Proof of Evidence of Mike Brown

Chair of No Detention No Haslar

Reference

CROWN/2026/0000005

Site address

Haslar Immigration Removal Centre, 2 Dolphin Way, Gosport, Hampshire, PO12 2AW

Proposed scope of works

The expansion of the Haslar Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) to accommodate an extra 470 detainees in addition to the current capacity for 130 detainees, involving the building of new accommodation blocks and ancillary structures, conversion/expansion of internal roads, demolition of existing structures, adjustments to the coastal path for parking, and site landscaping.

Dates of Inquiry

17-20 November inclusive

<u>Statement</u>

Summary

My name is Mike Brown. I am a [redacted] and I am the Chair of the **NoDetentionNoHaslar ("NDNH")** campaign group. My wife taught in [redacted].

I have worked in the voluntary sector since 2003, specialising in the development and management of advice, support and education services for refugees in the UK, including those in immigration detention. I was a volunteer visitor to detainees held at the Haslar IRC until its closure in 2015, and Chair of the Haslar Visitors Group (registered charity number 1080187) from 2007 to 2010.

NDNH is particularly concerned about the operational need for the expansion, the impact of the expansion on the living conditions of detainees and neighbouring occupiers, and the development proposal's compatibility with local and national planning policies.

In the main, those detained under immigration powers are either deemed to no longer have the right to remain in the UK or are foreign national ex-offenders who have served their prison sentence and are awaiting deportation.

These are administrative detention powers derived from the Immigration Act 1971 rather than automatic judicial orders. The Home Office have an obligation to use immigration detention sparingly, as a last resort. However, the Home Affairs Select Committee pointed out in 2019 that this policy is *"too often not being followed"*.[1]

Right to Remain and other humanitarian organisations have pointed out that the UK remains the only country in Europe without a statutory upper time limit on administrative detention. This is relevant when considering the impact of the development proposal on detainees.

The above Home Affairs Select Committee report has called for radical reform of immigration detention, including proper judicial oversight, fewer decisions to detain, *"an end to indefinite immigration detention"* and the introduction of *"a maximum 28-day time limit"*.

[1] [redacted]

Right to Remain and other humanitarian organisations have pointed out that the UK remains the only country in Europe without a statutory upper time limit on administrative detention, meaning that Home Office practice often diverges from the stated principle.

The Home Office has attempted to create the impression that a greater volume of administrative detention places is required when there is evidence that the capacity constraints relied upon are not justified (as explained by Professor Bosworth in her evidence). In reality, the case for expansion is the result of their failure to implement their own policy and their opposition to Select Committee recommendations.

The operational need for the proposed enlargement of the immigration detention estate by 40% – from 2,500 to 3,500 places – through the development of Haslar and Campsfield House IRCs must be scrutinised when effective community-based alternatives exist at much lower cost.

The impact of the proposed expansion upon local residents also needs to be carefully considered, particularly as it relates to the creation of an oppressive far-right atmosphere, thereby threatening the safety and security of local residents.

NoDetentionNoHaslar and background

NoDetentionNoHaslar was created shortly after the announcement of the proposal to re-open and expand the Haslar IRC in September 2022.

We have 33 members and more supporters mainly from Gosport, Portsmouth and the surrounding areas. We work closely with other local community groups such as Gosport Together, Stand Up To Racism (SUTR) Portsmouth, and national organisations such as the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID), Right to Remain (RTR) and Detention Forum, and partners such as the Coalition to Close Campsfield (CCC) and Friends Without Borders (FWB).

We hold monthly demonstrations outside the Haslar IRC site, and we have conducted leafletting campaigns in Gosport High Street.

I was employed by Refugee Action from 2005 until 2015, first as an Asylum Advice Caseworker, then as Area Manager, and in national posts including Information and Policy Manager. I worked on delivering a series of Home Office contracts including the One Stop Service (OSS), the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) and the Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) scheme.

During this time, I was a visitor to detainees held at the Haslar IRC, and I volunteered for Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) South, preparing skeleton arguments for pro-bono barristers acting for detainees at bail hearings, and presenting workshops in immigration removal centres to teach detainees how to submit bail applications and how to act as litigant-in-person at their own bail hearings.

From 2016 until I retired in 2021, I ran the CLEAR Project in Southampton. CLEAR (City Life Education and Action for Refugees) is part of City Life Church in Southampton, and exists to provide advice, support and English classes to asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants living in Southampton. I was also Chair of City of Sanctuary Southampton, a charity affiliated to the national City of Sanctuary movement, dedicated to challenging public opinion, creating empathy for asylum seekers and refugees, and seeking to reduce their isolation, stigma and discrimination.

