Our newsletter is written at a time when people we support are held in Brook House fearing removal to Rwanda, and when we face an inadequate response from the Home Office to the Brook House Public Inquiry Report in spite of the wholesale failure of safeguards described in the report. Our team are stretched to the limit. Yet, in this Spring Newsletter you will read about our hopes for our new research into use of interpreters, our hopes for our new EDI working group, you will meet our new Chair of Trustees and staff who are leading Refugee Tales and our post-detention work. You’ll find joyful memories from time spent as guests of the Landmark Trust and as nominees at the Sheila McKechnie awards. See our joy in community in the photo above taken at a Self-Advocacy group workshop. Read about how it is to start out as a new visitor and find out what 30 Windows mean to us! Thank you for your support. I hope there is much to inspire you in this newsletter reflecting on our work in our thirtieth birthday year.

Anna Pincus - Director GDWG
Do Good(er) - On starting to visit with GDWG

By Rachel Cutler

Last summer for two days I joined the GDWG Refugee Tales walk. Here I found connection, joy, strength, and gentleness. All of which worked as an antidote to my anger about the treatment of refugees in the UK.

I decided then to become a GDWG volunteer visitor, and having been pressed about my commitment and my capacity to take on the role, I began visiting a detained person in Brook House in January.

I feared that the man I was visiting would not find the visits useful to his life inside. I worried about the attitude of the security, and the tension that comes when others control your environment. I found the security mostly kind and careful, and it has been a useful experience to know that, even for a brief time, I do not hold the keys to my freedom. I hoped to create a strong relationship with the detained man, one where he would trust me, and enjoy our visits. It is asking an awful lot of someone whose life experiences have given him little reason to trust anyone, let alone this white, English, woman, ‘do gooder.’

But we have built a relationship, and we talk openly about the process of getting out, about how he can help the charity when he is out, and about fitness and football. He has forgiven me for being an Arsenal supporter and I have mostly forgiven him for supporting Liverpool. Four months into our visits I still feel I am not doing enough, but each time I arrive he lets me know how crucial they are to his life as it is now; detained indefinitely. If this man, who has seen so much that is bad, thinks that what GDWG visitors do is good, then I will follow his lead, and I will wear my ‘do gooder’ status with pride.

A message from Laura Moffatt, the new Chair of GDWG

The last few months of chairing the Board of Trustees GDWG has been a whirlwind of activity. I must thank all of Board of Trustees for their support and understanding of my inexperience especially the past chair Marie Dewson for her help and guidance and leaving the charity in such good shape.

At the heart of GDWG is of course our caring for and befriending people in detention and after. The figures speak for themselves of visits and support in our latest Annual Review that so well showcases the work of GDWG. What is very clear to me is that we are a giant puzzle of amazing volunteers and dedicated paid staff so wonderfully led.
by Anna, all fitting together with visits, practical support, clothing preparation and delivery, fundraising and getting our message out with Refugee Tales with those people with lived experience. It would not work without all these interconnections and co-operation that give us our strength.

In all of the numerous emails I write, each meeting I attend and every training session completed, the people I have visited are in my head. Although a supporter of GDWG for a long time it is visiting people in Brook and Tinsley House that draws me in. Making a connection and allowing space for someone in such a difficult situation to talk and share harrowing testimony, sometimes laugh together, to be so trusted is a privilege as all volunteers that visit will know.

When a text arrives after a visit ‘Thank you for coming to see me Miss Laura, it is so good to talk with you’. Thank you everyone in GDWG that makes that text possible.

In our 30th birthday year

At our May AGM, GDWG staff, trustees, volunteer visitors, walkers and experts by experience each reflected for a minute on 30 years of the charity and what its work meant to them. Advocacy Manager, Karris Hamilton summed up our work and we think her words say it all!

When I think of GDWG I think of human connection.

I think of building trust, brick by brick with people whose lives have taught them it is not safe to trust others.

I think of slowly repairing what has been torn apart.

I think of accepting people as they arrive and keeping judgment at bay.

I think of holding a space for someone, a space that is just for them.

