

Music in Detention

Organising music and dance workshops in Immigration Reception Centres (IRCs) might seem like putting a band aid on a broken leg. But these sessions have given immigration detainees respite from their sense of helplessness. They have restored a sense of self and inspired confidence and positive thinking. "They forgot they were in detention and the stress was lifted," commented an education manager at one centre.

Music in Detention (MID) is a new organisation set up to deliver a programme of musical activities in UK IRCs. It has been developed in partnership with three community music organisations based in South East England – Music For Change, Traditional Arts Projects (TAPS) and the Oxford Concert Party. The Baring Foundation has provided core funding to support the development of its infrastructure, enabling the organisation to build a long-term programme of activities, in partnership with The Helen Tetlow Memorial Trust and IRCs themselves.

"The role of music is about affirming one's essential humanity. When people are put into dehumanising situations, the fact that they can listen to music and participate restores a sense of self. Making music, in such circumstances, is like breathing - it is vitally important," comments Sue Lukes, MID's Chairwoman.

With an estimated 2,000 detainees being held at any one time – children, women and men - and the annual turnover of detainees said by Amnesty International to be 32,000 in 2004, Music in Detention certainly has a major task on its hands.

So far, the organisation has offered taster workshops in almost all UK centres. Comments from these sessions highlight the important impact the work is having: "It makes me feel human again," commented one participant. "It makes me feel as if there is a tomorrow," said another. "It's a relief, a remedy for everything – I believe that physically and mentally I have been relieved," was another response. One detainee explained: "It gives you the freedom that you can still be happy. If I can still be happy for one minute, means I can be happy for two minutes. Before you know what is happening, you change your motives, you change your thinking."

MID is now developing a programme of regular music activities involving detainees and staff in 10 centres – 8 in South East England, one in North East England and one in Scotland. It wants to offer practical support and guidance on good practice on music in detention for IRC staff and arts practitioners via its website.

MID has ambitious plans to work with ex-detainees offering support to those who are interested in continuing their musical participation, professionally or voluntarily, via a network of arts providers. This may be a significant development given that 40 per cent of detainees are subsequently allowed to resettle in communities but, unlike prison inmates, do not have access to any aftercare to help them recover from the experience of what can be a significant period of incarceration.

To try and combat the sense of isolation in detention MID also hopes to create musical messages with detainees in the IRCs to share their thoughts and feelings with local communities, and to create musical responses from those communities to play back to detainees inside the centres. "Detainees live in this kind of shadowy world and this project will help break the silence about their experience and enable them to feel that society does care about them," says Lukes.

While MID works with the IRCs it does not necessarily see itself as legitimising what has been a controversial aspect of immigration policy. "People in detention have a right to make music and the music that comes from these situations has a remarkably moving quality to it," comments Lukes. "Music has meaning for them. It is not about making a bad situation OK, but about enabling people to believe in themselves again and helping them to develop the capacity to overcome the situation they are in."

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