



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF  
ARUNDEL & BRIGHTON

# VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING IN DETENTION AT GATWICK AIRPORT

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## **Mary Barrett writes:**

As a volunteer visitor to the Immigration Removal Centres at Gatwick, I was aware that some of the men being held in Brook House and Tinsley House were victims of trafficking and modern slavery. I have heard their stories of being made to work in warehouses around Luton and Heathrow, of working on cannabis farms and many other stories of exploitation. However, I was not aware of these dire statistics.

Between 2016 and 2019, 4,695 individuals were recognised as foreign modern slavery victims in the UK but of these, only 549 adults were granted discretionary leave to remain as trafficking victims. The immigration status 'discretionary leave' gives people a temporary right to stay in the UK if they have suffered extreme hardship.

Some trafficking victims do not wish to stay in this country and can be offered assisted return. However, a parliamentary reply in July 2019 from the then Immigration Minister, Caroline Noakes does clarify the Government's stand on the return of those who might wish to stay in the UK

"I must make it clear, however, that being recognised as a victim of modern slavery does not automatically result in being granted immigration status in the UK. There may be victims of modern slavery who have no lawful basis to remain and for whom support is available to leave the UK voluntarily. It is important that we recognise the important role of our immigration policies. Although we are committed to supporting individuals to leave voluntarily, including with reintegration support, there may be occasions when they have exhausted all options and are refusing to leave, and we are faced with the difficult decision of detaining people to secure their return.

"I want to reassure the House that we do not take these decisions lightly, but it may be necessary to detain individuals, even if they are vulnerable, to effect their removal. When that is the case, we seek to keep the period of detention as short as possible and place their welfare and safeguarding at the heart of what we do."

As many MPs argued in the debate that followed in the House of Commons, detention is a particularly challenging experience for victims of modern slavery. They have often been

seriously traumatised and have little understanding of the legal system in this country and any rights they may have. Their access to specialist legal advice while in detention is often difficult and they are fearful as they do not know what will happen next. The UK is the only country in Europe that does not have a time limit on detention and so many frequently live in limbo, without access to the support they are entitled to.

More recently, Home Office data for 2020 reported that 969 individuals with indications of trafficking were detained, despite the decline in detention due to the pandemic. Theresa Schleicher, casework manager at Medical Justice (a charity that sends doctors into detention centres to assess the mental and physical health of detainees), said recently that the figures were likely to be the “tip of the iceberg”. She continued:

“We frequently encounter survivors of trafficking in detention who have not been recognised as such by anyone before, despite having gone through the Home Office processes that should have identified them and safeguarded them from detention”.

Last year, Safeguarding Minister Victoria Atkins rejected calls to prevent the detention of modern slavery survivors, stating in a letter to NGOs that the government would not support the “absolute exclusion from detention for any particular group”.

A Home Office spokesperson said the vast majority of the individuals accounted for in the figures were referred to the National Referral Mechanism while in immigration detention or after they had been released, adding: “We consider all cases on an individual and case by case basis, and have safeguards in place which underpin detention decisions.”

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group is a charity based in Crawley whose trained volunteers visit men held in detention at the two centres next to the runway at Gatwick Airport. As visitors they offer friendship and support during a weekly visit, hear their stories and try to give them hope for the future as they cope with uncertainty and fear. The charity tries to direct detainees towards high quality legal advice and access to good healthcare. However, no one can tell when a detainee’s removal might take place and it can happen very quickly or the detainee can be released into UK society after weeks of anguish. More than half of those detained are released back into their communities.

There are still many unanswered questions about the rights of those victims of modern slavery who end up in detention. As the Crawley MP, Henry Smith, asked in the debate in the House of Commons in 2019:

“May I seek assurances from the Minister that the staff who operate those centres receive correct and adequate training to ensure that they are identifying and detecting those who may have been victims of modern slavery?”

More information about the work of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group can be found here [www.gdwg.org](http://www.gdwg.org). Please write to your MP enquiring about the welfare of victims of modern slavery held in immigrations detention.