Impact of detention on detainees

My work in immigration detention gave me and my colleagues detailed and intimate experience of the psychological harm suffered by men and women as a result of being incarcerated for an indeterminate period.

Detainees were isolated from family members, friends and the community support networks upon which they had depended. It was almost impossible for them to obtain independent legal advice, nor to conduct any meaningful dialogue with a legal representative should they have been fortunate enough to have one.

Detainees are regularly transferred between immigration removal centres, adding to the detainees' sense of helplessness as their mental health deteriorated.

One of the detainees I visited at Haslar, a [redacted], had been held at several immigration removal centres for a total of twelve months after having lost his asylum appeal because of a lack of legal representation. His bail application was successful, and he came to live with my family in 2004 while we put together further representations seeking a fresh asylum claim. He contributed to a landmark 2005 Amnesty International report into all UK immigration detention centres.[2]

As his regular visitor, I was able to see at close range the effects of his continued detention in Haslar. His [redacted] was strong, but he was affected by [redacted].

He looks back on his detention in the following words:

> [redacted]

[2] [redacted]

[redacted]

In Haslar, I was closely involved with preparing and conducting prayer and worship services for the detainees, and I ministered to them as best I could to lift their spirits, especially the young and vulnerable detainees who were overwhelmed by their imprisonment and their fears of being returned to the country from which they had fled. I continued this ministry at Haslar even after my release, making phone calls every day to those whose spirits were crushed and who had lost all hope.

Detainees were brought to Haslar IRC from all over the country. Many family members were faced with a tortuous journey to visit their loved ones detained at Haslar, situated as it is right at the tip of the Gosport peninsula. Gosport has no rail service. Visitors arriving by train at Fareham would require a 39-minute bus journey to Haslar, while those arriving by train at Portsmouth Harbour would need to catch the ferry to Gosport (4-8 sailings per hour, 4-minute crossing) followed by a 10-minute bus journey to Haslar. There are only three buses per day to bring visitors to the Haslar site (0959, 1139, 1319) at times which are practical for visiting and returning (1142, 1322, 1502) to their rail connection home. A return taxi fare from the Gosport ferry costs in the region of £20. As a result, Haslar detainees found themselves isolated from family members, friends and the community support networks upon which they had depended before their detention. It was almost impossible for Haslar detainees to obtain independent legal advice, nor to conduct any meaningful dialogue with a legal representative should they have been fortunate enough to have one. Legal representatives would rarely be able to justify the costs of travel to Haslar for face-to-face meetings with their clients.

The Haslar Visitors Group made strenuous efforts to provide detainees with basic mobile phones and pre-payment cards, without which they had no contact whatsoever with the outside world other than through limited email access.

Impact on local residents: Community tensions

The opposition to the re-opening and expansion of Haslar IRC runs wide and deep in Gosport, as the responses to the Crown Development consultation have shown. But Gosport residents by and large fear being labelled as racists and supporters of the far-right groups which have descended on the town with divisive tactics, spreading disinformation on social media.

This has led to an increase in community tensions.

Since the Government's announcement in 2022 of Haslar's re-opening and expansion, Gosport and neighbouring Portsmouth have become the target of a series of anti-immigration protests from extreme right-wing organisations from across the country. While the pretext of many of these demonstrations is to prevent the landing of what they incorrectly label as *"illegal"* migrants, and they often descend into open racist abuse and violent disorder. Far right groups have attacked the police and the RNLI for supposedly being complicit in these *"illegal"* landings. Coaches believed to be preparing to transfer migrants to an asylum processing centre in Kent have had their tyres slashed and windows broken. Coach hire companies have been threatened not to engage with the Border Force in such operations.

In advance of the protest planned for 2 August 2026 in Gosport by Hampshire Resistance, Gosport Councillor Lesley Meenaghan said:

"In April, Hampshire Resistance conducted a protest march in Gosport and were completely disrespectful to our community, our families, our children, and to us who live in Gosport. We were shocked by that behaviour."[3]

Councillor Meenaghan added:

"I have been contacted by many local residents who attended the march on April 12, believing it would be a peaceful protest.

These residents, some of whom had taken their children, were appalled by the offensive language used, the hate speech, and the verbal aggression shown by some attendees, many of whom were not from Gosport."[4]

This Hampshire Resistance march was planned to protest about levels of small boat arrivals in general, and about a proposed Islamic Centre in Forton Road, Gosport, as well as to protest against the re-opening and expansion of Haslar IRC. This shows that Haslar itself is used as a mobilising grievance for the far-right.

