

Detention in the Asylum System

September 2014

When is detention used?

[Guidelines on detention](#) issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees state that it should be used for very specific reasons and should only exceptionally be resorted to. In an individual case the reasons include:

- There are strong grounds for believing that an asylum seeker is likely to abscond or refuse to cooperate with authorities
- For initial identity/security verification
- In connection with accelerated procedures for manifestly unfounded or abusive claims.

United Kingdom Visas and Immigration (UKVI) [guidance to staff](#) states that detention is usually appropriate on similar grounds to the first two points above, but also to effect removal. Cases where UKVI believe that another country should be responsible for dealing with the asylum claim often result in detention.

In addition cases in which a quick decision can be made may be referred to the Detained Fast Track.

UKVI also states that special consideration should be given to family cases where it is proposed to detain one or more family members and the family includes children, and has a policy on the detention of unaccompanied children.

Where are people detained?

UKVI has 10 detention centres, known as Immigration Removal Centres (IRC). In total the bed capacity of these centres is about 3275. The largest is Harmondsworth, near to Heathrow airport, which has a bed capacity of over 600. Other large IRCs include Brook House, near to Gatwick airport, and Colnbrook, near to Heathrow. In addition there are 3 residential short term holding facilities, with 89 beds. During 2014 a further 600 bed spaces will be added as the Verne IRC in the former Verne Prison, Portland, comes into use.

Some IRCs, such as Harmondsworth, accommodate male detainees only. The IRC which is the main one used when women are detained prior to removal is Yarl's Wood.

Since 2011 the Cedars has provided secure pre-departure accommodation for families and can accommodate up to 9 families, with 44 bed spaces. It is a short term detention facility. The other IRC generally used for families is Tinsley House, near to Gatwick, which can accommodate up to 8 families.

How many asylum seekers are detained?

During 2013 14,806 asylum seekers entered detention and 14,729 left detention. Within these figures there are some instances of someone who has been detained more than once but exactly how many people this applies to is not shown in the asylum statistics. Figures for the total number of detainees, both asylum and non-asylum cases, suggest that 3 – 4% of detainees are detained more than once. The figures include those detained before and after the determination of their asylum claim.

The totals include dependants who were detained along with the principal applicant. For comparison the number of asylum applicants in 2013, excluding dependants, was 23,584. In addition there were 6,291 dependants.

What these figures suggest is that roughly half of those who claim asylum will be detained at some point during, or at the end of, the asylum process.

Which countries are they from?

At the end of 2013 there were 1,684 asylum seekers in detention. Over 70% of the detainees came from 10 countries. The countries of origin accounting for the largest numbers of asylum detainees were Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka.

How long are people detained?

Home Office statistics include the length of detention, but do not give separate figures for asylum and non-asylum detainees.

For all those leaving detention in 2013, a total of 30,030 people, 35% had been detained for 7 days or less, and a further 26% for between 8 and 28 days. 3% had been detained for 6 months or more, including 49 people who had been detained for two years or more.

Why do people leave detention?

Of the 14,729 asylum seekers who left detention during 2013 there were 6,351 who were removed from the UK when they left detention. These are people whose asylum claims have been refused and any appeals rejected, or people whose claims fall to be decided by another country where they had been before coming to the UK.

The majority of those leaving detention were not being removed from the UK. 7,417 were granted temporary admission or released, and a further 739 were released as a result of bail applications. It is likely that in most of these cases, where people were not being removed, the asylum claim was still to be determined.

A small number (109) were granted leave to remain and so were released.

Detainees have the right to make a bail application. However they may have difficulty in obtaining legal support and sureties. [Bail for Immigration Detainees](#) (BID) offers support in bail applications. If bail is granted then the person may have conditions attached, such as reporting on a regular basis to UKVI.

Rule 35 of UKVI's detention centre rules requires the centre's medical practitioner to report to the centre manager any cases in which there are concerns that continued detention may be injurious to the detainee's health, concerns that the detainee may be a suicide risk, or may have been a victim of torture. A [report](#) published by Medical Justice in 2012 examined the operation of Rule 35. The cases of 50 people who had medical evidence of torture, but had been detained, were investigated. In only one case was the person released under Rule 35 even though 14 had later been given leave to remain in the UK by the time the report was written, and all but two of the detainees were eventually released, after an average time in detention of 226 days.

