Stepping up
Testimonies of Campsfield visitors
1993-2018
Campsfield House near Kidlington, on the outskirts of Oxford, opened as an immigration detention centre in 1993. Local people set up a volunteer visiting service soon after Campsfield opened and they merged with a local refugee support group to form the charity Asylum Welcome.

For 25 years, Asylum Welcome volunteers visited Campsfield almost every day. They saw every detainee who sought help, providing human contact and a bridge to the outside world – to family and friends, doctors and lawyers. In addition to the friendship and practical assistance offered, Asylum Welcome played an important role in raising concerns with officials running the detention centre and with national government. They promoted the welfare of detainees, negotiated their release and sought changes to policy.

The work was sustained by the commitment of scores of volunteers and a few staff, and by the financial support of individual donors and charitable trusts and foundations.

Asylum Welcome’s contribution is highly regarded. Its legacy is the difference made to the lives of tens of thousands of detainees and their families, the improvements negotiated in the conditions during the Campsfield’s existence. Advocacy for a reduction in the use of detention contributed to the closure of Campsfield in December 2018: when it closed it had 282 bed spaces.

Stories of help, support, compassion and solidarity abound throughout the 25 years Asylum Welcome was present in Campsfield House. This small publication contains just a few accounts through the voices of the visitors, staff and detainees.
Janet Makepeace

How it all started: Campsfield House used to be a Youth Custody Centre. It was turned into an Immigration Detention Centre (now called Immigration Removal Centre) in 1993. Some of us who lived nearby knew the Chaplain at Campsfield. He spread the word about possibly visiting the detainees. Shelagh Ranger and Elisabeth Johnson set up the visiting service.

In the beginning, we would hear the name of a person who had been taken to Campsfield House and so we would go and see them there. No booking was necessary we just had to wait in the queue and ask to see the detainee. Then when we visited them they would give the names of their friends (fellow detainees) who would also like a visit – so it was a word of mouth service.

In the early days both men and women were held there. At the start there were many Sri Lankans, and I visited a lot of them through the years. I also remember that one of the first people I visited was a Filipino woman. It was common for detainees to be held for very long periods of time: two years in one case that I saw, and 22 months in another, plus others of several months.

I believe we visitors have been able to give considerable support to many detainees from various countries, but for my part I always feel that I have gained much more than I have given. This is especially true for those who I visited over a long period because of the length of their detention.

I am still in touch with a few detainees who I met in the first couple of years of visiting. After they were released, I used to go to London to have a meal with them and see how they were doing. I have been witness at a couple of civil weddings and a guest at Hindu weddings and several birthday parties, which have been a blessing. Over the 25 years that I visited Campsfield I also came to know the staff there well, and many were very caring.

"I always feel that I have gained much more than I have given..."

Charlotta Nuboer Cope

I started visiting detainees in 2005. After visiting a few short-term detainees, I ended up visiting one detainee weekly for about six months. I found it a really meaningful thing to do. Basically, you are bringing your humanity and empathy to a person who is at one of the lowest points in their life. Where they have likely been treated with disbelief and disrespect, you provide kindness, openness and belief in them. This is no small thing in that moment.

I took on the role of organising ‘assessment’ visits every Thursday evening. In these sessions a volunteer visitor would see approximately four detainees, one after the other, for about half an hour each. We had a brilliant team of visitors – hugely committed and reliable. We would ask lots of questions in a gentle way and then write up detailed notes for the team at the office to action. These visits were the first time a detainee would see an Asylum Welcome visitor, so they were a friendly face whilst also assessing their needs – listening to concerns about physical or mental health, or their asylum case. If the client needed a solicitor chasing up, the office would do so. If they needed medical or mental health care, the office, again, would pursue that. I did this for 10 years – until 2015 when the assessment interviews became part of the drop-in sessions on Monday mornings.

In 2006 I set up a ‘Detainee Visitor Support Group’ for visitors to share ideas, provide mutual support, talk about any news in the asylum arena. For about nine years these meetings were held at my house every other month.

"You are bringing your humanity and empathy to a person who is at one of the lowest points of their life"
Professor Anthony Bradley


In those days visitors were allowed to see only one detainee per visit, so AW would try to find volunteers who could preferably speak a relevant language. If the first visit went well, the visitor could arrange to make further visits as long as the detainee was still there.

