



"If one government can come up with this policy, then another one can too": **The ongoing impact of the Rwanda detentions on communities in Greater Manchester**

November 2024



Photo: Right to Remain

Summary

This briefing is about the impact of the 2024 Rwanda detentions on residents in Greater Manchester – particularly in the context of the racist riots that followed shortly after.

Written by Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (the only provider of not-for-profit immigration advice in the North West of England), it is based on our own experiences as well as conversations with voluntary sector organisations, local authorities and Greater Manchester residents with lived experience of immigration control.

The briefing documents:

- Some of the impacts on residents and local services caused by the Rwanda detentions in the spring and summer of 2024, including detentions and arrests (p. 5), a climate of fear (p. 6-8), disappearances (p. 8-9) and housing problems and homelessness (p. 9)
- Some of the community responses to the Rwanda detentions (p. 10-11)

It also recommends (p. 11-14):

- that attempts to support communities particularly affected by the riots in July and August 2024 must connect the dots with residents' historic and ongoing lived experiences of racism, Islamophobia and state violence through immigration control
- that any use of community immigration raids and places of arrest and detention like Dallas Court learn from the impact of the Rwanda detentions



Context

With the stated aim to “stop the boats”, in April 2022 the Conservative government announced “anyone entering the UK illegally – as well as those who have arrived illegally since 1 January 2022 – may now be relocated to Rwanda”. Despite the UK’s Supreme Court ruling the Rwanda plan was unlawful, in **2024 Rishi Sunak’s government ramped up attempts** to get a photo of a plane taking off. To do this, they rushed through new legislation (the Safety of Rwanda Act 2024) which declared Rwanda a safe country.



Photo: BBC



Suddenly a sizeable number of people in Greater Manchester were swept into a group who could be detained and face imminent removal to Rwanda, particularly after it was announced that people who had a refused asylum claim were at risk.



An unknown number of people from Greater Manchester were detained at Dallas Court in Salford during April and May 2024 and taken to detention facilities near Heathrow Airport.



When the Conservative government failed to get a flight to Rwanda, and the new Labour government confirmed there would not be one, everyone was released on bail – some back to Greater Manchester and others forcibly dispersed elsewhere.

The intentional fear the detentions brought to our communities was significant. This was made worse by policy developments being leaked to the press rather than communicated to local authorities or voluntary services. The predictable result was an increase in disappearances, homelessness and exploitation.

Within a month of the Rwanda plan being scrapped, Greater Manchester experienced significant racist violence that targeted many of the same communities impacted by the Rwanda detentions – people of colour, Muslims, people with a migrant background, and organisations providing support to immigrants.

Throughout this briefing, in *italics*, are quotes from people in Greater Manchester about their experiences of this time. They include GMIAU caseworkers and solicitors; staff at other organisations supporting people seeking asylum; campaigners with lived experience of immigration control; community organisers and activists.



Timeline

15 November 2023

The UK's Supreme Court declares the Rwanda policy unlawful

25 April 2024

The Safety of Rwanda Bill (declaring Rwanda a safe country) becomes an Act

28 April 2024

New government policy leaked in the media announces people will be detained nationwide at routine immigration meetings and bail appointments for flights to Rwanda, due to take off in 10-12 weeks

22 May 2024

Rishi Sunak announces a general election in the UK for 4 July and shortly after confirms no flights will take off to Rwanda until after the election

3 June 2024

Home Office legal team confirms to the High Court that no flights will take off until after 24 July 2024

30 July – mid August 2024

Racist riots take place across the UK. In Greater Manchester this included: an arson attack on a hotel housing people seeking asylum, people of colour assaulted on the street, far right organised riots and plans to attack immigration advice charities

14 April 2022

Boris Johnson announces people coming to the UK "illegally" (by small boat or in a lorry) to seek asylum would be removed to Rwanda and have their asylum claim decided there, not the UK

13 March 2024

Home Office officials begin calling people whose asylum claim has been refused offering them £3,000 to voluntarily depart the UK for Rwanda

10 May 2024

Keir Starmer announces Labour will scrap the Rwanda plan if in power

13 May 2024

New government policy added to Home Office website saying the group of people liable to be detained for flights to Rwanda now includes those with refused or withdrawn asylum or human rights claims who have no ongoing appeal or fresh claim and no leave to remain in the UK

4-6 July 2024

Keir Starmer's Labour party wins the general election with a landslide and announces that the Rwanda plan is "dead and buried"



Explainer: what is reporting?

