



association of **visitors** to
immigration detainees

Hidden Stories

Commemorating 20 years of
supporting immigration detainees



Acknowledgements

Hidden Stories is dedicated to all those who have experienced detention.

Hidden Stories is a collaborative oral history project, carried out by AVID in 2014, to commemorate our twentieth anniversary.

You can view the accompanying film, by Mark Evans, at www.aviddetention.org.uk. We are hugely grateful to Mark for his contribution, not only in making the film, but also for his advice and guidance throughout the project as a whole.

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With thanks to AVID members old and new

AVID members 2014

Asylum Welcome

Bristol Visitors to International Detainees (Bristol VOID)

Detention Action

Friends without Borders/Haslar Visitors Group

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

Herts and Beds Asylum and Refugee Network

Jesuit Refugee Service

Larne House Visitors Group

Lewes Group in Support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Liverpool Prisons Visiting Group

Manchester Immigration Detainees Support Team

Morton Hall Detainee Visitors Group

Samphire/Dover Detainee Visitors Group

SOAS Detainee Support Group

Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group

Sudanese Visitors Group

Wandsworth Refugee Network

Yarl's Wood Befrienders

Verne Visitors Group

Zimbabwe Association

Introduction

AVID and volunteer visiting: 20 years on

Volunteer visitors, and the detainees they support, are at the heart of AVID's work.

For over 20 years we have worked to support, encourage and develop volunteer visiting across the UK, in recognition of the desperate situations facing immigration detainees and the hugely challenging role that volunteers take on.

For the majority of these 20 years, immigration detention was one of the UK's most hidden human rights scandals. Very few people were even aware that the British government was locking up migrants indefinitely for administrative convenience. At the time of writing, in early 2015, it is no longer so hidden, but the scandal remains. Volunteer visitors have played an integral part in the development of a growing civil society movement to expose the realities of our immigration detention system, shining a light into dark corners to ensure that the realities of life inside are heard by those outside, beyond the barbed wire.

Immigration detention is the practice of holding individuals and families subject to immigration control in custody, either while they await permission to enter, or prior to deportation or removal from the country. Unlike the rest of Europe, the UK detains migrants without time limit. Unlike in the criminal justice system, decisions to detain are not made in court, but by immigration officials. Detainees can be held in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs, also known as detention centres), as well as in Short Term Holding Facilities (STHFs), prisons, police custody suites, and other holding rooms, including at ports and airports.

Those detained may be asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim, or pending enforced removal from the country having had their asylum claim refused. They may be migrants facing removal, or foreign nationals who have served a custodial sentence in the UK and are facing deportation. While nearly half of those detained will be held for around two months, it is far from uncommon for detention to become prolonged. Visitors have supported detainees who have spent years locked up in detention, only to be released back into the community, their detention having served no purpose.

Volunteer visiting is a unique form of volunteering. Volunteers, usually part of a local visitors group in the community near the detention facility, provide emotional and practical support and advice to those inside. At the very basic level, they are befrienders, providing a listening ear, someone to talk to at a difficult time. But visitors are also so much more than this. Volunteer visitors are sometimes the only person a detainee has to talk to who is not an official. They are able to signpost and provide information about specialist services and sources of advice. They can follow up with solicitors and provide a vital link with the outside world. Often described as a 'lifeline' by people in detention, visitors are frequently the first person a detainee will confide in about their experiences and as such, they are often the first to speak out when someone is in need or at risk of harm.

As detainees' eyes and ears on the outside, visitors have also played a major role in helping others understand the realities of the immigration detention system, and often been the first to draw attention to the injustices faced by those

inside. Visitors, importantly, bear witness, and they have therefore often been the first to bring to light cases of prolonged detention which have subsequently been found to have been unlawful, cases where vulnerable people have been detained despite very serious damage to their mental health, people who should never have been detained in the first place.

What is AVID?

AVID, the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees, is the national organisation supporting volunteer visitors and visiting, and pushing for positive change in the detention system.

A membership network, AVID was set up in 1994 by individuals concerned by what was then the very early beginnings of the detention system. Audrey Atter and Reverend John Alleyne, both members of the Winchester Action Group for Asylum Seekers (WAGAS), had started visiting Kurdish asylum seekers in Winchester prison, outraged at the thought that those seeking sanctuary were being locked up behind bars. Both John and Audrey, and many others from WAGAS, would be integral to what would eventually become AVID. They recognised the need for those visiting to be supported and to have contact with one another, to help make sense of an increasingly complex policy environment.

All over the UK, people like Audrey and John were beginning to express similar concerns. Individuals began coming together at the local level, organising in what would become known as ‘visitors groups’ to provide emotional support to detainees in detention centres and prisons near where they lived. They also provided practical items like clothes and toiletries. These simple gestures of friendship would become the cornerstone of the visitors’ network that we have today.

As the use of detention expanded, so did visiting, and it became increasingly clear that visitors also needed training, information, support and advice in order to be able to provide the best possible

support to detainees. And thus AVID was established, initially to provide this training, but also to act as a hub for visitors groups nationally, so that experiences, issues, information and resources could be shared between groups.

AVID began making contact with groups across the country, but also helped raise awareness of the issues of immigration detention, and to establish new visitors groups in areas where none existed. In its role as a hub, AVID also worked to gather evidence on what was happening inside detention, to make comparisons and identify inconsistencies between detention facilities, and to use this collective evidence base to push for changes in the system, both locally and nationally.

AVID works to ensure the knowledge, compassion, expertise and evidence of volunteer visitors reaches the attention of policy makers, decision makers and the public. And in this way, AVID has achieved real change that has impacted on every single detainee. These changes range from pushing for the use of CCTV in escort vans to prevent abuses, improving access to mobile phones and the internet for all, ensuring visitors groups have access to detention facilities, and pushing for and helping draft the very first operational standards for detention. We’ve also raised awareness and pushed for changes in more systemic issues, such as the policies around vulnerability and mental health in detention, the detention of single women alongside men, and the misuse of segregation in detention.

These three strands of our work: training, information and development support to visitors groups; information sharing and awareness raising; and advocacy, remain at the core of what we do today. The volunteer visitors network has grown dramatically: we now have member visitors groups in every single detention centre and residential STHF in the UK, as well as in some prisons. In 2014 the AVID network comprised 20 organisations, with over 670 volunteer visitors across the country. Sadly, the need for volunteer visitors remains greater



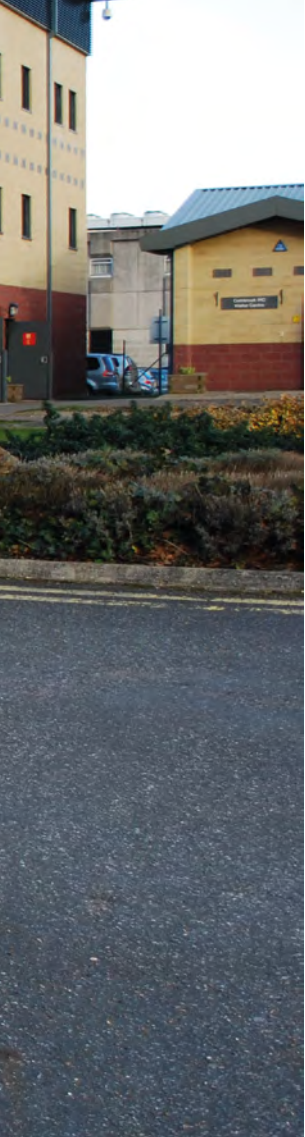
than ever, as the use of detention continues to expand. In 1994 when we started, there were 250 detention bed spaces and in our 20th anniversary year, 2014, there were around 5,000.¹ This is one of the largest detention estates in Europe, detaining around 30,000 people every year.

The visitors' network

All visitors groups are independent, but work with AVID nationally to share expertise and experiences, and ensure best practice. Visiting is organised at the local level by these groups, who recruit and coordinate volunteers from the

community. Visitors groups are often publicised within the detention centre. Detainees may self-refer, by contacting the group directly, or may be referred by detention centre staff, or by another NGO or visitors group. Once a detainee has requested a visitor and a suitable volunteer has been found, the visitor will provide a social visit to that person on an agreed basis, usually every week to ten days, for as long as the detainee needs. Ongoing support is offered to volunteers by the local group, for example in monthly support meetings, or through buddying with more experienced members of the group. AVID provides support through our range of

1. When Hidden Stories was being researched in 2014, there were 5,000 spaces. This figure included the number of spaces available in detention centres and STHFs, but also included bed spaces available in mainstream prisons for immigration detainees. Throughout 2014, there were around 1,000 spaces available within UK prisons for detainees. In 2015 the number being held in prisons reduced, and two detention centres closed.



Outside Colnbrook
Immigration Removal
Centre

training modules, one-to-one support and advice to groups, information and resources on our website, the visitors' handbook, annual coordinators' conference, and networking events. We also work with groups to promote access to detention centres, and to develop new visitors groups as detention expands.

Visitors groups have evolved over these 20 years, in response to the changing political climate and the expanding use of detention in this time. While some remain volunteer-led groups, others have grown and are now registered charities with paid staff, carrying out a diverse range activities alongside their visiting. This includes awareness-raising in local communities, casework, community support, campaigning, advocacy or providing support to those who leave detention. Visitors groups are now an

integral part of a growing civil society movement challenging immigration detention – a movement that continues to grow.

The diversity of groups in our network is a key strength. By working together, groups are able to achieve so much more for detainees than they would alone. All groups share a commitment to visiting, to providing an independent, non-judgemental listening ear and to doing what they can to make the situation that little bit more bearable. Volunteer visitors can and do make the world of difference to those in detention. And it is this compassion for the individual that has kept AVID and visitors groups going for so many years.

This is what we wanted to explore with Hidden Stories.

Immigration detention in 2014

When AVID began in 1994 there were 250 detention spaces, and a small number of volunteer visitors groups. In 2014, our 20th year, things look slightly different...

Around **30,000** people were detained in 2014, either in one of **11** detention centres, or in one of **four** 'short term holding facilities'. Families with children were still being held in a **'pre departure accommodation'** known as Cedars.

The UK's detention estate expanded massively in 2014. This included

580 new bed spaces

at The Verne IRC, Dorset and over

260 extra spaces

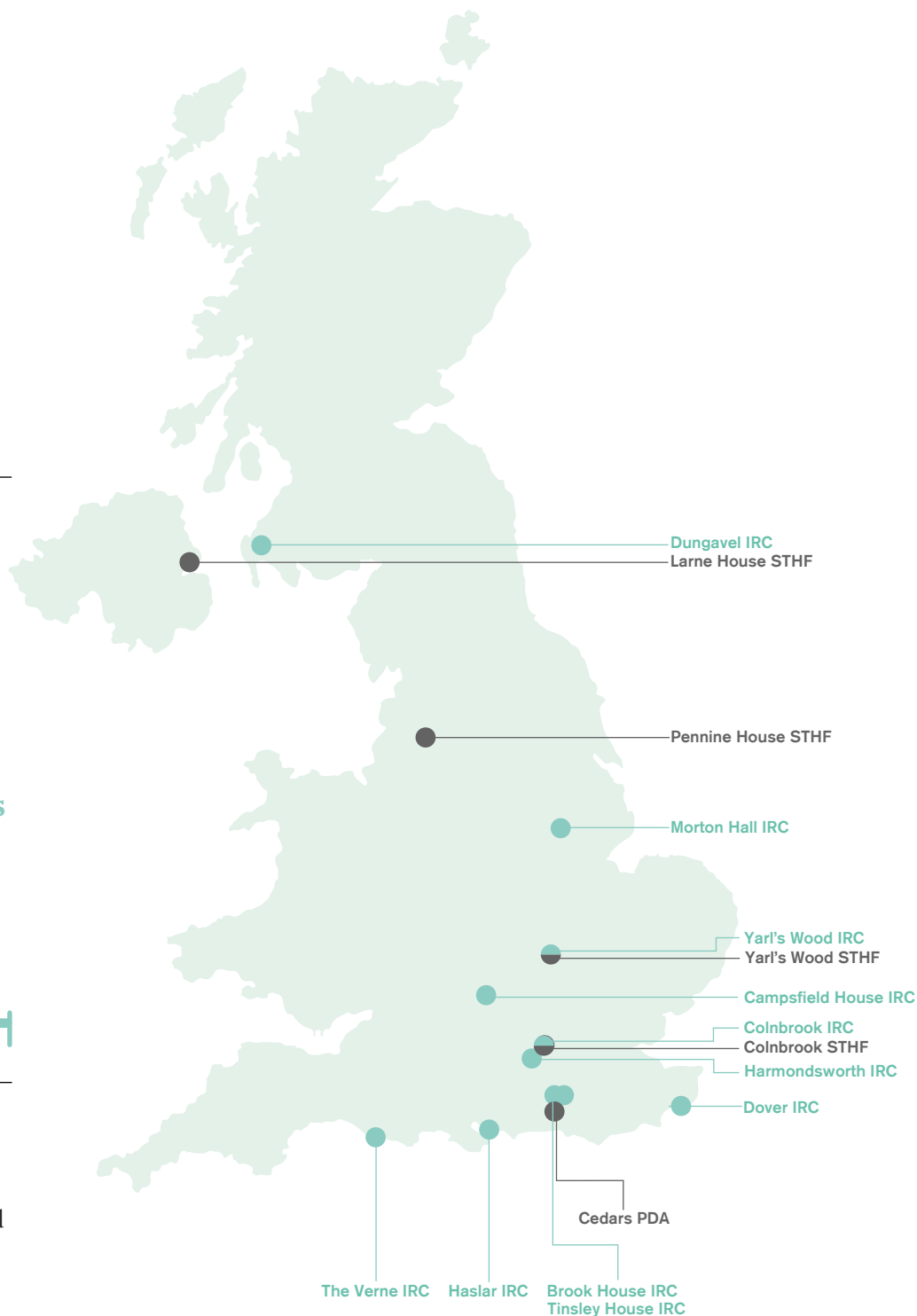
added to existing centres – the equivalent of a whole new detention facility, without any consultation.