Where they can be free, knowing that it is safe, and we will continue to be there.

I think of tears, difficult conversations, distress, and pain.

I think of not knowing what to say.

But I also think of joy!

I think of laughter and jokes,

And courageous people finding hope where there appears there is little.

I think of community and solidarity.

I think of continuously fighting against a system that has been created to break people down.

Unwaveringly showing up, trying to maintain hope and channelling anger in order to use it to demand change.

And to power us to keep going, day after day.

30 Windows

By Andy Barnes

30 Windows is a fundraising project, designed by GDWG, in which supporters are asked to create a social event between 8th May 2024 and 8th May 2025 to encourage guests at the events to sign up as Friends of GDWG. The Friends scheme is described on the GDWG website: www.gdwg.org.uk/friends-scheme.
We invite everyone in our community to organise such an event. These events could be anything from a coffee morning, to a workshop or a talk. We have a whole list of other ideas to encourage people to organise an event. The events will be called ‘Windows’ onto GDWG’s work; and the ‘30 Windows’ project refers to the charity’s 30th Birthday year in 2025 - which coincidentally is also the 10th anniversary year of the first Refugee Tales Walk - hence the idea of organising ‘Windows’ events between May 2024 and May 2025.

The ‘30 Windows’ project is also on the website, here: [www.gdwg.org.uk/30-windows](http://www.gdwg.org.uk/30-windows)

The idea is to make at least one ‘Friend’ for GDWG at each ‘Window’ event - i.e. someone who signs up for regular giving to the charity and this can be for as little as £5 per month. All GDWG Friends gain access to the charity’s special Friends events and updates, and Friends receive welcome gifts for signing up as Friends, too. We are encouraging everyone to join GDWG and Refugee Tales in celebrating these birthdays, whilst raising funds to continue GDWG’s ever-increasingly important work - we’re aiming for 30 Windows in our 30th birthday year. There can be no better way to celebrate!

**The first 30 Windows event**

By Mary Barrett

An Artist Open House event at St Luke’s Church Shoreham was well attended and featured some of the work of the Pickwell Foundation who have worked with refugees in a hotel in Devon, plus testimony from families who have benefitted from the family resettlement programme in Brighton. Mary Barrett introduced the work of GDWG...
and the Refugee Tales project. Well known actor Priyanna Burford read the Prologue to Book 2 and The Abandoned Person's Tale as told to Olivia Laing from volume 2 of Refugee Tales.

Our new Annual Review

Our Annual Review for 2023 'Building Community' is out. Our Director writes: 'As we enter our 30th birthday year, our charity reaches beyond the locality of the detention centres where our volunteers visit, and yet visits and the people we visit remain at the heart of everything we do.' In her first year as Chair of GDWG, Laura Moffatt pays tribute to volunteer visitors: 'I am determined to continue to be a volunteer visitor to constantly remind myself why this charity exists.'

In 2023 we welcomed the findings of the Brook House Public Inquiry with the GDWG Self-Advocacy Group central in our public responses and our Walking Inquiry multi-media exhibition took our call for change around the UK. The year in numbers conveys increasing need: we helped 2,306 people in detention, we gave out 2,661 mobile top-ups, provided 1,091 packs of clothes and carried out casework for 902 detained people. Thanks to our inspiring community for an intense year of dedicated work.

Research on use of Interpreters
By Karris Hamilton

Accessing interpreters and translated materials has long been an issue raised by people GDWG support. People will tell us that they had an appointment with a solicitor and understood nothing because there was no interpreter. People tell us of letters they receive that they don’t understand, which later turn out to be fundamental to their immigration claim but were missed due to the lack of translation. Not being able to access information in their own language is extremely isolating and increases people’s vulnerability, isolation and levels of distress.

There is little UK research into people’s experiences of interpreting and translation access in detention. However, through testimonials directly to GDWG staff and volunteers, HMIP reports, IMB reports, Brook House Inquiry findings and research into how this impacts people in prisons, it is clear that this is a huge issue. In HMIP reports it is repeated in nearly every IRC visited that Healthcare and Home Office staff do not use interpreters enough. The Brook House Inquiry found that the ‘day-to-day impacts of language barriers included detention paperwork not being translated, detained people not understanding their induction, and detained people seeing others struggling to understand their situation and being unable to communicate.’