“For me personally, it’s feeling worthless when someone is detained in front of you. I went there on the first day and someone went in and never came out. That feeling – oh God, powerless, there’s nothing you can do.”

Reporting is a condition of temporary admission to the UK, which is now known as **“immigration bail”**. Since the Immigration Act 2016, anyone who could theoretically be detained for immigration reasons has to have certain “conditions” imposed on them. One condition can be a requirement to “sign on” or “report” regularly at a reporting centre, a local branch of the Home Office.

For people in Greater Manchester the local reporting centre is Dallas Court in Salford. People have to go there as often as the Home Office specifies – monthly, fortnightly or as often as weekly.

The Home Office uses in-person reporting as an opportunity to detain people, transfer them to an immigration detention centre and try to forcibly remove them. Before every trip to Dallas Court people in Greater Manchester have to mentally and physically prepare themselves, and their families, that they might not be coming home.

During the period of the Rwanda detentions, when people were told to sign on, there was no way of knowing whether this would result in them being detained and sent to Rwanda.

For more information on reporting at Dallas Court see GMIAU’s research, [Living in constant fear](#).



A protest at Dallas Court in Salford, 2021. Photo: Right to Remain



What was the impact on Greater Manchester of the Rwanda detentions?

1. Detentions and arrests

"While waiting outside I saw people shaking, clutching crosses in their hand as they were going in – I could see the fear and anxiety in their faces – am I going to come out?"

"People were really worried. There were a lot of people reporting at the time. Very tangible tension and stress outside Dallas Court. People were really scared, including people doing signing support."

- An unknown number of Greater Manchester residents were detained at Dallas Court for removal to Rwanda. The exact number has not been disclosed by the Home Office despite repeated requests.
- People started being detained almost immediately after the leaked media announcement on 28 April 2024.
- People were forcibly taken away in Home Office enforcement vans to detention centres near London.

One person went to report as a group of four and was the only one to come home.

It was only clear some people had been detained when friends went to regular activities (e.g. a weekly sports club), found someone was missing, searched for them and discovered they had reported and not been seen since.

- Greater Manchester Police arrested people at Dallas Court when they stood in front of detention vans to try to stop the Home Office taking people away. Some people were injured.

On 29 April, GMIAU published a legal explainer about the Rwanda detentions with details of how people should contact us for legal advice. In two months, we were contacted by **24** people in the North West and two from other parts of the country.

- Most were signposted by support groups, which suggests they were embedded in communities.
- Most were still in the community, and some had already been detained.
- Many were nationals of countries with a high asylum grant rate like Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea. This means they are likely to be granted refugee status if their claim is heard in the UK.
- Most were very anxious, because they had previously been told that the Home Office was considering removing them to Rwanda, and had then been asked to report.



2. Climate of fear

"Being asylum seeking women, you know that you are here to be protected, and all of a sudden you're being asked that you're being deported to a country they've never been to before. The women were really in a bad state, because it's a huge blow for them."

"It was really fear, for as long as it lasted. That's really what it was. Fear. We didn't know who was going to be picked."

Lack of clarity

"It was a ghoulish sounding scheme that had been floated a lot in the media and going through the courts – but early on there was a real lack of clarity over what it actually meant and who might be impacted."

- The initial Rwanda detentions impacted people who had arrived after the 1st of January 2022. This still meant thousands of people were threatened, but many others could be reassured that they wouldn't be affected. But two weeks later on the 13th May, the government announced that the Rwanda policy would apply to *anyone* with a refused asylum claim, expanding the cohort to many thousands more.
- As it was impossible to tell who would be targeted from within a very large group of people who could potentially be detained, there was significant fear, anxiety and confusion among communities in Greater Manchester.
- Many organisations felt this fear was caused intentionally; to create the message that people seeking asylum (and migrants more widely) were not wanted or welcome by the Conservative government, with parallels to the "Go Home Vans".
- The impact of the Rwanda detentions was not confined to people identified as liable for detention in Home Office policies.

