



EX-DETAINEE PROJECT CONFERENCE 2016

**Helpline open 10.00am-1.00pm
Mon/Tues/Thurs/Fri**

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"The project advises, enables and empowers ex-detainees and seeks to influence positive changes in their circumstances"



Foreward and Welcome



Soeren Keil, *Chair of Samphire*

Taking part in the 2016 Ex-Detainee conference in London made me realise how important the work of Samphire is. While our Ex-Detainee Project focuses strongly on emergency support and signposting, we have worked very hard to ensure that the project also gives a voice to ex-detainees. They are often isolated, without access to support, destitute and desperate. Many of them have fled persecution, violence and fear for their life, only to find themselves in poverty and desperation again in the UK. At Samphire, our Ex-Detainee Project has been giving a voice to ex-detainees for many years. I realised that a one-day conference is probably not enough to discuss all the many facets of the challenging life that a person faces, once they are released from immigration detention. Yet, thanks to the efforts of our staff and volunteers, we have been able to bring ex-detainees together, and put them in touch with solicitors, other NGOs, and other key service providers, who can help and support them.

One of the main aims of Samphire is to give immigration a human face. Rather than discussing figures or the positive or negative impact of immigration, our staff have been working tirelessly to highlight that immigration concerns human beings and their dreams and hopes. This is particularly important for asylum seekers, who hope to rebuild their life in the United Kingdom, after it was destroyed in their home countries.

As the Chair of the Board of Trustees, I am particularly grateful to the clients of Samphire who participated in the conference and who spoke about their daily struggles and worries. I am also very thankful to our partner organisations, who have supported this conference. Finally, I would like to thank all volunteers and Samphire staff for their dedication and hard work. Organising such a conference is always challenging and requires good planning and strong commitment. Once again, our team has outdone itself and by doing so has been able to provide a forum for discussion, exchange and a meeting place. (2016)

The Ex-Detainee Project Introduction

The Ex-Detainee Conference is the project's biggest day of the year. We continually look forward to this important date in our calendar both with great anticipation and perhaps some mild trepidation! It is always exciting to organise events for our clients and we hope to have given them something positive to take away, whether it be from the variety of workshops on offer or from sharing experiences amongst other ex-detainees thus helping them to feel less isolated. The conference affords us all the opportunity to meet those we rarely see in person, but so often speak to on the phone, hearing how they benefit from the project and their views on life after detention. From our point of view this unique opportunity allows us to talk about the work we have been doing, the challenges we face and those that ex-detainees encounter. We are proud to see the Ex-Detainee Project going from strength to strength serving a unique and vital purpose.

Our client group has continued to expand. Since the time of the last conference we have registered an additional 131 ex-detainees. Annually, we continue to receive over 3000 individual requests for assistance. To put these figures in some sort of perspective, the original project was envisaged to support just 90 people, to date we have helped 1044 ex-detainees. The Ex-Detainee Project has over 500 active clients. Obviously, the need for our services stems from the large number of people being detained under evermore pervasive immigration powers.

For many years, migrants in the UK have been facing increasingly punitive legislation, cuts to asylum support, restrictions on the right to work and reduced access to legal help and healthcare. These hostile environment measures, coupled with huge reductions

in funding for migrant charities, have meant that small charities and projects like ours are placed under enormous pressure to meet the needs of a large group of people who have nowhere else to turn.

Our project has a national remit, with a free telephone helpline, which operates 4 days a week from 10am-1pm. It is the means by which we assist anyone who has been in, or been affected by, immigration detention. The project continues to evolve with the increasing demand. Out of necessity we have had to focus our very limited financial resources on the most vulnerable. We have become experts in crisis management helping people who have no recourse to public funds and who have no means to support themselves.



Christine Oliver, Ex-detainee Project Manager



For those hungry and homeless we provide emergency funds for food and other essentials, or arrange travel to places where they are able to stay – with a friend or at a night hostel – like the wonderful Coventry Peace House. It doesn't end there, next it is about putting a plan in place for the medium-term, for example helping our ex-detainees lodge a fresh asylum claim or assessing eligibility for asylum support. We provide advice and practical assistance to access health care, help people reconnect with family or access legal advice.