At GDWG we see the personal impact that has on the individual and how much distress it causes on a daily basis.

This is why we have been funded by the Lloyds Bank Foundation’s National Influencing Programme for a research project into this topic. We are really excited to have this opportunity to highlight such a pertinent issue and push for change within the system in order to empower individuals who do not speak English. We believe if this issue is resolved it could have huge personal benefits for the individuals who are
subject to immigration controls and also to increase efficiency within the system. Thank you to our volunteers who have raised concerns with us about interpreter access and drawn attention to particular stories of people they are visiting that could be useful for this research. Please do continue to share any examples of inadequate access to interpreters and translation.

Training from GDWG
By Lynne Bellworthy

Our group of volunteers in Horley, Welcome Club, part of Refugees Welcome Crawley, have been running an English conversation and social group with activities for people seeking asylum who are staying in Horley hotels every week for over a year now. We meet people from many different countries and with very varied levels of competency in English and our sessions are always busy, noisy and great fun. We also try to support people in other ways which has led us to consider training for ourselves in mental health, both in our supporting role and in supporting each other. Understandably our guests come with various practical and psychological problems to overcome.

We asked GDWG to provide us with a training workshop which Karris Hamilton and Val Coumont facilitated in Horley. The workshop was very relaxed, we had plenty of tea and cake and all the volunteers felt comfortable to take part in the conversations. We talked about how to spot signs of mental health deterioration and learned that we were already sensitive to signs and could often trust our gut instincts. We talked about ways to enable our guests to feel safe to talk to us if they wanted to. This led to discussions about how we ourselves would cope with what they told us and how we would recognise when we needed to direct them to seek professional help. We all feel an amount of guilt about the little that we can do to alleviate their situations but supportive signposting and encouragement of hope, tempered with some realism, can help our guests to carry on and not give up.

Val related a lovely and pertinent story about a teacher who gave a poor pupil a sturdy briefcase for his books. The boy grew up remembering this kindness giving him the hope that enabled him to have a successful life. Small gestures of kindness can help to change mindsets from despair to an enduring hope. We all admitted to having problems with setting and keeping to boundaries and so we are, as a group, determined to work on that. It is our job to support people in a bad situation and, to do that effectively, we need to look after our own mental health. We re-enforced this at the workshop and were reminded that our regular volunteer group meetings and informal chats before and after the classes are essential for us to talk through our worries and achievements in supporting our guests. We had a lovely and extremely useful afternoon and wish to thank Karris and Val for their wonderful support and encouragement. We are looking forward to two follow-up workshops in the near future.

The launch of the July Refugee Tales walk

On a cold January morning, walkers converged upon a church in the London Borough of Wandsworth to hear about
plans for walking in 2024. Train engineering works, a burst water main and icy conditions were no barriers to our determined community! We started with a walk led by John and Mary. Who knew walking in Putney and on Wimbledon Common would take us into woodland that felt far from busy London streets when it was really no distance at all. We even met a windmill! Walking at the back of the group with cards about Refugee Tales to give out was impossible. Everyone who came past had already been given a card by eager walkers before us. The ground was icy. Frozen mud was easy to walk on. There was colour from gorse but otherwise a beauty in a pale landscape palette. And lots of catching up and intense conversations welcoming new walkers and looking forward to walks in 2024. After lunch, we got down to the excitement of the day; hearing about plans for our July walk with Ridy from the GDWG self-advocacy group leading the event.

Mary told us we would be walking from Edenbridge via Oxted, Caterham, Wallington, Wandsworth to Westminster. Hannah told us about youth engagement over the last year and invited walkers to share any school contacts along the route. David introduced us to the theme of our walk this year: Human Rights. David shared a quotation from ‘Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being' by Paul Mason. In this book, Mason writes that defending the human and human rights... ‘Involves putting your body in a place where it can actually [defend the human] and having done so, to hold a tiny piece of liberated space long enough for other people to find it, populate it and live. The radical defence of the human being starts with you.' And David finished by saying: ‘That's what Refugee Tales does when it walks for human rights. It occupies, holds and liberates space. And then it walks and walks and waits for other people to catch up.'

