

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Autumn 2007

The Challenge of Brook House



As we go to press, demonstrators are encamped near Gatwick to protest against the building of Brook House, the new 420-bed detention centre which is due to open late next year. The camp has been organised by No Borders, a direct action group who oppose migration controls. It will run until 24 September and involve a number of workshops as well as demonstrations outside both Tinsley House and outside the Home Office in Croydon.

Whilst GDWG is not involved in the No Borders campaign, the opening of Brook House poses considerable challenges for us. We have few details on the centre at present, other than it will be able to accommodate three times as many detainees as Tinsley House. There have been rumours that it may be a more secure unit than Tinsley, holding more ex-foreign national prisoners and detaining people for longer periods. We expect to support detainees at Brook House in the same way as we already support those at Tinsley and, in the absence of more information, need to plan for all eventualities.

GDWG's 12 years' experience of visiting immigration detainees have demonstrated that there are serious

flaws in the detention system.

Detention can damage the mental health of people who have already been severely traumatised by the experiences which led them to flee their countries in the first place. We are appalled that torture victims continue to be detained, in contravention of the government's rules for the running of detention centres, that children are detained and that nursing mothers can be separated from their babies. We believe that every detainee should be guaranteed access to high quality legal advice, adequate medical and psychological care, and internet and telephone services.

If you would like to share your views on the opening of Brook House, the challenges this poses for GDWG or detention in general, a good place to do so might be the new GDWG blog <http://visitingdetainees.blogspot.com>. Alternatively, email (info@gdwg.org.uk) or ring us at the office. There are big changes ahead, and if we are to prepare for them properly, we need the views of all those with first hand visiting experience.

Nic Eadie

GDWG news:

All Visitors Meeting- Wednesday 26th of September at 19.30, St Barnabas.
Guest Speaker: Emma Ginn (NCADC and Medical Justice). Hope to see you there!

Arabic classes- Have been running for a few weeks now and have had excellent feedback - Marhaba!

Anna interviews Christina



Christina came to the south east three years ago from a small village in rural Northamptonshire to live in Cuckfield and worship at the Benedictine parish of Worth Abbey, where she met Father Paul and heard about Tinsley House and the work of the Gatwick Detainee Welfare Group.

Tell me about your visiting...

It is a strange adverb to apply but I actually enjoy visiting, meeting people from around the world, hearing their stories...I have had so many long and interesting conversations about cultural traditions and food and cooking!...I do tell friends and acquaintances that I visit and try to spread a balanced view of the immigration process. I try to redress the misconceptions held about immigration. I am delighted that my volunteering has given my sons an interest in the issue of migration.

And we were delighted that Matthew came and helped in the office as a volunteer during the summer holidays!

What do you do when you aren't visiting?

St Benedict emphasised the importance of welcoming the stranger, giving hospitality and friendship. This has inspired my work organising social events for the church, trying to build a sense of community in a large parish, and my work arranging social events for

Worth School, bringing the monks, the parish, the boys and their teachers together. I also serve refreshments for the mother and toddler group in Cuckfield, reaching out to mothers. I am aware that motherhood can be socially isolating and that childminders and grandparents, too, can need emotional support.

Your Catholic faith inspires this work...

I keenly feel the difficulties of competing demands in modern busy lives. My House Group is very important to me - giving a space in the week to discuss the Gospel reading for the following Sunday, discuss interpretations and how the reading touches our lives. I value the opportunity for us to support each other in our faith. I try to find time to listen to god's purpose in my life. I have made very uplifting visits to Peru, to Greece (following in the footsteps of St Paul) and to Medjugorje, a place of retreat.

How do you spend leisure time, Christina?

I do love mountain and fell walking...I love walking sections of the South Downs Way and I have my favourite stretches that I walk over and over again. We have had very special family holidays skiing and sailing, which is a family passion, and gardening is a personal joy of mine.

Thank you, Christina!

Public Education Programme

Last April, Don Cooper, Barbara Cottier, Felicity Dick, Mary Lean and Wendy Wilson spoke to 200 'Year 11' pupils (16 year olds) at Oxted County school in groups of about 30 at a time. We based our talk around a quiz on asylum and at the end the pupils were asked to complete a brief questionnaire, which asked how much they knew about asylum seekers and their treatment in this country and then went on to ask whether they felt that knew more at the end of the talk. We scored quite well here - most felt that they had not known much prior to the talk and definitely knew more afterwards.

