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Compulsory O2 mobiles for Yarl's Wood detainees September 26, 2011

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New detainees arriving at Yarl's Wood immigration prison, run by outsourcing giant Serco, are being given new mobile phones locked to O2 SIM cards with the back covers glued on so that no other SIM cards can be used, Corporate Watch can reveal. The new system, criticised by campaigners for isolating, monitoring and exploiting detainees even further, follows a similar scheme introduced by G4S in Tinsley House earlier this year.

The new phone system in Yarl's Wood started last month for new arrivals, with the aim of rolling it out for "the majority of residents" by the end of October. According to Serco, there are no immediate plans to roll it out to its other detention centre, Colnbrook, near Heathrow.

A letter handed by the management to all detainees in early August 2011 stated: "Every resident will be issued with a mobile phone on the O2 network, which has the strongest mobile phone signal of all the networks in the Yarl's Wood area ... This will be phased in over the next few weeks." The letter adds that the phones have a "built-in SIM card and a fixed mobile telephone number", and that O2 top-up credit "can be purchased from [the centre's] shop".

Earlier this year, [Corporate Watch revealed](#) that G4S had contracted secure telecommunications company Global Comms & Consulting Ltd (GCC) to run a new phone system in Tinsley House, one of its Gatwick immigration prisons. Detainees were given special new phones that could be monitored and disrupted when necessary by the immigration authorities or the prison's management. Calls were also said to be more expensive and detainees were not able to call free numbers. The new contract between Serco and O2 seems to be Serco's response to G4S's trial scheme, which was expected to be rolled out to all other detention centres in the UK if "successful".

'Best coverage'

The Yarl's Wood O2 phones come with an initial £5 free credit but detainees say this runs out "much faster than it should." Although Serco claims that its rates are "competitive", O2 is not the cheapest mobile network for calls within the UK or abroad, and many detainees prefer to use low-cost providers such as Lebara and Lyca. But Serco insists that the reason for choosing O2 is that it provides "the best signal coverage at Yarl's Wood", declining to comment on whether other providers were considered before deciding on O2.

Migrants held at Yarl's Wood and other immigration prisons can get some paid work inside, doing menial tasks such as cleaning and kitchen work (see [here](#) and [here](#) for details). However, Serco only pays them £1.50 a day, which is hardly enough to pay for essential needs, let alone expensive phone calls.

The second reason that Serco gives for introducing the O2 phones is that they provide "a much more efficient and effective way to communicate with our residents." A new "texting platform" to alert detainees via SMS (for example, about legal and social visits) replaces the old pager system that was in place. According to the Yarl's Wood management, the messages are coded, in the form of numbers, and non-English speakers are provided with a translated list explaining what each number means. For example, 1 means "go to white phone" and 3 means "social visit".

Critics of the scheme told Corporate Watch that the new system, with a fixed number and handset assigned to each detainee, will enable Serco and the immigration authorities to monitor detainees' phone calls and punish those who 'break the rules', such as talking to campaigners or the media during disturbances, by switching off their phones (see [this Corporate Watch article](#) for previous examples).

Campaigners and detainee visitor groups also argue that the scheme will

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isolate detainees even further. A member of the SOAS Detainee Support group said: "Yarl's Wood is already in the middle of nowhere. Making mobile phone calls more expensive for detainees is just another attempt to demoralise them. It will make communication with friends, family, lawyers and doctors virtually impossible for many of these people, who are already some of the poorest in our society."

New and old phones

Asked whether detainees will have their existing phones confiscated and replaced by the new O2 ones, the Yarl's Wood management claimed that phones compatible with detention regulations will be permissible.

There are strict regulations regarding the types of mobile phones allowed in detention centres (no camera phones are allowed, for example). The new O2 phones apparently meet all the regulations and Serco says they "offer a suitable alternative" to those whose phones do not meet the conditions and are confiscated.

However, the management's letter to detainees mentioned above states: "Every resident will only be allowed a Yarl's Wood issued mobile phone in possession," adding that, from 24th October 2011, top-up cards for all other networks "will not be sold in the centre's shop". The shop had already stopped selling SIM cards on 15th August.

In a letter sent to supporters, a number of Yarl's Wood detainees, who prefer to keep anonymous, expressed their frustration with the new phones: "We refuse to be forced to use O2. It violates our liberty, our right to choose a [mobile] network and the advantages gained [after] a year[s] contract with a non-O2 provider] while in the UK."

Profiting from detention

In March this year, Serco bought call centre giant The Listening Company, which employed more than 4,300 people in eight UK centres. Its Manchester centre handles O2 customer service calls.

O2 also appears to be the provider of Serco's landline phones. Serco's press office's answer machine does not seem to have been customised and the voicemail message is the O2 standard: "Welcome to the O2 messaging service. The person you are calling is unable to take your call."

Hearing the news about the new phone system in Yarl's Wood, anti-detention campaigners vowed to target O2 for "profiting from detention". One campaigner Corporate Watch spoke to, who has been visiting and supporting detainees in Yarl's Wood for many years, said: "As if Serco's exploitation of Yarl's Wood detainees wasn't enough, now O2, another massive corporation, is going to make profit at the expense of migrants locked up there like prisoners. The company is simply getting a monopoly over the phone calls of 405 people who do not want to use O2."

