

BROOK HOUSE INQUIRY

First Witness Statement of James Wilson on behalf of GDWG

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 3 June 2021.

I, James Wilson, Former Director of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, and currently Deputy Director of Detention Action (Unit 1.8, The Greenhouse, 244 – 254 Cambridge Heath Road, London E2 9DA) will say as follows:

Introduction

1. I am the Deputy Director at Detention Action, a post I have held since April 2019. I have additionally worked as Acting Director at Detention Action (from July 2019 – January 2020, and again from January-September 2021), whilst our Director Bella Sankey was on maternity leave. Detention Action is a national charity established in 1993 that seeks to defend the rights and improve the welfare of people in immigration detention by combining support for individuals with campaigning for policy change.
2. I worked as Director of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group ('GDWG') between June 2016 and December 2018. I was therefore Director of GDWG during the period 1 April 2017 to 31 August 2017 ('the relevant period').
3. As Director of GDWG during the relevant period, I was responsible for the charity's day-to-day operational and strategic activities. I line-managed the charity's (at the time) four other staff members and worked closely with many of GDWG's volunteers, taking responsibility for the charity's frontline work which included visits to detained people, casework and the provision of material support (such as clothes and phonecards) to people detained, and the policies and procedures that oversaw this. I was responsible for GDWG's external relationships, particularly with other NGOs and with Brook House

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management, and led on completing policy responses and submissions. I was also responsible for the day-to-day finances and running of the charity. Owing to the organisation's small size and the busy nature of the work, I regularly spoke with detained people myself and attended drop-in sessions at the IRCs when needed.

4. Although I am no longer an employee of GDWG, the organisation has given its approval for my giving evidence to this Inquiry drawing on my role as GDWG Director during the relevant period. I also have the approval of Detention Action to give this evidence.

Evidence about Brook House during the relevant period

5. I provided a witness statement which I signed on 13th September 2018 in the Judicial Review case which preceded the Inquiry. I have re-read that statement and, save as indicated below, confirm the contents are correct.
6. I have been asked by the Inquiry whether I have any relevant information which was not covered in that witness statement.
7. With the benefit of hindsight and the period of reflection since my dealings with Brook House management as GDWG Director, I have grown increasingly uneasy at the way I individually, and GDWG as an organisation, were treated by Brook House management. We were, throughout my time in post, treated primarily with suspicion and distrust. I believe that events at Brook House during and since the relevant period, and across the detention estate, have shown that a greater role for NGOs, not a lesser one, is vital for the improvement of welfare for detained persons across the detention estate. Speaking frankly, I would expect management at any IRC to reasonably view NGO activities within IRCs as a vital form of auxiliary support for those detained, not as a threat, particularly if IRC management culture genuinely prioritises the welfare of detained people and responding to safeguarding concerns and given that other welfare services and opportunities are so limited.
8. In my previous statement, at paragraphs 44-54, I described a meeting that took place on 18th August 2017 between myself, Mr Paul Gasson and Mr Stephen Skitt. As described in the statement, Mr Gasson and Mr Skitt took a highly combative and distrustful

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approach at this meeting, criticising GDWG for raising issues relating to the welfare of individual detained persons, something that GDWG always did in a polite and respectful way. With the benefit of hindsight, I feel that the approach towards GDWG became increasingly one that was tantamount to bullying. The criticism of GDWG for alerting the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) seems particularly unreasonable in retrospect – surely this is an appropriate route for raising points of concern regarding a detained person’s welfare, particularly when queries and requests to IRC management have gone unanswered or unresolved. I would like to highlight that this meeting took place just 17 days before the screening of Panorama.

9. At paragraph 7 of my previous statement, I said that I was concerned that in giving that statement Brook House managers may take me as unfriendly, and a critic, and as somehow on “the other side”, and that GDWG’s role in supporting detained people at Brook House and Tinsley House might be affected.
10. I do not recall any significant negative consequences for GDWG after I provided my statement in September 2018 (although I left my post as Director not long after this in December 2018). My recollection is that Brook House management did not arrange a further meeting with GDWG until we met on 14 September 2018, a full year after Panorama. I mentioned this then-forthcoming meeting in my original witness statement and as far as I remember this meeting took place on that date, or if not, it was rearranged for soon afterwards. The Chair of GDWG Trustees, Marie Dawson, accompanied me to this meeting. I recall that it was a fairly cordial meeting though I am afraid I did not detect any contrition, or even reflection, about what Panorama had shown.
11. I do not recall any particular pressure being applied to GDWG regarding the purpose of drop-in sessions after Panorama was aired in September 2017. I recall that we remained cautious about booking clients to be seen a second time at the drop-in sessions. I do not recall now how often we ‘pushed our luck’ and booked repeat drop-in sessions post-Panorama airing but as I recall we were not refused repeat visits.
12. I remained cautious about what issues I raised with Brook House management even after Panorama aired. For example, I remember there were issues where detained people were

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being put on 'closed visits' as an apparently punitive measure (which is not meant to happen) and being cautious about how far I pushed the point with Brook House management and whether I asked for exceptions for visits by GDWG volunteers.

