Welcoming
Young Refugees

# ‘Someone who smiles, that’s all you need’:

## Life in Yorkshire and Humber for a young person seeking asylum

December 2019

Migration Yorkshire
*Strategic leadership, local support*

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Drawings in the report were created by Aklilu, a young man who participated in the research.

**Contents**

## 1. Summary

The research for the Welcoming Young Refugees project focused on young people who are unaccompanied and who recently arrived in the UK in order to seek asylum here. We wanted to know what it is like for them to live in Yorkshire and Humber, and what could potentially improve their experience. Through the insights gained via the research our objective was to inform:

- training concerning young people who are unaccompanied and seek asylum;
- councils who look after them;
- all those who come in direct or indirect contact with these young people, either as practitioners, carers, managers, strategists, leaders or planners.

We conducted research in three geographical areas in Yorkshire and Humber. Adopting a qualitative research approach, we worked in depth with a small number of young people. This exposed us to their inner worlds. Many of the young people we met often felt that their feelings and opinions are overlooked. This is why in this report we mostly focus on the insights that derive from their perspectives and experiences. We also pay attention to various interactions between the young people and the researcher, as well as individuals who have caring responsibilities for them.

We invite you to consider five key priorities we identified as those that could potentially improve their experiences of life in the *early stages* of being in the UK. These are:

- **The importance of retaining a sense of individuality** - many young people feel that despite some shared experiences (e.g. searching for a better future), they want to be seen as individuals with unique needs, interests and opinions.

- **The significance of living with carers who care -** our findings suggest that a good, strong relationship with carers and social/support workers is of utmost importance, as they accentuate a sense for the young people that 'someone cares'. This is crucial considering the extreme difficulties many have been through.

- **Having free and accessible internet** – many young people that live in semi-independent accommodation do not have internet access outside college where they spend only a few hours over a few days per week. The internet is essential for access to services, for keeping in touch with those they care about, for learning and pursuing interests, and for accessing a myriad of information which affect their daily activities (e.g. bus timetables) and which keep them in touch with what happens locally and around the world. This chimes with the UN resolution which emphasises the importance of internet access for the adequate fulfilment of many human rights.

- **The challenge of having too much free time and how it relates to young people's pasts and outlook towards the future** – a number of young people, especially those that live in small towns and rural areas, told us they have too much unstructured time. Other than attending college, they feel there are not many activities for them. They see this as a problem because having too much

free time heightens their sense of boredom, which triggers negative thoughts stemming from traumatic past experiences and uncertainty regarding the future (partially caused by the lengthy asylum process).

- **Learning English and receiving fractured information** - many young people feel that their English is not improving quickly enough, and that they do not have enough opportunities to interact meaningfully with people who speak good English. Furthermore, our research findings identified some gaps in how information is communicated, or not communicated, to young people. If important information, such as legal matters, is not communicated adequately the impact on the lives of these young people can be dire.

## 2. Purpose of the project: Welcoming Young Refugees

Welcoming Young Refugees is a regional initiative which aims to do four things:

- To recruit foster carers and supported lodgings providers in Yorkshire and Humber for young people who were unaccompanied, and under the age of 18, when they arrived in the UK to seek refugee protection (in this report we will refer to them simply as young people). The recruitment is undertaken by a team of three social workers.

- To provide training for social and support workers, foster carers and supported lodgings providers in order to improve the quality of support offered to the young people and carers.

- To develop, support and improve governance structures so that local authorities across the region work together to share good practice and improve the quality of support for young people that are unaccompanied and seek asylum across the region.

- To conduct research in order to understand the experiences and needs of the young people better. Additionally, we also wanted to hear about expectations, challenges, practices and the perspectives of individuals that come in direct contact with the young people on daily basis and know them best: their carers and social and support workers.

‘Someone to smile at you, that’s all you need’ is a research report that addresses this fourth aim of the Welcoming Young Refugees project.

## 3. Research objectives

There were two main objectives to this research:

1. To better inform the training and recruitment process of foster families and supported lodgings providers.

2. To better communicate to practitioners and councils who look after the young

people what really matters to the young men and women, especially in the initial stages of their life in the UK.

Many of the young people we met often felt that their feelings and opinions are overlooked. This is why in this report we mostly focus on the insights that derive from their perspectives and experiences. We also pay attention to various interactions between the young people and the researcher, as well as individuals who have caring responsibilities for them.

