



APPG on Immigration Detention – Meeting

Thursday 20 March 2025, 11.00 – 12.00

CPA Room, off Westminster Hall

Attendees

- Speakers:** Joel Mordi, Nigerian LGBTQI+ and human rights activist, working with Rainbow Migration
Charlie Taylor – HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
Dr Hindpal Singh Bhui OBE – Inspection Team Leader, HM Inspectorate of Prisons
- APPG Members:** Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP – Labour (Chair)
Baroness Hamwee – Liberal Democrat
Baroness Lister of Burtersett – Labour
- APPG Secretariat:** Elspeth Macdonald – Medical Justice
- External guests:** Over 35 people with lived experience of detention, representatives of relevant NGOs and other organisations, and medical and legal experts.
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Meeting Summary

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed all attendees, and in particular guests with lived experience of immigration detention. She noted that the meeting was an opportunity to take stock of the current concerns in detention, how these are affecting detained people and what parliamentarians can do in response.

Detention was often discussed in figures and numbers in Parliament – so it was important to hear the human impact. It was also important to remember that the management of Immigration Removal Centres is privatised. And that the companies making a huge amount from this system were not being properly held account.

The Chair introduced the speakers and invited them to take the floor.

2. Presentations

Joel Mordi (JM) – JM introduced himself as a survivor of UK immigration detention, a refugee and a proud advocate for LGBTQI+ rights.

JM emphasized that immigration detention is a dehumanising, traumatising system. He had been detained at Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) and saw first-hand what it means to be LGBTQI+ in detention. He endured verbal abuse daily, witnessed sexual abuse, and saw vulnerable people being exploited in a place with no protection. Officers turned a blind eye to the abuse, or worse, participated as enablers.

JM noted that for LGBTQI+ people, every day in detention is a fight for survival with those who see their LGBTQI+ identity as a threat. Yet reporting abuse often meant retaliation or harsh rebuttal, not justice. Mental health support in detention was inadequate. There were suicides and unexplained deaths, such as that of Mr Oscar Okwurime, who died whilst detained at Harmondsworth IRC in September 2019.

The government's Adults at Risk in Immigration Detention (AAR) policy was failing to recognise the risks that LGB people face in detention. While transgender individuals were rightly considered an at-risk group under the policy, LGB people were excluded. Detention cut them off from support networks, which exacerbated their trauma. Their exclusion was not an oversight but a political choice. Sometimes they were deported to countries where they would face danger or even death.

There was "no pride in detention". JM was refusing to be silent, and was fighting for the abolition of all LGB detention.

The Chair had sponsored an [Early Day Motion seeking to end the detention all LGBTQI+ people](#). JM encouraged all MPs to sign it. If the UK government believed in human rights, it should end the detention of LGBTQI+ people. If it claimed to stand for dignity, it had to stop placing refugees in harm's way. Detention was doing nothing of any value – it was just creating lifelong trauma.

JM noted that we are excellent at pointing out problems, but not our role in creating them. He asked everyone to stand with him in the No Pride in Detention campaign.

He was not sure he had the strength to share the aftermath of detention, but suggested that people imagine the worst and take it from there. Detention was forever. The trauma lived on.

Chair – The Chair thanked JM for putting some humanity into these issues. Often the way they were discussed or dealt with was dehumanising. E.g. the Chair was aware of a case where an LGBTQI+ person provided evidence to the Home Office of a Facebook hate group set up about them in their home country, which had 30K followers. The Home Office's rebuttal to this was that it was "only" 30K people out of a population of many millions.

Charlie Taylor (CT) – CT thanked the APPG for the invitation to speak. It was very important that the group was convening.

CT had been in the role of Chief Inspector for 4 years. HMIP was established in 1982 to independently inspect prisons. More recently it took on the role of inspecting IRCs too.

What did independent mean? The Home Office would fact check numbers in an HMIP report, but not the findings. It also did not control when or the way HMIP inspected, nor when the inspectorate published its reports. HMIP's independence was well established and very important.

