said it doesn't belong to me anymore. It is a scared atmosphere. I am scared that they will come for me in the night. I don't sleep. I walk up the street and think people are watching me, ready to snatch me and take me back. I don't feel secure at all. I always go back to my house late to make the night short and to stay out as long as possible. Now my body feels weak, I am so stressed, depressed. I'm fed up of signing. Frequent signing creates work for the Home Office. I keep doing it but it doesn't mean anything to me. Even on the bus ticket you get when you sign there are rules as to what I can use it for. I feel confined and imprisoned even

though I'm no longer in detention. I get an Azure card, am not allowed to have cash, not able to travel, but I still have a duty to sign.

In the community I have the most excellent support. I have been referred to good services and have had no trouble accessing them. Being detained has been disruptive to the community and my friends. It has brought expense on my friends, sending me money, visiting me in detention, disrupting their work and family. It is not conducive to people thinking positively of how their country is run to hear of people being detained with no charge. This creates an unhealthy culture for all.

I don't know how I can express Britain now. The friends I have here are very good but the system here is rotten. Detention has a mixed feel to the community. Some say asylum seekers are criminals, some have great sympathy for those who come here to seek asylum. The system is very bad. What we read about Britain, a wonderful great country to live in, this is not what is displayed in reality.

I wouldn't want to put a time limit on how long in detention would be OK as detention is never OK, but the lack of time limit is the worst part of it as you don't know when/if you will get out. You can't say to yourself tomorrow I'll be OK. Tomorrow you will be locked in, or flown back to the country where you are afraid for your life.

Detention centres can't solve the problems. You can't access legal advice or produce evidence to prove your case, problems get worse. Even if your asylum application is refused there's no way you can run away or leave the country. You are not a criminal, you haven't done anything wrong, you are not illegal.

Detention is expensive to the country. Create a common court house where people go to report, get their case properly heard and resolved. Let us work so we can be a productive part of the community. If you confine me in detention for one month, one year without solving my problems, nothing changes. Get me to report to you, hear my views, my history. Engage with me and resolve my case. The current system is unending and stressful. I have lived here for five years, others fifteen years. It is a waste of human resource, a waste of human life. Being illegal doesn't mean that life has ended.

I am not in support of detention centres in any circumstances. It is not wise. It is a destruction of humanity. It makes me sad to my soul. Detention centres should be closed for ever. There should be a new system that doesn't treat asylum seekers as criminals.