## 4. Research design and methodology

We worked in three geographical areas in Yorkshire and Humber; one town and two cities. We spent prolonged periods of time with approximately 30 young men and women (between the ages of 16-18), out of which we established more comprehensive relationships with about 17. We also interviewed a few support workers, social workers and a number of carers.

The young people we spent time with came from or spent most of their lives in Afghanistan, Albania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq or Sudan. During the research period, we got to know more young men than women. This is not surprising considering that 89 percent[1] of the young people that arrive unaccompanied in the UK and seek asylum here are young men. The majority of the young people we spent time with did not arrive in the UK with 'refugee status'. This means that both the young people and their carers or support/social workers had to navigate the asylum process, many of them learning about it as they went along.

Our research approach was qualitative and we aimed to work in an in-depth and, where possible, participatory and collaborative way. Most often qualitative research is a lengthy process which involves interactions with a relatively small number of people as well as in depth and extensive analysis. Its greatest strength is that it exposes researchers to what we may call internal worlds of those participating in research; their conventions, expectations and practices. As such, it sheds light on the complexity of human experience. The process and outcome of qualitative research may take various shapes and forms: narratives, descriptions, walks, performances, video, film, photography, and so on. We used three research methods:

1. **Participant observation** – enabling us to learn about practices, thoughts and experiences of research participants in their 'natural' setting through participation in daily activities, such as going for a walk, sharing a meal, attending a religious ceremony, and so on.

2. **Digital storytelling** – enabling us to collaborate with young people and to learn about and from them. Digital storytelling makes use of narrative, moving or still images, and audio recording in order to generate 2 to 4 minute digital stories. We provided basic training on how to use video, photography and editing software. While the opportunity to participate in digital storytelling workshops was offered

[1] Home Office (2019), Asylum and Resettlement Datasets (Asylum Applications), https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets#asylum-applications (accessed 18.11.2019).

to young people in all three geographical areas of our research, only one group was interested to pursue this path. Others preferred alternative ways of socialising, like having a conversation over a coffee, some food or a walk. Six young men and one young woman opted to participate in digital storytelling workshops, generating seven digital stories between them.[2] In their stories they chose what to share with us, and by what means (photography, video or drawings). They also edited the materials.

3. **Interviews** – provided more focused information on topics that were important for the Welcoming Young Refugees project. We conducted seven informal interviews with two young women and five young men; eight interviews with carers; and four interviews with social or support workers.

With this in mind, we now move on to discuss some of the key themes that emerged from the research.

## 5. Research findings

### 5.1 Retaining a sense of individuality

*'I live with other young men like myself who came to Britain looking for a better future. But our lifestyles may vary significantly. Just like five fingers on the same hand are all different, people are different, even when coming from the same country or share the same religion….'*

*From 'Waiting', a digital story by 18 year-old Munir[3] available to watch on* https://vimeo.com/showcase/5852135

Unlike his peers' digital stories, which focused mostly on the difficulties they had been through before their arrival in the UK, Munir's story highlights some of the challenges encountered in his daily life in the UK. The passage opening this section is very telling. During the time we spent together Munir explained that because of a shared religion (Islam), shared accommodation (living in the same flat) and shared hope (to be granted refugee status), he felt he was linked with the young man he lived with. However, according to Munir they did not have much in common, and he preferred to be seen as an individual with his own set of activities and interests.

Many of Munir's peers felt a similar need to retain a sense of individuality. During various interactions we had over time, they often emphasised: 'I can only speak for myself', making sure that we don't make sweeping generalizations based on one person's actions or interests. Munir suggested in his digital story that even when the young people came from the same country and had a shared understanding of widespread conventions, behaviours, societal and religious values and expectations, their experiences and aspirations were very different and in great part defined them.

[2] The digital stories are available for viewing on https://vimeo.com/showcase/5852135
[3] In order to protect the identities of individuals participating in this research, all the names used in this report are pseudonyms.

Furthermore, whether a young person was a man or a woman mattered: it significantly shaped their past and present experiences and interactions, and also how they understood their future possibilities. For example, quite a few young women described how their first memory of arrival in the UK was shaped by suspicion towards and fear of unknown individuals, and uncertainty of how life would be. This fear was based on their previous experiences. The young men, on the other hand, did not express fear as such. Their first memory of arrival in the UK instead suggested a sense of worry: that they may be sent back to Calais or Belgium for instance.