HMIP remit covered IRCs, as well as Short-Term Holding Facilities (STHFs) such as the Kent Intake Unit, which saw significant improvements following an HMIP inspection in 2020.

HMIP inspections were mostly unannounced. Its methodology included speaking to managers and staff, but mostly to detained people. Following the BBC's 2017 Panorama documentary that revealed abuse of detained people by staff at Brook House IRC, every detained person now had the chance to have a private conversation with an inspector. HMIP also conducted a survey of detained people during their inspection, and the results were compared with other facilities and previous inspections.

HMIP inspected each IRC at least once every 4 years, or more often if there were concerns. Independent reviews of progress were now also being conducted at facilities of particular concern. Such a review had recently been completed at Harmondsworth IRC.

Dr Hindpal Singh Bhui (HSB) – HSB noted how movingly JM had spoken about the experience of detention. Through its inspections, HMIP was able to put additional context around these experiences.

HSB explained that HMIP had inspected Harmondsworth and Brook House IRCs in 2024. So far in 2025, it had conducted an Independent Review of Progress at Harmondsworth and inspected Colnbrook IRC.

Conditions in 2024 at Harmondsworth had been the worst inspectors had ever seen. There had also been serious concerns at Brook House.

Harmondsworth had been in an awful, neglectful state. The facility had smelt of cannabis and sweat and had an atmosphere of depression. Windows, toilets and screens were broken, shower doors were missing. Such conditions undermined human dignity and made people feel they were not being treated as human beings.

Inspectors had found that people detained at the facility who refused to share a room faced being sent to the segregation unit. Using segregation as a punishment in this way was not permitted under the law.

Since the last inspection of Harmondsworth in 2021, violence at the facility had doubled and self-harm had increased. Work to reduce both was weak.

People had been openly smoking drugs and cigarettes on their units, without any staff challenge – this was very unusual and shocking to see. In HMIP's survey of detained people at the facility, 11% had said they had developed a drug problem since arriving at Harmondsworth. There had been too few staff and they lacked experience and confidence. There was not enough support or supervision from managers.

The Home Office was still continuing to hold people for too long at the facility. HMIP had found two men who had been held at Harmondsworth for 2 years, and 6 men who had been held for more than 1 year.

Not enough was being done for vulnerable people detained at the facility. Half of the detained people surveyed by HMIP said that they had mental health problems, and half said they were suicidal. Near-miss investigations were not being acted on – HMIP found that ligature points known to have been used in successive previous suicide attempts, for example, had been left in place. There was another very serious suicide attempt while HMIP were on-site. Activities and welfare provision were also totally inadequate.

HMIP had also inspected Brook House last year. While the centre had been calmer, and staff had a better sense of what they were doing, there was still too much violence and too many incidents of self-harm. Violence against staff had increased five-fold since HMIP's last inspection in 2022.

At the time of the inspection, the Home Office had assessed almost a quarter of detainees at Brook House as being at one of the two higher levels of risk under the AAR policy. A number seriously ill people detained at the facility had been sent to the segregation unit, rather than to hospital. HMIP found one man who had been held in detention for more than 500 days, and 10 men who had each been held for over a year.

Many people at the facility were ultimately released. HSB had been struck by JM's comment that detention is a life sentence. It was hard to get rid of that sense of being controlled, of being imprisoned. To detain a person, then release them, then re-detain them, then release them again was unacceptable. At the IRCs HMIP had recently inspected, only around 40% of people were actually being removed from the UK, even though removal was supposed to be a key purpose of detention.

People detained at Brook House had made allegations of excessive use of force against them by staff.. HMIP had found poor use of de-escalation, and many poor applications of the use of force.

Within the healthcare team at the centre, inspectors had found poor culture, low morale and under-resourcing. The inspection of healthcare was conducted jointly with the Care Quality Commission (CQC). It found two breaches of the Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 and issued an action plan request to the provider (Practice Plus Group).