On 22 September 2026, there was an abortive landing of migrants at Gosport, at which 6 people were arrested amid the slashing of the hull of an inflatable craft at sea.[5]

The local newspaper, the Portsmouth News, ran the headline *Masked men dominating our streets: Anti-racism groups condemn Gosport protest amid migrant boat incident*, reporting *that "a number of people seen at the demonstration were men wearing black shirts, several with face coverings".*[6]

[redacted]

The newspaper added:

> *"Councillor Lesley Meenaghan, a borough councillor for Harbourside and Town Ward, urged people "our heads cool" and "community safe" after disorder during protests which resulted in bins being set alight, officers assaulted and residents scared."*[7]

During the demonstration on 4 October 2026, organised by the South Coast Patriots, protesters set up a blockade to prevent any coaches containing migrants from leaving Gosport. Residents' bins were taken from their gardens and used as barriers. Nails were deliberately thrown across roads leading from the proposed landing area, causing damage to residents' vehicles, and leaving Gosport volunteers to clear up the affected roads the following day.[8]

Gosport MP, Dame Caroline Dinenage, was reported as saying that residents were *"left feeling vulnerable, some felt trapped in their houses - and some local roads barricaded by police"*. She asked the Home Office to reimburse Gosport Borough Council for the clean-up costs, plus Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary for policing costs, as well as why the vessel was not re-diverted to Dover as it was previously.[9]

The appearance of masked men dressed in black marching through Gosport streets shouting racist slogans has been intimidating for the residents, particularly those of colour. Some barricaded themselves in their homes during the march.[10]

Because of these tensions, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Constabulary has repeatedly deployed emergency dispersal orders, face-covering bans, and enhanced policing powers to manage localized disorder and keep communities safe.

[redacted]

Regarding the impact on the children of Gosport, one of our NDNH members who works in the education sector in Gosport has said:

> *"Division and hateful rhetoric in the community harms all children, and responding appropriately to the worries and experiences of children (whose families may be on either or neither side of the issue) is placing an additional burden on local schools. I grew up here, and I can recall absolutely nothing like this scale of local community disruption from my own childhood. Although similar issues will have affected other communities in the past, and we can learn from that, the level of hate and distress being expressed at the moment feels like uncharted territory for Gosport."*
>
> *The problem affects schools at the planning level, with resources having to be dedicated to managing the impact of community issues, often at short notice. Conflict and intimidation in the community negatively affect children's ability to concentrate on their learning and to cooperate with each other. According to British values, schools are supposed to be environments of tolerance (at minimum), and the counter message that children are receiving outside of school is unhelpful to this aim.*
>
> *In particular, those protests that are called on the day-of, such as the weeknight boat-chasing and the group outside Wetherspoons on 28 October 2026, are highly unpredictable compared to protests which have been planned at least a few days in advance. This does not give families reasonable notice to avoid the area, and it disproportionately affects Muslims and people of colour who are unable to make themselves less visible when moving around Gosport during the course of their daily lives. People should have a right to protest at short notice, but behaviour intended to intimidate others requires a swift response.*

None of this would be happening without the planned expansion of Haslar IRC acting as trigger. The influx of non-local far-right protesters has already caused significant disruption to the lives of local people, across the range of residents who would otherwise support or oppose the centre's reopening. It is forcing parents and guardians to have difficult conversations with their children, which some families may be ill-equipped to manage, and the fallout from these conversations is felt at school.

There is also the "Prevent duty" which requires school workers to be alert to signs of radicalisation. Mutual respect and tolerance is threatened when children see the opposite modelled outside of school – or in school, as I am sure is often the case when a child's family member is outspoken about these issues, and increasingly the case as pupils get older and have more independent access to news and commentary"

Another of our NDNH members who is a community and youth worker commented:

"At the Hampshire Resistance (HR) protest outside Gosport Town Hall on the Saturday after the May 2026 local elections, the HR protesters coached a group of young local boys on their bikes to scream obscenities into the HR megaphones at the counter protestors - slogans along the lines of [redacted] *– for around 15 minutes ,after which they stayed and listened to the other things Hampshire Resistance were saying about trans and gay people (and people with blue hair, and the disabled and those on benefits). Then they came over to me and asked why Hampshire Resistance were being horrible about their siblings, their parents, their families. They said, "*[redacted] *were we on the wrong side?". We have since talked a lot and we're all good and I don't think they're going to end up fascist, but it was close."*

Summary

In summary, **NDNH** opposes the proposed expansion plans for Haslar IRC for the reasons outlined in its statement of case, and on the following grounds:

1 The Home Office has not shown the operational need for the expansion of immigration detention capacity at Haslar. Over half of those detained are ultimately released back into the community.

2 Gosport has become a rallying point for far-right anti-immigration sentiment. Community cohesion in Gosport has already suffered, and will continue to suffer, if the expansion of Haslar IRC becomes a reality.



Mike Brown