Various differences were present also in their UK experience. For example, some young people lived with carers, others lived in independent lodgings. This means that the latter group's only meaningful contacts with adults - such as support or social workers and college teachers - were constrained by 'professional boundaries' and by 9 to 5 working hours. While the young people seemed accepting of this condition, not all of them were indifferent towards it. Their peers who lived with carers, on the other hand, got an opportunity to develop important relationships with adults that were not constrained by specific hours.

In addition, some young people got news about their application for refugee status within a few weeks of their interviews at the Home Office; others had to wait much longer, sometimes even a few years. This has shaped their ability to plan for and prepare for the future. Another variable was that, when we met the young people, they had spent different lengths of time in the UK (some as little as three weeks, others more than two years). These details, and the fact that they have been placed in different geographic locations with different levels of demographic diversity have significantly shaped their current experiences, not only in terms of their ability to communicate, but also in terms of how much they felt settled or 'at home' in the UK.

In addition to our research which suggests that notions of individuality were very important to the young people, other scholars have identified this need and have proposed practitioners adopt an 'individualized approach' when determining, for example, what kind of foster family is most suitable for a young person (Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh 2015). During meetings and conversations we had with social/support workers for this project, we noticed how their work and practices often centred on young people's individualities.

At the same time though we also observed how ideas of individuality can be overshadowed somewhat by young people's immigration and legal status which places them in particular categories. Most commonly, young people under the age of 18 who arrive in the UK unaccompanied and seek asylum here are referred to as UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children). In addition to being administratively convenient, there is a political and legal imperative to cluster people that face similar issues under the same category, as it better equips us to provide and advocate for their legal and political rights.

However, in day-to-day practice this grouping may result in some important pitfalls. The most obvious one is that in this process, differences between individuals may get overlooked easily. For example, during our research occasionally individuals caring for or working with the young people made comments such as 'they all like

football', 'they are all so ambitious', 'these young people are always late', or 'they all love chicken and rice'. However, just like Robel, in fact they may prefer music, or as Abdul, they may not be so driven; and Salam may not really like chicken and rice. This is where life with carers becomes crucial, especially at the initial stage after arrival in the UK.

If **relationships are good**, living with carers will not only mean that a young person can learn English faster or about how things work in the UK, but crucially it will mean that they will be in an environment where they will **consistently** be recognised as an individual, for what she or he is: first and foremost a young person with particular interests, experiences and ambitions – rather than as one young person in the UASC category. Relationships with carers is something we turn to in the next section.

### 5.2 Living with carers who 'care'

*'….someone who smiles and when you come in they ask you 'how you doing?' That means a lot: it means your English will be improving and you will have someone to talk to. You are not alone. If somebody smiles at you every day they tell you that you are welcome. And that's all you need…They tell me how to manage my money, they even found me a job, by themselves…they help me, they tell me what I have to do [in order] to get what I want...So that is so so nice'...*

*17 year-old Tesfay*

Several young people who participated in our research, like Tesfay, lived in supported lodgings or with foster families for much or all of their time in the UK. Others have spent very little time with carers and most of their time in the UK they spent living with other young people who arrived here in order to find safety. Our findings suggest that whether young people live with carers or independently with their peers creates different opportunities and poses different challenges.

Immediately upon their arrival, when and where possible, many – though not all - young people seem to prefer to live with carers. For this to work, however, the relationships with carers need to be strong, built on trust, where household rules - if they exist - apply to everyone. In other words they need to be 'like-family' relationships, as some researchers call them (Sirriyeh 2013).

After some time passes and young people begin to feel more settled-in, once they get the spatial and practical knowledge of how things work in the UK, many tend to prefer to live either on their own or with peers. However, in cases when the relationships with carers are not good from an early stage, the inclination to want to live more independently increases sooner, even if a young person still has not acquired the practical skills and knowledge of how things work in the UK. In this case, the response – wanting to live independently - is often linked with a young person not enjoying their placement rather than reflecting their preparedness to live independently in the UK.

**Accommodation settings for the young people who seek asylum in Yorkshire and Humber**

The majority of the young people participating in this research lived in one of the following accommodation settings:[4]

Foster care
Care in a family setting either in an Ofsted registered and inspected placement with an Independent Fostering Agency foster carer, or in a placement with a local authority foster carer.

Supported lodgings
A service which can allow an individual to live in a family home, experiencing domestic life in a shared and supportive environment, but with a lower level of immediate support than in foster care. The young person has their own room and shares the kitchen and bathroom facilities with the family or householder - or 'host'.

