

I have been a volunteer visitor for Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group on and off for about 10 years. I first heard that there were immigration removal centres at Gatwick by talking to Father Paul, who has been involved for many years with Tinsley House and Brook House.

I felt drawn to do something and, with great nervousness, I applied to Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group to be one of their volunteer visitors. Before I made my first visit I was given training and one of the GDWG staff came with me on the first visit. I was anxious - what would we talk about, how would we communicate (maybe I would be visiting someone with little English), how might I cope with what I was told of people's traumas? My first visit was to a charming man from Afghanistan. He told me a little of his story and then we noticed that there was cricket on the TV and we joked about the English obsession with cricket and its obscure rules. I don't know if I helped him but it was a pleasure talking to this cultured man and learning about his family and life in Kabul. He told me that the time that he felt most upset at Tinsley House was eating in the canteen and thinking about meals back home where all generations of his family lived and ate together. I don't know what happened to him but I will never forget him. I have had so many memorable visits since then. There have been stories of great hardship and suffering and sometimes I know that the person I have visited has suffered torture in their home country. Every person I have visited has had a unique story to tell.

Each visitor approaches the visits differently. I have tended to give the person I am visiting as much time as they want to tell me their story, their troubles and then to have some time at the end talking of trivial things - cooking, current affairs, silly things that are going on at home. When my boys were teenagers they were a rich source of funny anecdotes for my visits. Always on the next visit the person I was visiting would ask - how is your husband, how are your sons? It became a two-way visit - they were giving to me too.

I have learned so much about different countries, different cultures and also about how we are all so similar - we need security and safety to thrive. So many of the people I have visited come from countries with wars (sometimes civil wars) or extremes of political instability or they are minorities persecuted in their own countries. They see Britain as a beacon of fairness, justice and sanctuary but sometimes feel very disillusioned when they come up against border staff who don't believe their stories. They also feel humiliated at being put in detention (and in the UK there is no time limit on detention) when they have not committed any crime. My visiting has greatly enriched my life and has given me new perspectives.

GDWG is always pleased to welcome new volunteer visitors.