Then came the crunch question - had the talk changed their attitude? 6% said that they had positive views of asylum seekers before the talk; 58% neutral and 36% negative. Of those who started off neutral, 67% said that their views had become more positive and of those who started with negative views 51% had changed to a more positive position. There were many comments like the following to explain the change:

- "It made me realise it's not their fault"
- "It made me realise how desperate people are to get away from their country",
- "I thought more were coming into the country".

But, before we all feel too pleased with ourselves, of the third who started off with negative feelings, 48% still had negative feelings:

- "I don't like them much"
- "They should go to nearest safest country",
- "I feel we have too many and those that do get through take our jobs."

GDWG Volunteer Survey 2007: We are happy you are happy!

Overall, the 31 visitors and 5 trustees who completed the questionnaire considered being involved with GDWG an extremely positive experience. Visitors felt that the organisation was focused on the well being of the detainees and there was high praise for the organisation and the support given to the visitors.

When asked about their main reasons for becoming a visitor, both visitors and trustees rated the wish to support detainees both practically and emotionally as the main reason, as well as the perception that detainees receive poor treatment, which brings in the motivation for them to provide care and support. Some visitors stated that their decision to become a visitor arose from previous experience either personal or professional (e.g. humanitarian aid, Migrants projects).

All aspects of group support were positively and highly rated, amongst them the selection process and training, the introductory session and first visit to Tinsley house, as well as the all visitors meeting and the area support groups, whilst you rated the newsletter as very good.

Some of your suggestions on how to improve GDWG included: introducing a mentoring scheme for new volunteers, more background information on a detainee's country of origin and notification of a detainee's departure.

Thank you for taking part in this survey and thank you for volunteering with GDWG.

The GDWG Blog



Notice-boards are handy things. When you pass along the common corridor or come into the common room, it's always a good idea to look for anything new on the notice-board. That's where the news will be.

The GDWG blog (web log) can become our notice-board, our electronic one. All the news from the office can be put on the electronic noticeboard, the blog. So too can news and comments from you and all the other members of the group. You can sign-up for an event when it is published on a material notice-board. You can do just the same on the blog. You can also add a comment on what you've read.

Meanwhile, unlike the material notice-board, the electronic one will not become clogged. As one item on the blog follows another, so there will be an automatic movement from the blog to the archive. If you want to find

something that isn't immediately evident on the blog, then just go to the archive and find it there.

You can see an illustrative blog by going to:

<http://visitingdetainees.blogspot.com>

Read the contents. Think about what you've read and then post a comment. The appearance of the blog, how use you think it might be, what needs to be considered before the device is adopted - all these matters are open to your comment.

If there is a general welcome for the idea, if there is a general willingness to try out the electronic notice-board, then it will go live. At present the blog is open to anyone who knows the address, but if we go live then admission will be restricted to members of the group.

Don Cooper

GDWG- MEDIA TEAM: Would you like to contribute?



The Guardian newspaper recently ran an article in the weekend colour supplement called

'Fancy a somalian' [7.4.07]

It was a very positive and sympathetically produced piece which described the lives of the people who offer us the huge variety of take-away and restaurant food in Britain today, the countries where they originated from, how they came to be in Britain and how they live now.

All the stories were examples of determination and entrepreneurship. We would like to build on this idea

and collect recipes from detainees and compile a collection of detainees 'stories'. These may be about their lives before they came to the UK, how they chose to come to the UK and/or what their lives have been like since they arrived here. The recipes may be as part of this or a separate venture.

If Visitors feel it is appropriate for the person they are visiting, we would be grateful if you could ask detainees for recipes and also if they would like to write about their lives'

Please contact the office!

Lizie Storey

Welcome...

Hello everyone, my name is Nic Eadie, and I am the new Co-ordinator at GDWG. I've only been here for a month, but already I am struck by how committed the volunteers I've met are, and what a valuable job you all do. It seems clear to me that the GDWG has some testing times ahead, what with the seemingly never ending changes in government policy towards the use of detention and towards asylum in general, and of course with the impending opening of the new centre at Gatwick.

However, with the excellent staff, Management Committee and volunteers here, I have no doubt that we will meet these challenges head-on, and adapt to ensure that our service remains excellent.