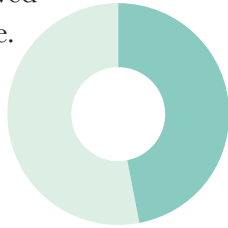
There were also around

900-1,000

immigration detainees held in prisons at any one time throughout 2014.



47% of all those who left detention in 2014 (nearly 14,000 people) were released back in to the community, their detention having served no purpose.



In March, HMP The Verne on Portland, Dorset began holding immigration detainees. It is now the second largest detention centre in the UK, holding **580 men.**

HMP The Verne

In 2014, over **670 volunteer visitors** made up AVID's **20 member groups**, supporting over **2,000 people** in detention over the course of the year.

Verne Visitors Group

AVID's newest member, the Verne Visitors Group, was established in July in response to the opening of this new detention centre. By the end of the year they were already supporting **25 detainees** every week.



At the end of September 2014, the longest recorded period that someone had been detained was over **4.5 years.**



The average cost of detention per person per day in 2014 was **£96.16**

The Government figures put the cost of running the detention estate in 2013-14 at **£164.4 m**

In July, a young Guinean woman become the sixth



person in 3 years whose detention was found to be a breach of their human rights under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights constituting 'inhuman and degrading treatment'. It was also the first time the High Court has ever ruled that detention explicitly caused – rather than exacerbated – a deterioration in mental health.

The first Parliamentary Inquiry into the use of detention was launched in 2014. Overseen by a cross party panel of MPs and Peers, the Inquiry gathered evidence from a huge range of different sources including many visitors groups. Importantly, this Inquiry also heard evidence directly from people in detention.



By 2014, 7 of the UK's 11 IRCs were run by profit-making private security companies including G4S and Serco.



The High Court declared the Detained Fast Track process to have been operating unlawfully for vulnerable or potentially vulnerable asylum seekers, in July 2014, following a legal challenge by Detention Action.

Where were people held in 2014?

	Location	Contractor	Detainees	Capacity
Immigration Removal Centres (no time limit)				
Brook House	Gatwick	G4S	Male	448
Campsfield House	Oxfordshire	Mitie PLC	Male	276
Colnbrook (IRC and STHF)	London Heathrow	Mitie PLC	Male (27 female spaces in STHF)	408 (381 male, 27 female)
Dover	Dover	HM Prison Service	Male	401
Dungavel	Strathaven, Lanarkshire	GEO Group	Male and Female	249
Harmondsworth	London Heathrow	Mitie PLC	Male	661
Haslar	Gosport, near Portsmouth	HM Prison Service	Male	197
Morton Hall	Lincolnshire	HM Prison Service	Male	392
Tinsley House	Gatwick	G4S	Male, and families (border cases)	153 (119 men, 34 family spaces)
The Verne (from 28/09/14)	Isle of Portland, Dorset	HM Prison Service	Male	580
Yarl's Wood	Bedfordshire	Serco	Female, families with adult children	372
Total IRC				4137
Residential Short Term Holding Facilities (up to 7 days)				
Larne House	Outside Belfast	Tascor	Male and Female	19
Pennine House	Manchester Airport	Tascor	Male and Female	32
Yarl's Wood	Bedfordshire	Serco	Male	38
Total STHF				89
Pre-Departure Accommodation (up to 7 days)				
Cedars	Near Crawley, Sussex	G4S and Barnardos	Families	9 apartments (44 people)
Total PDA				44
Prisons (no time limit)				
Various	Across UK	HM Prisons Service	Male and Female	Up to 1,000 throughout 2014
Total residential detention spaces				4270
Total spaces including prisons				5270

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG) was set up in 1995 to support those held at the 'Beehive', at the time a small detention centre holding about 40 asylum seekers and migrants. It became a registered charity in 1996, with ten visitors, the same year Tinsley House was opened, with 150 beds. As Felicity Dick, one of their founder members, described, "the group found itself faced with the needs of a quarter of Britain's immigration detainees."¹

By 1997 the group had 45 visitors, many from local church groups, and had provided support to 154 detainees. Posters were displayed in the detention centre to let detainees know they were there, and visitors were allocated to one detainee, whom they visit every week until they are released, transferred, removed or deported. Felicity writes, "They provide support and friendship, help with small material needs, watch out for the detainees' health and wellbeing and help to find reliable legal representation when needed". GDWG also provided speakers for local groups and church services, to raise awareness and enlist new visitors. These core elements remain central to the group's work today.

In March 2009 Brook House, one of the highest security detention centres in the UK opened at Gatwick. Suddenly the group had to respond to an additional 426 detainees, many of whom came from prisons, and with a huge variety of complex needs. It is testimony to their flexibility and strength that they have been able to expand their support to Brook, and in 2010 to Cedars, which detains families under the new family returns model.

GDWG is now one of the largest visitors groups in the UK, with around 80 volunteer visitors, organised into five local groups, each with a

volunteer coordinator. The office now has five paid staff. The group retains its key focus on local volunteers, expanding their reach through continuing to hold the important awareness-raising events and talks in local churches and schools which complement the visiting by ensuring detainees' stories are heard in local settings. They are also involved in lobbying on detention issues, both as part of the Detention Forum network and in their own right. A particular concern for the group is access to legal advice, and the detention of vulnerable migrants. In 2012 the group published *A Prison in the Mind*,² which takes a critical look at the mental health implications of detention in Brook House.

While GDWG has come a long way since the early days of visiting the Beehive, their focus on supporting detainees remains. Their Director, Nic Eadie, describes the future for GDWG:

'We've come a long way as an organisation in the last 19 years, and seen a lot of changes along the way. With more detention happening than ever before, and a more hostile environment for migrants more generally, it can often feel like we are facing an uphill battle to try and support the often desperate, and desperately lonely, people who need our help. However, whenever despair rears its head, so does a determination from everyone in our group to continue to make a stand for those we visit, and to say to the world that we are all the same.'

Felicity Dick and Nic Eadie

Gatwick Detainee Welfare Group supports detainees held at Tinsley and Brook House, as well as support as needed to families held at Cedars pre departure accommodation.

1. Felicity Dick, "Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group" article in AVID newsletter, June 1997.

2. <http://www.gdwg.org.uk/downloads/gdwg-prisoninthemind.pdf>

Why oral history?

The Hidden Stories Project

Our anniversary

As the 20th anniversary of AVID approached, we were unsure what to celebrate, if at all. After all, this had been 20 years of the growth of an unjust, unnecessary and damaging system. Twenty years on, the situation for immigration detainees seems even bleaker than it was when AVID began. Detention has expanded significantly: it has become a normalised part of immigration control, and affects far greater numbers of people – and for longer periods than ever before. We have had cases of unlawful detention, and breaches of the human rights of the most vulnerable. But for as long as there has been detention, there have been volunteers willing to cross the line, to make the journey to and from the visits hall, simply to let those on the other side know that there are people outside who care. And for us, that felt like something worth celebrating.

The idea for the development of an oral history project was born, like all good ideas, in the pub. After a board meeting, we were reflecting on the many stories we had about the visiting experience, which are often untold, as there is little time for reflection within a visitors group. Work on detention is so immediate, so demanding, so reactive. The situations facing detainees are often so complex – often critical – and as small charities or grassroots groups we never have either the time or the resources to reflect on the broader impacts of the visiting relationship and changes over time. We also felt strongly that the experiences and stories of visitor and detainee should somehow be recorded and preserved, so that they could

be remembered. We wondered whether these stories could help us understand better this unique relationship and how it impacts upon the visitors themselves, the detainees they support, the wider community... and the system of detention itself.

Oral history

We wanted people to tell us their memories, feelings, attitudes, motivations, and experiences, in their own words. Oral history was chosen as it is ‘living history’; it is about people telling the stories that are unique to them.¹ It is described as ‘enabling people who might have been hidden from history to have their voices heard,’² and this is exactly what we wanted to do for visitors and detainees. For the first time, we would seek to record and preserve the uniquely personal experiences of visitor and detainee, and to celebrate that relationship.

In early 2014, we sent a call round our membership network of visitors groups to assess whether there was any interest in participating in such a project. We were overwhelmed with the response. Groups and individuals from all over the country began contacting us. Not only were they keen to be interviewed as part of our work, they had photos to share, letters to show, drawings or art work or other memorabilia they wanted us to see. We quickly realised this was important not only for AVID but for the membership network as a whole. No one had attempted such a study of volunteer visiting before.

The project has grown in ways we couldn’t have anticipated. Throughout 2014, thanks to

1. Heritage Lottery Fund (2009) *Thinking about Oral History* available at: www.hlf.org.uk

2. See above.

funding from Awards for All, we were able to pull together a research team to travel around the country, interviewing visitors, former visitors and former detainees, in their homes or other community settings. We were welcomed by volunteers from all over the UK, who opened their doors to us and shared their experiences about visiting. A total of 32 interviews were carried out in various locations, across the country, from Glasgow to Ramsgate. Some were filmed, others audio recorded. An accompanying online survey was completed by a further 75 volunteers.

The Stories

Our interviews were carried out in visitors' own homes, or settings familiar to them. We used the oral history form, a semi-structured format, to allow open-ended and fluid conversation so that the stories which emerge are those of importance to the interviewee themselves. All researchers encouraged interviewees to be guided by what they remembered, and what they wanted to tell us. We were struck by the honesty and enthusiasm of everyone we spoke to.

From the very first interviews, it was apparent that there were common themes emerging. Some were not surprising, for example the sense of frustration on behalf of those detained, the difficulties of navigating such a complex system as a visitor, the sadness and helplessness felt when the person you are visiting is removed. The day-to-day realities of detention featured heavily in the stories, as did the importance of the visitor to the person detained. Not one visitor failed to tell us how moved they had been by the resilience, strength and courage displayed by detainees. And not one detainee failed to tell us what a huge difference their visitor made to them. There were other, unexpected themes too:

some visitors told us about changes over time and heightened security in detention centres, with more restrictions on their visiting. Some described visiting as simply another activity or meeting in their week, whereas others were much more involved, describing their visitor or the person they were visiting as family. People who had been in detention spoke of the trauma it had left them with, and of the challenges of making a life for yourself after detention. Visitors told us how difficult it can be to know what to say sometimes, or how disheartened you can feel when a visiting relationship doesn't go well. And some visitors told us that they felt a responsibility to raise awareness of what is going on in detention, and to tell others about it, whereas others had experienced such hostility when describing their volunteering that they did not mention it socially at all.

With over 32 hours of transcribed testimony, collating and organising was no easy task. We've gathered excerpts of testimony here, in an attempt to illustrate the diversity of voices and accounts we recorded over the past year. It is not comprehensive as we are only able to reproduce a fraction of the testimony here. We've built the report around key themes, but believe very much that the testimony speaks for itself, providing for the first time an oral history of volunteer visiting over 20 years. Accompanying this report is the Hidden Stories film, by Mark Evans, available on the AVID website, which brings the stories to life.

We hope that this resource will be a way of remembering and celebrating visiting, a form of volunteering that until now has been largely unacknowledged. We are grateful to all those who shared their Hidden Stories with us.

“It could be anyone”

The detainees

They come from all kinds of backgrounds, all countries. Campsfield only has men and they tend to be in their twenties, but sometimes in their thirties, sometimes older as well...I've seen students, I've seen all kinds of professionals, all different backgrounds from wealthy backgrounds to poor backgrounds.

Charlotta

It could be anyone. There was an orphaned child whose family were a minority in south Asia; he had seen atrocities in his lifetime, villages burnt to the ground, things he would never share.

Katie

I've visited ladies in their 60s, and any ages between that, 30s, 40s. They've all had, to a greater or less extent, tragedies. They've suffered mentally, physically, they've witnessed violence. They have been subjected to violence themselves. So when I see them they are obviously not in the best possible state... and what adds to their distress, of course, is the fact that they are detained. They cannot understand why they are detained. In their mind they've come here to seek help. Some have been arrested immediately upon arrival at the airport, and some have been here for many years, some have worked here...it is a mystery how the system works.

Marie-France

What I've learnt is that there are no two stories the same... it's actually incredible to me how each story is individual, special, and they all end up there. After all these years of visiting, I've not managed to be able to have an overview of who ends up in detention. It seems to be people who have been picked up because they were working without permits. We see quite a few detainees that have been first in prison, usually for minor offences, driving without a license, or working without a permit, who then are sent to Dungavel. We see people who are at various stages of their asylum claim. We've seen European citizens in there... it's impossible to say, there are so many. I think that is what distinguishes them, that there is no pattern. There doesn't seem to be any pattern whatsoever.

Giovanna

The people come from a range of different places but I do begin to notice that people come from a very specific racial or socio-economic profile. I notice that the people that I visit in detention are disproportionately non-white in comparison to the people in the UK. They are disproportionately poorer than you would see in a cross-section of society where there is a mix of rich and poor people. You wouldn't, in my experience, see a white European or North American or Canadian person who has overstayed their tier one visa in detention for example.

Leah

Charlie



Charlie is a volunteer with the Liverpool Prisons Visiting Group. He has visited immigration detainees in various Liverpool prisons for over 12 years.

They happen to have had bad luck: where they're born, the things that have happened to them in their lifetime, things that have happened to their families. They've often got the most harrowing stories. They often are sad, really sad, really depressed. But would you be? Would I be? Yeah, we would. They've lost their brothers, their sisters, their fathers, their mothers, their children. They've been tortured. And yet in many cases, their ability to rise above that, their ability to actually still be human beings and still think well of people in many cases, and not to be bitter: I don't think I could do that. I mean I'm sure I would be extremely bitter about some of the stories that I've heard, if I put myself in their place.