“...visitors were allowed to visit two or more named detainees in a single session”

On my first visit, the chilly atmosphere at reception told me that Campsfield was, in effect, a prison. At that time no welfare officers existed in Campsfield nor were there computer facilities for detainees. Some AW members were told that any complaints they made on behalf of detainees would not be heard.

Relations between the Campsfield authorities and AW were very poor, also the Campsfield authorities did not like the vocal Close Campsfield campaign; but in time, relations improved. Over time it perhaps became part of the contract for the management provider to have good relations with local organisations. It was agreed that visitors were allowed to visit two or more named detainees in a single session. Quarterly meetings began between AW, the Campsfield management provider and representitives of the Home Office. AW noticed that there were fewer complaints from detainees about conditions (for example about food) but difficulties remained with detainees’ medical needs.

From 2005, AW was allowed to hold regular ‘drop-in’ sessions where visitors were available for any detainee to come and see them. The drop-in sessions enabled every new detainee to make initial contact with AW, without waiting to be fixed up with a visitor, and they enabled AW to assess a detainee’s needs.

The period that I was most active as a visitor was in the years 2010-2013 when I helped to run the drop-in sessions. As a longstanding visitor I was often paired with a less experienced visitor – to help with taking notes or putting questions, and in that way the service was sustained over time.

Khalid Rasho

I am Kurdish, from Iraq. I came to the UK in 2015 and applied for asylum upon my arrival. Now, I’m 25 years old and live in London, I’m a student at Uxbridge College.

I applied for asylum as soon as I arrived in the UK – I was detained for one night and then released into the community. A few months later, I was arrested by UK immigration in order to send me back to Austria as I had passed through that country on my way from Iraq to the UK, and my fingerprints had been taken there. I was sent to Campsfield House. I was very frustrated and felt hopeless. I wanted to stay in the UK so I could be closer to my sister who lives in this country too.

They kept me in detention for four months and 21 days which was a very long period of time. I didn’t know what to do or how to get out of that place. It was not a comfortable place to stay. I had never been in prison or anywhere like this before.

One day when I was trying to interpret for another detainee, I came across two kind ladies from Asylum Welcome. Now I know that this was my lucky day and I was very fortunate to meet them. From that point onwards, I was in regular touch with volunteers from Asylum Welcome. They visited me and made me feel comfortable and gave me hope that one day I would get out of that place. They helped me to communicate with the outside world by topping up my mobile phone, bringing in clothing, helped me to keep in touch with my solicitor and talked on my behalf. Basically, they helped me and other detainees with everything they possibly could.

It has been over three years since my release from Campsfield and I can say proudly that I am a part of Asylum Welcome. I made a lot of friends through them and I will never forget their warm welcome to everyone. I would like to thank them as they are all amazing people.
From my observations, Asylum Welcome’s Detainee Support Service did a lot of good work. When I first started to volunteer I was worried that those I visited would feel the visits were somewhat pointless – if we could not offer legal advice, what exactly was our purpose? In reality, I rarely felt this and I think it was only one or two men who were particularly frustrated with their circumstances who voiced these feelings.

Firstly, we helped with general befriending/psycho-social support which meant a lot to those who had no or few visitors. Listening, supporting, asking questions about their background, families, sharing stories, finding common ground, talking about issues outside of their immediate situation. A range of memorable conversations included: the Bedouin in Kuwait, life in prison, weight-lifting, best Bangladeshi restaurants, their children’s accomplishments and other family anecdotes, and experiences of slavery in the UK.

Secondly we offered material support: phone top-ups, providing travel tickets for family, the occasional book, magazine or art materials to help relieve the sheer boredom and drudgery. It often felt like such a tiny drop in the ocean, but was nevertheless much appreciated.

Thirdly we had a vital liaison role: chasing solicitors, case workers and probation officers was clearly a massive part of the success of the Detainee Support Service. At the peak, busiest times I felt the AW office was overwhelmed by the need, but it was clear individual detainees were getting a lot of support.

Finally, there was the dialogue between visitors and Campsfield staff. A few times I felt the need to flag up the vulnerability of a detainee and to ask the staff to be alert to the decline in their mental health. A few times I certainly felt they had not been aware of this until I mentioned it, and they were always quick to reassure me they would keep a closer eye on the individual.