It was an inspiring day! Thanks everyone who joined us in solidarity and we look forward to walking with you in July.

Reflections on the Refugee Tales launch

'It was my first walk and I enjoyed the day and will come next time. The walking was very relaxing. I don’t talk with many people usually so I wondered if I talked too much and it was tiring but I am always going to come on walks now. It was good to talk with many people.'
'It was fantastic meeting together again. I found the day very nice and interesting... The walk in July sounds special because we will be walking to London. I didn't know the exact places but it sounded a beautiful route ending in Westminster. I feel better after a gathering. My main problem is we don't have people to talk to, so Refugee Tales is a good opportunity to share ideas and meet new people. I exchanged a lot of ideas. Instead of giving tablets, a better way to treat people is an improved social environment. The first symptom of poor mental health is withdrawing from society so helping people to bring back to connection is the best treatment.'

'It was nice meeting new people and people you haven't seen for some time. You could discuss things with everyone. It helps me a lot mentally to discuss with people. You see everybody and you see people are helping you go through what you are going through. You are not neglected. You are not alone. It helps me so when I come back home I feel better. You feel as if everything is okay. You feel a sense of reasoning. People are helping you.'

**GDWG Director at the AVID Birthday AGM**

The GDWG Director spoke at the 30th birthday of AVID. Here are some of Anna's reflections:

Thirty years of bearing witness to immigration detention. The essential elements of visiting have always been radical, about taking time out of a busy schedule to sit and create a space in which the visitor gives up control of how the space is used. The visitor does not have to extract, weigh and measure stories shared but to experience them as they emerge sometimes in narratives that have been often told and sometimes in fragments almost shocking to the teller in their first revelation. Visitors enter a destabilising space where there is no timeline either for the stories shared that are rarely linear, or the journey the detained person is currently on that is always unknown with detention being indefinite and the future being uncertain. This is a space of loss. Loss of freedom, family and friends, loss of intimacy, privacy, certainty, loss of agency. It is also a space for loss of health, loss of safety, where mental health deteriorates.

We know visitor groups all around the country are monitoring progress against the recommendations of the Public Inquiry into mistreatment at Brook House IRC and AVID are enabling a network of informal human rights monitors UK wide. Listening is at the heart of our advocacy and emanates from the listening in the visits room that is at the heart of all our work. We see AVID at the heart of a network with listening at its heart and believe that this colours the way we and other visitor groups engage positively with people of influence. We are convinced that all visitor groups working more closely and combining our monitoring and evidence gathering will be a strength in the future. Thank you, AVID for enabling us to speak with one strong voice. Our visitors are human rights monitors, but more than that they are human rights beacons. They see and describe but they also enact and demonstrate a better way and shine a hopeful light.
Easyfundraising

Thank you to everyone who uses easyfundraising to raise money for us every time you shop online. Raising money for GDWG through easyfundraising is brilliant throughout the year. Using easyfundraising every time you shop online means that over 7,000 brands will donate to us, including all the big names like eBay, John Lewis & Partners, Argos, ASOS, Expedia, M&S, Just Eat, and many more! Using easyfundraising means you can raise free donations for us no matter what you’re buying. If you haven’t signed up to support us yet through easyfundraising, it’s completely free and isn’t too time consuming to set up. These donations really help us, so it would be great if you could take a moment to get started. Please email Lauren at lauren@gdwg.org.uk if we can help with setting up easyfundraising.

You can find our easyfundraising page here.

Welcome to the team to Lara and Lauren!

GDWG is delighted to welcome two people to our team this year.

Lara Bligh-Caplan joined GDWG to work on Refugee Tales and to support our Board of Trustees. Previously, Lara trained to be a professional dancer and has run dance and music based community engagement workshops working with displaced people, neurodivergent adults, women’s groups and children. Lara has loved engaging with communities through various artistic mediums so has the perfect background to work on Refugee Tales events with their mix of storytelling, music and dance.