The performance of the Detention Engagement Team (DET) had improved. But this was being undermined by an insufficient number of Home Office caseworkers.

Staff were trying to provide more recreational activities. But Brook House was not designed for long term detention – there was not enough outside space. Even though the facility was not at capacity, inspectors found it felt crowded. There were also too many people being detained from prison – arrangements for their deportation should have been made earlier to avoid this.

What was the current situation at Harmondsworth IRC? The inspectorate had conducted an Independent Review of Progress at the facility in February 2025 and found good progress in 11 areas. There was better leadership at the facility, and improved interaction between the Home Office and the contractor (Mitie). Renovations have been made to the buildings, which HMIP had been calling for over several years. The number of staff had doubled and was continuing to increase.

Illicit drugs were being better controlled – staff corruption had been identified and staff suspended. The illegitimate use of segregation as punishment has ceased.

HSB highlighted that many challenges still needed addressing at Harmondsworth, however. Windows at the facility did not open, which was affecting airflow and also impacting people psychologically. The Home Office were still holding too many people without progressing their cases. Rule 35 of the Detention Centre Rules 2001, a key safeguarding mechanism to identify particularly vulnerable people in detention, was not being used properly. Eg. HMIP had found a lot of detained people who were at such high risk of self-harm/suicide they were under constant watch; in very few cases however had concerns about their suicidal intentions being flagged to the Home Office as required by Rule 35.

HMIP had also inspected Colnbrook IRC earlier this year and found improvements. There had been more investment in staff, the physical environment, and preventing the ingress of illicit drugs.

More generally, IRCs still looked like prisons – HSB believed the Home Office needed to rethink their design. While there had been some improvements in safety across IRCs, there was still a long way to go: tragically there had been another death last year at Brook House IRC, which appeared to be drug-related.

Chair – The Chair noted that she had visited IRCs several times. Each time there had been a smell of fresh paint, and detained people reported a flurry of activity prior to the visit – but the deeper problems and concerns remained.

She highlighted that even from a purely economic perspective, detention was wasteful. The cycle of detain-release-redetain was very costly, and put the person through a lot, only for the Home Office to finally allow them to stay in the country in many cases. She believed it was an awful way to treat human beings and noted that companies were making a profit from it.

3. Questions & Answers

- Did HMIP monitor what was in the Home Office's contracts with private IRC providers?
- Regarding the Kent Intake Unit – was there anything in terms of the Border Command and their new responsibilities that parliamentarians should be pushing for at the moment?
- Progress at Harmondsworth is encouraging – what lessons could be taken from it? Was it all down to leadership?
- Hearing that Brook House is better, but not good, was concerning – particularly since there had been a public inquiry on the facility. Why did HMIP think it was so poor?
- How many detained people asked for a private conversation with HMIP inspectors, and did the conversations reveal any additional information?
- Many problems at Harmondsworth had stemmed from a delay in renewing the contract as that affected investment. Yet the contract still had not been renewed. While the new leadership was making a difference, problems remained e.g. a recent sudden increase in people being released to no fixed abode; and people with severe mental health issues being kept in detention, despite it being unsuitable for them – an issue exacerbated by a lack of mental health beds in the community. Voluntary returns were also taking too long – at least 28 days or longer, which affected mental health. People were also not being taken to hospital appointments, and more vulnerable people were being detained e.g. neurodivergent individuals, and those with mobility issues.

CT – CT noted that HMIP saw in all establishments how good leaders make a real difference. An added complication in IRCs was the Home Office's role and responsibilities e.g. delays in processing asylum claims, which will have a detrimental impact on people held in IRCs.

HMIP did not input into contracts but was in regular dialogue with the Home Office. Failure to renew the contract at Harmondsworth meant the provider, Mitie, was in limbo, and could not recruit staff. Mitie's current contract had, however, recently been extended until 2026.