Detainees in Campsfield House were in the middle of a mixed bag of staff and professionals flowing around them.

The key thing with Asylum Welcome is it’s a voluntary organisation: there’s no profit motive. It was very wonderful when Asylum Welcome was instrumental in a positive situational change, but detainees came to know that even if we couldn’t make a big change we would still show up every week.

There were moments when a detainee would go from thinking ‘what’s the angle?’ to the realisation that there are people who see things are wrong and cruel and stupid, and are there to do what they can. I know that detainees became deeply touched by this in a moment. I could see it when it happened. It gave us a unique legitimacy. Such a thing is not quantifiable to a stakeholder but really gets to what an organisation like Asylum Welcome is really about.

“We offered material support... it often felt like a drop in the ocean, but it was much appreciated.”

“...there are people who see things are wrong and cruel and stupid, and are there to do what they can.”
I had the pleasure of volunteering with Asylum Welcome for over five years: supporting individuals who from fear and frustration left their homelands and families.

"Asylum Welcome has been a great instrument for change at Campsfield"

In recent years Asylum Welcome developed a second visiting team, one with expertise in health – a first class team of nurses, psychologists, social workers and doctors. We regularly identified and informed Campsfield medical centre and other supporting bodies of the developing medical conditions among the detainees such as high blood pressure, depression and suicidal thoughts. Sometimes we saw torture-survivors who were not aware of the significance of the torture and torture marks for their asylum claims or for their right to be released from detention.

I have no doubt Asylum Welcome is one of the most effective and efficient organisations that I have come across. Although the material support offered by Asylum Welcome is very valuable, for me the most attractive component has been the total dedication and understanding of Asylum Welcome office staff and visitors to each and every asylum seeker. Asylum Welcome has been a great instrument for change at Campsfield.

They embarked on long and often painful journeys, to be exposed to a new country, language, culture and environment, interrogated by authorities and transferred to intimidating detention centres. It takes individuals with special gifts and expertise to offer helping hands to relieve this pain, sorrow, loneliness, and many other associated problems.

Asylum Welcome has been a great instrument for change at Campsfield"
Graham Diggle

I joined as a volunteer in September 2017 and worked as an office-based volunteer in the Detainee Support Service until Campsfield House closed in December 2018. My job was to provide support and resources to detainees in Campsfield House and to those who were visiting and meeting them.

“... they were all human beings with an incredible determination to live their lives without the constant reminder of their tragic past.”

Like many jobs, the nature and value of the work only becomes clear over time. At first it seemed to me that I was mainly ‘feeding the database’ – keeping a record of interactions between visitors and clients and recording what the solicitors said about their situation. I came to recognise that we provided an important service – contacting detainees to find out what their needs were and finding ways of meeting those needs. Our resources were strictly limited – I have no legal knowledge and cannot give legal advice, I cannot argue a case with the authorities. Nonetheless, we could alert services and agencies both within Campsfield House and outside.

Occasional success stories made the work very worthwhile: for example, reuniting a client with their belongings which had been left in their accommodation or at a police station when they were detained; helping to arrange a family visit; alerting our health visitors to ensure that appropriate medical treatment was given. Over time the clients’ names and stories became known to us and to hear someone say ‘X has been released’ became a cause of great pleasure.

The men detained at Campsfield House were representative of a broad range of humanity – not all were angels, although most that I spoke to were very decent people. But they were all human and therefore deserving of their human rights, and none deserved to be locked away without having committed a crime. I believe that much of the value of our work was to demonstrate to individuals that someone outside Campsfield had their interests at heart.

Dr. Clara della Croce

In 2009, I visited Campsfield House for the first time alongside a very caring and knowledgeable Asylum Welcome volunteer who had significant experience working with the probation service. He guided me with the first detainees I saw: two young Angolan men who had been tortured and abused during the civil war. They bore the physical and mental scars of such horrific experiences.

I took in Portuguese books and CDs for them to ameliorate their very difficult situation. They often talked about their sense of solitude and incomprehension. They had sought solace and protection in the UK, but ended up in prison and immigration detention because the only way to get out of Angola was with a false Portuguese passport. On arrival in the UK, they did not understand the asylum system or the language and as soldiers they felt it was shameful to talk about their past. To me though, they were vulnerable human beings with an incredible determination to live their lives without the constant reminder of their tragic past. Whenever I visited them, we talked about the beauty of their country, their music and also about their immigration case. This was a way to connect with them and bring some joy and support. Both called me from London when they were released and granted asylum in the UK.