Once the most urgent needs have been met we have to find novel ways of helping those who are already trying to survive on the bare minimum of asylum support or without any financial help. Last year we noted how the number of calls we received primarily for emotional support now outweighs every category of request. We have long-known that the experience of immigration detention further compounds the vulnerabilities of migrants. The inability to use their own skills to earn their own living serves to make them more vulnerable. We do what we can to help a difficult life be somewhat more tolerable, but we recognize that many ex-detainees remain stuck in an uncomfortable limbo.

Many of our clients feel lonely and isolated - with depression being widespread. Our help is as specific as it can be to the individual we are supporting. Some may need to be (and many are) referred to receive psychological help. Sometimes this is because of trauma they have experienced, which led them to come to the UK or arising from time spent in

detention in the UK. As the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Immigration Detention noted, not having a time limit on detention has a proven negative impact on mental health. Some ex-detainees sleep on the streets, 'sofa-surf' or live in circumstances where they can be exploited. When people eventually qualify for asylum support, the level of financial support they receive is insufficient to sustain a decent quality of life. No permission to work means they are denied the autonomy to improve their situation, whilst not having the resources to do anything enjoyable with their time.

Over the past few years we have tried to combat this issue in a number of ways. We use our database to refer and signpost to help available in the person's local area, and try to come up with creative (and low cost solutions) to problems. To give an example a lot of ex-detainees receive non cash asylum support or have no recourse to public funds – so they don't have money for public transport. This serves as a barrier to accessing education, volunteering and community activities. If we can refer a client to a bicycle project that can help them to feel more empowered and improve their quality of life.

The Ex-Detainee Project aims to Advise, Enable, Empower and Influence. We keep these aims in mind when undertaking policy and advocacy work. We look forward to updating you next year!

Speakers Contributions



Justice is a member of Detention Action's Freed Voices. He was introduced to the group by Samphire when he was released. Freed voices are a group of experts-by-experience dedicated to speaking out about the realities of immigration detention. Between the members of the group Justice belongs to, they have lost over 20 years of their lives to detention. Justice was detained for 6 months and spoke about his experience.

When Justice first met with the other members of his group they had to decide who they spoke for when they spoke out about detention. Their conclusion was that they spoke for a greater number than themselves. Justice was motivated by being a mouthpiece for those still in detention, those who have been deported and for other ex-detainees. This sense of shared responsibility affected the way Justice thought about telling a story that was bigger than just his own experience.

Justice went on to give a speech in Parliament on the same day as a vote on Amendment 84 of the Immigration Bill, something which would allow judicial oversight to the detention system for the very first time. Justice remembers feeling anxious but confident that he a person who has lived detention, was an expert on the issue. Someone who knew more about it than all of the leaders and politicians in that room put together. With the support of the

other members of his Freed Voices group in the audience Justice gave an impassioned account of his experiences. Many MP's and Lords said they would support Amendment 84 after hearing his speech. For Justice the promise of action and change vindicated his decision to speak out in the first place and allowed him to directly challenge his experience of detention. Justice reflected on how very few people understand the realities of detention, and how there is real power when an expert-by-experience demands change. This type of activism is not for everyone and there are many different ways to speak out – it doesn't have to be in Parliament, it can be through easily accessible blogs, social media and in one-to-one conversations.

Justice's insightful recollection of his time in detention reminds us how being in detention is like being in a cage on an isolated island – far away from the general public and decision makers. This voiceless congregation of individuals are kept just the way the Home Office likes it – silent. When Theresa May was Home Secretary she detained more people than anyone else in British history, painting those in detention as 'criminals' and 'dangerous'. She is now Prime Minister. Get involved in speaking out about detention reform because, as Justice's wife says, "If YOU don't who will?"

Speakers Contributions



Lisa Mathews, Right to Remain

Campaigning for change

Right to Remain have developed a toolkit to be used by asylum and migrant support groups. Many people have lived in the UK without the “right to remain” for many years, for many different reasons.

However, there is now a greater focus on removing these people – raids on workplaces, no right to work, ordinary citizens (for example, bank clerks) being asked to report inconsistencies, checks at bus stations and social and legal restrictions are getting worse.