The Home Affairs Select Committee in its [report](#) of October 2012 on the work of the former UK Border Agency noted that of 109 Rule 35 reports made to UKBA by healthcare managers at Harmondsworth IRC only 5 resulted in the release of the detainee. The Committee recommended that UKBA should carry out an independent review of the application of Rule 35 in IRCs.

Detention of children

In May 2010 the new coalition government announced that child detention would end. In December 2012 a new process for the removal of families with children from the UK was announced. The secure pre-departure accommodation at Cedars, to be used where families did not cooperate with removal directions, opened in September 2011.

The number of children in detention has dropped significantly since 2010. However 228 children were detained at some point during 2013. Just over 70% of the children detained were asylum claimants or dependants. 155 of them were under the age of 11.

The majority (over 80%) of the children detained were at Cedars or Tinsley House (Family Unit) IRC. Both of these facilities have accommodation designed for families.

Some asylum claimants where there is an age dispute, as to whether the person is under the age of 18, may be detained as adults, and then released when they are recognised as children. There are no available statistics of how many age disputed cases result in detention.

The Refugee Council works to get these children released and in 2012 wrote a report of this work.

Oversight of detention

Each IRC has an Independent Monitoring Board, made up of local unpaid volunteers, who work 2 – 3 days a month. The Board is responsible for monitoring day to day life in the IRC, listening to the problems of individuals, and ensuring standards are maintained. Each Board publishes an Annual Report.

The 2011 report by the Board at Harmondsworth IRC highlighted the failings in the treatment of detainees suffering from mental health problems. In addition in a number of legal cases brought against UKBA the High Court found in favour of the former detainees who had suffered mental health problems, finding that they had been falsely imprisoned and subject to inhuman and degrading treatment. The Home Affairs Select Committee expressed concern at the Court's findings and asked UKBA to apologise to the former detainees and to set out the steps to be taken to prevent reoccurrence of such incidents.

Visitor Groups of volunteers have been established, usually linked to one or more IRCs. They provide support and practical advice to detainees. The [Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees \(AVID\)](#) is an umbrella organisation, acting as a membership network for all volunteer visitors to immigration detainees.

Inspection of IRCs

The responsibility for the inspection of IRCs rests with the HM Inspector of Prisons in relation to the physical conditions and human rights of detainees.

In December 2012 a [joint report](#) by HM Inspector of Prisons and the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration examined the effectiveness and impact of immigration detention casework. Among the recommendations in their report were that detainees should be informed in writing of the reasons for their detention, that detainees should be informed of their legal right to apply for bail, and that detainees' asylum claims should be determined in a timely manner.

There was a specific recommendation that torture survivors should only be detained in exceptional circumstances. The Inspectors commented that the Rule 35 process did not provide sufficient safeguards for vulnerable detainees, and quoted an example of a torture survivor who had been detained without a clear explanation of the reason.

Comparison with other countries

The use of detention is widespread across the EU but there are significant variations from country to country. Some countries, such as Greece, use detention as a matter of routine, including the regular detention of unaccompanied children seeking asylum. Other countries, including Denmark and Sweden, are increasingly examining alternatives to detention, with open accommodation centres and detailed case management. The UK is the only EU country which allows indefinite immigration detention.

[EU policy](#) is well defined, but legislation across the EU member states covers only a few minimum standards.

Links

Home Office Statistics

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2014>

UNHCR Detention Guidelines

<http://www.unhcr.org/505c33199.html>

UKVI Instructions to Staff

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chapters-46-to-62-detention-and-removals>

Bail for Immigration Detainees

<http://www.biduk.org/>

Medical Justice Report on Rule 35

<http://www.medicaljustice.org.uk/mj-reports,-submissions,-etc./reports/1953-qthe-second-tortureq-the-immigration-detention-of-torture-survivors-220512.html>

Report of the Home Affairs Select Committee on the Work of UKBA

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmhaff/603/60302.htm>

Joint Inspector's Report on Detention Casework

<http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Immigration-detention-casework-2012-FINAL.pdf>

Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees

<http://www.aviddetention.org.uk/>

EU Policy on Detention

http://www.detention-in-europe.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=92&Itemid=213

About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We give help and support to asylum seekers and refugees, and also work with them to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed by decision-makers.