

Haslar Visitors Group

ANNUAL REPORT 2001

Some extracts:

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Coordinator's Report

This year has been one of changes: there is a new Coordinator, a new Governor, even a new Home Secretary who seems to have some fresh ideas.

John and Patricia Bingham, who were Coordinators from the near the start of the Visitors Group in 1994, retired as such in May. They have both contributed tremendous energy and commitment over the years and much of our success today is because of their efforts. John has continued to serve as Treasurer and Patricia still organises the Court Monitoring Project.

The change in coordinator also involved the creation of a full time paid post and the establishment of an office, generously provided at a nominal rent, by the Anglican Council of Social Responsibility. Funding for the post has come from various charities to all of whom we are most grateful. Other funding, for example for our computer, has come from a number of sources including individual visitors and we warmly thank them all.

The year ended with two distinguished men agreeing to become our patrons: General Sir David Ramsbotham was the last Chief Inspector of Prisons and has spoken out vigorously against the imprisonment of asylum seekers; the Earl of Sandwich is locally based and may be able to speak for us in the Lords.

After a somewhat unhappy period the prison got a new Governor in May and the atmosphere there has become altogether better and more cooperative though an incident at the prison in September did lead to 32 men being sent to local prisons. For some weeks they were kept in cell accommodation 23 hours a day despite our vigorous protests. The new Home Secretary, David Blunkett, has now ended the practice of holding asylum seekers in local prisons and reclassified Haslar as a Detention Centre, operating under Detention Centre rules. In the short term this is not expected to greatly affect the regime, but it is to be welcomed and in the longer term we can probably expect a number of improvements. Most detained asylum seekers are now held in custom built centres offering considerably better standards of accommodation than those at Haslar which was originally built in the 19th century as an army barracks..

We have provided visitors for 114 men in the six months since I took up post, approximately 50 people visiting at any one time. The detainees have included men from 37 different countries including Zimbabwe from where thirteen have come in the six month period.

We have had two training days this year, and in a new development we have done some of the training ourselves, using members of the group with special skills or knowledge. AVID provided their trainers for some of the sessions. In addition to training sessions we have updated the handbook and maintained the website which now has an average of fourteen visitors a day, mostly from this country but also from around the world.

Monthly visitors meetings have not been very well attended in 2001 and the committee is now considering a slightly more structured format, perhaps with a speaker or theme to start the discussion. The committee has continued to meet monthly.

The court monitoring project (we review all the cases heard at Havant Court) bore fruit in the autumn when a local MP sent a copy of our latest report to the Lord Chancellor. No less than 52% of the cases which go to Havant are adjourned, many because the Home Office has not produced the right documents, or the right interpreter. This startling statistic seems to have caught everyone's attention and a reply was received from Baroness Scotland, of the Lord Chancellor's Department, announcing that a number of changes are on the way and that the Haslar Visitor Group report has been copied to all relevant officials. Congratulations to the dedicated team which carries out this work.

As Coordinator I have attended the Asylum Rights Campaign Detention Subgroup each month, the Home Office Detention User Group bi-monthly and was called in, together with many others, for consultation with the Chief Inspector of Prisons in December.

Our group has organised a number of meetings throughout the year including some for One World Week, a fringe meeting at the Labour Party Conference and one associated with the Ann Frank exhibition in Brighton. Meetings such as these both provide information and recruit visitors – do think about suggesting a speaker from the group if you know of an organisation which might be interested. As Coordinator I also represented the Group in an interview on the BBC Television programme South Today, and was invited to meet the Archbishop of York on his visit to Portsmouth in September.

Visiting can be very hard work, particularly when men you respect and believe in are returned to countries like Angola, as happened this year. There are also moments of great joy, as when a man is returned to his family or given refugee status, or simply freed on bail, all of which have also happened. What is undoubtedly true is that the vast majority of men hugely appreciate the visits they

receive. In the course of the year one man told our Visitors' Meeting that his stress levels were halved on the day of a visit.

In conclusion could I offer my personal thanks for all the support I have been given as I have started this new job. It has been a real pleasure to work with such a good group of colleagues on such an important job.

Michael Woolley

“ On the day of a visit our stress levels are cut by 50%”

a detainee released on bail who came to speak our Monthly Visitors' Meeting

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Treasurer's Report 2001

The major event this year has been the employment of a full time paid co-ordinator, working from an office in Portsmouth. We have been very fortunate in being offered the use of an office in the All Saints Centre by the Portsmouth Diocesan Council for Social Responsibility at an appropriate proportion of the rent they pay for all their offices. This was most generous and we very much appreciate it.

Employing a paid co-ordinator has brought a significant change to our financial management. We now pay liability insurance, monthly office rent, and a monthly salary. We also offer the Give As You Earn facility. From the salary we deduct income tax and national insurance

according to the Coding instructions we are given and pay them quarterly to the Inland Revenue. After a flurry of different coding notices in the first few months, this seems now to have settled into a regular routine.