Semi-independent accommodation
Accommodation in a multiple occupancy house, shared mostly between other young people that are unaccompanied and seek asylum (and occasionally with young people that are not seeking asylum). This type of accommodation allows young people to live very independently but usually with visiting support – which should be tailored to the needs of each individual young person.

Our research suggests what really shapes young people's experiences is the *quality* of the relationship with their carers. Life in a friendly and supportive environment allows them to practice their English outside formal settings (as illustrated in image 1, drawn by Aklilu) and may help to tackle some of the other challenges young people face (such as boredom and internet access). Furthermore, and significantly, it gives a sense that someone 'cares' about them. The knowledge that 'someone cares' becomes crucial for the young people who have faced ordeals and challenges already many times. But what does it mean to care about someone?

Image 1

Our engagement with the young people shows that from their perspective 'caring' about someone could mean different things: for 18 year-old Yonas it is about noticing the small things, that he prefers bananas to apples, for example; for 18 year-old Ajkuna to care meant not to be judgmental about her decisions and practices, but compassionate and

[4] Department for Education (2018), What is a suitable placement for an unaccompanied asylum seeking child? (accessed 27.11.2019) https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Suitable%20placements%20for%20UASC%20updated%20April%202018%20Final.pdf

supportive; for 16 year-old Aazar, caring is about applying the same rules to all the children and young people living in the same household; for 17 year-old Tariq, caring is simply about giving helpful advice on how to manage life in a new country; for 18 year-old Agon caring is about making a special dish from his country of origin, or even just about making the effort to purchase the right ingredients for it; for 17 year-old Tesfay, as the excerpt at the beginning of this section illustrates, caring is about making him feel welcome and showing interest in his daily life.

**Expressions of care by carers**

A few foster carers that had very good relationships with the young people in their care told us about various things they do for the young people – some small or some big - that are clearly all expressions of care. Diane, for instance, encourages the young men in her care to have friends over and to cook together as 'that's part of them feeling that they have got a home'. She also told them that her place will always be their home, and that they can always come back to her; Rose and her family try to spend much time with the young man in their care, they cook together and watch films, they go on walks in the countryside and swimming; Katie makes sure to buy the food that the young person living with them likes, and also makes an effort to cook some dishes from his country; many carers told us they respect the Halal rules if that's what matters to a young person; Helen told us that in their household they don't have rules, but they try to respect everyone's needs; Naomi made an extra effort to create opportunities for the young person that lived with her family, she fought to get him into education sooner than that would have been possible otherwise, and she got him into a local cricket club without any fees; Trish and Mike made sure to leave a house key somewhere safe if they go out, and Diane wondered how can a young person 'live here' without a key, so she made sure they each had one. We too have noticed that having a key to the house seems to be particularly important for the young people: symbolically as an expression of trust, and practically it means that a young person does not have to leave the house when carers are not in.

**Expressions of care by social workers and support workers**

Good relationships with social and support workers seemed important for all the young people, particularly those that lived in independent lodgings. For them frontline professionals are the main adults who can advocate for them. A few social and support workers told us about kinds of things/activities they do for young people that are manifestations of care. Many of these do not seem to be an essential part of their role. For example, Ben said that he takes the young people to the supermarket to do a weekly shop as quite a few of them liked cooking, and buying bigger quantities once a week was cheaper; or Emily, a social worker, said that she always thinks of a young person first and foremost as an individual and that she tries to identify her or his needs; quite a few social and support workers talked about giving advice to young people as 'they would to their own children'. However these relationships are necessarily constrained by the social/support workers' position and hours, which means that the young people in semi-independent accommodation are often unable to access the support of these key people on evenings and at weekends.

Caring revolved around noticing things important to a young individual; genuine and non-judgmental interest in one's daily routine, one's past and aspirations; and around practical and constructive support for settling into a new life. Thus, when the young people talked about what it meant 'to care', they did not talk about anything material. Caring is about deeds, what you do, and also about what you notice. Most of the time these are simple, small things, that are manifestations of something greater, manifestations of care. Despite nuanced differences in these examples, the conversations and the time we spent with the young people point to three important elements that underpin the sense that someone cares:

1. **recognition** – in the sense that a young person's feelings and opinions matter;
2. **trust** – in the sense that a young person's story is trusted, as well as that s/he is trusted;
3. **empathy** – in the sense that a young person's experience and deeds are met with support and not judgement.