"All my clients seeking asylum have been contacting me a number of times seeking assurances that they would not be detained if they reported. I'm also being contacted by my clients who aren't even seeking asylum because they are worried about signing at Dallas Court."

"There was a sense of anxiety amongst the homeless community."

"People who had been granted leave to remain were coming in worried about it. If someone who has gone through the process and had leave to remain for a year still felt worried it shows how it contributed to that sense of hostility towards people who weren't born in the UK. Not just people in the asylum system."



“Our work is with people affected by Brexit immigration changes and they were saying “is this what this country thinks about people who weren’t born here, that we can be rounded up and flown away to some faraway country?”

“A woman stopped me in the street and used google translate to explain that she had seen Rwanda on the news the night before and was fearful it would apply to her, even though she doesn’t meet the criteria as she has children under 18.”

- The Rwanda detentions amplified the injustices people were already experiencing in the asylum system, and had a significant impact on people’s mental health. This was another injustice on top of many others people were already enduring.

➔ One person supporting people reporting at Dallas Court said that asking someone “how are you?” could be like opening a pressure valve. Sometimes no one else had asked that person how they were. The trauma that was sometimes disclosed exposed how little emotional support people were receiving.

“Why are they doing this to us, what more to they want to do when the system is already so unfair, what do they want to achieve with this?”

Lack of communication

- The fear experienced in Greater Manchester was made worse because of the way Rwanda detention policies were communicated by central government—leaked to the media with little detail and with no communication to voluntary or statutory services. This created an information vacuum for rumours to spread.

➔ Several organisations noted that in Greater Manchester’s asylum hotels, information about Rwanda was not disseminated by private contractor Serco in case it frightened people. But this left people without any reliable information.

“At one point there was an unsubstantiated rumour among the Eritrean community that officials were waiting in Rwanda to identify and arrest Eritrean asylum seekers.”

➔ At times it was also difficult to get reliable information from the Home Office. When the Home Office started cold calling people offering £3,000 to voluntarily depart (see timeline), Home Office officials themselves were unclear whether the whole thing was a scam.



- The effects of these rumours were exacerbated by the legal aid crisis. Most of those who could be affected by the Rwanda detentions did not have access to legal advice to decipher Home Office announcements and explain whether they might affect them. One organisation said: *"The saddest thing is many of them don't have a lawyer, their asylum claim hasn't been accepted and they are just in limbo."*

3. Disappearances

"We had a couple of women who ran away from their hotel when they heard about Rwanda, they just ran, because no information was shared with them. They stayed away for a few weeks – going back to abusers, wherever they could find someone to stay with. Because of language barriers it's easy for these women to be in the hands of wrong people because they don't have any information, they don't know what's going on. What if someone had taken their life because of this?"

- Again and again, organisations told us the Rwanda detentions meant some people stopped engaging with the immigration system as well as with wider activity that rooted them into the community.

➡ It was common for voluntary sector services to hear of people who had "disappeared", "gone into hiding", "gone underground", who had decided it was "too risky" to stay. People stopped attending reporting appointments to avoid being detained, or left asylum accommodation so the Home Office would not know where they lived.

➡ People were not resolving their immigration issues (and remaining homeless) because they were scared to contact the Home Office:

“I met with a man who could have been removed to Rwanda. His asylum claim had been withdrawn (he didn't know why) and he was homeless. While the media frenzy about Rwanda was at its peak, he was understandably reluctant to make further submissions as he'd be back on the Home Office radar.”

➡ Young people stopped attending college in the belief they could be picked up by immigration officers.

“Some people left asylum accommodation in other parts of the country to come to Greater Manchester to live below the radar with friends and family.”



- Many services were having conversations with people about whether it was safe to report. GMIAU solicitors said:

“People are worried, seeking reassurance from us, which we may or may not be able to give depending on the case.”

“The main thing was that they were very scared about reporting so I would advise beforehand to tell a friend, take my phone number etc and I would try to contact them later that day to see if they were OK.”