In HMIP's view, the Home Office should award contracts with enough time to enable a smooth transition to new providers. If not, conditions could deteriorate rapidly, which in turn affected recruitment and, ultimately, outcomes for detained people.

HSB commented that although HMIP did not input into contracts, its findings showed what needs to be included in new contracts. E.g. the Home Office were now requiring providers to have more staff, and it had been announced recently that approx. 80 staff would go into prisons and work with foreign nationals who might be transferred to IRCs.

He explained that key themes from private interviews were published at the end of each HMIP report. Generally the interviews provided a depth of evidence to support what HMIP's raw survey data said. E.g. if the survey showed that detained people felt unsafe, the interviews would give details of why.

HSB believed the big lesson from Harmondsworth was that IRCs improved with more staff, more investment and better leadership. This lesson was being heeded elsewhere in the system– e.g. the initiative to send staff into prisons, mentioned above.

On the situation in Kent: HSB explained when HMIP had inspected the original facility, Tug Haven, conditions had been appalling: children were not safeguarded appropriately, and no-one was gripping the problem. At Manston STHF, conditions had improved since it opened, and it now felt like a proper contingency facility. The number of staff had increased, and there was a greater focus on care, not just warehousing people. Management responsibilities were now split between the reception centre Western Jet Foil, and Manston. This meant more leadership, and problems being picked up earlier. Current outcomes at both facilities were middling – but not as poor as previously. The foundations existed for improvements.

- Did HMIP have any concerns about the arrangements under which detained people can earn money by working in the IRC e.g. as cleaners, in the kitchen, or as 'buddies' in the welfare office? It created a real power imbalance between detained people - individuals who had worked in the system for longer had a higher "rank". They said "jump", and other detained people said "how high"?

HSB explained that in HMIP's view, it was good that detained people were given work opportunities. But the system needed proper staff oversight, otherwise a power imbalance could arise. HMIP had seen examples of this.

- Detention was there to mess you up emotionally and psychologically. If you were not a strong person, you would come out like a robot. Why was the Home Office refusing to properly follow the Hardial Singh principles in detention cases? It ended up having to pay £millions each year in unlawful detention claims. Did it not care because it was taxpayers' money?
- The attendee was CEO of an immigration charity and a trustee of Medical Justice. She had been detained at Yarl's Wood IRC, when it was a women's-only facility. At the point of being detained, she had been due to have surgery in two weeks. She was detained for 6 months, seriously ill and fearing for her life. There was a culture of disbelief within the healthcare service at the IRC. In one incident, she had called the IRC nurses because another detained woman was having a stroke. The nurses said they thought the woman was pretending because of an upcoming removal flight, and so ignored her. The woman was now paralysed.
- What was HMIP's view on health service delivery at IRCs? If practicing in the community, some healthcare staff would be reported for gross misconduct.
- The attendee had been one of the youngest people detained at Brook House when it was first built, aged 18. He was now 40. As detainees, they had had to build the centre and also make it livable.

How many stories were needed? People were sitting here talking, while those in detention were suffering. Even if you were released from detention and turned your life around, it did not count. The same problems continued, regardless of which party was in power. When would enough be enough? The government was playing with people's lives – some people take their own lives upon release. After release, people have to pay immigration health surcharge and other immigration fees to the Home Office. The UK is getting worse and worse to live in. Are they building new detention centres just to create jobs for people? The media was always painting a negative picture of migrants. Why did they not discuss people being released from detention, the jobs they get and contributions they make? Some of the kids being detained had been born in the UK and had British birth certificates. It was human lives, not contracts, being discussed here. The Home Office did not have a clue what to do – they were just building more detention centres.