Over 10 years I saw people of all ages, nationalities and backgrounds, including those who had been trafficked, who were stateless and those who had come to the UK as children and lived all their formative years here. For all of them detention was a really difficult experience, it crushed their hopes and raised fears of being returned to countries which either they did not know or where they faced some sort of reprisals. I learnt a lot from each one of them: about their personal lives, their journeys, their countries; and about resilience, courage, optimism and deep sadness. What motivated me to keep returning to Campsfield for 10 years was the thought of these men’s exclusion, fears and hopes and the thought that perhaps something could be done to alleviate their suffering.
I was a volunteer visitor at Campsfield for nine years, between 2009 and 2018. For most of this time I did initial interviews with detainees, and followed up cases where Asylum Welcome could make a difference, generally liaising with solicitors or other support agencies.

Most detainees have had a very difficult time, and many have had a very hard life. Many too have been traumatised by their experiences, sometimes seriously. Dealing with so much misery and injustice often required a thicker skin than I felt I possessed, and I found I had to set limits to my involvement.

In most cases there was little to be done to prevent deportation or end incarceration despite the misery and injustice which so often accompanied it. But sometimes one could be the catalyst for fundamental and life-saving developments – this was incredibly rewarding.

AW’s interventions could be decisive in preventing deportation or ending detention, and over the years I was involved in several such cases. Most striking was that of a man who faced deportation to Uganda where his life would certainly have been in danger. At one point he was within hours of deportation, which was stopped only when I called up immediate legal intervention. I stood bail for this man, attending three bail hearings, and three further immigration hearings which eventually led to his obtaining refugee status. This was one of many cases where a detainee’s history and circumstances were not believed or not understood by Home Office officials or by the courts.

I hope the experience gained by AW can be disseminated to other agencies involved in such work, for which there is an enormous need. My main message to such agencies and their volunteers would be to not underestimate the value of such work and the critical difference it can sometimes make to the lives of vulnerable people. Volunteers in this field should be encouraged to take an active and interventionist approach, and not be unduly cautious because of their own lack of legal, medical or other knowledge. In time, you learn a great deal and such knowledge and experience can be put to good use.

“You learn a great deal and such knowledge and experience can be put to good use”

I always felt a little trepidation when I first made contact with new detainees. I knew that I had neither specialist skills nor any power to affect the decisions taken about them by the Campsfield authorities or, more importantly, the Immigration Service.

I always wanted to underline the limited nature of what I could do as a visitor and yet I need not have worried. Nobody ever asked me what I thought I was doing there or complained because of the limited number of things I could do. Perhaps the lack of power and specialised skills helped to emphasise that we were both just ordinary people and our conversation was not happening against a backdrop of potentially negative consequences for the detainee. I had no hierarchical authority to exercise and that made it easier to speak with a degree of mutual confidence.

In retrospect, I think I failed to recognise that my primary function was not to make things happen but simply to be a person that the detainee could talk to. Certainly many of the detainees were extremely happy to have a chance to tell me about the things they cared about, whether it was Indian League Cricket or opposition politics in Zimbabwe. I found it extraordinarily heart-warming when a detainee who was released rang me to thank me for coming to see them during their stay in Campsfield. They did not have to do that.

The presence of visitors was an important element in giving Campsfield a reputation of being one of the better detention centres. I remember the TV documentary which revealed terrible abuse at the Harmondsworth centre where inmates were physically beaten. When I visited Campsfield the next day, the staff wanted to underline that such things would not happen there. I think they could have happened, but the regular presence of 60 or so visitors made it less likely, and would certainly have led to the information passing to the outside very quickly.

“You learn a great deal and such knowledge and experience can be put to good use”
Almas ‘Navid’ Farzi

I joined the staff of Asylum Welcome in May 2014 – I worked with volunteers to develop the Detainee Support Service into the largest volunteer visiting group in the UK. The service made thousands of visits a year to Campsfield detainees. Here is an account of one visit...

“I realised the human impact of all those thousands of visits our generous volunteers offered detainees and the difference they made by offering human solidarity, hope and the chance to talk in confidence.”