The knowledge that foster families and supported lodging providers care seems to be particularly important considering the difficult encounters young people have to go through as part of the asylum process. Their Home Office interview seems to be precisely the kind of environment where the young people describe feeling the absence of 'care'. In other words, during these interviews the young people most often feel that their feelings do not matter, that their stories are doubted and that there is little empathy for what they have been through. Thus, being placed in a supportive 'like-family' setting could help to offset some of these negative encounters. On a purely practical level, it could also provide straightforward access to the internet which the young people participating in our research identified as essential, as the next section shows.

### 5.3 The importance of having free and accessible internet

*'…I miss Hana and her family. I cannot find them. They no longer live in the neighbourhood where we used to live and they do not use social media. Not knowing where they are is hard. I don't remember my father. I have few memories of my mother. I have no other family but them. I hope to find them.'*

*From 'Separation', a digital story by 17 year-old Aklilu available to watch on* https://vimeo.com/showcase/5852135

Being in touch with their families and friends is of great importance for the young people who participated in the research. As Aklilu's digital story suggests, due to the scattering of family as a result of political and socioeconomic conditions, keeping in touch with family members and friends can be difficult at times. However, we found that keeping in touch can also be hindered simply due to the lack of adequate access to the internet. Not all the young people we met had access to the internet at all times. For example, in some councils the young people that lived in semi-independent accommodation did not have internet access outside the college where they spent a few hours, 2 to 4 days a week, only during term-time.

Not having internet access has a major impact not only on young people's ability to communicate with friends and family, but also on the availability of and access to

services, information and knowledge. This inevitably shapes what and how they learn, know and do. 16 year old Robel, for example, who aspires to be a musician, watches YouTube in order to learn how to edit and record music, while 17 year old Amanuel tries to advance his English while watching films. In his words:

*…'I watch films online, I put subtitles on and if I don't understand something I pause, rewind and watch it again. I check the words I don't understand, that's how I learn'.*

The internet is now perhaps the most important platform for the expression of opinions and the spread of knowledge and information, and provides a multitude of opportunities for a wide variety of forms of association. Equally, various governmental bodies require online access to services, such as universal credit, and colleges tend to assign and expect homework to be completed online. For these and various other reasons a few years ago the UN passed a resolution[5] which emphasises the importance of internet access for the adequate fulfilment of many human rights.[6] Furthermore, councils have a duty under the Children Act 1989 to promote contact between children in their care and their families.[7] The young people have parents and other family members and friends either in their home countries or other parts of the world. To be able to communicate with them internet access is crucial.

Robel, Amanuel and many others who live in independent lodgings, need to pay for their own internet. They perceive this to be unfair, considering their friends who live with carers have free access to the internet at all times. It is also challenging as monthly internet payments are rather costly in relation to the weekly allowance young people receive for food, toiletries and travel expenses.[8] Councils have valid concerns in terms of internet safety, especially considering the past experiences of some young people. However, not having internet access at home may expose young men or women to unnecessary danger if they decide to go to riskier places at night in order to access the internet. Not having internet access also makes the pool of options smaller in terms of daily activities, especially if young people live in a small town. This then means that they are likely to have more free time, which leads to a sense of boredom. As the next section will show, this is not always desirable.

### 5.4 Troubled pasts, mundane presents, uncertain futures

*'I started drawing in order to avoid thinking about the past, about my journey…it helps me focus on the present. I feel safe here, but I have been waiting for a long time to hear about my asylum application. The future is still uncertain'.*

*From 'Journey', a digital story by 17 year-old Abel available to watch on* https://vimeo.com/showcase/5852135

[5] United Nations Human Rights Council (2016), 'The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet', https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf (accessed 1.11.2019)
[6] J. Tomalty (2017), 'Is there a Human Right to Internet Access?', *Philosophy Now* (accessed 21.10.2019) https://philosophynow.org/issues/118/Is_There_A_Human_Right_To_Internet_Access (accessed 19.1.2019)
[7] Children Act (1989) http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents
[8] A 12 month phone contract, which also includes internet access, could be cheaper. However, it was not available to most of the young people we spent time with either because of their age (one has to be over 18), or because of their legal status (one cannot have a bank account if one seeks asylum and without a bank account one cannot get a contract).