- The attendee was the co-founder of a human rights network. He had been detained at Harmondsworth in 2005. All the same challenges remained today. Why was the UK putting vulnerable people in detention? Why did it keep repeating the same mistakes? When detained, the attendee had been vulnerable and sick. He had sought help, but never received it. Upon release, he had had to have surgery. No testimony could ever convey how bad detention really was. How could campaigners ensure that no more vulnerable people were detained?
- The attendee worked in the NHS, was doing a master's degree in human rights and planned to continue to a PhD. She had been detained at Yarl's Wood for 9 days. Why were detained people seen as criminals? They had gone through a lot in their countries - bombs falling, and friends being killed in front of them. What criminal offence had the attendee committed in this country? She had only sought asylum. She had been diagnosed with PTSD and dissociative amnesia – but had overcome this to stand here today. She had been detained in the middle of the night, and when she arrived at the IRC, healthcare asked her so many questions. Why had she been given this punishment of detention? Detained people should not be seen as criminals.

JM noted that he felt there was a safety concern of putting people who have no background in crime together in an IRC with people with criminal backgrounds. He also wondered how the people who had lost their lives in detention could be honoured? It would not bring people's loved ones back, but could there be a form of compensation to the families?

The Chair noted that there were clear reasons why detention existed in the UK – it had to do with race and political choices. Whenever the country was facing difficulties, rather than fixing problems, some politicians liked to blame “the other”. For several years, migrants have been “the other”. They were being demonised and seen as worth less. So, it was really important to hear the human stories of detention, and show that the individuals being detained are human beings worthy of dignity. Discussing IRC contracts though could help to show that detention does not even make sense financially.

- Very few of the Brook House Inquiry's recommendations appeared to have been adopted by the government. In the absence of a separate oversight mechanism for inquiries, what was HMIP doing to follow up on the Inquiry's recommendations? How did they inform the inspectorate's approach? Did it assess implementation of the recommendations during its visits?
- Was HMIP looking at the STHF in Northern France, which is administered by the UK?
- The current Border Security, Asylum and Immigration (BSAI) Bill included provisions to further extend detention powers. This would just exacerbate all the issues discussed today. What could be done?

- Like LGBTQI+ people, women faced specific harms in detention. Research showed that the majority of women in detention were survivors of violence. This was particularly relevant given the government's commitment to reducing violence against women and girls (VAWG). Could the APPG look at this? Was HMIP seeing specific harms against women in detention e.g. being under constant surveillance by male guards, despite this being banned since 2016?
- Had HMIP found any reports issued under Rule 35 (1) or (2) of the Detention Centre Rules 2001 on recent visits?

HSB explained that HMIP found very few Rule 35 (1) and (2) reports. Around 90-95% focused on torture instead. So Rule 35 was not being used to its fullest extent.

HMIP had inspected the STHF in Northern France in November, and would be publishing its report soon. It was a complicated situation – France was providing the facilities, and the UK was running them. He invited people to contact HMIP with any questions or for further information.

HSB noted how powerful people's testimonies had been. They had raised questions about why detention is used, given how much suffering it causes. Personally, HSB believed the government should look at the purposes and outcomes of detention. But those were bigger questions, far beyond HMIP's remit. HMIP's role was not to judge why detention is used, but to provide strong evidence of what was happening on the ground.

The quality of healthcare provision varied across IRCs. A key problem was the culture of disbelief amongst staff. Like in the community, concerns and complaints about healthcare could be reported. There was a very high level of need in detention in terms of mental health, and virtually no IRC was getting its provision on this right. HSB explained that talking therapies, for example, were generally not good in detention.

4. Thanks and close

The Chair thanked all the speakers and guests, and also the secretariat Medical Justice for organising the meeting. She noted that the APPG would seek to raise a number of the issues discussed with the Home Office, including the STHF in Northern France, VAWG and the use of banned practices, and the release of people to no fixed abode.

The Chair commented that the meeting had been very timely, given the increased current focus on removals and deportations, and the BSAI Bill. She explained that the group had met recently with the Minister for Border Security and Asylum, Angela Eagle MP and hoped to visit Harmondsworth IRC soon. She invited anyone with additional points to contact the group with them.