Often campaigns run by people in the community aren’t especially effective. Many asylum seekers and migrants do not integrate successfully into the community as they are not allowed to work or are regularly detained. It appears that there is no longer any real discretion or a great degree of compassion in decision-making on individual’s immigration or asylum applications - only legal action seems to work.

Asylum seekers and migrants are forced to protect their anonymity because of the risk of persecution on return and feel unable to raise legitimate concerns about the Home Office or detention. Making noise, in effect “going public” can be risky. It is often through “behind the scenes” negotiations that the best results are obtained. Due to the legal, procedural and emotional barriers they face, migrants seeking the right to remain need someone to support them. The current system denies people their basic human rights. The system is extremely complicated, unfair and violent. This unfortunately is only getting worse, for example, with legal aid being cut.

Right to Remain are increasingly focused on detention. They are looking to encourage a popular swell of protest simultaneously with greater media attention on the injustice of this system. In order to tackle it from a new angle they are looking to those with experience of detention to lead rather than members already involved in the cause. To best serve this cause Right to Remain have linked up with other social justice organisations working with vulnerable adults and families.

Migrant Challenges and Progress Made

It's a very challenging time for migrants and the organisations supporting them, with a new Immigration Act that implements a 'hostile environment' for migrants and a message that is largely negative.

Some positives are that the lobbying by charities and NGO's prevented some of the more extreme measures in the 2016 Immigration Act being implemented, including important concessions to protect families from becoming homeless. NGO's working together have created movements such as the City of Sanctuary which is evidence of grass roots willingness to welcome migrants & conquer the prevailing narrative.



Mike Kaye, Still Human Still Here

Workshops

FREED VOICES PROJECT

DETENTION ACTION

This workshop gave an opportunity to learn more about the Freed Voices project, how it is supporting people to tell their stories, who is involved with it and why it can be a really powerful experience for those who have experienced indefinite detention.

The workshop started off by calculating the number of months lost in detention amongst those attending the workshop. This figure was estimated at 100 months.

The discussion explored themes such as;

- Pain, suffering and loss
- Understanding and practical help
- Speaking out and informing change
- Self-exploration and celebration of achievements
- Making experts from experience

Participants all agreed that they would like to see alternatives to detention introduced.

DRUMMING

FEEL GOOD MUSIC

A fun feel good workshop where participants got to work with an African drumming specialist to use percussion to test their rhythm and explore music from different countries.

This drumming workshop explored different cultures through enjoyable immersion – using the music to break down barriers.

The attendees were first taught the basic techniques of drumming and then the composition was mixed to include elements from other cultures. For example, African drumming with English nursery rhymes.

Music for Change also employs drumming and singing in schools to encourage the children to take care of each other as part of an anti-bullying strategy.



Workshops

CARING FOR YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY

FREEDOM FROM TORTURE

A pastoral workshop with the experts from Freedom from Torture's Survivors Speak Out Network who facilitated discussion and shared ideas about how to maintain emotional resilience and look after yourself even in tough circumstances. Freedom from Torture provides support and assistance to anyone who is living in the UK who has been tortured, as defined by the United Nations.

The support includes 1-2-1 psychological support, art, football, creative writing. However, they also produce evidence-based reports, network, campaign and advocate. They work on a UN platform, which includes discussions relating to lawful/unlawful detention. Anyone who is referred for medical/legal reports, related to torture, should be discharged from detention.

They are completely independent and receive no government funding.

ART FOR EXHIBITION

SAMPHIRE

Each person in the workshop made a piece of art, with one message, unique to themselves and their experience of detention.

Art is also a form of psychotherapy and can be used as a mode of expression and communication. It can help to address emotional issues that can be distressing to talk about.

These and other works of art will be displayed in a large church in Dover over the summer. The art will be seen by a lot of people and raise awareness of detention and its emotional and physical impact on detainees.





Ex - Detainees' Perspectives

During the course of the conference many ex-detainees gave impassioned accounts of the misery caused by serial episodes of detention. The themes shared throughout these ex-detainee's stories highlighted a distinct lack of accountability for the officials who deal with them. We regularly hear from our clients, and these accounts were no different, about the revolving door of detention.

Migrants and refugees in the system find little opportunity to regularise their status through official channels. Living hand to mouth in dire circumstances often results in people failing to adhere to their release conditions, in turn leading to further detention and in some cases the start of deportation or removal proceedings.