At the heart of many conversations we had with Abel was a monotonous daily routine, overshadowed by waiting for a decision on his asylum claim and fresh memories of past ordeals. His experience illustrates how past trauma, a sense of boredom in the present and future uncertainty are interlinked. He told us how this affected him. When he had just arrived in the UK, he was placed with a foster family who lived on the outskirts of a small and isolated town. He had a lot of free time and he felt very lonely. As a consequence, his mind would often wander off, thinking about the past and difficulties he encountered. It also made him worry about his future, especially since he did not know if he would be granted asylum in the UK. In order to deal with this Abel developed a technique: he started drawing. Drawing made him focus on the here and now, on an object placed in his immediate surrounding. For example, he drew his foster family's house.

Not everyone though managed to find ways to deal with boredom, nor did the drawing technique always work for Abel. Most young people we met wanted to have more things to do in their daily lives. Both the uncertainty about the future and a sense that nothing is happening often came up in our conversations.

Another young man, Aklilu, for example, drew an image of his expression of boredom [see image 2]. The explicit focus here is not on him and his mobile device, but rather on his mobile device being connected to electricity. What Aklilu attempted to convey was the *amount* of time spent on his mobile. There was nothing else for him to do. To be bored may mean various, not necessarily negative, things, and boredom - as concept and experience - is culturally and socially variable (Musharbash 2007).

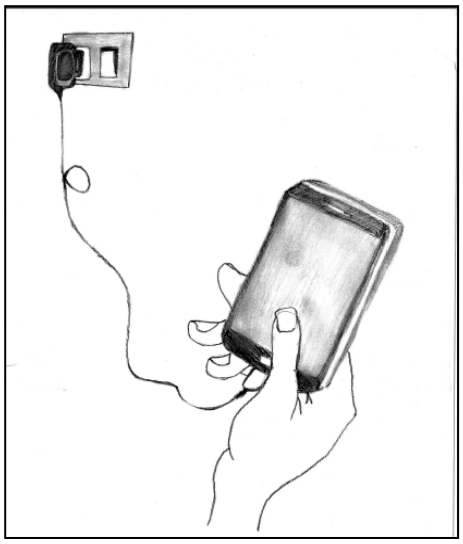

Image 2

For the young people we met too much free time was often interpreted as boredom. This triggered negative thoughts which stemmed from their troubled pasts, and occasionally from the uncertainty of the future.

Our research found that the experiences of too much free time should be understood in relation to four, often intertwined, elements:

1. **Geographical location** – young people that lived in small towns, or isolated areas, more often felt there were fewer opportunities and things for them to do
2. **Time of the week/year** – boredom seemed to have been an issue especially during breaks from college (weekends and holidays).
3. **Length of time spent in the UK** – for some young people, especially those who have not yet spent much time in the UK, lack of familiarity with a new geographical and social context limited their pool of options and it accentuated a sense of boredom.
4. **Activities available** - most young people we met wanted to have access to a greater choice of activities. We often heard 'all the UASC love football' from service providers, in fact, while Abdul indeed liked football, Robel was into music, Hassan liked theatre, Mariam liked basketball, and Salam enjoyed writing. What

most young people told us was that they would like to be exposed to activities which would not only provide something to do that they are interested in, but, importantly, would also create opportunities to practice and improve their English. This is something we turn to in the next section.

**The carers' view**

Quite a few carers we talked to who are based in small town or rural areas, identified boredom to be a serious concern. They particularly singled out summer breaks and lengthy periods of time when some young people tend to have nothing to do from the moment of their arrival to the UK and the day they commence school or college. In the words of foster carer, Trish, whose family looked after 16 year old F:

*'The biggest thing is the frustration… the frustration for us all is that they are kind of placed with foster carers and then they are left. There is nothing for them, so there is no college, no school…other foster carers feel the same, in terms of frustration. And F, bless him, he is here with us at this tiny village, totally isolated, and it has affected him, and it is because he is bored.'*

Another foster carer, Naomi, shared Trish's sentiments and told us what she did to try and find a solution for this problem:

*'My young man 'wasn't allowed' initially into education and it took a considerable amount of effort and foot stamping to say it is not appropriate for a 15/16 year old boy to just be left loafing round the streets and at home doing nothing. What else is there for him to do? And really kind of pushing the boundaries of what you know about youth groups, free sport, we got him involved in the local cricket club, they just waived his fees…it was using a bit of a network of skills.'*

## 5.5 Language learning and receiving fractured information

*Language learning*

*'My English is not improving, but my Amharic is getting really good. Now, I can speak it really fast'.*

*16 year-old Robel*

16 year-old Robel said this jokingly while a few of us were eating shawarma. We all laughed. In reality, though, Robel and his peers were rather frustrated by this. They felt there were not that many opportunities when and where they could speak English. Robel, for example, lived in semi-independent accommodation in a small town, with his peers who spoke Amharic (the official language in Ethiopia). While Robel felt most comfortable speaking Tigrigna (the official language in Eritrea), spending much time with his friends meant that his Amharic, which he already spoke a little, improved.

