



Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN

Immigration Detention

'Evils which have struck their roots deep in the fabric of human society are often accepted ... as part of the providential ordering of life. They lurk unsuspected in the system of things ...'
William Charles Braithwaite, 1919, Quaker Faith and Practice 23.05

Why are Quakers concerned?

As Quakers we believe in that of God in everyone. Our concerns for those held in immigration detention stem from our testimonies to equality and justice.

Described by Amnesty International as a 'quiet disgrace' (Amnesty Issue 196, Spring 2018), the UK's immigration detention system is not often in the public eye, though the abuse of vulnerable men and women has been exposed by undercover reporters for the BBC's Panorama (Brook House, September 2017) and Channel 4 News (Yarl's Wood and Harmondsworth, March 2015). Mitie, Serco and G4S, companies run for profit and for the benefit of shareholders, have been awarded lucrative contracts to manage these centres. Their lack of accountability can lead to a culture of impunity, as the TV coverage revealed.

The UK is a founder member of the European Convention on Human Rights, and British citizens have a right to liberty. But every year, some 30,000 migrants and foreign ex-offenders are locked up – out of sight, out of mind, without legal process, without a time limit. At any one time there are about 3,000 people held in immigration removal centres (IRCs) round the UK, many of which are converted high-security prisons.

What needs to change?

The Immigration Act 1971 first included the power to detain immigrants, and later legislation has extended or amended that power. The initial decision to detain is made by immigration officers without reference to a court. In theory each detainee has the right to apply for bail after seven days, but this is difficult to do in an unfamiliar language and without access to appropriate legal advice. We join with others to call for a 72-hour limit, by which time the case for detention must be considered by an appropriate judicial authority.

The UK is the only country in Europe that doesn't have a time limit on detention. The UNHCR has repeatedly called for this practice to end. Indefinite detention damages people, physically and mentally – not only the detainees but their children and other family members. Detainees describe themselves as living in limbo and speak of the 'emotional torture' of having no idea if or when they will be forcibly deported or, as more than half of them are, eventually released into the community. As a first step towards the abolition of immigration detention, we call for an absolute limit of 28 days.

Our Government says its policy is not to detain survivors of torture (Rule 35) or those with serious medical conditions or mental health problems. However, survivors of rape and torture, pregnant women, and those with severe mental and physical health problems are often found in detention, with their experience of detention in the UK in many cases adding to the trauma already suffered in their country of origin. An HMIP report on Harmondsworth IRC (September 2017) highlights the continued detention of victims of torture. At Yarl's Wood, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are detained despite the Government's 'adults at risk' guidance, meant to protect them. The prevailing 'climate of

disbelief' at the Home Office makes it particularly hard to 'prove' you have suffered rape, for example, or are a victim of trafficking.



Illustration by George Sfougaras

Women for Refugee Women's 2017 report 'The Way Ahead' explores community-based alternatives based on support and engagement. When these are put into practice there are very low levels of absconding and far less damage to mental health, and the cost is much lower. It appears the Home Office is, in many cases, using immigration detention for administrative convenience – at a cost to the tax payer of around £120 million each year. According to Amnesty, an additional £21 million has been paid out over the past five years in compensation for unlawful detention. It is high time the Government implemented community-based alternatives to detention, such as those operating successfully in countries like Sweden.

What can we do?

Inform ourselves: detentionforum.org.uk is a good place to start.

The Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) website can signpost you to the many organisations working in this field, and to some of the key reports. Our network mailing list sends out regular updates about what's happening in this fast-changing area. We hold meetings, organise conferences and support one another in our work.

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Ask your Meeting to become a Meeting of Sanctuary. Sanctuary Everywhere encourages Quakers to act in solidarity with refugees and migrants. Meetings are supported from Friends House with briefings, training, retreats, conference calls and an online discussion forum. The Sanctuary Everywhere Manifesto expresses the commitment of Britain Yearly Meeting to this work.

Engage with your MP. Write to your MP, in the first instance. Act as a 'door opener' if your MP is a key player: arrange a meeting and invite an expert on detention to join you.

Support detainees: volunteer with an NGO working in this area. There are opportunities for volunteer visitors, interpreters and advocacy workers.

Write to your papers. Use social media to challenge lies. Organise a public meeting. Attend events as a speaker. Talk through your local networks. Above all, speak the truth, wherever your leadings take you.

Freed Voices is a group of experts-by-experience committed to speaking out about the realities of immigration detention in the UK. You can contact them to invite members of the group to speak at an event.

Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network
qarn.org.uk May 2018