

Immigration and the alternatives – a comment after the Panorama programme on Brook House.

Panorama (4 Sept) has shown us some shameful evidence of poor treatment and negative staff attitudes in an immigration detention centre. Most of these centres are run in a reasonably professional way by well-intentioned staff, on the evidence of inspection reports and the independent monitoring boards, as well as what I learn from chaplains working in them. The Government will no doubt want to act quickly to cut out wrongdoing and abuse.

Immigration detention has been a largely hidden world, where around 3,000 people at any one time are held in prison-like conditions. Fewer than half of those detained are removed to another country from the centre. This makes the name 'immigration removal centre' a misnomer. Stephen Shaw's thorough Review in 2016 shone a useful light on the centres. It was great when children stopped being detained (although not completely) in 2010, and there are better safeguards now for pregnant women. However, detention is still a harsh world. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has made clear the damage that indefinite detention can do, even in a month or so.

There is certainly a case for moving someone to a secure place before a flight which they don't want to board. But we are almost the only country in Europe where there is no legal limit to detention, and although most are detained for not more than a month or two, the uncertainty of what will happen, and when, takes its toll.

Most detained people have committed no crime. Detaining them is expensive - about £86 a day for each person. The Government has said that it wants fewer people in detention, and there were fewer last year than the year before. So it is a good time to think practically about how to detain as few as possible.

Part of it is to provide better legal advice and oversight by judges, to ensure that detention is legal. Another step forward would be to put a limit on detention. But it will come as no surprise to people of faith, that the best approach is to focus on the people involved.

First, the caseworkers. They are not faceless officials, they have to make the hard decisions. They need proper training and support, time to look at a person's situation from every side, enough contact with the person to understand. They don't need pressure to hit targets of how many they must say no to.

Second, the migrants. They are not just 'cases', bodies who, if not detained, are on bail or are reporting regularly to an office or on an electronic tag. Mostly they feel confused and alienated by a system that seems arbitrary and unpredictable.

Migrants are human as must be treated as human. Refugee Action ran a pilot of 'key workers' who came alongside individuals. Detention Action piloted a 'community support project' for people released from prison without immigration status. The Government itself has trialed various schemes – in Solihull, Dover, Gatwick, elsewhere – which have had mixed results - but all show that adding the human angle adds value.

In the USA – a Lutheran agency ran a scheme for community support of migrants during consideration of their asylum case that worked so well it has been taken up by government. Schemes in Australia and Sweden point the same way.

Churches in many parts of Britain, but especially where asylum seekers are 'dispersed' to, are doing amazing work coming alongside migrants, getting to know them, giving practical support.

Increasingly this is through the sponsorship of refugees, but they have been doing it for years with asylum seekers. Meanwhile, many charities and NGOs are working at ground level, especially with the more vulnerable groups and minorities.

Most of us recognise that our country has to have an immigration policy, has to police its borders and take measures against illegal immigration. But it doesn't have to be a hard, fierce, impersonal business. Government wants to get people to comply with its procedures; and it doesn't want people to go to ground, to abscond and hide from the authorities. There's so much that could be done by building trust. That needs three forces to learn to work together, keeping their separate aims but united in wanting an honest, transparent and trustful culture around immigration. Those forces are government, NGOs with all their experience, and local communities - including churches.

There's no reason why we shouldn't start again: leave behind the damaging nonsense of hostile them-and-us rhetoric. A lot of work has been done on 'alternatives to detention', especially by the Detention Forum. The most hopeful alternative is a positive one. Let government drop its air of all-round hostility, for all that it must take unwelcome action to remove some people. Let the NGOs be welcomed by government, not to be its agents, but to work as critical friends for the good of the nation. Let churches and community groups build a momentum of practical and moral support for migrants, so that they speak and act with truth and authority. Last year the immigration minister said about progress on detention "It is a question of how we can harness the processes in community". I don't think churches want to be 'harnessed' - but they will and should work with officialdom if it is reasonable, fair and treats all people as fully human.

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