Lara studied a Masters at SOAS in Migration and Diaspora Studies and has volunteered with migrant and refugee organisations such as: The Launchpad Collective (TLC), Refugee Community Kitchen, The Migration Connection Festival and the South London Refugee Association.

We’re pleased to welcome Lara to the Refugee Tales community and she’s already brought dance to some of our workshops. Thank you, Lara.

Lauren Powdrell joined the GDWG team after having worked in Media at The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Charity, and in Communications & Digital Content at UN-Habitat in Kenya. While studying at Durham University, Lauren chose to write her dissertation on Refugee Tales, a project she loved and that led her to follow GDWG’s work.

Since 2022, Lauren has volunteered with No to Hassockfield, the campaign group calling for Derwentside IRC to be closed, and was President of Durham Student Action for Refugees before that. She also enjoyed volunteering with Durham City of Sanctuary, Aid Alliance, and as a regular volunteer at a school in an informal settlement in Nairobi. You’ll see Lauren greeting you in a Refugee Tales tabard when you attend our Saturday day walks and it’s great to have her on the team. Welcome Lauren!
Visit to a Landmark Trust property

We felt hugely fortunate when we were successful in our application to the Landmark Trust ‘50 for Free’ and were granted five days for the GDWG Self-Advocacy group to stay in The Grange at Ramsgate, the home of Augustus Pugin looked after by the Trust that was an incredible setting for us to inhabit.

Visit to The Grange

The experience at The Grange in Ramsgate was surreal, magical and unlike anything I have ever experienced. It was the kind of place with hidden doors, floor to ceiling bookshelves, ornate wallpaper and secret staircases that lead you to floors unknown. It transported you back to being a little child and wanting to explore; you could see it on the faces of everyone walking through those big wooden doors for the first time; I think the term is ‘big eye’ - when one’s eyes stretch so wide to take in the surroundings one looks perpetually shocked.

Lara Bligh-Caplan wrote:

The experience at The Landmark Trust was a very grounding experience, we all cooked, ate, played games, collaged and danced together. Initially, everyone was a little nervous about my dance workshop, stating ‘I’m not much of a dancer’ or, ‘I much prefer watching dance then doing it myself’. However, once the music started the atmosphere shifted, the group became more playful, putting their own spin on the movement and adapting the movement to what best suited them.

My intentions were for the group to connect with their bodies, gently

Drawing from ‘The Grange’ by Ruby Wright
mobilising joints, stretching and unfurling different body parts, trying to understand how they move, or what movements felt natural. I tried to stress that the session was more focused on how the body feels as opposed to how the body aesthetically looks - more of a somatic approach. We finished the session with some meditation; a dear friend of mine, Lluis Domenech Plana, had recorded a meditative flute track as accompaniment while I led the group through it. Asking them to pay attention to different body parts, their breath, weight, tension etc. There is something so powerful about movement where one does not need to speak the same language to communicate - the body speaks louder than words often do. I found this to be the case in this session (although English was not an issue) giving the body a platform to ‘speak’ opened up a whole new way for the group to connect.

Before I left, one of the group members asked whether we had time for another dance workshop - this was a lovely note on which to end my time at The Grange.

Lauren Powdrell wrote:

One day we went to the Crab Museum and ate fish and chips at Margate seafront. One of the Self-Advocate members highlighted that, ‘I learned so many things at the Crab Museum. There was a beautiful view at the beach.’ We also had a writing workshop led by Kat at Howling Notes, who helped us map out memories of our past and hopes for our future. We wrote poems about random objects and our trip to Margate. Speaking about the workshop, members of the Self-Advocate Group said: ‘Before I didn’t know how to start writing and the workshop helped me start writing’ - S ‘The way she brings out words and made use of your experience to talk about the now and the future was great.’ - O

We then walked along the beach and Lucy shared a lot of history about Margate, with O commenting that, ‘I learned a lot about Margate and Ramsgate that I didn’t know before.’ This was our last evening at The Grange, so we explored the very grand house again and enjoyed a reflective meal together. O reflected that, ‘I have immensely benefitted from the stay - emotionally, physically - I can’t quantify it, but it was enormous. In Ramsgate, I could stand still and nothing was bothering me. It was like a visit of freedom - a day was like 1000 years for me. It refreshed me. I want to thank The Landmark Trust for keeping the place alive.’

