

Written evidence submitted by Freed Voices (COR0051)

Introduction

- 1) Freed Voices is a group of experts by experience dedicated to speaking about the realities of UK's immigration detention and calling for reform.
- 2) All Freed Voices members have experience of immigration detention and the UK immigration and asylum system. Our members have been held in immigration detention periods ranging from weeks to more than four and a half years. Some of the Freed Voices members now have legal status in the UK and some are still going through immigration or asylum process.
- 3) Freed Voices is coordinated, supported and facilitated by Detention Action, and we work closely together on all our activities.
- 4) Given our remit and area of expertise, we are addressing two of the issues detailed in the terms of reference of this inquiry:
 - a) How the Home Office and its major contractors are working together to ensure the safe and effective operation of contracted services is maintained, particularly where these services affect vulnerable people;
 - b) The effectiveness of Home Office communications to its partners, responders and the wider public about its preparations.
- 5) Related to the above two areas, we address particularly:
 - a) Our concerns on COVID-19 in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs).
 - b) Unclear communication followed by the Home Office related to the suspension of reporting conditions for people navigating the immigration or asylum system.
 - c) Asylum support and accommodation.
- 6) As a group of people who have experienced immigration detention and have navigated the immigration and asylum system, we believe that the Government's response to the current Covid-19 is wholly inadequate. We see unprecedented measures being implemented across the country in order to protect human health and life, but we see those in the immigration system, and people in IRCs in particular, being excluded. The implication is that the health and life of those in the immigration system is not considered to have the same value.

Covid-19 situation in IRCs

- 7) There have now been two confirmed cases of Covid-19 in IRCs, with many more people showing symptoms and being held in isolation. We are very concerned at reports that the latest confirmed case of Covid-19 was of someone newly detained at Brook House IRC despite showing Covid-19 symptoms on arrival¹.
- 8) We note that the Ministry of Justice has implemented testing measures for both prison staff and prisons and is publishing the results regularly, showing that over 100 prisoners and more than 20 staff have tested positive so far. It does not appear that similar testing measures have been implemented by the Home Office for IRCs.

- 9) Given the highly contagious nature of Covid-19, the number of Covid-19 cases in IRCs is very likely to be higher than the two confirmed so far. We are deeply concerned that the lack of testing and transparency in IRCs is putting people at even greater risk. There can be more than two Covid-19 cases but it is difficult to identify true numbers due to the lack of testing.
- 10) We are alarmed by the claims by an IRC whistleblower that staff have been forced to escort people in IRCs and prisons without Personal Protection Equipments (PPE)ⁱⁱ. IRC staff going in and out of the centres also risk spreading Covid-19 either to those held or to the outside community.
- 11) As people who have been held in IRCs, we know from experience that the conditions of detention make it impossible to practice safe social distancing in order control the spread of Covid-19. IRCs are notorious for unhygienic conditions. People share toilets, shower units, cells and laundry rooms that are often unhygienic. Communal areas such as eating areas can be hotspots for Covid-19 to spread.
- 12) In March, the Home Office suspended visits to IRCs from family, friends and support groups due to Covid-19. These are a lifeline for those detained, and not having contact with the outside world will only increase the pain and uncertainty felt by many. For the families of those detained, this is also an agonising time. They are unable to visit their loved ones in detention and will be worried for their safety.
- 13) From our first hand experience we know that being held in IRCs is a traumatic experience for anyone, even during 'normal times'. Many people in detention have serious mental health conditions. People are cut off from their loved ones. Self-harm and suicide attempts are a daily occurrence. We are concerned that being held in IRCs during a crisis time period with lack of contact and external support can increase that suicide attempts in IRCs.
- 14) We know from bitter experience that the concept of 'imminent removal' is routinely stretched beyond any credible point. Members of Freed Voices have been held in IRCs for periods ranging from weeks to more than four and a half years.
- 15) The Home Office has now acknowledged that removals to more than 49 countries are not possible due to global travel restrictions. Even voluntary returns are currently suspended, meaning that even if someone wanted to return to another country, they would be unable to do so.
- 16) The one and only purpose of IRCs – to facilitate immediate removals from the UK - cannot be fulfilled at this time. Consequently, there is no reason to expose a single person to the risks posed by Covid-19 in detention centres by holding people in IRCs when it is apparent that imminent removals are not possible.
- 17) While no deaths resulting from Covid-19 appear to have occurred in IRCs to date, we must acknowledge this as a sad possibility. We must reiterate in the strongest terms that further cases of Covid-19 in IRCs and any possible resulting deaths are entirely preventable tragedies. Given that there have already been many deaths in IRCs over the years, our view is that the Home Office must take every measures to prevent any deaths.
- 18) In these unprecedented times, when the world is facing a global health emergency, our view is that everyone becomes vulnerable and deserves protection. There should be no exception for people held in IRCs. We are strongly of the view that all the people currently held in IRCs must be released with suitable accommodation provided when necessary.