I've met a huge number of people, women from all sorts of backgrounds, women who have had no education at all; they'd been living in very remote places. Women who have been running businesses, who have degrees, who have been studying here for a long time, people who have just come into the country. A lot of women I have met have been fleeing persecution because they are women...many of them have had extremely distressing stories to tell, and sometimes that can be very hard, and very upsetting.

Heather

He was in a cannabis factory in London and he couldn't speak any English. And obviously he didn't know what was going on, but it was raided by the police. He was so scared he just jumped out an open window. But he was a couple of floors up, and he broke both his legs, ribs. All these injuries. He was hospitalised for two months. From there, he went into prison for six months. Although he was a victim, the authorities had put him into prison, because he was picked up in a cannabis factory. So he had no rehabilitation for his legs, or his other injuries. And from there, he went straight into Tinsley House.

Beryl

I got to be in detention when I first went to seek asylum at Lunar House, at my screening interview. I was just asked my name, my partner, whether we were in a relationship... and I told them. They asked for my partner's details and I gave them. They asked which country I came from and I told them. And they said 'Alright, we're going to detain you and put you in fast track'. The only question they asked me that felt so alarming was 'why are you seeking asylum' and I said 'I am afraid to go back to my country because I am scared of dying' and the next thing I know I'm being put into fast track and off to Yarl's Wood.

Simone

Barred window,
Colnbrook IRC





Derrick

“My life was over”

Derrick was detained in Dover IRC in 2010. He was supported during and after detention by Samphire. He is now a volunteer visitor with the group.

I can remember that quite well. Like it was yesterday. My first day inside there, it was snowing. Early morning. We turn up at Dover port...my life was over. First you was in the prison, in your mind, and then now, your life is over. It was shocking.

And this guy come in, and he was like, showing me his body, of all these burn holes on him you know. And I could hear it all because I couldn't sleep. I was turning my back on it all, and listening, and I didn't turn round till the morning. I was in tears. It's crazy.

When I asked for asylum and they said to me... they were taking me to Yarl's Wood. I was like 'what's Yarl'swood? Where is that?' They said to me, 'it's a home it's very nice, you're going to be kept there.' They told me so many sad things about it. I didn't care, because all I wanted was somewhere safe to live, that's all I wanted. I reached there in the night, they gave me a room. I didn't expect anything, I wasn't expecting anything, for me all I wanted was somewhere to lay my head.

Ruth

“It just seemed like an obvious thing to do”

The visitors

I first heard about the Gatwick group through reading a magazine article written by Felicity Dick and I was at the point where I was looking for something else to do. I didn't know much about refugees. The last time I had any contact with thinking about refugees really was when I wrote something at school after the Second World War when the United Nations convention on refugees was actually set up. So I thought I would find out what Gatwick were up to and go along which I did. And I got involved with them as a visitor going down first of all to the Beehive which was a funny little round white building, very strange it was, but after about seven or eight months they then moved everybody into Tinsley House which was the purpose built facility at Gatwick airport at the time and I started visiting with them.

So it was quite an eye-opener to find out about them and then through AVID to find out about the whole scope of them throughout the UK plus all the hidden ones that were held in prisons.

Helen

Giovanna

What is special about Scottish Detainee Visitors, I think, is the fact that there are people there from all walks of life. People get there through different routes. Some people might do it because it ties in with their religious beliefs, some people do it because of their political beliefs, but at the end of the day what keeps us together is the fact that we all think that is wrong to keep people in detention, particularly to keep people in detention indefinitely. This is what I really like. It's the fact that people have values, that's what brings us together. It's always very pleasant to meet other visitors and to go on visits with other people.

Giovanna is a visitor and committee member with Scottish Detainee Visitors. She has been visiting Dungavel since 2010.





Heather

“I found the whole idea really surprising.”

Heather began as a volunteer visitor with Yarl's Wood Befrienders since 2005. She was their Coordinator for over ten years.

I'd not really done any volunteering before; I wasn't looking particularly for a volunteering role. I had heard that there was some opposition to the building of the place. And I just found the whole idea really surprising; how awful it would be to be locked up without any really good reason, just stuck there waiting. And I felt that if that was me or my children I would like somebody to talk to, and once I found out about the Befrienders it just seemed an obvious thing to do.

I was particularly interested to start visiting people in immigration removal centres because I think it is a very interesting political strategy to detain people in centres in the UK, and something that has evolved in a specific climate. I became aware that centres were being used to push certain agendas and, in my opinion, scapegoat certain type of people for wider economic problems in society. I was quite interested to get first-hand experience of the people who are being subjected to those strategic political decisions.

Leah

Oakington Friends Group

When Jillian Wilkinson moved to Oakington in 2000, neighbours warned her not to leave her washing outside in case it was stolen by escapees from the newly opened Oakington Immigration Reception Centre. Her response was to place her washing line in the front garden.

The conversion of Oakington Barracks into a detention centre was thought by many local residents to put the community at risk. Fortunately others were more enlightened and Dr Louise Pirouet founded CAMOAK (Cambridge Oakington Concern) to campaign for the welfare of detainees, while others began Cambridge Bail Circle.

Initially Oakington operated the ‘fast track’ system and detainees were held for no more than 10 days. When the population became more varied and stays longer, Chaplain Pamela Cressey and her husband Martin proposed the establishment of a visiting group. The centre management somewhat grudgingly agreed and with the help of training provided by AVID and a grant from the Helen Tetlow Memorial Fund, visiting began in 2004. Jillian became the group’s coordinator.

Volunteers visited detainees on a one-to-one basis in the small, crowded, noisy, social visits room. Detainees wore high visibility jackets, to avoid a recurrence of the occasion when a detainee escaped by swapping places with his brother at the end of the visit.

When Oakington Friends began the detainees included women and children (the 2004 inspection found 41 children there), but the centre became men-only when the women and families moved to Yarl’s Wood. The fact that Oakington was formerly a barracks made life there a little

different from other centres. Detainees slept in dormitories of twelve, but were free from 7am to midnight to wander anywhere they liked within the security fences.

Oakington’s initial designation as a fast-track centre meant that facilities for detainees were limited and one of Oakington Friends’ achievements was the establishment of a much-improved professionally organised library, manned two afternoons a week by members of the visitors’ group.

The group’s relationship with the centre management was none too easy. They would threaten to ban any visitor who assisted a detainee with his case, limiting Oakington Friends, in theory at least, to social visiting.

Oakington was due to close in 2006 and its allegedly imminent closure was one reason that Oakington Friends remained a volunteer-led group. Despite this, they had a pool of around 50 potential visitors at any one time, recruited mainly from the local churches, Cambridge University and by word of mouth. Without the help of trained staff, they were always very grateful for the assistance that AVID gave them.

When the centre finally closed in November 2010 many visitors were saddened. They knew that the detainees were simply being held elsewhere and missed the opportunity of contributing to their welfare.

Kathy English

Oakington Friends visited and supported detainees at Oakington for six years, 2004 to 2010.

“We have this support system”

The visitors groups

You go and have a training day first of all, in which all the issues of detention and Dungavel are discussed, in quite a thorough respect. Then when you make your first visit, the organiser of that visit phones you beforehand to see if you’ve got any questions. Experienced visitors can advise you of what is going on and how to handle it.

One of the issues is that we don’t know who’s in Dungavel, so we can only rely on detainees requesting a visit. There are lots of detainees who we never see. So I assume that we see the ones that are perhaps a bit more proactive. Perhaps less depressed. There must be quite a few who feel pretty hopeless in there and don’t even want to come and talk to somebody. That’s something that worries me a bit.

Duncan

We have this support system: I’m in a local group – the Horsham Group for me. We meet other visitors and a member of staff, and a pastor as well, and we share experiences. Everything like this – whether its counselling or whatever it is, needs some kind of support network.

It is a way of understanding and coping with some of the stresses and strains. And there are stresses and strains.

Martin

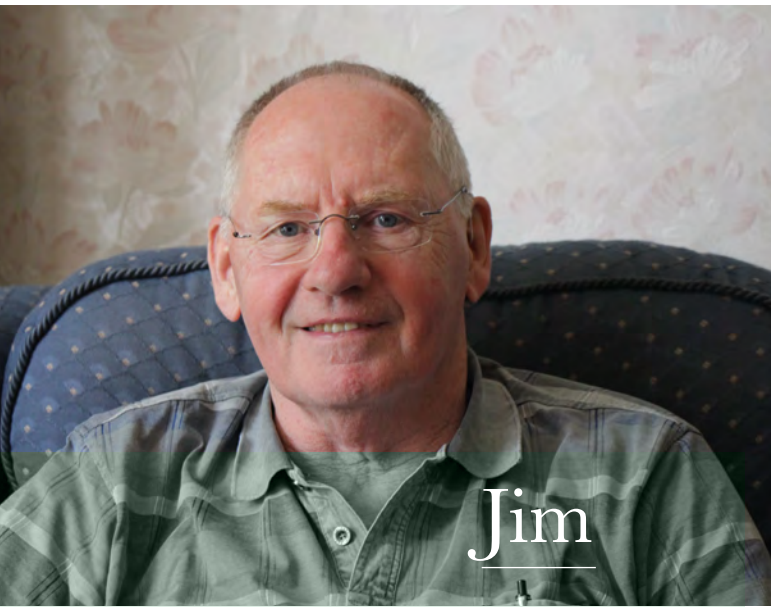
As a Coordinator of the SOAS Detainee Support Group, I receive referrals from inside the detention centre. I take a few details and explain the nature of what we do as a group. We are not able to offer legal or medical advice, but we can support detainees with certain elements of their casework. We are very lucky to be based at SOAS, as we have a very wide resource in individuals who are experts in countries all over the world, and they can verify arrest warrants, wanted posters, newspaper articles, which can be really helpful in support of an asylum claim.

Once we receive a referral, I would then match up the individual with the visitor from our group. That can be on the basis of their particular visitors’ availability, their location or willingness to travel, perhaps language skills, sometimes someone might need an Arabic speaker or French speaker, so we endeavour to match them with an appropriate person. Then that person would arrange their first visit directly with the detainee.

Leah

When I applied we had an application program, process. Then there was an induction period with training with some AVID material...so we felt quite prepared when we did start visiting. We have a rather shorter induction process now, but our training is based still on the AVID training. And that has been tremendously helpful.

Heather



Jim

At the beginning it's front-loaded with training, of course, excellent training...I was very impressed with the training that I received in this group.

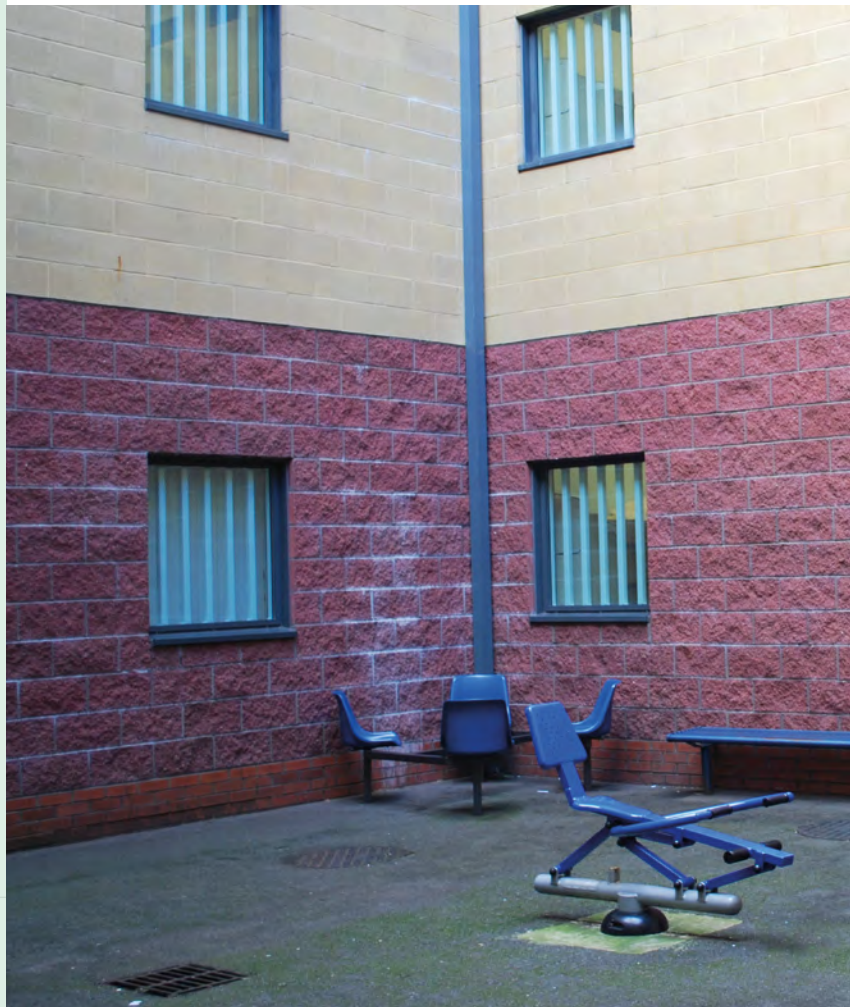
We don't go looking for detainees to visit, which I would have found a little bit difficult...the detainees find our literature which is placed in a rack of literature in the detention centre and they contact us through a telephone call. Our office then finds a visitor for the detainee that's made contact. So that does make it authentic, in the sense that they're inviting us.

Jim is a volunteer visitor with Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, and has been supporting detainees in Tinsley and Brook House for seven years.