13. I have been asked by the Inquiry about my comment at paragraph 65 of my previous statement that, *'....we [GDWG] did not see anything of what Panorama reported. I did not know the individual staff members implicated. We are not on the wings, of course, and as I have described our exposure is more limited than I would like it to be. It is possible it might be improved if we could hold drop-in surgeries at the Welfare Office which is deeper into the centre.'*

14. By this I meant that, while GDWG was aware of complaints made by people detained about their treatment during the relevant period, we did not directly witness any of the extreme types of mistreatment shown on Panorama. It was only on watching the Panorama programme that GDWG gained a proper understanding of the scale and severity of the abuse people were experiencing whilst detained at Brook House and the culture behind it. We were shocked, not only because of what we saw on the Panorama programme but the fact that, partly due to the inherent vulnerability of the targets of abuse, the extent of it was well-hidden from those who did not have direct access to the wings. However, as I said previously, we were not surprised, because we were aware of complaints from detained people about their treatment and we were also aware of the hostility of Brook House management towards the service we were providing to detained people.

15. As mentioned in my earlier witness statement, at paragraph 33, we were in contact with the young detained person [redacted] who subsequently featured in Panorama. My colleague had made a referral to Safer Custody at Brook House and had asked Brook House managers to be allowed to make a second drop-in visit, the purpose of which was to refer him to the Refugee Council for advice. However, we were not aware of what Panorama reported about him: that he had been placed in a room with a detained person known to be violent who had forced him to test Spice.

16. I have recently been shown records by GDWG's Recognised Legal Representative ("RLR"), relating to a person who was detained at Brook House during the relevant

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period, [D687] (who has the same RLR), which show that GDWG was informed by him of an incident of the use of force that I believe was shown on the Panorama programme. [D687] reported the use of force to GDWG after he was moved to another IRC and the records show that we referred him to the visitors group for that IRC. I was not aware of this when I made my previous statement as Panorama gave [D687] a pseudonym and I did not recognise him on the programme not having met him myself. We would not have reported a safeguarding concern in relation to each and every use of force reported to us, as our understanding is that there were internal systems in place for recording (and therefore reviewing) uses of force, and more likely we would have provided information on or assisted with making a complaint instead, where the detained person wanted to make a complaint, but in this instance the use of force was not reported to us while [D687] was still detained at Brook House, which is why we referred him.

17. I now understand that GDWG was in contact with one other detained person who appeared on Panorama. I was not aware at the time either of watching Panorama or at the time I signed my previous statement that this detained person was even in touch with GDWG in order to discuss matters relating to his treatment at Brook House. Again, I did not recognise him on the Panorama programme.

18. I am also told by GDWG that there were two other detained people who appeared on Panorama but that the specific incidents experienced by those persons were not reported by them or anyone else so GDWG did not know about those matters until the programme was broadcast. This accords with my recollection.

19. There are a number of possible reasons why we were unaware of the extreme mistreatment seen on Panorama. In my experience, people detained are often reluctant to raise mistreatment either with the IRC or with outside agencies, for a variety of reasons including a lack of faith in third parties' independence (even that of NGOs) and a fear that raising concerns or complaints could lead to punitive measures or damage in some way to their immigration cases, applications for bail or other claims. As explained in my previous statement, we experienced difficulties during the relevant period with repeat drop-in sessions, and often it would take multiple sessions for a detained person to trust us. I also explained in my previous statement that volunteer visitors would see people in

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the visits hall, which could be noisy and offered no privacy. There is also the fact that whilst GDWG was working with a considerable number of people held in Brook House during the relevant period, it would have been a minority of detained people that we got to see. Large numbers of people were not aware of GDWG (not at all helped by the issues with Brook House management and the limitations placed upon our drop-ins), or associated us with providing specific services (notably the provision of phonecards and social visits) only and did not realise that they could raise welfare or other concerns with us, seek help with referrals to solicitors or other specialist support services, or receive help with making complaints.

<u>Statement of Truth</u>	
<p>I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings for contempt of court may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.</p> <p>I am content for this witness statement to form part of the evidence before the Brook House Inquiry and to be published on the Inquiry's website.</p>	
Name	James Wilson
Signature	<div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">Signature</div>
Date	15/11/2021

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