Asylum support allowance and accommodation

- 19) We echo the calls by specialised immigration and asylum sector organisations calling for asylum allowance to be increased by £20 per week due to the impact of COVID-19ⁱⁱⁱ.
- 20) People with ongoing asylum claims receive £37.75 and people with refused asylum claims receive £35.35 per week. All Freed Voices members had been in receipt or are currently in receipt of asylum support (Section 95 or Section 4). From our first hand experience we know that people on asylum support struggled to cover their daily essential expenses even before the Covid-19 outbreak. The current situation has only increased pressure on those receiving asylum support.
- 21) The UK is currently on lockdown and the Government has advised the public to practice social distancing and to limit the travel to tackle the spread of Covid-19. For people on asylum support it is impossible to limit their travel to do shopping infrequently. With the current level and frequency of asylum support, it is not possible to buy enough essentials, such as food and toiletries, to last a week, meaning that more frequent trips to shops are required. In addition, often more than three residents have to share one refrigerator in asylum accommodations and space issues are commonplace. This puts asylum seekers and those in the immigration system at a higher risk.
- 22) We believe that limiting someone to live on roughly £5 per day, particularly during a crisis situation, is contrary to British values.
- 23) We highlight the regular difficulties faced by people receiving Section 4 support, which are also exacerbated by the current Covid-19 situation. Those receiving cashless Section 4 support constantly face many challenges; during this time, extra flexibility is required in order to enable people to meet the unique challenges of lockdown. During this Covid-19 crisis, people receiving Section 4 support must receive cash support equivalent in amount to Section 95 support.

Asylum accommodation and Covid-19

- 24) We echo the concerns by refugee organisation regarding asylum accommodation. People who have sought asylum are made to share cramped rooms and even share beds with strangers in asylum accommodations^{iv}. These practices are the opposite of Government advice to contain Covid-19.
- 25) Asylum accommodation is often very unstable, with people entering and leaving frequently, which poses a serious threat to residents if they are not tested for Covid-19.
- 26) We are alarmed by reports of people in asylum accommodation being made to share beds. This is not only unsafe during this Covid-19 situation but also hugely inappropriate at any time.
- 27) We believe it is vitally important that overcrowding is dealt with as soon as possible, and that any private contractors providing asylum accommodation are scrutinised in order to ensure that they are providing safe and acceptable services.

Reporting conditions for people navigating the immigration and asylum system

- 28) We welcome the Home Office decision to suspend reporting conditions until further notice during the current Covid-19 situation.

- 29) Like many in the system, members of Freed Voices are required to report with the Home Office at disproportionate frequencies, some even twice per week. Disproportionate and unnecessary reporting conditions can severely disrupt the daily lives of those affected. We believe that the current suspension of reporting is an indication that such requirements are all too often not necessary.
- 30) We also take this opportunity to highlight the fact that reporting can be traumatic for people due to the ever-present risk of detention. Many are taken into detention when they go to report, sometimes even while their children are present. Those reporting are complying with their conditions and are engaging with the immigration system, and reporting should not be used as a method of taking people into detention.

Recommendations

- 31) **1:** The only purpose of IRCs is to facilitate imminent removals from the UK. Given that removals are not currently possible due to travel restrictions and that there is a major risk of a Covid-19 outbreak in IRCs, all people currently held under immigration powers should be released immediately with suitable accommodation when needed. There should be no new detentions while the Covid-19 risk remains high.
- 32) **2:** The weekly asylum support allowance should be increased by £20 per week for both Section 95 and Section 4. People on Section 4 support should receive payments in cash in the same way as Section 95.
- 33) **3:** All asylum accommodation should be immediately reviewed to ensure that residents are able to practice social distancing in line with the government advice. As much as possible, people should be given single rooms that will enable them to practice safe social distancing and to protect their privacy and dignity.
- 34) **4:** We consider that the suspension of the Home Office reporting conditions until further notice is an indication that the harsh reporting conditions are not essential and there are other ways to engage with people navigating the immigration and asylum system. Reporting procedures should be reviewed as soon as possible.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for any further information.

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ⁱ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-detention-immigration-removal-centre-brook-house-home-office-a9458206.html>

ii <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/forced-removals-leave-immigration-workers-21856249>

iii <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/news/joint-letter-on-increasing-asylum-support-rates-in-response-to-the-covid-19-crisis>

iv <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/15/coronavirus-fears-uk-asylum-seekers-made-share-cramped-rooms>