Please feel free to contact me if you wish, either at the office, or at neadie@gdwg.org.uk. In the meantime, do keep up all the fantastic work you are doing. Without you there would be no Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, and my job would be a lot harder!

...and goodbye

Dear readers,

As some of you already know, I will be leaving the post of Assistant Co-ordinator at GDWG shortly, in order to join another team - familiar to all of you - as a campaigns organiser with Amnesty International.

I am very sad to announce my departure so soon. I have only good things to remember in my time at GDWG and this is mainly due to the fact that you are all just really nice people. I will miss you all greatly. Thank you very much for your support.

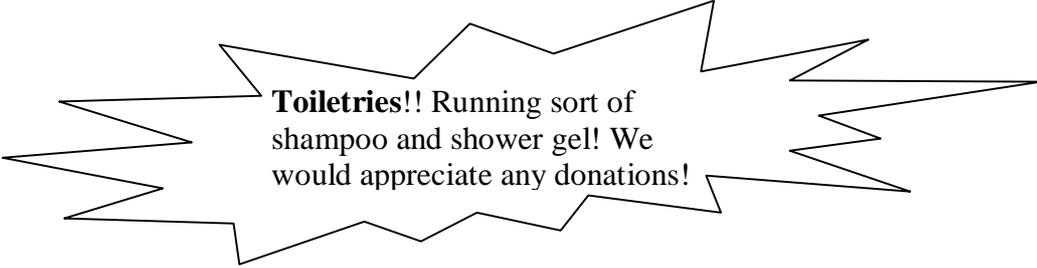
However, I am not planning to disappear: I will stay in touch as much as I can.

If any of you wish to keep my contacts- please ask the office. I have made some great friends here and I hope to keep them!

Yours,
Evie

...and congratulations to:

Caritas Matora, our volunteer from the Crawley Group Area who has succeeded in her UK Citizenship Test!



Toiletries!! Running sort of shampoo and shower gel! We would appreciate any donations!

MC Update!

Goodbye and welcome

Roger Baker and Irene Balls retired from the Management Committee at the AGM, Roger stood down from the Secretaryship, and Felicity Dick from the Chair. Many thanks to them for their hard work and dedication over the years. The AGM elected John Barrett, Iyadh Daoud, Felicity Dick, Yasser El Hamad, Doreen Johnson, Mary Lean, Adrian Radford, Anna Seddon and Lizi Storey to the committee, with John as Chair, Adrian as Treasurer, Anna as Training Officer and Mary as Secretary.

Company Ltd by guarantee

The AGM approved the memorandum and articles of association for the new company limited by guarantee, which will replace the existing charity, giving the trustees more protection. We are now applying to the Charity Commissioners for permission to proceed.

Policies and procedures

Since my last article, we have agreed Disciplinary and Capabilities Procedures for staff, a Media Policy for the group, a Vulnerable Adults Protection Policy, and a Code of Conduct for Trustees. If you would like to see any of these documents please contact the office.

Independent Monitoring Board (IMB)

Over the years the MC has often discussed the issue of how to liaise better with the IMB appointed by the Home Office to monitor conditions at Tinsley House. We have now established a system for the exchange of information: if you have concerns which you would like passed on to the IMB please inform Iyadh Daoud (iyadhdaoud@yahoo.co.uk).

Volunteers' suggestions

We continue to receive a rich supply of suggestions from the area groups, including concerns about health risks to volunteers visiting people with TB or Hepatitis C (our advice is that these are negligible); concern about the 'disappearance' of detainees who have been tested for HIV before their results can be passed on (we have relayed this concern to AVID); the need for clearer guidelines on how to respond when detainees have been assaulted (a subgroup is working on this). These ideas are channelled through the local area groups, and are a great help to us, even if we can't implement them immediately. So please keep attending your local group and keep your suggestions coming!

Annual review

We spent much of our annual review in July discussing how to respond to Brooke House, the new 426-bed detention centre which will open at Gatwick in January 2009 – and how to raise the money to cope with any expansion this may involve (and to continue what we are already doing). Many of the funds who have financed us in the past are moving away from refugee issues, so this is an area of concern. Please send any suggestions to Felicity (fmnick@btinternet.com), who, thank heavens, is continuing as fundraiser.

Mary Lean