

Guardian : "Yarl's Wood detention centre's family wing to be shut down" - 21/07/10

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"Nick Clegg describes facility opened by Labour government, which detains up to 1,000 children a year, as a 'moral outrage'

Yarl's Wood immigrant detention centre, Bedfordshire The Yarl's Wood detention centre near Bedford has faced controversy since it opened in 2001. Photograph: Graham Turner

Campaigners and children's charities today welcomed the government's announcement that it is to close the family wing of Yarl's Wood, which detained as many as 1,000 children a year.

Nick Clegg told the House of Commons that it was a moral outrage the previous government locked up children "who were innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever".

The deputy prime minister then announced that, as part of the government's pledge to end child detention, it would close Yarl's Wood, the main removal centre for women and families, as part of its pledge to end child detention.

The Home Office later clarified however that it was only the family wing of the 405-bed facility that was to be closed and the rest of the centre would "continue to function as an immigration removal facility for adults".

Nevertheless, a spokesman for the Outcry campaign, made up of the Children's Society and Bail for Immigration Detainees, welcomed the closure as a "step in the right direction".

He said: "The OutCry campaign has repeatedly condemned the unnecessary practice of immigration detention of children which seriously harms children's physical and mental health. We believe that locking up children, who have committed no crime, for months at a time, is unacceptable in Britain in the 21st century. This commitment is a huge step in the right direction."

Isabella Sankey, director of policy for the human rights group Liberty, said: "The Yarl's Wood family unit is a notorious contradiction in terms, where children have been incarcerated and mothers driven to despair.

"We look forward to government plans to close the unit and to replacing detention with a more humane and family-friendly policy.

"Protecting those fleeing persecution is a moral and legal obligation. It is no crime to be a refugee and certainly no crime to be a child."

A spokesman for Medical Justice, a charity that fights for adequate health provisions for detainees, said: "We agree with Nick Clegg that detaining children at Yarl's Wood is a moral outrage. So too is the continued indefinite and arbitrary detention of vulnerable women at Yarl's Wood, including torture survivors, pregnant women, victims of trafficking and women with serious medical conditions, some of whom are denied adequate medical care.

"We believe that the harm being caused by Yarl's Wood is so extensive that the only solution is to close it down. We therefore call on the government to close Yarl's Wood in its entirety today."

Earlier this year, the children's commissioner, Sir Al Ainsley-Green, reported that children held at the Bedfordshire centre faced extremely distressing arrest and transportation procedures and were subjected to prolonged and sometimes repeated periods of detention. He highlighted concerns over healthcare.

A growing body of medical evidence has found that the detention of children in the asylum system is linked to serious physical and psychological harm.

A Home Office spokesman said: "The new government has been clear in its commitment to end the detention of children and this includes those held in the family wing at Yarl's Wood.

"We are currently working to find an alternative that protects the welfare of children, without undermining our immigration laws."

Article on the Guardian's website