We are very grateful to the Lloyds TSB Foundation, to the Servite Sisters, to the AW60 Trust, to the Network for Social Change, to the Tudor Trust and to a number of individuals for their generosity in supporting us and making it possible for us to recruit and employ a paid co-ordinator. This has, I believe, enabled the Group to provide a better service to detainees. Lectures at University College, Chichester, have again made a significant contribution to our income.

Advertising for the post of co-ordinator, arranging and conducting the necessary interviews cost us just over £1000, but this was a necessary expense. It was important to ensure that the proper procedures were followed.

During the year we have provided grants of US\$30 or £20 to 10 asylum seekers either before they were returned to their country or when they were released from detention here without funds of their own. From the middle of the year, we started contributing 70% of the expenses incurred by visitors required to attend a bail hearing in London and have done this now on four occasions. We have also contributed to the train fare of one detainee's family, enabling them to visit him in Haslar.

I would like to remind visitors that, if the detainee they are visiting appears to be about to be removed, they can get US\$30 from a travel agent to send him and the Treasurer will re-imburse them against the receipt. He will also re-imburse them for a grant of £20 on release to bail or temporary admission. In addition, as stated above, up to 70% of the expense of attending a bail hearing at York House or Taylor House is available on request.

As the figures on the following page show, we are in a reasonably healthy financial state at present, but we need further substantial support from trusts and similar organisations if we are to be able to continue to employ a paid co-ordinator. Applications are in hand, but the future remains uncertain. We remain most grateful for any contributions that any individual or organisation can make.

Finally, I shall be handing over to Jean-Pierre Paternoster, as approved by the last A.G.M., in late January or early February.

John Bingham

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SECURE BORDERS SAFE HAVENS

Immigration White Paper February 2002

We will fundamentally reform the asylum system: [by] introducing a managed system of induction, accommodation, reporting and removal centres to secure a seamless asylum process; the introduction of an Application Registration Card to provide more secure and certain evidence of identity and nationality.

"Secure Borders, Safe Havens" Immigration Whitepaper 7th February 2002

Many of these measures are already in place and are in the process of expansion, raising doubts as to the value of the consultation process which the White Paper is supposed to entail.

*Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
8th February 2002*

We will fundamentally reform the asylum system [by] streamlining our appeals system to minimise delay and helping to cut down barriers to removal.

"Secure Borders, Safe Havens" Immigration Whitepaper 7th February 2002

These measures will certainly increase the capacity of the system to enforce negative decisions against asylum seekers, but they do little to increase what should surely be the main function of asylum procedures, which is to maintain high standards of protection and ensure respect for human rights.

*Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
8th February 2002*

We will fundamentally reform the asylum system.

"Secure Borders, Safe Havens" Immigration Whitepaper 7th February 2002

Headlined as "Ensuring End-to-End Credibility", the White Paper contains no discussion as to why the system is widely regarded as having little or no credibility at the present time.

*Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
8th February 2002*

BETTER THINGS TO COME?

Additionally immigration detainees are held in.....Her Majesty's Prison Haslar. I am taking steps to establish [this] as an immigration removal centre..... **It may take some time before the facilities match those of other removal centres, but that is our intention.**

David Blunket, Home Secretary, in the Commons 14/1/2002

KEY DATA

- **Office:** All Saints Centre, Commercial Road, Portsmouth PO1 4BT
Phone 023 9283 9222 The office, suitable for one person working normally or an occasional meeting of three or four people, is provided by the church at a rental of less than £1000 a year. A similar office elsewhere in the area would cost at least four times as much, benefit in kind £3000 a year.
- **Charity Registration:** 1080187, first registered March 2000.

- **Funding:** last year from five grant making trusts (see attached report). This year we hope to collect £5000 locally, partly to involve the local community and partly to re-assure the trusts that we want to do something for ourselves. We shall apply to trusts for the majority of our needs. We have received donations in the last couple of months of £650 from visitors towards a new computer. Microsoft have donated software and Dell a discount.
- **Chairman:** Rev Peter Whiting, 5 Pook Lane Havant PO9 2HT
- **Trustees:** Mrs Mary George, Secretary, 19 Cuckoo Lane, Stubbington, PO14 3PF; Commander John Bingham, treasurer, Windmill House, Hambledon Road, Denmead PO7 6PS; Dr Timothy Bushell, Copper Beech, Church Lane, Birdham PO20 7AT; Ms Di White, 71 Hamble Springs, Bishops Waltham, SO32 1SF; Jean Pierre Paternoster 25 Sinclair Road, Lordshill, Southampton SO16 8GF; Philip Warren, 42 Blenheim Gardens, Havant, PO9 2PN
- **Staff:** Michael Woolley, The Flat, Baffins Lane, Chichester PO19 1UA
- **Bankers:** Lloyds TSB, Waterlooville
- **Patrons:** General Sir David Ramsbotham, The Earl of Sandwich

POST SCRIPT

Asylum seekers and immigration detainees, in my view, should not be sent to prison, because they have not committed or been accused of a crime that makes them subject to prison rules.

David Ramsbotham, patron of Haslar Visitors and ex-Chief Inspector of Prisons, in the Daily Telegraph 18/12/2001