Beyond accommodation arrangements, Robel also went to college with other young people who, similarly to him, arrived in the UK to seek asylum. They were all taught English in a formal setting through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, a style of teaching many found to be 'very boring' [see image 3]. The majority of young people we met hoped to be exposed to different, less formal, ways of learning English – for example through music lessons.

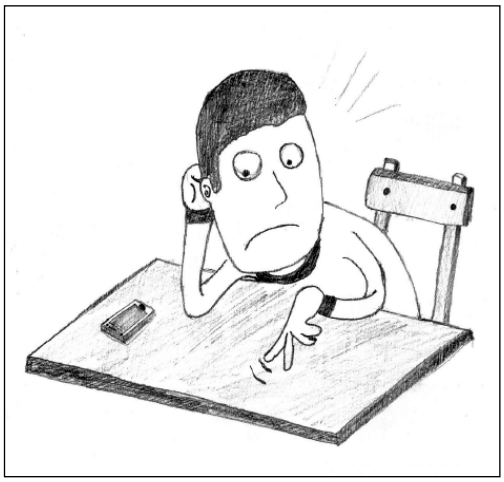

Image 3

Due to the nature of how accommodation and college were arranged they spent time mostly with young people who similarly to them have arrived in the UK to seek asylum. These relationships and contacts proved to be crucial precisely because of shared challenges and expectations young people face once in the UK. However, it also meant that young people got very few opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with local peers. They complained that they did not have any or enough English friends, and no opportunities to practice English.

Ironically, some of those who interact with the young people perceive their lack of proficiency in English as the main barrier to their participation in certain activities. For example, we heard opinions that a young person cannot take music lessons because her English needs to improve in order to be able to profit from it; or quite a few people wondered how were the young people to participate in our arts-based research as many of them spoke very little English. Conversations we had with some carers and social/support workers, as well as our own interactions with the young people, suggest that much of the time the ability to communicate is more to do with one's willingness, confidence and experience to engage successfully with someone who does not yet speak good English, rather than language proficiency. For example, two of the young people who participated in our digital storytelling workshop did not speak any English when we first met. We nevertheless managed to communicate and they created two important stories without using professional translators.

**The carer's view**

Diane, a supported lodging provider who at the time of the interview had two young men from Vietnam living with her, told us some of her concerns about English provision:

*'…I think ESOL is debilitating, to be honest. There are seven Vietnamese in an ESOL course and they all sit together and talk Vietnamese. Whereas if they were in different classes, with English people….I have noticed a difference in M [a young man who previously lived with her], as soon as he started training [where everyone spoke English], he came on so much in that year. So that was really good'.*

Diane, like some other carers, was also concerned about lengthy periods of time when young people had nothing to do, like the summer period. In order to manage this she 'found a loophole':

*'…Another thing that's an issue for them is that there is nothing over the summer, and that's a long time. I found a loophole to this which works for me, but only for a reason. So university do a private English school over the summer for well-off children who come to England to learn English…I managed to get a deal from them [and support from social care]….. The only reason I knew that I had a chance at that was that one of my best friends is quite high up in social work, so he said there is money, but you will have to be a bit creative. And so I did. And I only knew that …I just think there needs to be more out there for us and training.'*

A conversation with Diane and other carers reveals not only concerns around learning English, but it also identified some gaps in what information is communicated, or not communicated, to carers. Accordingly, it seems that the right contacts and enough willingness for 'foot stamping' as Naomi called it, increases the likelihood of being able to do things that can improve the young person's overall well-being and settling into a new life.

*Communicating information to young people*

Our research shows that communicating information may also significantly impact the young people. This manifested in two main ways. First had to do with *how* information was being communicated. For example, we talked to a young person who has had some health issues, and even after a visit to a doctor it still was not clear to her what the issue was; or we noticed that seemingly mundane and simple information – such as what is about to happen during a certain event, or an encounter – is often communicated to a young person in a speedy manner, inconsiderate of the fact that a young person hardly spoke any English.

