

It was a Catholic parish in Crawley that first became aware of the detainees at Gatwick and looked to see what support they could provide. At that time they were housed in the old Beehive at Gatwick Airport, and Fr Paul was one of the first to visit them. He is still the chaplain to both detention centres, Tinsley and Brook House, and is often the one who refers them to the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group. This supplies visitors, about a hundred of us, to detainees who want visits but lack family or friends who are able to visit.

This country is unique in Europe in not only putting so many people in detention but keeping them there indefinitely. Nearly all the ones I have got to know have been god-fearing, admirable people. The detainee I am visiting at the moment is a case in point. He fled here from Sierra Leone 21 years ago but was never given permanent residence here, only extensions of his 6 months visa. In 2003 he was working in security at a Co-operative store in Cambridge and living in a Co-op hostel with many of the others who worked there. He realised that there was a bunch of them on the fiddle, pinching up to £1k at a time from the tills, with the collusion of the manager. He refused to turn a blind eye, and they tried to intimidate him, first intercepting his letters (he went to the police about it, but all that happened was that the police confiscated his passport) and then one night 3 of them attacked him in his bedroom. He fought them off with nail scissors, and they reported him to the police for grievous bodily harm. Whilst in prison on remand there were a number of the gang there too, who spread the word that he was a coppers' nark. As a result he got a hard time from both fellow prisoners and staff. The latter entered his cell while he was showering and took all his papers, which contained details relevant to his case. He complained to the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, who found in his favour, but his papers were never returned to him. He was in such a state at his trial that he refused to give evidence and was sentenced to 2 years and 4 months. After his release he was not allowed to work and was supported by his cousins, friends and the Jesuits. Each week he had to report to the police, travelling there by bike as he could not afford public transport. One day in November 2015 they confiscated his bike and told him he was going to be deported to Sierra Leone. In the meantime he would be held in detention. He has no family or contacts in Sierra Leone and is determined to remain here. He is clever and would like to study economics or business management but has never been in a position to do so. The legal position is that a refugee who is sentenced to more than a year in prison is liable to deportation. His only claim to stay is that he has lived here for many years, but that is not enough, and I expect him to be deported at any moment.

Where we visitors can help is by lending a friendly ear. Detainees have all, it seems, suffered so much from betrayal that they do not confide in each other, but they can confidently confide in us. We can bring them clothes, books, etc., and we can act as a link with other people. I email this fellow's sister in America, and I have been trying to contact an ex-lady friend of his. It is minor stuff but it is valued.

In the office at Crawley there are 4 professional staff. One member of staff is Anna Pincus, who has a child in Worth School, organised the Refugee Tales last year, and is engaged with sponsoring Syrian refugees. Another is a lawyer who gives advice to both detainees and volunteer visitors. Regular courses are provided by the office. There will be one in March 2016 on legal advice.

Most of the financial support for the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group comes from the Lottery but is not guaranteed. If you would like to make a donation to the work of the Group please call 01293 657070 or email [info@gdwg.org.uk](mailto:info@gdwg.org.uk)