The GDWG Equity Diversity and Inclusion Working Group

By Liz Nissan

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED) Working Group has been created as part of the GDWG new 5-year strategic plan. There, we find Equity as one of the “four pillars” that epitomise the organisation’s values and it is in elaborating the ways in which we intend “to imagine equity better together” over the next five years that the establishment of this group is mentioned. Specifically, the goal over the next five years is to “increase the involvement of experts by experience and develop the diversity of our community ensuring a space that is anti-oppressive and welcoming for all.” An independent organisation will conduct a full EDI audit.
of every aspect of GDWG’s work with the EDI Working Group there to “guide our progress” in seeking to develop GDWG as a more diverse, inclusive organisation in its policies, processes and practices.

These are early days and our first meeting on 2 April was very exploratory: we learnt of the initial EDI training that has already started for staff, volunteers and trustees and about the organisation that will do the audit of EDI in GDWG’s work. We began to get to know each other as we started to explore our own ideas around EDI in the context of GDWG. And we moved towards a consensus on the first actions we need to take. Firstly, we felt that we would benefit from attending an EDI training session as a group, to help us create a common ground, shared understandings, and help us to develop terms of reference for the group. Secondly, we hope to diversify membership of the group further by inviting members of the Self-Advocacy Group to join as well as other volunteers who may be interested.

Developing a stronger culture of EDI is a huge task. Being a member of this Working Group is both daunting and exciting: daunting because the scope of the task is potentially so far-reaching in moving towards that “better imagined”, and exciting because of the privilege and learning involved in being part of that journey. Do let us know if you would like to join us.

Walking Inquiry shortlisted for National Campaigner Awards
By Ton Bunnin

In April we got the exciting news that our Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention was shortlisted for the 2024 National Campaigner Awards, run by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK).
SMK is a charity set up in memory of the late housing and social justice campaigner Sheila McKechnie. It supports campaigners and campaigning, and offers training and resources to help people develop campaigning skills. Each year its awards celebrate the most innovative and effective campaigns, from individuals and tiny grassroots groups to large national organisations.

The Walking Inquiry was shortlisted in the Amplifying Voices category, recognising campaigns ‘either led by or that give voice and profile to those groups who are least heard.’ We were alongside two other impressive nominations: These Walls Must Fall is a lived-experience migration justice campaigning network formed by Right to Remain; Holding Our Own is a campaign driven by young people that challenges dominant narratives about ‘serious violence’ that have fuelled the expansion of police powers. They have created non-policing community-led alternative solutions to respond to the root causes of violence and injustice.

In the run up to the awards SMK were active on social media promoting all the shortlisted campaigns. Through a dedicated page on the SMK website we were able to tell new audiences about the Walking Inquiry and why indefinite detention must end. The winners were announced at a ceremony in London on 15 May. I was delighted to attend on behalf of GDWG and Refugee Tales. Being in a room full of people all committed to achieving social change was energising. It was exciting to learn about the many creative and inspiring ways that people are working for greater social justice. Lots of people I chatted to already knew about the Walking Inquiry and were full of praise, and others were interested to learn more.

In the event, we didn’t win. The Amplifying Voices award went to Holding Our Own, but I came away feeling proud and motivated. Being shortlisted is a testament to everyone who has taken part in the Walking Inquiry, especially the members of the Self Advocacy group and others with experience of detention. As GDWG trustee and self-advocate Pious says on the SMK website: “Being part of the Walking Inquiry has been a powerful and important experience for many people.

We come together through walking, talking, and raising awareness about immigration detention. Having this recognition from SMK gives us hope and confidence that more and more people will join our call for change.”