The standards by which the Home Office decide immigration cases is widely perceived as deeply unfair and inherently prejudiced. The unpleasant experiences ex-detainees have when in direct contact with the Home Office reinforces the view that they are to be feared. We understand through our experience of helping migrants and refugees that the Home Office's conduct can fall far short of exemplary.

At our conference claims were made that Home Office officials at Yarl'swood had abused detainees, signed documents on behalf of detainees, and that detainees were being drugged if considered unruly. These worrying accounts indicate unacceptable treatment of vulnerable people for which the Home Office are accountable.

Ex-detainees tell us that they feel like second class citizens in the UK. They see for themselves the frequent negative portrayal of migrants in the media. These repetitive and widespread myths about migration have resulted in large numbers of people being ignorant of the facts and adopting prejudicial views.

For this reason it is now more important than ever to change the narrative! When people understand facts over fiction it leads to changes in attitudes which have positive changes for migrants and communities as a whole. Many organisations and projects that support ex-detainees, including us here at Samphire, are working towards changing attitudes to migrants in the UK and creating better futures for all, so get involved!



Reflections on this years conference

This year's Ex-Detainee Conference builds on our experience of previous years, as we try to invite a greater number of people from outside Samphire and facilitate the travel to and from the venue for more of our clients. The organisers have also aimed to introduce a greater variety of interesting and thought provoking speakers as well as offering useful and dynamic workshops for everybody to attend. This year we feel we achieved those goals with there being a multitude of memorable moments from Justice demonstrating his fantastic oratory skills to the energetic and hopeful drumming workshop, plus many others.

The Conference is always very beneficial for ex-detainees, giving them the opportunity to meet one another as well as the Samphire team. It is a chance for relationships to develop and grow, and because Samphire's Ex-Detainee Project is largely run over the phone meeting face to face is always a joy. It is therefore a very sociable event where there is a real sense of community something conveyed particularly well by this year's high number of superb photos of attendees together, a big thanks to the photographer, Rob Wyllie, for donating his time and talent.

Nothing in the design of the Ex-Detainee Conference is left to chance. Our purposeful yet

invigorating and fun selection of workshops this year - such as the virtual reality film exhibition, art class and drumming workshops, deliberately contrasts with the serious legal and informative content of our speakers' presentations. This all has one purpose in mind, to create a sense of hope whilst celebrating the diversity our project has to offer.

So what have we learnt? Well, it goes without saying that we would like to do more face to face work. We aim to reach this goal in the coming years, but of course this is funding dependant. It is a shame that we never get enough time in one afternoon to listen to everybody speak. We know that many attendees wish to have their voices heard on the issues raised and have relevant and important contributions to make. It is also beneficial for ex-detainees to share experiences publicly. This is why projects like Freed Voices are so important and is the reason why they were so well represented in our 2016 Conference. The Samphire Ex-Detainee Conference may be the highlight of our yearly calendar but it is clearly not the only space to share stories. There are lots of ways to share through a variety of means, including advocacy groups, blogs and public events. We can help you to do this, so do get in touch.

Issues & Actions

Community Integration

We have publicised the fact that ex-detainees are allowed to volunteer in the face of previously unclear guidelines.

We refer ex-detainees to volunteering opportunities. This helps with a sense of wellbeing and helps individuals play constructive roles helping to change negative public perceptions of migrants.

Advocacy and campaigning

We continue to encourage and assist ex-detainees with getting their stories into the public domain.

We continue to advocate for the right to work and for improvements in asylum support, including basic human dignity for all, regardless of immigration status.

Events for ex-detainees

In April 2015 the Ex-Detainee Project invited ex-detainees to speak about their experiences at Samphire's first public event in Dover, "Against The Tide." It was organised by Samphire's Awareness Raising Project. Several ex-detainees spoke movingly and had a terrifically appreciative response from local people.

We held an outreach workshop in Coventry, which we hope to roll-out to other locations in the near future.

Emergency Support

We continue to provide a small amount of financial assistance for food, essential travel and telephone cards.

It is an injustice that migrants and refugees can work in detention but not outside. We continue to campaign for the right to work.

With Generous Thanks To Our Funders And Sponsors



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