Often people have said to me “*Why? Why do you want to come see me? I don't know you actually.*” I just say, “*Maybe you can talk about some stuff, if you're happy to do that*”.

What we do is we send them a letter, and explain who we are, and that we're nothing to do with the government, nothing to do with the prison – we're just a group of volunteers that would like to try and help. And then they write back to us, and say whether they want (support). So it doesn't come from us, it comes from them. And that's very important. It's important that they feel in control. And if they don't want to see us any more, then that's fine. We try to persuade them that they should, maybe. Because if they don't want to see us, often it's part of a shutting off process. They're shutting everybody off. But we don't have a magic wand. And that's one of the frustrations, that you cannot do that much.

Charlie





Garden, Colnbrook IRC

I belong to the local visiting group, Gatwick Visiting Group. It's a very supportive group because we've got staff in the office who are always there in daytime hours to answer any query you've got and they give a lot of support.

So if there's a detainee that you're worried about or a question you want to ask them about the whole detention set up or a particular worry about a particular person you're visiting, they will always come back, either by phone or email, and then will give you the answers and the support you want, and make you feel that everything is alright. Obviously they can't solve all problems but they will listen, and give what information there is.

Cathy



Outdoor exercise area, Colnbrook IRC

“It’s not one to forget.”

The first visit



Katie

You go through security... a lot of security.

You have an experience, it is profound, it is emotional. I felt a bit guilty that I was just a visitor; I hadn't (yet) formed a bond with the person I was visiting. And with that first visit, it was actually very difficult, because the individual who I was visiting for the first time had limited amounts of English. And his story was difficult to fully comprehend and appreciate at that first meeting. It was all overwhelming. But at the same time I thought it was an important experience that I take with me and I have stuck with it when I can. That first visit is not one to forget.

Katie has been a volunteer with Detention Action (formerly London Detainee Support Group) since 2009, supporting detainees in Harmondsworth and Colnbrook.

I didn't know how I was going to feel about this visit. I was open to it because my friend had encouraged me. So, the befriender came, she was lovely, the loveliest woman I've ever met. She gave me time to talk about what I wanted to talk about. She didn't push me to talk about what I didn't want to talk about. She brought me toothpaste, knickers, and all these things...I was really humbled by that kind gesture that she gave me.

And then I was telling her I was so stressed. I don't know how to even give the magnitude of the stress I was under. I was going to court in a few days, I was trying to put everything I needed for the court hearing together, and it wasn't going well. I'm limited, I have no money to make as many phone calls as I want to, reach out to as many people as I would like to. So it was just really stressful. And she said 'don't worry; I come to your court hearing'. I was like 'oh my god' I thought 'wow', I really felt very comfortable with her because she really was there, the way a mother can be there and just say the right words and just make you feel you're doing the right thing. I just felt very, very, comfortable with her.

Simone

It's really difficult to visit. It's an incredibly isolated place. It used to be an old hunting lodge. The thing that really impressed me when I first visited was just the level of security, because you get your fingerprint [taken], and your sticker with your photo on it, and then you get patted down and swiped with the wands. And all the doors are always being locked. I think in Dungavel people often feel very forgotten about.

Marion

It was traumatic, it was horrendous. Because you had to go through security. It's a very alien environment because obviously we're not used to that sort of stuff. Very emotional I think – you get very angry, very emotional. In a way you feel helpless as well – there's only a certain amount of stuff that you can do to help these people.

My first visit. That was with a guy who I'm still in touch with. There was ethnic cleansing going on (there), so it was quite emotional. He was an amazing guy actually, because he had three removal directions, and he ended up gaining asylum here, and he's now a teacher, married, with two kids. Just an amazing story. And that was my first visit.

Beryl

I think that one of my very first visits was to somebody from Eritrea and I remember being nervous. I remember that the first time talking to somebody, it was very moving and it was – it felt like a privilege – that still feels like privilege every time I go in there, because you're meeting people that you wouldn't normally meet.

But nine times out of ten a conversation does flow because, generally speaking, if they've requested to have a visitor, they want to talk. They want somebody to be there to listen. And it isn't really so much about yourself as about the other person. Because that's what you're there for.

Cathy

When I came in, I didn't know anyone, I didn't have anyone, not even a friend. No one. Until when I was seated with someone in my room, and they mentioned something about people who – befrienders – they come, you make them your friends, you tell them your problems. If they can help somewhere, somehow, then they are willing to do that.

So I was intrigued, I was feeling happy, like 'that's a really nice idea, I'd love to have one as well' so she said follow, me, come on... She showed me a form to fill in, but I wasn't sure, I was like 'friends? People who befriend someone? Someone you don't even know? '

To my surprise, I got a note down my door: 'you have a social visit'. I was like: 'me? I'm having a social visit? From who?' And then my friends were telling me 'it's the friend you asked for.' I was like, 'ok, I can't wait to meet my friend, my new friend.'

The first day I met her I just cried. Because I couldn't imagine...you know... in my own country, these things, they don't...befriending someone...I knew I was in the place which is really, really terrible, it became terrible afterwards, but I knew I had a friend, I had a mother to look after me, so everything was ok.

Ruth

Starting visiting is quite an interesting and quite a disarming or unsettling process, in that you don't really have a sense what a detention centre is going to be like, until you visit one.

You often don't know what the person looks like that you're going to be visiting. So you're kind of scanning the room, looking for someone... and then when you sit down, there is that first question that hangs in the air. I always ask people what they want to talk about, which is odd for them to respond to, I'm sure, because if someone said to me what I'd want to talk about, I'd say *'well you're the one who's come to visit me, so what do you want to talk about?'*

Leah

I think when you go for the first time, it is a bit of a shock to see the fence, the razor wire, all those locked doors that open in a rather sinister way. The whole paraphernalia of detention is a bit of a shock, and I think most people have no idea that this goes on in their name. And would be quite horrified if they knew. The procedure is definitely hostile; you are, after all, body searched and they take your fingerprints. One of the charms of being older is that fingerprints wear out so they don't work which we found rather funny.

Sylvia

Audrey

When I first started visiting, I was visiting young men my son's age, and that was quite something. To think about what would it be like for my son in a foreign country with absolutely nobody to help him. And I also had some extraordinary letters from this young man when he was in Wandsworth prison and in Winchester prison because he'd been seriously depressed, I mean, very, very seriously depressed to the point he wasn't absolutely sure he wanted to go on. And although I wouldn't want to claim too much, I do actually think visiting does help people in those situations, there's actually somebody outside who does really, really, care about them.

Audrey was a member of the Winchester Action Group for Asylum Seekers, and co-founded AVID in 1994.

Communal lounge,
Women's Short Stay
Unit, Colnbrook IRC



Philippa



It was hard because he was very quiet, and very anxious about the imminent removal, and I didn't really know very much about his country so I felt a little bit on the back foot. I felt like I should know more. And he was very quiet. It was good, because one of the things we had spoken about in induction was silence, and not feeling like you had to fill the silence, which was a really good thing for me to bear in mind. And just at the point where I was just starting to feel a bit uncomfortable with the silence, he spoke.

Philippa is a volunteer visitor with Samphire (formerly Dover Detainee Support Group). She has been supporting detainees held in Dover IRC since 2012.

The first time I went to Dungavel I was quite anxious. I didn't know really what to expect. It felt a little bit invasive that they would take my fingerprints. That felt really strange. I had never had to do that before. I went with other visitors, they were more experts than me, but I chanced upon a detainee who was very, very, very, angry. The whole time, we spent an hour there, which felt extremely long, and there was nothing I could say that would make him happy because everything I said, he would turn it back and say 'it doesn't matter because we are still here at the end of the day' and so on. So it was a very long hour, and I thought 'goodness me, is it going to be like this?' but in fact it was a one-off and after that the vast majority of the visits have been very, very different. It has actually been a pleasure most of the time to be there... for us at least.

Even though it was a difficult visit, I didn't have any doubt that I would go back. I thought that this man had all the right in the world to be angry and despite the fact that most people are not as angry, I wasn't expecting to have an easy ride. I knew I was dealing with people who are in a very difficult situation, so I was prepared for that. I had no doubt that I would go back.

Giovanna

Manchester Immigration Detainee Support Team (MIDST)

In the middle of the 1990s, three or four Catholic lay brothers in Bolton were discussing the news that an immigration detention centre had been established at Manchester Airport to hold “immigrants”. They were concerned that people far from home, friends and family should find themselves imprisoned and without anyone for support. They decided to do something about it and formed MIDST – Manchester Immigration Detainee Support Team. Their next step was to contact the chaplaincy at the airport, so beginning a cooperative relationship, which lasts to this day.

Our group consists of volunteers from a range of backgrounds and ages. Though we describe ourselves as “people of faith,” we are not all members of a formal religious community. We have 11 active members at present and visit Pennine House short term holding facility three days a week, spending up to three hours with detainees who have requested a visit.

Due to limited time that people are held at Pennine House – often no more than 3 or 4 days - there is usually only an opportunity for providing a small amount of practical help. Visitors are, on occasion, able to help contact a friend, collect property left behind in a person’s home when they were detained, or buy a particular item that they need. But mostly volunteers are there for detainees and prisoners for personal and emotional support, through simply listening and talking together.

In our visits we take care, as we must, to emphasise that we are not lawyers and cannot

give legal advice. We are, though, aware that legal matters are very often at the top of the needs and interests of those we visit. As such, one of the most important things we can do as visitors is to ensure that everyone we visit, if they are transferred to an immigration removal centre, is informed about the Detention Duty Advice Scheme, so that they can try to access legal advice at the earliest possible opportunity. We also, provide information about organisations like Freedom from Torture, Bail for Immigration Detainees and Medical Justice who may be able to provide them with more specialist support.

In recent years, at the request of a prison officer and with the help of AVID, MIDST has developed into another area of visiting: foreign national prisoners being detained post-sentence at HMP Manchester. Those we visit often have very little connection with UK and few or no other visitors. Unlike those held at Pennine House for only a few days, many are held at the prison for significant periods after their sentences finish, and in some cases we have visited someone for several years. Recently there has been a pause in this side of the work, caused by the large-scale reorganisation of the prison service, but this is just beginning to start up again, and we are hopeful that we will be able to continue to expand our work there and reach more people.

Chris Lukey

MIDST has been supporting immigration detainees in the short term holding facility at Pennine House since the mid 90s.

“There are expectations on both sides”

The visitor’s role

I can’t give them any legal advice, I have to put aside whatever I may know about the legal system, and try to say “*I will try and find you a solicitor, I will try and help you in the practical sense.*” And the practical sense may be that I say “*I can get some clothes for you.*” That’s what we do. We usually give them a fifty-pound grant when they come out of prison, from the group, to help them a bit when they are released. We will pass them money from time to time to help them with various issues. So we help them in a practical sense as well.

Charlie

I think it’s hard sometimes because some (detainees) you know, ask “*you don’t get paid?*” they ask, “*why are you doing it then?*” And then when they do understand that you’re actually just doing it because you want to be friendly to somebody, and that not everyone out there thinks they should be in here, then I think they very much appreciate it. But I think some people just struggle with the concept of volunteering.

Philippa



Melanie

There are expectations on both sides. I always start by saying do you know what Asylum Welcome is, we cannot give you legal advice, but people are so desperate to get help and we are limited in what help you can give. It’s also amazing how much you can communicate with someone who does not speak much English.

Melanie

Melanie has been a volunteer visitor with Asylum Welcome since 2008, visiting detainees at Campsfield House.



Duncan

My main feeling is, “*How can you help?*” And that’s quite frustrating because there’s not an awful lot you can do. I feel a bit sort of, pathetic sometimes, with the gratitude they express, and you think “*well actually I haven’t done that much.*” I’ve maybe contacted a lawyer, collected some belongings, contacted Medical Justice.

Duncan has been a volunteer visitor with Scottish Detainee Visitors for four years.



You actually meet such wonderful people – they’re not all wonderful. But they’re all different, all unique. It is fascinating the people I’ve met. You meet people from all over the world – I’ve met 75 different detainees from about 36 different countries. And people of all different faiths too. I find that very, very interesting. You can help: you can help make them feel they’re actually worthwhile: you can help a little bit if they’re depressed. You can help with their lawyers, a little bit with their case, you can produce things for them that they need – clothes sometimes – they haven’t any spare pair of clothes or anything. There are all sorts of little things you can do. That can be really inspiring.

Martin



“...oh I’m being reduced
to less than a human being
right now...”

“I didn’t know how to cope”

Realities of detention

Simone

Being told fast track, and detention, and Yarl’s Wood, I was shocked. And to be honest it took me time to realise that all this is happening to me. The funny thing is that day, I went for my screening at nine in the morning, and I didn’t get to rest that next day until about three in the morning. So they drove me around in the van, going places, I don’t know what they were picking up, chatting with the drivers. With no food, only water they were giving us. And I thought *‘oh I’m being reduced to less than a human being right now.’* You know just because I am seeking asylum doesn’t mean I committed a crime or anything like that. So I really felt very belittled by the whole process.

I remember the first few days I was in a very confused state of mind, didn’t know what to, didn’t know what to expect. Only hear horrible stories from other ladies, some people were very harsh, hostile, it’s not a friendly, good environment. Its very... there is a lot of intimidation, I felt very intimidated. It’s like a prison because there are guards everywhere, the way they are dressed and the weapons they have, you’re like *‘we’re just women here, we’re not murderers’* I don’t know what to call it. I was very lost and I didn’t know how to cope with all this. I even developed depression because I didn’t know how to cope. I didn’t know what to do, it was really overwhelming. It wasn’t easy at all.

Simone was detained in Yarl’s Wood in 2012, during which time she was supported by Yarl’s Wood Befrienders.

