



association of **visitors** to
immigration detainees

AVID (Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees)
We Work Keltan House
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Nick Thomas-Symonds MP
Shadow Secretary of State for the Home Department
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

8th December 2020

Dear Nick Thomas-Symonds

Following reports in the media which highlighted the terrible conditions at Napier Barracks – and that volunteers have been asked to sign confidentiality agreements linked to the official secrets act - organisations working with people in detention and people seeking asylum are writing to you to work with us to fix the broken asylum system.

We believe that it's unviable to keep people housed in barracks. The accommodation is not suitable for vulnerable people and over the last few days there have been suicide attempts, hunger strikes and protests about conditions at the Napier Barracks. It is impossible to socially distance when there are as many as 28 people sharing two toilets and up to 14 people sleeping in a room. As you know, there have already been a number of Covid-19 cases in the barracks which shows the difficulty in keeping the virus contained in such conditions.

The unsuitability of the accommodation is worse for the people being housed in the barracks who are victims of torture at the hands of soldiers or militia. For them, and all those fleeing wars, being kept in a military facility surrounded by barbed wire is proving difficult for their mental health. They are being retraumatised by their surroundings.

We have seen the damage done by forcing people to undergo the excruciating and drawn out uncertainty of immigration detention. It is now widely acknowledged and understood that this has a profoundly detrimental impact on people's mental health. While the barracks are not detention, the consequences for individuals are the same: being isolated and cut off

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from support networks, without access to legal advice and other specialist help, while being held in wholly inappropriate conditions for an unknown length of time.

In both Penally and Folkestone the barracks are in isolated locations making it difficult for the residents to get out and about, increasing their sense of isolation and distress. It also makes it easy for far-right activists to target them when they leave the barracks and they have been subjected to filming and abuse, designed to degrade and humiliate. While we want to see the barracks closed, closing them won't solve the problem, the residents will simply be moved to more unsuitable ad hoc accommodation. A first vital step is the immediate release of everyone from the barracks into safe, supported, community-based alternatives. The issue then has to be fixed at the source, and that is the often-glacial processing of asylum claims.

Recent government figures showed that in September 76% of people awaiting a decision on their asylum claim had been waiting for more than six months, up from 58% in September 2019. There is growing evidence that managing people's cases while they remain in the community with access to support is both less expensive and more effective. Given the significant backlog in processing asylum applications, made worse during the current pandemic, now is the time to consider alternatives.

We would be delighted to work with you to highlight the challenges of the system. We'd also be very happy to facilitate conversations with people who are stuck in the system so that you can better understand their concerns.

Yours sincerely,

1. *Ali McGinley, Director, **AVID (Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees)***
2. *Anna Pincus, Director, **Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group***
3. *Bella Sankey, Director, **Detention Action***
4. *Ben Bano and Phil Kerton, Co-Directors, **Seeking Sanctuary***
5. *Beth Wilson, Director, **Bristol Refugee Rights***
6. *Bethan Godley, Acting Project Coordinator/Director, **Morton Hall Detainee Visitors' Group***
7. *Celia Clarke, Director, **Bail for Immigration Detainees***
8. *Chris Lukey, Joint Coordinator, **Manchester Immigration Detainee Support Team (MIDST)***
9. *Chris Perks, Chair, **Kent Refugee Help***
10. *Clare Moseley, Founder, **Care4Calais***
11. *Clea Khan, Chair, **Medicins Sans Frontières UK Take Action Group***
12. *Dorian Leatham, Chief Executive, **Migrants' Rights Network***
13. *Dr David Brown, Chair, **Birmingham City of Sanctuary***
14. *Dr Edie Friedman, Executive Director, **JCORE (Jewish Council for Racial Equality)***
15. *Dr Razia Shariff, CEO, **Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)***
16. *Dr. Jacob Berkson, Trustee, **Thousand 4 1000***

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17. Ellen Waters, Director of Development, **Doctors of the World UK**
18. Emily Crowley, Chief Executive, **Student Action for Refugees (STAR)**
19. Emma Ginn, Director, **Medical Justice**
20. **End Deportations Belfast**
21. Grainne Farrell, Coordinator, **Refugee Info Bus**
22. Jean Gould, Co-chair, **Lewes Organisation in Support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (LOSRAS)**
23. Joanne MacInnes, Director, **West London Welcome**
24. Jonathan Ellis, Project Director, **Detention Forum**
25. Jonny Willis, CEO, **Refugee Youth Service**
26. Josie Naughton, CEO, **Choose Love**
27. Julian Prior, Chief Executive, **Action Foundation**
28. Kate Alexander, Director, **Scottish Detainee Visitors**
29. **Larne House Visitors Group**
30. Liz Peretz, Chair, **Oxfordshire Against Immigration Detention**
31. Loraine Masiya Mponela, Chair, **CARAG (Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group)**
32. Maddie Harris, Director, **Humans for Rights Network**
33. Maddy Crowther, Co-Executive Director, **Waging Peace**
34. Mark Goldring, Director, **Asylum Welcome**
35. Marta Welander, Executive Director, **Refugee Rights Europe**
36. Maude Casey and Gianpaolo Boldrini, **Migrant English Project, Brighton**
37. Maya Esslemont, Founder & Director, **After Exploitation**
38. Mel Steel, Director, **Voices in Exile**
39. Mia Hasenson-Gross, Director, **René Cassin**
40. Michael Collins, Coordinator, **Right to Remain**
41. Naomi Webb, Executive Director, **Good Chance Theatre**
42. Nazek Ramadan, Director, **Migrant Voice**
43. Nick Harborne, CEO, **Reading Refugee Support Group**
44. Nicola Woods, Director, and Lou Armitt, Coordinator, **Yarl's Wood Befrienders**
45. Priya Commander, Clinical Manager of the Multi-Ethnic Counselling Service, **Waterloo Community Counselling**
46. **Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN)**
47. Richard Williams, Chair, **Sanctuary on Sea (Brighton & Hove City of Sanctuary)**
48. Ros Ereira, Director, **Solidarity with Refugees**
49. Sabir Zazai, Chief Executive, **Scottish Refugee Council**
50. Sam Grant, Head of Policy and Campaigns, **Liberty**
51. Sarah Teather, Director, **Jesuit Refugee Service UK**
52. Siphosibanda, End Destitution Coordinator, **Participation and the Practice of Rights**
53. **SOAS Detainee Support**
54. **Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers**
55. Stephen Hale OBE; CEO; **Refugee Action**
56. Dr. Sue Conlan, Director, **TACTIC Immigration and Asylum Training Consultancy**
57. **Sussex Defend the NHS**
58. Tanya Long, Director, **Samphire**
59. Toni Soni, Centre Director, **Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre**

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60. Traci Kirkland, Head of Charity, **Govan Community Project**

61. Veecca Smith Uka, Organiser for **These Walls Must Falls West Yorkshire**

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