I visited a young person who could not speak English and did not have a friend or anyone he could talk to there. I was about to leave after an hour’s visit, most of which I spent listening to what he had to say in Kurdish, when his head went down and then up. With watery eyes he said, ‘Do you have to go so soon?’ I stopped moving, forgot about the meeting I needed to attend soon after this visit and said, ‘No! Of course not, I’ll stay a bit longer if that is OK.’ His face changed, he smiled and said ‘Yes’ in Kurdish – that I also understand – and started talking. This time he talked faster, as though he knew our time would soon be up and he wanted to make most of it. I felt emotional, but held back and did not say much. About 20 minutes later, it was obvious that he did not want me to go but I had no choice. I remember well that when I got out of that place, it was raining. I had no desire to get to the car but instead lifted my face to the rain, to the sky for its humble and unconditional generosity. I needed fresh air and comfort! Then, I realised the human impact of all those thousands of visits our generous volunteers offered detainees and the difference they made by offering human solidarity, hope and the chance to talk in confidence.

Allan Kasasa

I was arrested and detained at Campsfield House for nine months. This was an absolute shock to me as I come from a country where they had no respect for human rights and human dignity. I was seeking protection and sanctuary in the UK.

I felt lonely and isolated as I had no family or friends to turn to. One evening I found a leaflet that explained that I could have friends who would visit and talk to me, perhaps help me out. They were based in Oxford and their name was Asylum Welcome. I decided to ring them, and when my call was answered I heard a voice of an angel!

She calmly talked to me, and promised to send a friend from the organisation to visit me. That evening two visitors came to the centre and visited me. I felt like I was resurrected. Over a bottle of water, we talked, they listened and comforted me. Ever since that day my life changed. Asylum Welcome got me a solicitor to work on my case, and also helped in gathering information. Eventually, they became my sureties in court. Then, I got my bail hearing. My friends from Asylum Welcome supported and accompanied me to the hearing. Finally, I got out as a free man.

While out there in the community, I started fighting my asylum claim with the help of Asylum Welcome, and after attending several court cases together, I was granted my refugee status. The credit for all of this goes to Asylum Welcome and I am so grateful for that simple phone call I made.

“I get emotional every time I have to narrate this story – the nine months of my wrongful detention, the life I will never get back...”

I get emotional every time I have to narrate this story – the nine months of my wrongful detention, the life I will never get back, or heal that spot in my life, but fair enough as I am alive, and free, and with my family now, God is great.
Even in the most difficult circumstances many detainees took time to express their appreciation. Visitors treasured these messages. Here are just a few:

“I am always very happy to see my visitor – they bring me great happiness. It’s not just the uncertainty of my case but also because I feel trapped and lonely here.”

“I am positive about another visit and very grateful for the help offered by Asylum Welcome. I really appreciate the regular visits, and feel I now have a good solicitor.”

“I am very happy and grateful for the progress on my case. I thank you for all your hard work, commitment and being there for me at a time when it felt like the whole world had forgotten me.”

“Some days are better than others, although there are times when I feel very affected by my situation. I really appreciate the visits – it’s important to me to spend time listening to and helping other people in detention, but I put myself in second place.”

“Thank you for everything you and the office have done… I was so happy to be able to phone my family – it lifted me up from the awfulness of detention.”

This publication is dedicated to all the detainees held at Campsfield and all those who offered them help.

Despite the closure of Campsfield, people continue to be held indefinitely in immigration detention centres elsewhere in the UK. Asylum Welcome continues to be concerned for the welfare of those detainees and to call for a fresh approach so that indefinite detention is no longer part of immigration policy.
“Thank you for being there for me at a time when it felt like the whole world had forgotten me.”

For 25 years Asylum Welcome’s volunteer visitors made daily visits to Campsfield detention centre, seeing every detainee who asked for help.

Campsfield closed in December 2018 and this publication records some of the experiences of visitors, staff and detainees. Asylum Welcome continues to work to safeguard asylum seekers, refugees and migrants at risk of detention.

The current funders of Asylum Welcome’s work with detainees are The Persula Foundation and The Bromley Trust. We are grateful for their support and also wish to thank the many other charitable trusts and foundations, community organisations and individuals whose generous financial contributions have sustained this service over 25 years.

You can support Asylum Welcome by donating online at: www.justgiving.com/asylumwelcome