I told them I was seventeen and they knew I was seventeen. I gave them my birth certificate as well. The first time, they didn't believe I was seventeen, and I had to phone back home to send me some documents. And they sent me my birth certificate and my school documents, but still, they didn't believe I'm seventeen. But they called a doctor, who was a specialist with age, and he checked my age and developed a statement - I was under 18. But still, they just kept me in detention.

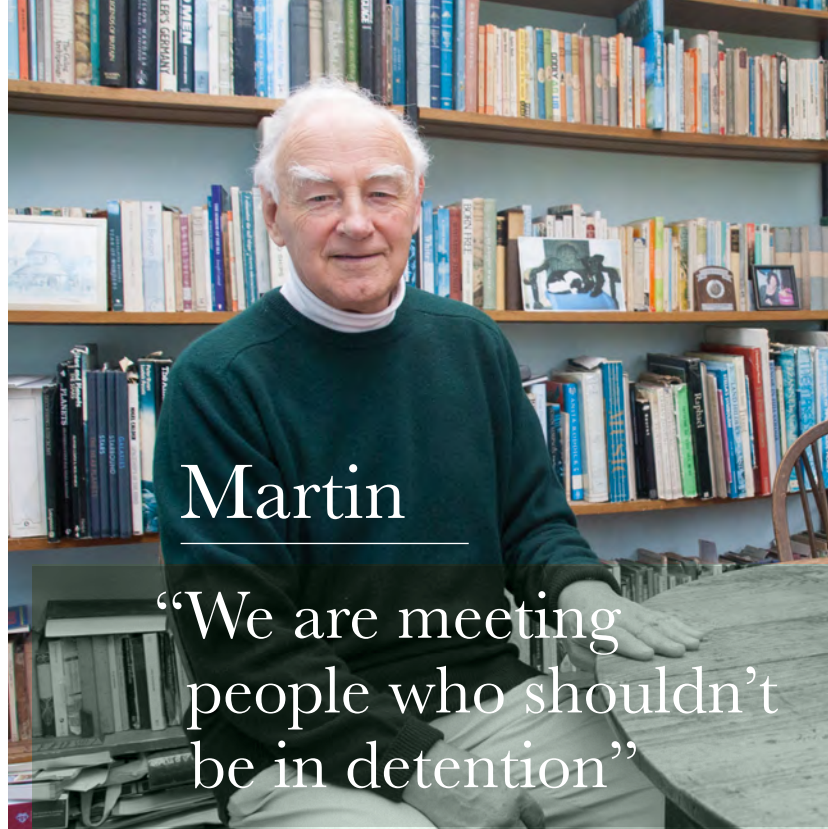
I don't even know why I was detained in the first place. It was a really, really, tough time.

Abel

The big problem for people who are immigration detainees in prison, is that in an immigration detention centre, that's the sole purpose of the detention centre existing, whereas a prison exists for 'normal' prisoners, i.e. people who are not in the immigration detention estate, as they call it. And that causes major problems, because they don't have access to the telephone – getting on the telephone is really difficult – they have to ask for a code to use to phone a particular number, and I can't phone them – I could in a detention centre. In detention centres they have duty solicitors – I know there are big problems with that but they still exist. Whereas trying to get someone in prison is really, really, difficult.

They often have psychological problems because they could have been detained for years. I'm visiting a guy at the moment who has been detained for over four years.

Charlie



Martin

“We are meeting people who shouldn't be in detention”

Many of them have been torture victims. I am very, very sad, sometimes angry, that we put torture victims into detention, which is the last thing we should do! It renews all their fears. It makes them feel they're in the same dangerous position. It's against government policy. Many torture victims are not believed. That's one of the saddest things: that we are meeting people who shouldn't be in detention.

Martin has been visiting with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group for 17 years.



You know the legal avenues are very limited, and getting more and more limited, and they are treated really, really harshly. They tend to be absolutely beside themselves with shock that they are in detention. ‘You know, I’ve never committed a crime’ they’ll say, ‘but here I am in jail, how is it possible?’

And that’s one thing: just being so shocked that you could be locked up for not having committed a crime. And the other thing is that you don’t know how long you are going to be in detention. So you could be there for a day, you could be there for a week, a month or even several years. I saw somebody who’d been in detention almost two years. I think that makes for a very, very difficult experience.

Charlotta

My first days in Yarl’s Wood, seriously, they were terrible. You know why? You are somewhere you don’t know anyone. So I would sit in my bed and cry. I wasn’t crying because of the situation I was in, but I was crying because I didn’t like where I was and I didn’t even know why I’m there. Seriously, my first, first week it was really terrible.

First of all, being held in detention is like prison. I never even dreamt about being detained in a county where I’ve run for help.

I didn’t expect someone to babysit me, to pamper me, but I expected help, not to be held. So when they took me to detention, everything I was suffering from multiplied by a hundred.

Ruth

**Segregation Unit
toilet and sink,
Colnbrook IRC**



Mostly they are watching television all the time, and maybe meditating.

I have seen detainees put on weight, lose weight. I think it is that it is the idea of being an engaged bird that is so difficult to cope with. So not only are you not able to leave but you also don't know your future status. That psychologically has a very negative impact on those who I have visited.

Katie

He's younger than my son. And I just kept looking at him and thinking: any mother could look at him and see he's not over 18. But I really did feel he looked young and...just sort of thinking about what he'd been through. It just always makes you appreciate how lucky we are, and how lucky my children are and not having to be in that situation.

Philippa

It must be very, very tough indeed. I know that, I hear that they are trying to improve things, make things better but let's face it, detention is far from ideal. And I know the building doesn't look like a prison but it is a prison. You know, they have very tall walls all around, with barbed wire on top. They are not allowed out, they have lost their freedom. And that has a very detrimental effect on their wellbeing, extremely detrimental. On the whole they are not criminals. They have come here for safety. There is no reason they should be detained at all.

Marie-France



It's good when you hear about people being released - that's such a happy moment for them. But actually for the whole system it's quite sad, because it means there's so many women being detained who should never had been there. It's meant to be a removal centre, which is what it claims to be. It's not. It's just a purgatory.

I think detention is very frustrating. Principally because there's no end date. In prison, people know when they're being released, but in detention there's no end date. It could be tomorrow, and it always could be tomorrow.

Alison has been visiting with Yarl's Wood Befrienders for 4 years.

Verne Visitors' Group

AVID's newest member group is the Verne Visitors Group. In March 2014, following months of refurbishment, HMP The Verne on Portland, Dorset, began to hold only immigration detainees. It had been due to open as an IRC at this date, but continued to operate as a prison until September 2014.

Ahead of this significant expansion, AVID had been working with staff at HMP the Verne and local contacts to ensure a smooth transition for any new visitors group. In February 2014 AVID and Detention Action held a public meeting in nearby Weymouth. Over 100 people from across the county came to find out about the arrival of immigration detention in Dorset, the issues facing people held in detention, the vital role of visitors in supporting people being detained – and to discuss the possibility of establishing a local visitors group. We were overwhelmed by the interest of the local community, a great start to any new group.

From this initial gathering, over the next few months local volunteers came together to form a coordination group to steer the development of a Verne visitors group. AVID has been working locally to ensure visitors are trained and that referral mechanisms are in place so that detainees can access this new support. The first 11 volunteer visitors were trained in Weymouth in July, and a further 11 trained in September. The group made their first visits to detainees in August 2014, and are now visiting the Verne on a weekly basis and receiving a growing number of requests for visits.

“Our launch was actually amazingly smooth. We have a wonderful group of volunteers with a wide range of skills and vast enthusiasm, and the detainees we have met have really made our work worthwhile. To any other group starting up, it's not so daunting once you are actually doing it.”
Lee Dalton, Verne Visitor Group Coordinator

While the visitors group continues to grow and reach more people, the Verne does pose a number of challenges. When it reaches full capacity, it will have over 580 spaces, and will therefore be the UK's second largest detention centre, after Harmondsworth at Heathrow airport.

A major issue is its geographically isolated location on the Isle of Portland, one of the most southerly points of the UK. Public transport to the centre is extremely limited and travel for any family, friends, solicitors or specialist support organisations coming from London or other larger towns and cities is lengthy and expensive. Such are the difficulties that until the Verne Visitors group started visiting, the visits room had gone almost entirely unused.

Although the Verne is now operating as an IRC, its first few months it had a confused identity as a functioning prison but holding only detainees. This meant that detainees were held under a more restricted regime, which amongst other things, prevented them from accessing mobile phones and internet, making it much harder for family, friends, legal representatives – and visitors – to get in touch. It also meant that people were unable to access legal aid support via the Detention Duty Advice Scheme – available in IRCs, but not in prisons.

While the centre is not yet at full capacity (there are over 200 men held just months after it opened), the sheer size of this centre will mean that the visitors group will be an invaluable link between some of the most isolated detainees in the country, and the outside world. AVID is looking forward to continuing to help them do so.

Jessica Lousley

The Verne Visitors Group began supporting men held at the Verne in 2014.

“I’ve tried so hard to forget”

The impact of detention on those detained

I didn’t know anybody and there were different people from different countries, and I was just confused and didn’t know what to. And I had not any family in the UK to contact and tell them what is going on. I used to stay with two other detainees in one room, and the first night I didn’t sleep. I was really scared. It was a really tough time. Not a nice place to be, in detention.

In detention there are things you can do, but it’s not really making you happy, your mind is just locked. You can play football, there is a cinema, there is a church, of course there is food as well. But these things don’t make you very happy. You are not there purposely; you’re just being kept there for a long time. There are many people who have been more than seven months – three years, four years.

Detention is not a good place to be.

Abel

There are so many more things that’s going on (in there) that’s so wrong, I’m surprised how people come out of there and get on in normal life. It takes time. It does take time. I’m still trying to get over everything; this is like, two years later. Still trying to get over the whole thing. Trying to live. When people knock at the door – my heart starts going. Every time the door knocks, every time you hear a police car, every time a person goes by, any screech – if someone looks a bit funny, you know. I wonder if I’m being followed.

Derrick

I know one young man who was paranoid. He had an appalling mental health record. And he got temporary release, and he was with his family, and he was integrating, and then he was recalled when he went to sign on. And just being put into the system where there was the jangling of the keys (because he’d been tortured) he then really became very ill... very paranoid and very, very, very distressed. You know, I don’t think detention is right for anybody, but particularly not for somebody suffering mental health problems.

Anne

I remember a particular one, a female detainee, telling me ‘*I can’t let anyone know I’m in here. I can’t let anyone know I’m in here. I’m so ashamed, I’m so ashamed*’. So I think that’s one thing. And the other one is the fact that they have no control over their own lives. And finally the fact that, whilst for some it’s quick, for others and for many others there’s no end in sight. They don’t know when it will end. They see other people who have been in there for one year, two years. And they’re thinking ‘*Is that going to be me? Am I still going to be in this situation every day...?*’ It’s Groundhog Day, not knowing when it will stop, not being in charge at all.

Giovanna



Segregation Unit,
Colnbrook IRC

When I ended up in Yarl's Wood detention centre in 2008, it was a horrible feeling. Especially being in a place where you're being told you're going to be taken out of the country, away from your family. I was lost. I felt like I was in a coffin, but I was still alive. I was nailed in a coffin, but I wasn't dead. I was choking. That's how it felt like every day, like I was choking. That's what was happening to me. Having to deal with that, and having to deal with the fact that I was having medical issues, in fact I felt that death would have been better. Trust me, that's the truth. That's what Yarl's Wood felt like.

Iris

'Cultural kitchen',
Colnbrook IRC



John A

“Meeting people like that really make’s one’s life worth living”



Reverend John Alleyne was involved in the setting up of AVID in 1993-4, and was a Trustee until his retirement from the Board in 2011.

I suppose we don’t often think about things in this way, but if you’ve got good friends and think about what they mean to you, and then say if you meet a refugee, you realise that you’re meeting a very remarkable person, who’s coped with things that would absolutely frighten me. I mean how would I cope? I really rarely like to think about it. But they have, and they’re coping now, so often in such rotten situations that are nonsense and disgraceful, but they’re still coping, wonderfully. And you can talk and laugh with them about things. And meeting people like that really makes one’s life worth living, and if we don’t want people like that to live in this place... well, we’re mad.

One man was from Iraq, and he was a very educated man. As I left him each week, he was going back to the week ahead, which didn’t hold very much for him... he hadn’t told his family he was in detention. People often will not tell their family. They’ll be phoning their family and pretending they’re somewhere else. But he was waiting for his case to go through the system and he said to me... he said *‘You have to learn to wait beautifully.’*

Jim

Being in that place is hard itself. You are being locked up. You wake up in the morning, they need to count you, they need to do this... it’s just difficult. You may not be affected physically, but emotionally you are being drained. That was the most difficult part. Psychologically people are dying in there... it lives with you forever.

Ruth

Very often people are extremely frustrated, often frightened. They see people self-harming, they see people making suicide attempts, they see people being dragged out, physically removed. Some are resigned. Some remain absolutely terrified. And it's very hard for people to hear things going on, hear people crying and screaming. There are always people crying, no matter what time of the day or night. There are always women crying. And that's very difficult for anyone to deal with. It must be very difficult for the staff to deal with.

Heather

Being in detention affected me in so many ways. It affected my confidence, my esteem, it affected my memory, my ability even to do certain things. You lose yourself.

It's not a friendly unified world, as they like to put it. I saw so many human rights being abused when I was in detention. It has really changed my perspective on so many things a lot. I've never been the same since I left detention. I've tried so much to forget and recover and move on but the effects I feel are still there within me. And it's very sad.

Simone



Women's Short Stay Unit, Colnbrook IRC



Sylvia

I think detainees find detention universally difficult: it doesn't matter where they come from or what their circumstances, they are always miserable to be detained. There are very few that don't mind, sometimes they don't mind all that much. (A detainee) said '*at least I can't be shot here*' but I think that was just a way of coping.