“Some people wanted to disappear but we advised them that it would mean abandoning their asylum claim and the loss of support and that only a few would be removed – this was difficult as I totally understood why they wanted to disappear.”

- The implications for people of going underground to avoid the Rwanda detentions have had lasting consequences. Some people have continued to disengage long after the end of the Rwanda plan.

“I heard of one person who did disappear who has been able to re-enter the system with legal help, but I’m aware a lot of lawyers don’t have capacity for people who are wanting to do this.”

4. Housing problems and homelessness

- Everyone detained pending removal to Rwanda was eventually released, either because of a bail application or when the plan was scrapped after the election.
- For people needing asylum accommodation to be bailed to, it usually meant being dispersed on a no-choice basis. Some Greater Manchester residents were forced to leave the city-region.
- Breakdowns in communication between the Home Office and private accommodation contractors meant people risked losing their belongings without intervention from support organisations or friends. For example,
 - ▶ if the accommodation contractor was not notified when someone was detained and assumed the person had gone missing
 - ▶ if someone was bailed to another part of the country and there was no process to transfer belongings from their old asylum accommodation to their new address
 - ▶ if someone returned to their old asylum accommodation and the contractor had arranged for a new person to move in



Adam's experience of community connection and legal advice

Adam has been in the UK nearly a decade and has children here. His nationality is disputed, so until the Rwanda plan, there was no country to which he could be removed from the UK. He was made homeless by the immigration system but since 2023 had found stable accommodation through a Greater Manchester charity.

Adam was detained while reporting at Dallas Court and sent to an immigration centre near Heathrow Airport. He contacted GMIAU and we represented him at his bail hearing. The judge placed considerable reliance on his history of reporting and the fact that he had a stable address. Adam's support worker attended the hearing to confirm his accommodation in Greater Manchester was still available.

Adam's mental health deteriorated in detention, he was very stressed and experienced high blood pressure due to anxiety. He was very relieved to be released and to go back to his home.

5. Community mobilisation

"People who have influence and power to change need to hear of this. They need to know that these people have come back, that they are our people! People are detained then they decide no, they're not going to be sent to Rwanda, and then they release them back to the community who have to deal with the mess."

"The positive thing to come out of it was the community."

- When the Rwanda detentions began, there was an initial scrambling to understand what was going on, who was affected and what was needed.
- Some of the forms of support people organised to provide included:
 - ▶ Practical and emotional help
 - ▶ Legal information
 - ▶ Solidarity spaces
 - ▶ Campaigning – including a solidarity gathering
 - ▶ Signing support at Dallas Court and protest march in central Manchester
- The community response to the Rwanda detentions built on long standing community support networks and campaigns like #AbolishReporting.
- Many of those involved were part of small, community-based organisations, often with members directly affected by immigration control. Most had little resources or infrastructure to do the work but were stepping up in the absence of more formal support and because of long-standing, deep-rooted connections with people impacted.



- These connections mattered: people have said it made a difference who was delivering information and support, with trusted community sources being most valued.
- Because of the sense of crisis, the detentions also brought together people campaigning on different social justice issues who saw Rwanda as a threat to the community. For example, university students active on Palestine became involved in signing support at Dallas Court.
- The impact of the Rwanda detentions on staff and volunteers in support organisations/networks was significant – particularly on the back of years fighting anti-asylum policies:

“Disheartening, dispiriting, scary.”



It brought up traumatic memories for people of their own lived experience – of the asylum system, and of reporting.



“It came up in our daily debrief that staff and volunteers were worried about particular people.”



“It was a shock. It was a really distressing time. It was very, very difficult and very distressing. It affected me a lot and the team as well.”

- Understanding the Rwanda detention policies and supporting people appropriately displaced a lot of other work during this time. For example, at GMIAU it took up a huge amount of time – reassuring clients, giving advice about reporting as safely as possible, checking in afterwards, briefing local authorities, putting out information for the community, creating a “front door” into the organisation for people who had Rwanda letters or who had been detained, giving advice and taking on those without legal representation.

What needs to be done

“When they make policies they should think about the humanity, they should think about how they are treating people. So even if in the future they want to bring in a bill or a law or anything regarding asylum seekers, they should think about their safety first, about safeguarding. They should always treat them as human beings.”

