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Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

March 19th 2020

Dear Home Secretary,

As trustees of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG), we are writing to urge you to urgently release people from detention during the Covid-19 emergency.

In the 25 years of our charity we have never before called for detention to completely cease, although we have called for a time limit. Now, however, we are experiencing an extraordinary and unprecedented situation, and we call for urgent action.

Our experience of regular visits to the centres means we are acutely aware of the centres' physical environments and daily routines, and how conducive they are to the spread of infection. There is serious risk to both detainees and centre staff of rapid and uncontrollable spread of Covid-19.

Staff are unlikely to have the training, skills and personal protective equipment (PPE) to practise effective and sustained infection control. Nor are the physical conditions adequate for the good hygiene and infection control measures that will be needed for many months. We have no confidence that self-isolation in any room would restrict the spread of the virus.

Many people in detention have underlying health issues and being detained itself reduces immunity through acute stress, lack of sleep, poor diet, and limited physical exercise.

If staff become ill, this will put their families and wider communities at risk, and significantly reduce the centres' capacity to operate.

We are seriously concerned that if anyone inside a detention centre – detainee or staff member - tests positive for Covid-19, the virus will spread further and more swiftly inside the centre than it would outside, and people will die as a result - this would create a preventable public health scandal.

Detention occurs when there is a realistic prospect of removal. With flights to many countries cancelled and with this emergency predicted to last for months, we urge you to urgently reassess the use of detention in Tinsley House and Brook House during the time of this virus. Public opinion will not stand for detention centres becoming breeding grounds for the virus to cause illness and death both inside and outside detention.

We look forward to your response as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely,
Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Trustees