Sylvia has visited Campsfield House with Asylum Welcome since 1999.



Detention seems to affect almost everyone who is in there in the same way. It's funny how the first time you hear the sentence, you're surprised, but the more you see people, they all say the same sentence: how they feel like they are treated like animals. They don't understand that, just because they forgot to apply for a paper.

Marina

The thing you notice immediately is that they're obviously very bored – it is tedious.

You can see some detainees are getting quite dejected, and it's difficult to lift their moods. One of the problems is that they obviously want to talk about their case, but you're aware that what is depressing them is dwelling on that. And yet it seems a bit impertinent to try and talk about something else, in a feeble effort to lighten their mood. Whereas others seem to be able to cope with that better. Although, even with them you see periods where they seem a little down, which I think is inevitable.

Duncan

Being told you've got to be there, you've got to do that – that chips away at you. And your life is on hold, and if you've got a family. Somebody I was visiting who had been in the country a long time, he had three children. His third child had been born while he was in detention. He was incredibly worried about his wife who was depressed and struggling, and poverty stricken. You've then got a whole family that's destroyed. And people have to work hard at keeping their brain occupied, their spirit up, and their outlook hopeful.

Philippa



Marie-France

“It affects every single one of them”

Marie-France is a volunteer visitor with Yarl's Wood Befrienders, and has been visiting for two years.

There is a case in Yarl's Wood of someone who has been in there for three years. That in itself, of (being) there for an indeterminate period of time is very aggravating, it affects them very deeply. And in a way you might think that they all support each other in a way, despite the fact that their stories are all very different, but that is not always the case. There are sometimes problems between detainees. The longer they are in detention, the more I would say they become mentally fragile. Some are already very mentally fragile when they arrive there and very often by the time they leave, they are much much more affected. So it affects every single one of them.

“She’s like my mum now”

The visitor-detainee relationship



Abel

“I really care
about her”

I was by myself – I have no friends in this country, no family, nobody coming to talk to me. I was feeling really alone, feeling really down. Because nobody came to see me. But after I contacted Gatwick Visitors, and they sent me Celia, I was really happy to talk to someone from outside. She changed my brain, because I was thinking, ‘British people are all the same’. But after I met Celia, my brain changed. To think that there are people like this – who don't know me, but she came every week to see me. To talk to me.

Really, she's like my mum now. I really care about her, because she cares about me. I have no words to explain about Celia.

Abel came to the UK from Ethiopia in 2005, aged 17. He was detained twice, in 2006 and 2012. He now has refugee status and lives in London with his partner and young son.

A guy I met from Iraq – he'd been tortured, and kidnapped. He was in a terrible state. Medical Justice went to see him, and did a report. So he was actually released in the end. I had a terrible job trying to communicate with him. But over the weeks, you sort of make a break through. And he began to relay his story to me. But he was very, very difficult to talk to, very difficult to manage. But you have to listen a lot. We often got a lot of silences. But I think it helped. I think it helped him. He was very strong.

Beryl

You will find occasionally someone who is extremely depressed. I don't just mean feeling blue, feeling down they could be suffering for clinical depression, who finds it difficult to talk. You'll find some people who have seen you as possibly their last hope. We can't be angels that arrive and solve all their problems, but just by being there we can give them a space, we can give them an hour and in the course of that hour they will continue frequently to talk almost obsessively about their case sometimes.

Jim

I think that visiting, the difference that people can make when they're visiting is just to make the person that is in detention feel that there is somebody in the outside world that is a voice for them. I suppose it's a voice and ears really, because the voice means that there is somebody that's on their side that will do what they can for them, and the other thing is really about listening which is the most important of all.

Cathy

Having someone to visit me every week... I feel happy. You know when you're so lonely, you know you don't have a mother, a father, no sister, no friend at all and someone walks into your door and is like, *'I've come to see you,'* how would you feel? Seriously. I was screaming, the first day I screamed...because she brought me creams, body creams, she brought me a shower gel. And I felt like ok, I've not only got a friend, I think I've got someone, I've got a shoulder to cry on.

It's a good feeling to know that someone cares even if they don't know you but you know someone cares unconditionally. That's the most important part, someone cares about you unconditionally.

Ruth

I find you have to be incredibly patient and be entirely in the moment. It makes you really slow down and live totally in the present, and totally for that other person. Someone comes in, sits down and you know nothing about them, basically. And I've learned that you can't guess what emotional state they are in. There is one guy I met, he was laughing and smiling all the way through. After half an hour, I said *"wow this is amazing you seem like you're doing alright, I've never seen anyone in detention who's managing so well"*. And he just burst into tears and for an hour he just couldn't stop crying. He'd been there for months and hadn't contacted us because he thought that if he did he would just be so emotional he couldn't talk. And I just felt so bad. I realised. It was a lesson.

Melanie



Iris

The first time I remember I saw her, we just cried together. She just sat there, staring at me and cried. We couldn't talk.

It helped. To know that someone out there was thinking about me, and concerned about me, and appalled at what was going on.

Most of the time, when the women were detained they had nothing. Maybe they were going to sign in, like I did, and they were detained with no toothbrush, no tooth paste, and needing to make a phone call, just distracted and lost. And once they came in, the ones that would come to me, I would give them a phone number to call a befriender, or I would call myself. It's like everything would just fall into place.

I remember whenever my visitor came to visit me, I didn't want to go back to my room. Because as soon as you go back in there, the memories start. But when you come out, out of the room and into the visiting area, it's like you're back with other human beings. That's what it feels like. She would buy chocolate and say, "Well, I'm dieting today, what do you think?" And I would say "Well I'm dieting too!" And then we would share the chocolates. Those are the things I remember, I would never forget. I had a reason to smile in a horrible situation.

Iris was detained in Yarl's Wood in 2008, and again in 2012-13. She was supported by Yarl's Wood Befrienders.

I think it's always useful to remember that people in detention are just people. I've met detainees who are very, very funny, who have very light-hearted approaches to their own situations. I think for the visitor it is very easy to become very earnest and very wrapped up in the things that you're doing and the reasons why you're doing them. Sometimes people just want to have a light-hearted conversation, and it's not all about feeling bad or sorry for other people, but everyone is on an equal footing. There can be humour in that as well.

Leah

I think you walk alongside people who would otherwise have been on their own. Young men, my children's age. Terrible really.

Anne

One of the things I thought, half way through my visiting time, I thought 'are we doing enough? Is this enough? Is it not just something that appeases my conscience but doesn't do much good?' I realised that first of all, people who are in detention are very, very grateful. It seems little to us but to them it is a lot. So we do make an impact but also it is important that we take their stories out of Dungavel. There is no other way for these stories and for these people to get out. They are in Dungavel, locked up in the middle of nowhere. Most people that live possibly a mile away from Dungavel don't even know it's there. So I think that is a very important role that we have. But also the friendship, we get so many people that tell us how wonderful it is to see us there. And to have that little bit of normality, and outside life, instead of an institution life they lead all the time.

Giovanna

Colnbrook IRC





Marina

I think what I liked about him was, sometimes I would go there and think *'this week I'm really stressed. Maybe I shouldn't go because I'm just going to completely depress him. I mean I don't even fancy talking today.'* And I would just go there, and he would always have jokes. But there were days where I didn't want to go and I had a bad day, but I went there and he would make me laugh for an hour, and I was glad I went. I don't think he would ever get to know that he helped me in other ways as well.

Marina visited with Detention Action at Harmondsworth and Colnbrook from 2013-14.

It does just come down to two human beings, doesn't it? And I think that's what I like about this work – that on the surface you've got nothing in common with the person you're visiting, but you make a connection. And sometimes that connection is only very brief, and you never know what happens to that person afterwards. And sometimes it might not be brief, and then it could be more long standing. But it's a connection and I just know that when you're going through a trauma of any kind, whether it's an accident and you're going to hospital – how you're treated makes a massive difference. You remember people that treated you badly and you remember people that treated you well, and you don't remember the mediocre, nothing in-between.

Philippa

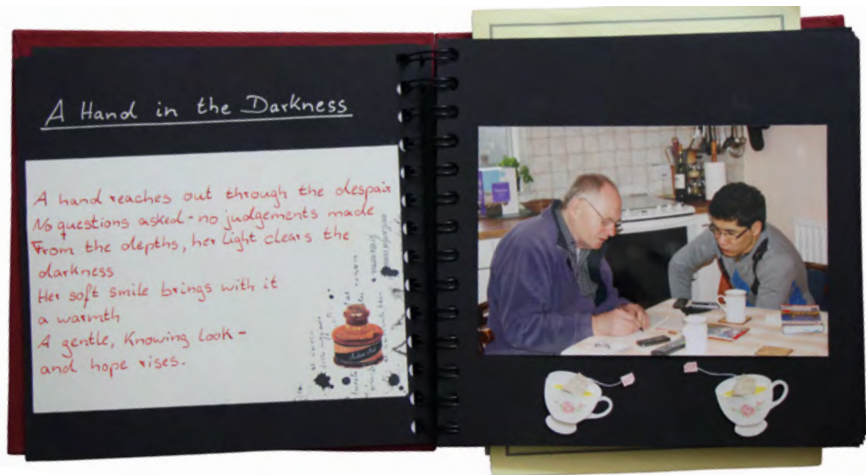
Kitchen,
Colnbrook IRC



Activities Room,
Colnbrook IRC



Quilt made in a joint Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group project by people detained at Tinsley House IRC, near Gatwick, and local primary school children from Crawley



Scrapbook made for Jim Howley (visitor with Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group) by the man he visited at Tinsley House

Pilot Bill Merry, husband of Cathy (visitor with Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group) holds a paper plane made by an Algerian man supported by Cathy for over 9 months



“It made me stronger”

The impact of visiting on detainees



Ruth

She’s my mother now, seriously. I got a friend, a friend, not only a friend, a mother, that’s really, really important to me. She will always have a special place in my heart, no matter where I go. She’s the reason I’m here, she’s the reason I’m smiling right now, she’s the reason I got my job. She’s the reason for everything I have right now.

Ruth came to the UK in 2009. She was detained in Yarl’s Wood after claiming asylum at the airport.

The role my befriender played is... I probably would have lost my mind. I probably would have tried to kill myself, and maybe been successful. I probably would have... I don’t know, maybe... I lost my sense of being, you know, and she somehow helped me see that there is something on the other side, so I need to not give up on fighting for what I believe in, for who I am. I shouldn’t give up, so she gave me that hope, even though we were fighting something really big and very bad, she gave me that hope, yes.

Simone

When I go there to visit, you know, I do feel like they want to cry out, they want to talk. Some of them don’t want to talk to nobody because they don’t trust nobody. Because they feel everyone is out to hurt them, and we have to say, ‘we’re not here to hurt you, we’re here to help you’.

Derrick

Some of them who have a family, they don't need a visitor. But, like me, someone like me, really it was helpful. You feel like you have a family, because they treat you like you are a family member.

She was there in a bad situation. When I have no family, I have no hope, she was there.

Abel

She called every day. Every day. Would make a phone call to see if I needed anything, to see if I was all right. She became like my bodyguard – that's what she became.

It made me stronger. Because there were times when I just wanted to die. And it's only when she called, and reminded me of a lot of stuff, that I would stop.

Iris

Visiting, or receiving a visitor, is a way of being out of that stressful environment for just a bit – talking to someone else on a one-to-one basis who isn't an officer and isn't a detainee. Someone who's just a normal person, a friend, who can just have a chat to. It gives them a bit of a break – they can leave the inside of Yarl's Wood and go into the visits hall. I think they think of it as a date! A night out! As much as they can have one. So all sorts of reasons people like having a befriender. From a bit of a different, change of scenery, to some of the more practical things you can do to help.

Alison



Leah

For many people who we visit in immigration detention, it's the first time they've had a conversation with someone who doesn't disbelieve everything that they are telling to you. It's the first time they are sitting down with someone who hasn't required them to tell their whole case history for the 50th time that week. So perhaps that is a refreshing communication for that individual.

Leah is a visitor with SOAS Detainee Support, where she is also a Coordinator. She began visiting in January 2014

“It opened my eyes”

The impact of visiting on visitors

The thing that I will take with me, all my life, from visiting, is the experience of meeting people with such courage, such bravery, and sometimes a serenity of coping with so many difficulties.

And not relying on anything that we would rely on – home and belongings and so on – having only the clothes they stand up in, and yet not being worried that they don’t have any of those other things that we feel we need for security. Having that somehow faith in the future that we might not have, and still going on believing that good can come out of it.

Martin

When you are visiting someone in a detention centre, it is sometimes very difficult to switch off. When you walk outside the gates, and grab your stuff from the locker, you walk back the 800m or so to the bus stop and you think your mind is racing, your mind is racing, and you need to offload this on someone as well.

If there is something I can take away from the experience, it is how incredibly positive some people can stay within an environment of uncertainty, adversity. Incredible resilience, absolutely incredible resistance, absolutely impossible unless you have experienced first-hand. And they still have goodness in their heart.

Katie



Robin

I feel that I have been affected. This volunteering with Scottish Detainee Visitors has certainly opened my eyes to the complexities of, and the various reasons why, people are in detention. But definitely that it’s very important to maintain that people should be treated as humans with respect and dignity.

Robin is a visitor with Scottish Detainee Visitors. She started visiting those held in Dungavel IRC in January 2014.



Eike

Well, it was a huge part of my life for many years. In a way, for much longer than I expected and that's because I thought it was important, so, even when there were other pressures and changes in my life, my family said we should continue. And, meeting all those different people and hearing, you know, first-hand accounts, really, gives a very different picture of the world than just relying on the news.

