Background
The British immigration detention system is one of the largest in Europe and the only country with an indefinite time limit. Up to 4,200 detainees may be confined at any given time across nine immigration removal centres (IRC), three short-term holding facilities and some prisons (AVID, 2017). The participating organisation, a volunteer visitor group called Yarl’s Wood Befrienders, visits women, mostly asylum seekers, detained in Yarl’s Wood IRC to offer them emotional and practical support to help cope with the distress and uncertainty of detention.

Aims and research questions
The exploratory study aims to better understand the everyday work lives of volunteer visitors that befriend detainees in an UK Immigration Removal Centre. It answers the questions: What do befrienders ‘do’? In what ways does the compassionate body act as a befriender? Emotions and the body are central to the study where physical contact reminds confined detainees they are in touch with the world outside the Centre.

Methodology
I am a ‘complete member’ (Adler & Adler, 1987) of the Yarl’s Wood Befrienders as a volunteer-befriender, trustee, consultant and former detainee. As an ethnographer and befriender, I return to the Centre where I was detained for one night ten years ago. A radically reflexive (Cunliffe, 2003) and emotionally reflexive (Burkitt, 2012) approach is taken employing the following methods:

• Participant observation for nine months: field notes from 105 hours befriending nine detainees one-to-one; 145 hours engaged in social activities organised for detainees inside the detention centre, writing fundraising bids, at volunteer recruitment & training events and Board meetings to gain first-hand experiences

• 22 conversational, unstructured interviews with participating befrienders to gather perspectives and meaning-making of befriending detainees
• Solicited participant diaries for three months for further insights into their emotions and actions involved in befriending, but written in their own time

Impact
This study furthers our knowledge of compassionate organisations and the voluntary sector support in immigration detention centres. It advances organisational ethnography by studying one’s own membership group and centring researchers’ embodied emotions to better understand everyday voluntary organisational life.

References

Photos, left to right: Volunteer visiting (Yarl’s Wood Befrienders, 2015); Visits Hall at Yarl’s Wood IRC (Serco, 2015); Visitors Centre at Yarl’s Wood IRC (Vincett, 2015); charitable clothing and shoes (Yarl’s Wood Befrienders, 2015); mobile phone (Vincett, 2015).

Charitable clothing, shoes and mobile phone credit ‘Each time I was detained by surprise […] I didn’t have anything with me except my purse.’

Ana, formerly detained for four months