Please visit the SMK webpage about the Walking Inquiry and share it with others: smk.org.uk/awards_nominations/the-walking-inquiry-into-immigration-detention/

To find out more about the SMK awards, all shortlisted campaigns and winners, visit: smk.org.uk/what-we-do/connect/awards/

Walking in Solidarity in Lewes and Innsbruck

Thank you for joining us for Walk With Us in April. We enjoyed a scenic walk along the river and woods in Lewes, a picnic lunch with a beautiful view over the South Downs, as well as flapjacks that motivated us on the uphill! Thank you to Jean for
organising the walking route and for baking tasty flapjacks for us. At lunchtime, Delvin read one of his poems for us, which was aptly titled, ‘On Top of the Mountain.’ Here is his poem:

At last conquers all
Doing something, standing tall
Getting ready to be up there
Taking so long but prepared and fit
Fascinating just to see
From on top as far as the eyes can
Feels a lot closer next to the sky
In this moment the heart finds proof
Nothing else matters
Nothing seems vague
One more chapter out of the book of life's page
Feel no anger, hate or rage
Like a myth, all legends made
A long way up,
A hard fall down
Only few birds may nest around
The snow unfriendly, the wind so heavy
The mist hugs dearly at times you can't see
Clearly. Despite all the perils and the Dangers evolved. The Top of the Mountain
Is the greatest achievement of them all.

There were more than 60 of us walking in Lewes in the sunshine. We were so thrilled that our friends in Innsbruck, Austria, were also walking with us in solidarity - in the snow! The Innsbruck University radio team reported on the Innsbruck solidarity walk in the podcast, "The English Frequency." You can listen via The English Frequency Podcast 13 | cba - cultural broadcasting archive at [24:15-31:00]. Thank you to Professor Helga Ramsey-Kurz for organising this walk, and for sharing the following reflections from walkers:

"This walking with people ... it convinces me. You walk along with others, talk to this person and then to that person and all in goodwill. Simple kindness happens even between people who have never met before and it's so easy, when you walk together, so easy to connect."

"This year's solidarity walk was completely different, the route, the weather, the impossibility to enjoy a picnic, as we did last year, and yet it too was perfect, in fact I had the feeling the rain and snow brought us even closer together. We were braving the cold together, laughing about getting wet, and glad that for most of the walk we were protected by trees." Thanks to everyone
who walks in solidarity with us and please let us know if you would like to take part in or host a solidarity walk.

Statistics and People

By Stephen Klein

The other day I received a link to the House of Lords debate on immigration. The video showed the minister on his feet answering questions from his peers and totally at home in the polite British debate process that typifies parliament. The question was put by Shami Chakrabarti.

The answer was provided with confidence and clarity. My Lords, the noble Baroness will be aware that the supplier has changed; as of 2020, Serco now looks after this particular situation. I would also say that the vast majority of people are in fact detained for less than 28 days: 65% are detained for 28 days or less and 23% are detained for seven days or less. A laudable 65% of all those detained were released within 28 days. It sounded and looked an impressive achievement.

It was only when the video clip had finished that a shocking realisation hit me. That means that 35% of people had been detained for longer than 28 days. It is very likely that you will have met several members of that 35% cohort. Refugee Tales is made up of many of their individual stories.

So, I downloaded the spreadsheet he was proudly quoting from. You can do the same thing at http://tinyurl.com/mt85mvhm. What did I find? The thing about statistics is that they look different depending on the angle from which you are looking at them and the level of magnification you apply.

First lesson. At the end of September 2022, there were four people who had been detained for more than 1000 days, which is approaching three years. Each of those four people will have a story which should be included in Refugee Tales. The longest people had been detained for was more than 1570 days. That is well over 4 years. It is also the case that people detained at Brook House can remain there for a considerable time after they have been granted bail. If the Home Office really thought it was important they could cut that 35% number of people staying over 28 days, by radically diminishing the amount of time spent by detained people awaiting approved housing after they had been found to be fit for bail and therefore not considered a risk to the community.