Eike was a volunteer visitor with the Gatwick Detainee Welfare Group in 1996, and became a Trustee of AVID in 1997. She remained involved as a Trustee, including a period as Chair, until her retirement from the Board in 2011.

I don't know whether it's changed my political thinking, because I think immigration is such a hugely complex area and I'm very suspicious of people who have a kind of simplistic line. I mean, it must be quite reassuring to have a sort of purist line about this, but I just think the whole thing is very, very complicated it opened my eyes, opened my eyes in that sort of geo-physical political sense.

Audrey

It has been a very, very positive experience for me, because I've met so many people from so many different countries. I've met so many people who I've been to baptisms and weddings with. I have gained because of it.

But I have to say, there was a time (and my parents were ill at this time) I did actually have a break, because I did find it very distressing. I do think it can be very distressing. And our group do have these geographical areas where our visitors can actually talk about our experiences, just to debrief, to say it's ok, that happens to lots of people. I think it is stressful. It's stressful for us, but the poor detainees, it must be appalling.

Anne

“It’s heartbreaking actually”

Challenges of visiting



Charlotta

I remember one, one Somali man; he was I think only in his early twenties. He started talking about his story and he just cried and cried and cried. And it was really hard because I didn’t know what to do, and so I just sort of sat there, and made sympathetic noises and maybe he needed that. But it’s really hard because you don’t really know what to do. So sometimes it is difficult to hear the unbelievable misery that people have experienced... and you really hear a lot of that at Campsfield.

Charlotta is a volunteer visitor with Asylum Welcome, and has been supporting detainees in Campsfield for nine and a half years.

I could see that nothing I said made any difference at all, and it made the visits excruciatingly hard. I tried all possible options and nothing worked. Of course I didn’t want to be seen to abandon her, I would have never stopped visiting her, but the only way was to just simply shorten the visits and that’s how I had to cope with it in the end. She was fine with that and it made my time there a little bit easier, knowing that I wasn’t going to be there for very long. But it is an exception, it is really an exception.

Marie-France



Beryl

I find it difficult to get a detainee that is clearly under age. I've had that from Afghan boys, that have been in detention and the Social Services come and say 'Yes, they are over eighteen', and clearly they're not over eighteen. You can tell by their body language, and all that sort of stuff. So that's very difficult. They're in detention centre, usually with men, which is difficult for them. It's heart-breaking actually.

Beryl has been visiting with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group for over 12 years

It was the lowest point: someone who is young, who has been in this country for five years, taught himself English, is so inspiring, on good terms with everyone around him in the detention centre, and the staff members. (He) is such a good soul...and to be sent to country that isn't his own, and where he has no status...we never heard from him again.

In that situation it was heart breaking, it was absolutely heart breaking. And you try to draw on all the resources that you have, absolutely, anyone who you know who works in human rights, any organisations who you think might be able to help on the ground. And yet you still need to respect that person's wishes... you have to just hope for the best and remember this person is resilient and that you did everything that you can. But really, I reached out to everyone I knew who might be able to help. And never heard from this person again. That was tough.

Katie

It's not always easy. One or two, you think *'can I cope with this again?'*

And you know that they need friends, because they're so alone, they need friends.

Our visitors group has a lot of resources. We have a resident psychologist who can visit those with depression – all sorts of trauma they've experienced. So we can get help from them. We have contact with Medical Justice, Freedom from Torture. There are various organisations we can put them in touch with. Skilled doctors can come and visit them, and actually get the evidence that is needed in court, of torture and trauma and so on. It's vital we have those contacts. So we feel when those experts come, we feel we are doing something worthwhile for them.

Martin

There are times when I find it quite overwhelming, but generally I get over that fairly quickly. And people ask me how I cope with it. I really don't know what the answer is – somehow I got through it. And sometimes it does have a very marked effect and it is difficult to switch off because they are people, and sometimes I've been the first person that people have actually told some of the details to.

Heather

I think the most difficult one was visiting somebody who had been tortured...he was obviously depressed, and I just felt particularly powerless, because it was just so hard visiting somebody who was so depressed.

Because I just had to keep reminding myself that there was nothing I could do really, and I couldn't stop this person being depressed, but I could just hopefully make him feel slightly less alone, that somebody had come to visit. And I just kept saying to myself that was the most important thing, that I was still visiting.

Philippa



Artwork made by people detained at Colnbrook IRC



It's hard, every time I walk out of the visits hall, and the lady I'm visiting walks back into Yarl's Wood, and I think why? Why is this me? And I go home, and watch TV, or read a book, or visit friends - all these things I'm free to do, and they're not free. And that hits me every time I leave Yarl's Wood. But it's so important, and they tell me what I'm doing is so valued, that I think, if I let it get on top of me and decided to stop befriending because it was too much, I think that would be letting people down, so you've just got to keep going.

Alison



Cathy

When the detainee tells me something sad, and upsetting, it's difficult during the visit. It's difficult because they tell me something... awfully sad... and you want to be supportive, but at the same time encouraging, but you don't want to be so encouraging that it sounds like you're making light of something which is terribly serious to them. So during the visit itself it's hard, and when you drive away you feel very sad. So what do you do with that sadness?

Cathy is a visitor with Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group. She has been visiting at Tinsley and Brook House for over five years.

Samphire

Samphire was founded in 2002, the year Dover Immigration Removal Centre (Dover IRC) was established, and it was registered as a charity in November 2004. It was set up as the Dover Detainee Visitor Group by a group of local volunteers, supported by the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID), Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN), and Refugee Action.

Our work has centred on a visitor scheme, which is still running over 10 years later. This has around 20 active visitors at any one time, and helps give a link to the outside world for detainees throughout their time in detention. Over the years our work has developed and we now provide emotional and practical support to detainees in Dover, as well as to those released from detention nationwide.

Our Detention Support Project built on the work of our visiting scheme, and we now have a small team of staff and volunteers who do casework to assist detainees. This helps them communicate with their solicitors and to connect with the services that can help them get out of detention or ease the effects of detention. It has also helped Samphire spot problems and trends in detention in Dover on which we can advocate on behalf of our clients to the detention centre, as well as feed into the work of organisations such as AVID.

The Ex-Detainees Project was launched in 2008 in recognition of a lack of provision for immigration detainees upon release into communities in the UK. Samphire was increasingly receiving calls for help from ex-detainees released from Dover to all over the

country that were homeless, struggling to meet their basic needs and feeling isolated and confused. We set up a telephone helpline through which we provide advice, and also hold an annual Ex-Detainee Conference, which gives a vital opportunity for ex-detainees to share their experiences and meet one another. This work has expanded beyond Dover and we are now assisting over 500 ex-detainees from detention centres throughout the UK.

We also have a small legal project, which provides legal advice, and representation where legal aid funded solicitors have been unable to assist. With recent cuts in legal aid, this provides a vital route to justice for those who would otherwise remain unrepresented.

We have used our experiences from all of these projects to feed into our awareness raising work. This has involved talks in local schools and community groups to counter a prevailing negative view of migrants. We also established the *Detained in the UK* blog to which staff and supporters contribute. In Kent, many people in the local community are hostile to work supporting migrants. However, our volunteers are members of the local community who would like to see a different side to the portrayal of migrants in the media. It is this message which we hope will spread further in the local community and beyond.

Fraser Paterson

Samphire, formerly the Dover Detainee Visitors Group, has supported detainees at Dover IRC since 2002.

“You can never be prepared for goodbye”

Endings

I feel good, I feel good, I've got my partner now, I've got work, I do everything I want to do, I feel really, really good and no-one is going to come and knock on my door, no-one is going to take me back to detention and I have people at my back, people supporting me still even though I left detention. I feel good, I feel really, really good.

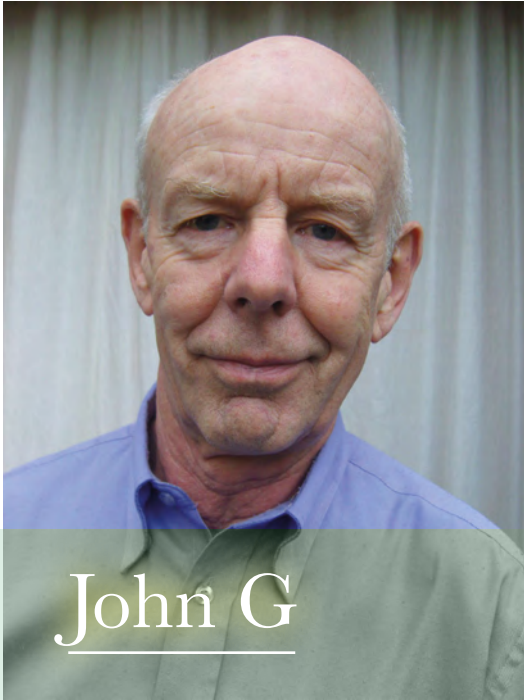
Ruth

We meet people who are very afraid of what's going to happen to them, especially before removal, and that's where we have to support them and help them as much as we can. In the end, we can't stop it happening. We can help with getting good lawyers for them (it's getting much more difficult than it was before) and we can help with contact with the lawyers, and sometimes our knowledge is quite useful with getting them ready with what to expect for the next stage.

Martin

Detainees' belongings,
Colnbrook IRC





What is a concern is that people are being taken out early in the morning, or being taken to Heathrow, and then driven about and then brought back again. £800? £1,000? To do that? Why? And why are people refused two or three times? A recently married couple, refused twice... irritating things like that need sorting.

John G has been visiting with Yarl's Wood Befrienders since 2007.

It's very difficult sometimes when you know that a detainee is going to be removed. You have to gear yourself up to talking about how they are going to cope when they get back to their country of origin. We try to support them in that respect – the organisation will give them twenty quid or whatever. So you have to try to gear them up for when they are returned, which sometimes is quite difficult. A lot of them accept it, and know they have to go back. They'll get in a mindset of knowing 'I'm going on this particular date' and they'll be ok about it. It's quite traumatic for us as visitors, because you never know what is going to happen to them. Especially if they're going back to Afghanistan or somewhere like that. It's horrible actually.

Beryl

And some you never hear of again, and you think...especially when they're scared about what's going to happen when they get there, and they're worried they're going to get picked up at the airport and thrown in prison, or meet with the very people they've been fleeing from. And you don't hear from them, and you think...did the worst happen?

Alison

What you don't expect is that we as visitors get a lot out of it – as a relationship. It's also a relationship that we know is going to come to an end and we don't know when that end is going to be and frequently it can be very abrupt.

Jim

You can never really prepare for a good bye. One week I was visiting him and he told me *'I have a ticket to go back.'* And he said *'they're going to take me at Tuesday at 6 in the afternoon.'* And I said *'ok great I'll come at 2 to see you'*. That's when it gets horrible. I came with a little card to say goodbye. They let me in and I waited.

But they don't allow you to see detainees on their last day. So I didn't get to see him. And they promised me to put his card in his luggage. And then he was never deported. So I got to have another visit with him, and I asked him about the card, I said *'did you get it?'* and he said no.

Marina

Talking about removal with people is often very difficult. I guess it's something I avoid, talking about the actual reality of what will happen when they get removed. Because generally people don't want to even think about that as an option. But I increasingly feel that it is helpful that people are prepared for that if it is going to happen. And the difficulty is knowing if that is going to happen. Even if someone gets to the airport and onto the plane, it might not happen. It's difficult preparing someone for removal if it might not happen, it's slightly torturous. It is such a difficult issue.

Melanie



When people are released from detention, they've been longing for that for so long and have such high expectations. But life is pretty tough afterwards – you're moved into a flat, which you often have to share with other people in a similar circumstance. (He) moved addresses three or four times. You think – someone's got bail! That's wonderful! But it's not wonderful, in a world where they have no support, and they are not allowed to work.

The whole system seems very demeaning, and taking all the dignity, from people who come here with such a positive desire to be part of society.

Marion has been part of Scottish Detainee Visitors since 2008.

“Being a witness is very important”

Raising awareness



Wendy

There are times when I've written to and spoken to the MPs...when issues have come up in Yarl's Wood that seem very wrong. Attitudes, and lack of care to the person I'm visiting. And I asked them to use their voice, to bring this to the notice of government. It's mainly healthcare, and also when people have been deported, the brutal way some of them have been treated. And that makes me very angry, and powerless, so that's when I've contacted the MP and said 'this is not right! Please do something about it!' But its being powerless, its very frustrating. When you see something that's really wrong, and needs to be put right. So then it becomes political.

Wendy has been visiting Yarl's Wood with Yarl's Wood Befrienders since 2007.

Spreading the word is always a good thing, definitely. Why keep quiet about it? You can try and work on people. There will always be those people, who are very much on one side of the fence, and there is nothing you can do to change their views or opinions, but there are people who are maybe sitting on the fence or borderline, and it's easier to veer them in the right direction. Every person that you change the mind of and who takes an interest in the issue is a plus.

Marie-France

The other side is there are a few people like my lawyers and my befrienders, they really, really, go far and beyond to fight for justice and fairness and they'll do whatever it takes.. And it happens. I'm glad the few people are there who can do that. They are friends in so many ways, in different categories, but they are all fighting for the same cause. They can't even help as much as they would want to because there are a lot of limitations. But they are there and they are ready to fight, so I appreciate that.

Simone



Door spyhole, Housing Unit, Colnbrook IRC

People in Bedford often don't seem to know that Yarl's Wood is there. There obviously is the huge amount of negative publicity about asylum seekers. Some people will take the attitude that "well, they shouldn't be here anyway," they're not really interested. But if you tell them an individual story about the experiences of one particular woman, they're often quite taken aback and they're not just a faceless, nameless group of people. There are some very individual, painful stories that people will feel somewhat differently about and think, *well perhaps she should stay then...* So telling peoples' stories, being that witness, I think it very important.

