



GDWG

Refugee Tales

# Our Manifesto for General Election 2024

## Our call for change

We believe that the UK, like all countries, can and must work towards a future without immigration detention. As first steps towards that future, we call on **all political parties and election candidates to support these five goals:**

- 1 Implementation of the Brook House Public Inquiry recommendations**
- 2 A 28-day time limit on immigration detention, so that no-one is held indefinitely**
- 3 The right to work for anybody whose case for asylum takes longer than six months**
- 4 Access to high-quality interpreter and translation services for everyone in immigration detention**
- 5 An approach to asylum grounded not in hostility but in the fundamental principles of human rights**

## About us

**Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG)** is a charity that supports people during and after detention at Brook House and Tinsley House Immigration Removal Centres at Gatwick airport. For 30 years we have been visiting people held in detention, offering friendship and support and advocating for fair treatment. We have helped over 20,000 people in this time.

**Refugee Tales** is a GDWG outreach project. Since 2015, Refugee Tales has shared the stories of people held in indefinite immigration detention in the UK, to raise awareness of their experiences. The stories have been published in four volumes. Refugee Tales organises walks in solidarity with refugees, those who have sought sanctuary, and people who have experienced immigration detention. Refugee Tales is rooted in, and shaped by, the experiences of people who have been subjected to immigration detention. Refugee Tales has observed the long-term devastating impacts of arbitrary detention.

## Why we are calling for these changes

The United Kingdom is the only country in Western Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules. In the year ending June 2023, the UK detained 20,354 people in immigration detention. This is set to increase dramatically under the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

People detained indefinitely do not have a release date to count down to; they can only count up – this has a devastating impact on mental health.

Many people enter detention having already experienced trauma. Detention is an isolating and anxiety-inducing experience that causes harm. Since 2000, there have been 41 deaths in immigration detention in England and Wales, 18 of which were self-inflicted, including two in 2023.

Immigration detention is brutal and dehumanising; it deprives people of agency and its abuses are systemic. Community-based alternatives to detention are possible, and research has found them to be more humane, more effective and less expensive than detention.

## Implementation of the Brook House Public Inquiry recommendations

The Brook House Public Inquiry was the first public inquiry ever to examine immigration detention in the UK. It was established in response to a 2017 BBC Panorama programme that used undercover reporting to reveal mistreatment at Brook House. Chaired by Kate Eves, the inquiry lasted almost four years, cost over £18m and heard from 101 witnesses. It reported in September 2023.

The Inquiry's findings were extremely concerning. It describes the prison-like conditions of detention, a toxic culture among staff with a lack of understanding of existing power dynamics, a culture of impunity, inappropriate use of force on vulnerable detained people, attitudes of racism and toxic bravado, use of violence and violent language. In relation to safeguarding the report describes 'a wholesale breakdown in the system of safeguards designed to protect vulnerable detained people.'

The Report made 33 recommendations in total. If implemented, these would actively address the abuses and toxic culture highlighted in the report, and go a long way towards improving the treatment and conditions of people held in immigration detention. However, to date, we have seen no discernible change or meaningful progress with implementation.

## A 28-day time limit on immigration detention, so that no-one is held indefinitely

Many respected bodies have called for an end to indefinite immigration detention in the UK, including the British Medical Association and the Bar Council in 2017, and the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2019.

The Brook House Public Inquiry recommended a 28-day time limit to immigration detention. It said it is: *'clear from the evidence of detained people, those who worked at Brook House, NGOs, and inspection and monitoring bodies that indefinite detention caused uncertainty, frustration and anxiety for detained people, with a negative impact on their health and wellbeing' and 'contributed to conditions where mistreatment could occur more easily.'*

We have been supporting people during and after immigration detention at Gatwick for 30 years, and every day we see the damaging effects of indefinite detention, and the many physical and psychological harms it causes. The damaging impacts last long after release. In its arbitrary, indefinite, isolating and repetitive nature, depriving individuals of personal agency or even the knowledge of what may happen to them next, detention breaks spirits and traumatises lives.

## The right to work for anybody whose case for asylum takes longer than six months

Under our current system, people seeking asylum are barred from working. They can apply for permission to work if they have been waiting for over 12 months but if this is granted, the jobs they are permitted to carry out on the Government's Shortage Occupation List include many specialist roles that few people can perform. In many other countries people can support themselves at an earlier stage without restrictions. This policy change would benefit approximately 10,000 people and their dependants.

While people cannot work they live in destitution. Their skills, energies and creative powers do not have outlets in the workplace that would promote a sense of self-worth as well as being of wider benefit. Being able to work after six months would lift people out of poverty and reduce the cost of supporting them. We recognise how destructive it is to hold people in limbo and to deny them the right to carry out meaningful activity for financial benefit. Meanwhile we have shortages in many unskilled jobs as well as in skilled jobs. People should have the opportunity to have the dignity of being part of the workplace and to support themselves whilst integrating into society and benefitting all.

## Access to high quality interpreter and translation services for everyone in immigration detention

Lack of access to high quality interpreter and translation services underpins many of the communication difficulties experienced by people in detention. Poor communication leads to increased frustration and tensions, including between staff and people who are detained. Current interpreter and translation services are of variable quality, and not always available at the point when they are needed. Online services exist, but there is very poor uptake by detention centre staff, and they are not used by healthcare teams or by the Home Office.

Lack of interpreters mean that mechanisms intended to ensure that vulnerable detained people are assessed by a medic and brought to the attention of the Home Office are not working properly: people who are victims of torture, suicidal, or whose health is at risk because of continued detention are not being identified and protected in the ways that Home Office rules say they should.

Without interpreters, people are unable to access legal advice, or even if they do have a lawyer, may be unable to understand who their lawyer is, what they are saying or the legal documents relating to their case. They may be unable to correct errors or respond to questions that would help them explain their situation and set out their case.

Without interpreters, some people are unable to communicate their healthcare needs, and as a result can experience severe pain, lack of appropriate treatment and ongoing poor health.

## An approach to asylum grounded not in hostility but in the fundamental principles of human rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says *'No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.'*

Indefinite detention is both a breach of human rights and of the rule of law.

Arbitrary detention is self-perpetuating: the more that people are arbitrarily and inhumanely detained, the more those detained are treated inhumanely, and the more detention is

normalised as a political practice. The Illegal Migration Act 2023 increases the use of arbitrary detention. This logic of normalising detention must end.

Our future government must end the UK's dependency on arbitrary detention and restore its commitment to the principles of human rights.



### Further information

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