Above all, I remain shocked by the dramatic effect that indefinite detention has on people. We hear on the news about those people still imprisoned because of their indeterminate prison sentences. Over the years while I was working at Broadmoor I saw the corrosive effect of having no end in sight. The minister seemed to think that a maximum detention would put the community at risk because of the inability of the Home Office to process people appropriately. Maybe our Home Office should ask advice from Germany, who have a legal maximum detention period of 6 months but average 17.2 days. Whether you look at it in terms of the individual lives or the numbers, the conclusion is the same. Brook House is a symbol of this country’s failure as a humane and competent society.
Our Director Anna Pincus was recently invited by the influential Home Affairs Select Committee to give evidence in Parliament about progress - or lack of it - with implementing the Brook House Public Inquiry recommendations.

The committee is made up of MPs of different parties, and its role is to scrutinise home affairs policy and investigate specific issues. Since the Brook House Inquiry reported last September, we have been contacting committee members to explain the importance of the findings. We have provided written briefings and held several meetings with individual MPs, including with GDWG self-advocates.

Our persistence has been fruitful. Six months on from the Public Inquiry report, the committee decided to visit Brook House in March and hold an evidence session with the GDWG Director Anna and Public Inquiry Chair Kate Eves on 1 May. This was a rare and important opportunity to speak directly about what is happening now at Brook House, and what more needs to change.

Anna started by saying that, despite the government’s claims that it is making good progress in responding to the Public Inquiry recommendations, “for people on the ground, there is no discernible change. In fact, there are elements that have actually worsened in the way people are experiencing detention at present.”

She gave the example of time spent locked in cells. “The report asked for a consideration of the lock-in regime. The time that people are locked up for roll-call at lunchtime and in the evening has been extended. People feel that intrusion on their time, being locked back down in the room, as something very difficult to endure.”

Anna highlighted the lack of access to interpreters and resulting poor communications as a fundamental problem, compounded by low staffing. “Staffing levels are still an issue at Brook House. That has an impact on the way staff relate to people in detention. They will have less patience to understand conversations that are being brought to them by people who do not have English as a first language. They will have less time to speak to people using interpreter services.”

Another key theme is inconsistent and often very poor quality healthcare. Anna told MPs, “There are basic elements of communication that fail regularly, and communication between healthcare and detained people is one of those areas ... Once an initial assessment is made, there does not seem to be any appreciation that assessments need to be dynamic.”

On indefinite detention, she stated, “People say that being detained is worse
than being in prison, because they cannot count down the days to their release. You are doing that to people for no reason, because you are releasing them back into the community... you are depriving people of their liberty and causing them the harm of the uncertainty of indefinite detention, and then just putting them back where they were.”

Towards the end of the session, Anna reminded MPs that alternatives to detention are possible. “There have been two alternative to detention pilots, one of which has been reported on by UNHCR. They involve people in the community being supported holistically, making connections with medics and getting advice on their immigration case. The outcome of that is that people are less likely to abscond and are more likely to follow due process, because they feel that they have been heard and that their cases have been heard swiftly and fairly. It is important to always bear in mind that detention in a place like Brook House is not the only way.”

Kate Eves also spoke eloquently throughout, making clear that even though she chaired the Public Inquiry, the government has not communicated with her since about its response to the recommendations. She said it is extremely unclear exactly which recommendations the government accepts and plans to implement (if any), and which it does not.

As the session ended, committee Chair Dame Diana Johnson MP told us, “thank you, Anna, and all your colleagues for all the work that you do.”

To watch the whole session, visit Parliament TV. Evidence on Brook House starts at 10.30: parliamentlive.tv/event/index/49900f45cribed0-4-fd-f-b83d-196f974021f9

You can access a transcript of the session here: committees.parliament.uk/event/21219/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/

***

Thank you for reading our Spring Newsletter.

If you would like to come along to our Refugee Tales walk in July, please book to walk via our website: refugeetales.org

If you would like to attend our Refugee Tales July evening events, the links to book are here:

6 July, Refugee Tales in Oxted

7 July, Refugee Tales in Caterham

8 July, Refugee Tales in Wallington

9 July, Refugee Tales in Wandsworth