Heather

If you can tell the individual stories, that's really powerful. Because you can talk about government initiatives, you can talk about the law – but actually it has no impact on people. But when you talk about one person, that you know personally, and what has happened to them, in their life. I mean, when I talk about somebody that's been tortured in their country, and then brought here and tortured again in a different way. Tortured by keeping them detained, without access to any medical help, without access to any medical assistance at all, then that is far more powerful.

Charlie

The detainees desire to have their stories told. And I have experienced that when you talk about the detention centre, people don't actually believe you. They don't believe there is a detention centre that holds 450 young men; that they can't come out; they can't have free access; they can't work. It's appalling. And they can be held in detention without any knowledge of how long they are going to be held in detention.

We look at human rights in other countries and say their human rights are appalling. And what do we do? What other group in society would be treated like that? And I feel very strongly that once you listen to the stories, and you get to know them, people's views change. Because the majority of them want the same as you or I: to have a family, to be at peace, to have somewhere to live, to work.

Anne

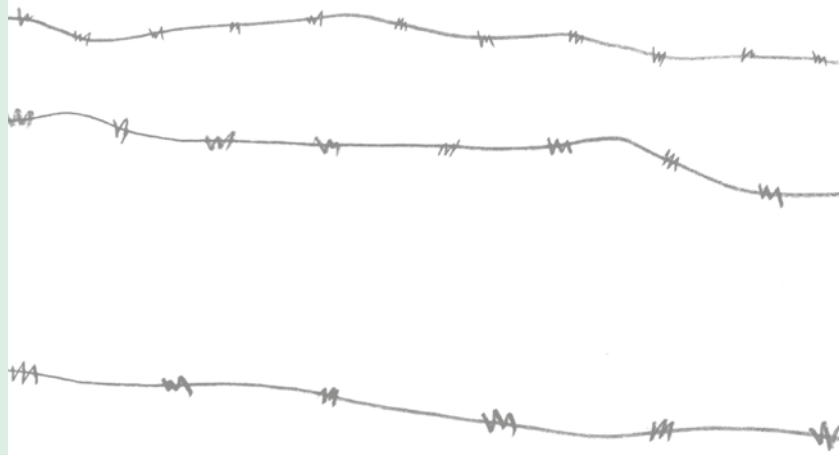
I think that it's really important as visitor we actually counteract those kind of prejudices so that when people talk about asylum seekers or immigrants that we are there to put the other side of it.

As soon as you the start to give a name to somebody, and explain their story, then they begin to... they might say *'oh no, I don't mean those kind, cause those people can stay'*. And then it's really quite important – even if it's a one-to-one kind of a basis when you're chatting to somebody – that you get a chance to explain people's story.

Cathy

When you read the newspaper you read generalisations, you read stereotypes. If we were in that situation, if we had to run for our lives, if we were a part of a persecuted minority or we were in the middle of a war zone, wouldn't we try to get to a safe haven? Didn't people do that during the Second World War? People had to flee their countries all the time.

Philippa

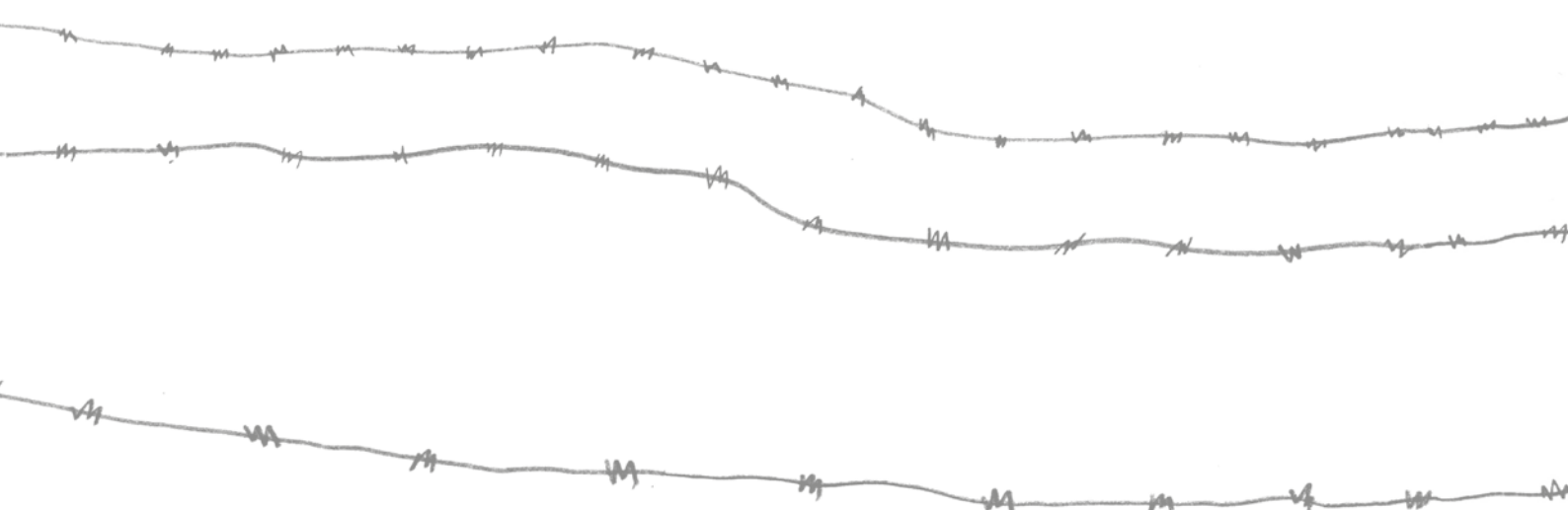




Helen

Helen began visiting with the Gatwick Detainee Welfare Group before joining AVID as their Coordinator, a post she held for several years.

When I first started with AVID, we had a couple of friends to dinner one evening and they asked me what I was doing and I told them about detention and I'm afraid their attitude was very much 'well, that's where they ought to be, they shouldn't be here in the first place,' and I don't think actually a lot of that has changed. I think that there is a lot of resentment of people coming to the UK, who they see as immigrants, but I think the main thing is that people still don't understand what refugees, or asylum-seekers, whatever you want to call them, actually need.



“They don’t seem to come up with alternatives to detention”

Changes over time

Immigration detention hasn’t changed that much I think. I think more people are being detained. I haven’t seen that many changes at Campsfield. I mean – now they are allowed to have phones, but really I think in general I haven’t seen that much change. The framework that they are living in is getting more and more tight and more controlled and more difficult for them to get to stay.

Charlotta

I think there are many, many more people in detention and I think they’re moving people more quickly as well. So there’s just so many people in detention its crazy! It’s just a waste of tax payer’s money if you ask me! And now you’ve got places like Brook House, which are category B prisons. And so many people who’ve been picked up for minor offences, they get put in prison and then straight from prison they get put in a detention centre. And the ultimate aim then is just to remove them from the country. So I think a lot of people are moved more quickly.

People’s perception of detention, I don’t think has changed at all. I think people are mostly ignorant about detention. People seem to live just in a bubble. They have no idea what goes on.

Beryl

Yes, detention has changed, and the people in detention have changed. I visit less asylum seekers now. I visit more immigration detainees that are there for all sorts of reasons. Many of them for crimes that would have been seen as civil offences before. Now, coming into the country without the passport, you are assumed to have deliberately got rid of it, and that’s a criminal offence. Trying to leave the country and go to Europe is a criminal offence. All sorts of things are criminal offences now.

The other big change is that legal aid has become so difficult, that many of our cases can’t get proper defence. That is making it much more difficult to help them with good lawyers.

That’s what’s happening. The legal assistance is being cut from them, and that’s really sad. They’re not getting full justice from the system.

Martin

In my experience the detention centre, the centres remain the same, the workers remain the same. The companies’ names might have changed, but it but it doesn’t feel much different.

Katie

I suspect that detention has got worse in a sense that there are more people in detention, they're still building detention centres, they don't seem to come up with any alternatives to detention. Maybe there is a tiny improvement that families are theoretically not detained but I drove past the family detention centre this morning.

Cathy

Detention has changed considerably in the time that I have been visiting at Yarl's Wood. We are seeing many more elderly people being detained, sometimes extremely elderly people. We also see more disabled people... Yarl's Wood is not a suitable place for people with physical disabilities. We see an awful lot of people with mental health problems; we see a lot of evidence of self-harm.

Heather

Sally

When I first started visiting... the size of the estate, it was minuscule. However, many of the problems that still exist now were problems then. Mental health issues, communication, access to legal advice – all the things that preoccupy visitors now, and detainees, are the same. What was not a big issue was the question of foreign nationals in prisons. That was not on the agenda in the way that it is now.

Sally became involved with AVID in 1995, later going on to become the organisation's Chair, a post she held until 2011.



Anne

When we first visited, twenty years ago, we used to be able to share a meal together. Now you have to sit across a table, you're searched, you can't take anything in, there's no sharing of photographs, a game – we used to be able to do that, but you can't do that anymore. I don't like the process because it dehumanises me – what it must do to the detainees, must be appalling.

Anne was one of the founding members of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, and she has been visiting for over 20 years.

A snapshot of visiting, 20 years on

In 2014 there were 20 group members of AVID, from our oldest member Haslar Visitors Group to the newest, the Verne Visitors group:



There is a visitor group/AVID member presence in every single detention centre and short term holding facility in the UK

7 groups visit in prisons

11 have paid staff

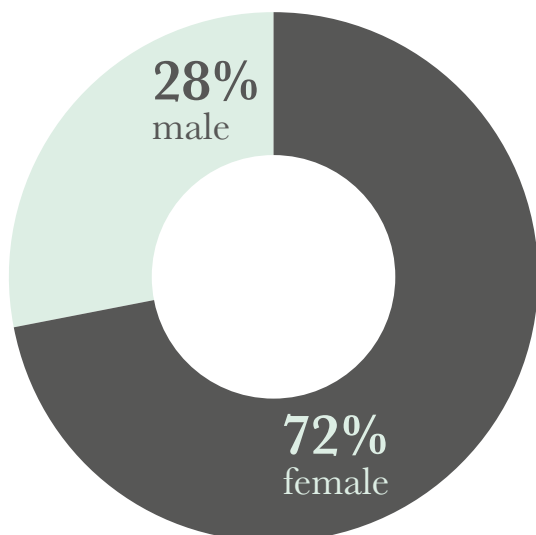
10 are volunteer run

892 volunteers are registered with all groups

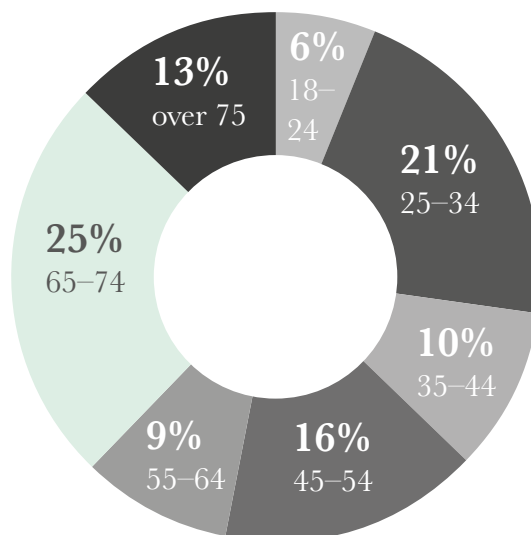
In addition to visiting, many groups now provide additional services and supports including drop in workshops in detention centres, or support to former detainees. Other groups provide general support in the community

A survey of 75 volunteer visitors (and former visitors) in 2014 revealed:

Visitors by gender:



Visitors by age:

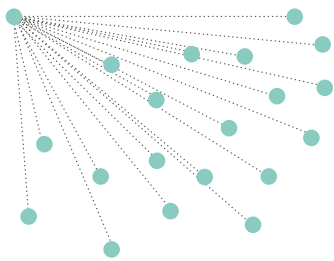


The first recorded visit in our survey was in

1992

the most recent was that same week

88% of respondents had taken in items that a detainee needed, such as toiletries, clothing, personal possessions or phone cards.



Most respondents had visited between **1 and 19** detainees. A small proportion (**7.5%**) had visited over **100** detainees.

2

the longest someone had been visiting the same detainee

years

27 people had visited detainees for between one and six months.

53% had liaised with, or asked their group coordinator to liaise with, the detention staff on behalf of the detainee

14% of visitors completing the survey had visited for over ten years, **19%** for between 5 and 9 years. **51%** had visited for between one and four years and **16%** were relatively new visitors: visiting for less than a year.

89% had received formally organized training in relation to visiting



45% received informal briefings with the group coordinator

36% received 'on the job' mentoring and shadowing

5% told us they had received no support or training relating to visiting.

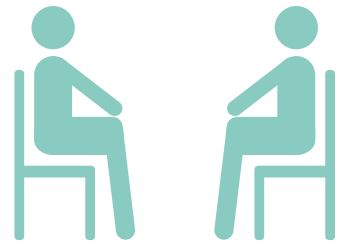
49% had communicated with a detainee's friend or family on their behalf.

2,320

Total number of detainees supported by one-one visits

49% of respondents had reported to the relevant people that they believed a detainee was at risk of self-harm.

Main kinds of visits:



One-to-one **84%**

Group visits **23%**

Workshops **11%**



64%

had been involved in communicating with a solicitor on the behalf of their detainee.

88% of respondents said they had found visiting challenging.

Of this 88%, the most common forms of support drawn on were:

- **65%** drew on support through visitors group support meetings
- **62%** took support from other visitors, informally
- **59%** had drawn on support from their Visitors Group Coordinator
- **47%** friends or family
- **9%** sought support through formal counseling
- **3%** did not seek support

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