

Sources of Hope – Chit Chat

Practise English in the heart of Guildford

Pre-lockdown: Where in Guildford would you find international research scholars, au pairs, immigrants from the local service industries and visiting parents of international students all chatting with one another over a cup of coffee?

If you pop into Chit Chat on a Wednesday morning during term time between 9.30am and 11am you will find a team of volunteers from local churches chatting with internationals

giving them an opportunity to practise and develop English conversation skills. We have a different topic for conversation each week with visual aids provided to stimulate discussion. Topics have included favourite foods and cooking, memories of childhood homes, the weather and who I would most like to meet and why.



We recently welcomed a record number of guests – 46 internationals from different faith backgrounds all busy chatting and laughing in their groups with the volunteers. A foretaste of heaven!

On one occasion I had the privilege of listening to a Chinese research scholar talk about her childhood home in rural China, consisting of two rooms, no running water and a communal toilet in the yard shared with three other families. An au pair from Spain listened open-mouthed and then told us about her six-bedroom childhood home with full *en suite* facilities! We learn a lot from our guests as we chat each week and they learn a lot from each other.

Chit Chat provides a safe space where our guests know they will be listened to patiently, where they can ask questions about things they don't understand in British culture and where they can find help with filling in forms etc. Chit Chat is recommended by social services, healthcare professionals and housing services as a place which offers a warm welcome to internationals in our town.

Post-lockdown: The words above were written by one of our wonderful volunteers and describe perfectly what a Wednesday morning felt like at Chit Chat. Then lockdown happened. We were all told to stay at home. Following government advice we cancelled the remaining sessions of the Spring Term, not knowing when we would be able to open our doors again.

However, the need was still out there. We started to have conversations about how and if we could continue with Chit Chat. Zoom was mentioned. Should we? Could we? Eventually we decided we would dip our feet in the water and give it a go. We had designated people who could call a Zoom meeting and an email was sent inviting guests to sign up for our online sessions, which follow much the same pattern as before except you have to bring your own coffee!

What a joy it has proved to be. As Europe and indeed the world are going through the difficulties and challenges of the pandemic, for one hour on a Wednesday morning we can connect with each other to share our experiences and chat. In addition to guests based in the UK we have had the pleasure of previous guests joining us from around the world including Spain, France and Malaysia. Just last week I had a virtual tour of Hong Kong harbour from the 31st-floor flat where one of our guests was calling from.

Until restrictions change Chit Chat will continue in this form, reaching out to offer friendship and support in these extraordinary times. We thank God that we have been able to continue to do this in his name and pray he will continue to bless us all.

Rosemary Lee
November 2020