The impacts of the spring and summer of 2024 have not ended for communities in Greater Manchester – people are still living with the trauma of what happened during the two years the Rwanda plan was government policy, as well as the consequences of the wider Hostile Environment and the escalation in racist violence in August.



People told us that what has happened **“should be on the record”** because **“even though they have said they are not going to deport them to Rwanda, they can change their mind at any time”**. Our conversations also made it clear that for many people in Greater Manchester, there is no firm distinction between lived experiences of:

- the racist riots
- the prolonged racist, anti-immigrant rhetoric from government
- the state violence of immigration control, including the Rwanda detentions.

And that any response needs to understand these connections and do better.

“The threat hasn’t gone away. We’re likely to see the same again and worse, if there’s another trigger.”

“We want to highlight that this isn’t over: **people are still living in fear and worry** about [the violence] happening again. It’s not just about the people rioting. We’re angry at the government for describing migrants in certain ways, putting us in certain groups. Using us as scapegoats, as usual and always. **It feels like we’re the first ones to be attacked** – not just by rioters but by them as an establishment.” – [GMIAU Action Group](#)

“We must be clear that this is the culmination of years of government policy and rhetoric. Politicians of all stripes must take accountability for their role in normalising the racist and dehumanising rhetoric that underpins this violence. **A total change of approach is needed** – one which puts people’s humanity first and unites our communities around shared values of compassion and solidarity.” – [Joint statement on racist riots](#)

Over 40 organisations in Greater Manchester have come together to create a set of **Expectations for our politicians**, representing the area in local, regional and national government. The Expectations make clear that local politicians should be

- listening to people with lived experience of immigration control
- speaking out about the importance of welcome, safety, justice, home and support for all Greater Manchester residents, regardless of immigration status
- being accountable.





In the aftermath of the Rwanda detentions and racist riots of 2024, particular attention should be given to our Expectations on:

1. Reparative justice

We need reparation and restoration for communities traumatised by the ongoing injustices of immigration control, the Rwanda detentions and racist, Islamophobic violence. This must include:

- accountability from the Home Office about what happened to Greater Manchester residents during and after the Rwanda detentions
- individual compensation for those who experienced detention as part of the Rwanda plan
- support for communities feeling the continuing impacts of the Rwanda detentions and wider immigration enforcement.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has made funding available through a Community Recovery Fund for areas most affected by the violence in July and August – including Manchester and Bolton. We believe any central or local government funding

- should be focused on places communities turn to in times of crisis – trusted, community-based, often small, grass-roots organisations with little funding or infrastructure
- must recognise and respond to the state actions that make people more vulnerable to racist violence (directly and indirectly) and less likely to turn to state agents (such as Greater Manchester Police) for support.

2. Home Office policies that leave people hyper-visible

Hostile Environment policies that make people hyper-visible to racist violence (by corralling people of colour into specific places, or onto the streets) must end. These include:

- in-person reporting
- the long-term use of hotels to house people seeking asylum
- evicting people onto the street 28 days after a positive refugee decision.



3. Repealing hostile immigration legislation

While government has stated that the Rwanda plan will not go ahead, legislation criminalising asylum must be repealed. starting with the Safety of Rwanda Act (2024), the Illegal Migration Act (2023) and relevant parts of the Nationality and Borders Act (2022).

4. Investment in legal aid

In every part of England and Wales, there is a deficit between the need for immigration and asylum legal advice and the provision available, but **the largest deficit is in the North West**.

On a day-to-day basis this is a personal disaster for the many people in Greater Manchester who face unnecessary destitution, homelessness, joblessness, poor health, isolation and immigration enforcement action as a result. But when crisis events happen, like the Rwanda detentions, it means we are simply not equipped to manage.

We need government to stop weaponising access to justice as a political football, and push for the long-term investment of legal aid – for the benefit of our communities and the people in them.



A demonstration in solidarity with people seeking asylum in Manchester, 2023.

Thank you for reading this briefing and to all the people who have contributed their experiences to it. For further information contact amanda@gmiau.org or visit our website, www.gmiau.org.