



## Facts about Yarl's Wood and immigration detention

### 1. What is Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre?

Yarl's Wood IRC, in North Bedfordshire, is one of 12 immigration detention facilities distributed throughout the UK. Together they can hold over 3,600 detainees, while a further 400 spaces are provided within the prison systems. Approximately 30,000 people are detained in these facilities each year.

### 2. What is immigration detention?

The government detains people indefinitely while their right to enter or remain in the UK is decided. Its purpose is to aid administrative processes and, where necessary, facilitate removal back to countries of origin.

### 3. What is unique about Yarl's Wood?

Yarl's Wood is the main centre for holding single women (around 300) as well as some adult family groups and a small number of men (on a short term basis). In total they have the capacity to hold just over 400 detainees.

### 4. Is Yarl's Wood just a local issue?

While people in Bedfordshire share a special concern for the women and families detained at Yarl's Wood, in reality this and other detention facilities are a national concern. Wherever you are based in the UK, detainees are likely to come from a community nearby.

### 5. Who is detained?

The largest group of detainees are those who have at some point made a claim for asylum. Others may have entered the UK illegally or have overstayed on visas. About 12% of detainees at Yarl's Wood are awaiting deportation having served prison sentences – this figure is higher across the entire detention estate.

### 6. What is it like being taken into detention?

Often detention comes as a total shock – you wake up expecting a normal day and end up being detained with nothing but the clothes you stand up in. Detainees then have to rely on family, friends and landlords to salvage their possessions and keep them safe for an unknown period of time.

7. What are the fears of detainees?

Many detainees recount terrifying stories involving violence, intolerance, abuse, rape and trafficking, and have genuine fears about being returned to their country of origin. Many have been estranged from their home country for a number of years and have no family or friends there to return to. Others would not be welcomed by their families if they did return.

8. How long are people detained?

While many detainees are released within 50 days, it is common for those visited by the Yarl's Wood Befrienders to have been detained for longer. Currently one of the Befrienders is visiting a woman who has been detained for 27 months. The record for immigration detention is over 4 and a half years.

9. How many detainees are eventually removed from the UK?

Less than 50% of women and families detained at Yarl's Wood are removed from the UK; the others are released on bail or under a variety of different conditions. It is impossible not to be affected by the journey of fellow detainees. Release is a reason for celebration and hope while removal, especially when forced, knocks the spirits out of the entire centre.

10. Who manages Yarl's Wood?

Yarl's Wood is run by Serco on behalf of the Home Office, with health care being provided by G4S. The way in which the centre is run is monitored by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCI) and an Independent Monitoring Group (IMG) made up of volunteers. The IMG has access to the centre and can speak to detainees 24 hours a day.

11. How about reports concerning the ill treatment of detainees?

Although there have been some justified criticisms of the management and staff at the centre, a number of reports have recognised the efforts of staff to care for and support detainees under such challenging circumstances. Thankfully these reports have found no underlying culture of abuse but, unfortunately, as in all walks of life a small minority abuse the power and trust placed in them.

12. What does the centre look like?

The centre was built in the design of a prison. Detainees share twin rooms, each with its own bathroom. There are communal lounges and dining areas. One popular activity is to book the cultural kitchen with a group of friends in order to prepare and eat some dishes of choice. How much better would it be if the women could cook with the gardening scheme's home-grown produce?

13. Do detainees have access to outdoor areas?

Yarl's Wood benefits from a number of well laid out gardens, which would be an excellent foundation for the gardening scheme. However, the planting currently focuses on low maintenance rather than imagination and there is little diversity and colour for detainees to enjoy.

14. Can detainees have visitors?

Detainees can enjoy pre-booked visits with family and friends although, sadly, some have to travel long distances to see their loved ones. The visits hall is a large area, with comfy chairs arranged in groups, vending machines and a play area for children. It is a very important and busy area of the centre – a place both of great joy and great heart-ache.

15. Can detainees work?

All detainees receive a small allowance of 71 p per day which they can spend in the centre's shop. The Home Office allows some detainees to work, earning £1.00 per hour. Jobs are available in the kitchen, salon, helping out with craft activities and helping to meet and support new arrivals.

16. What do detainees do all day?

There are number of activities at Yarl's Wood for women to engage in, although less is provided for men who are more restricted in their movements around the centre. Women can go to the gym, engage in crafts and visit the library or salon. A number of activities are held throughout the week, ranging from exercise classes to music workshops.

17. Are the activities enough to keep the women busy?

The fact that women have so much time to exercise, braid hair and paint nails can put pressure on Befrienders like me, who arrive all scruffy at the end of the day! But, seriously, after a while the activities start to lack meaning and purpose, anxiety grows and time starts pass very slowly.

18. How does Yarl's Wood compare to a prison?

Although detention facilities and prisons share many features in common, Yarl's Wood detainees enjoy more freedoms than many prisoners. Those who have come through the prison system, however, say that detention is hard because you have no known end date or outcome to work towards (detention is indefinite for all detainees). Also, with no emphasis on rehabilitation, there is only minimal investment in activities. Many prisons have Government-funded gardening schemes, for example.

19. The mental health of immigration detainees

As you would expect, mental health is a real issue for immigration detainees. A recent HMCIP report noted that 54% of detainees felt depressed or suicidal when they first arrived. At best detainees are anxious about their futures and about being isolated from friends and family. Many have more serious mental health conditions, however, often as a result of traumas they have experienced in the past.

20. In other circumstances Yarl's Wood would be celebrated as a diverse and vibrant community.

Other than the majority of detainees being women, diversity there holds knows no bounds. Detainees are young, old, gay and straight, disabled or able bodied, hail from a whole host of countries and ethnic groups and belong to a wide variation of faiths. Some have long-term health needs and, sadly, some are pregnant.

21. How are detainees of so many different faiths supported?

Many different faith-based groups visit the centre, co-ordinated by a Christian Pastor. Trust in a faith and the will of God can be a really important thing for detainees. It can help make sense of the situation detainees find themselves in and provide hope for an uncertain future. The centre has a particularly vibrant choir, and the Sunday service can be an important event for all faiths.

22. Who helps to support and stand up for the rights of detainees?

Many groups care about detainees, and campaign to end or reduce immigration detention and to promote the rights of detainees. Other groups focus on providing emotional and practical support to detainees – it takes all of us acting together to build a fairer world.