The second way in which information has been passed on to a young person was more about *what* was being communicated. This is well illustrated in what Diane told us:

*'…I've now realised from N that this is a huge problem particularly amongst Vietnamese. When they're interviewed they don't tell anything because in their culture the type of thing that has happened to them as part of trafficking they won't disclose. So both of my boys have been trafficked, but all they both said [at the interview] was that they've come to find family. T literally only said "I've come to find my brother" [as a consequence, his application for asylum got refused]. In reality he's been abused, beaten, drugged, I could go on and on and on…this is what really frightens me… During an interview with solicitor to see if he had right of appeal, as they need 50% chance to get legal aid. The way it was going he wasn't gonna get an appeal because he just kept saying "I just came to see my brother." And that's all he would say. And I just looked and I thought that isn't right and I know it isn't right. Now what I don't get is, he's been interviewed how many times, and I said to him afterwards has no one ever said to you that you*

*need to talk about what happened and that it is important in terms of possibly staying and he just said "nobody told me this". And then I've asked N, and he said the same. And I think that's just failing them…'.*

The UK immigration system is complex and difficult to navigate by individuals whose English is fluent, let alone by those who don't speak much English. Diane's example illustrates the urgency to communicate adequately and fully the information about how it works to the young people, otherwise it can have a dire impact on their lives. Diane told us that she was very upset that no one had had a conversation with the young men in her care about trafficking, and about the fact that it was trafficking that had happened to them. No one had explained to them that it was acceptable to talk about the bad things that have happened, and that telling it, no matter how difficult, could help their asylum claim.

Perhaps the solicitors or social workers that worked with the two young men from Vietnam did not know about the stigma and shame associated with sharing difficult experiences within the Vietnamese context, so they did not think to convey to them the information Diane conveyed. This example illuminates well not only the momentous impact fractured information may have on an individual, but also that what sometimes is lacking is knowledge and familiarity with expectations and behaviours of what is acceptable, or how things are done, in a place where a young person originally came from. This knowledge, however, may profoundly improve and enhance caring for young people who seek asylum here.

**Some challenges identified by carers and social and support workers when working with the young people**

1. Quite a few carers communicated to us they wished there was a network between all the carers, so that they can support each other, and so that the young people who often arrive together and get separated into different homes could keep in touch.

2. Some carers told us they wished there was more support and more activities for the young people. This opinion differed between a city (where people generally agreed there was a good range of activities) and a small town where they thought more activities were needed.

3. Most carers would have liked more training opportunities for them, from early on, focusing on different aspects of caring for the young people (such as different traditions and cultural awareness, the asylum process in the UK, and so on). Quite a few felt they knew nothing about the young people or places they came from and had to learn everything from the young person, but thought it would have been more useful if they had at least some knowledge (for example about religious holidays).

## 6. Conclusion, recommendations and examples of what could work

In this report we have elaborated on five key priorities - individuality, relationships with carers, internet, boredom and communication - that the young participants in this research singled out as important in improving their early experiences of life in Yorkshire and Humber. We have suggested that young people who live independently are entirely dependent on formal services and networks, which means that they miss out on various opportunities. Their peers, however, who live in supportive family environment, have benefited from myriad informal and everyday opportunities – including employment, sports, education, friendships, internet access, etc.

In what follows we suggest some ways in which these can be addressed. First, we propose some recommendations deriving from our research. This is followed by some practical advice carers have for other carers.

*Recommendations*

- **Treat each young person as an individual at every opportunity: their immigration status is relevant for interactions with the Home Office and eligibility for certain services, but it does not define who they are.**

Emily, a social worker, told us how for some young people being placed in a big family with children may be a wonderful experience as many of the young people come from big families and miss a family environment. However, a busy household with younger children is not suitable for everyone. She told us about a young woman who has been through a lot of trauma and who thrived in a household with a single female in her late 60s, who was very maternal, warm and loving. At that moment in time it was exactly what suited her needs.

Equally, she told us that managing cultural or religious differences can sometimes be overwhelming, making living with carers too difficult. According to Emily, there is no ideal. What mattered was to be attuned and sensitive to those needs and try to match a young person with the right carer, or find alternative, equally appropriate, accommodation.

- **Create opportunities for the young people to socialise with peers who speak English fluently, e.g. through youth organisations, and offer a choice of activities.**

Recently, a couple of team members from Migration Yorkshire attended an event organized by the Youth Partnership in Strasbourg, France. At this event they have heard Majd Khalifeh, public speaker, a journalist and documentary maker who fled from Syria, speak about his experiences as a young man who sought asylum in Belgium. During his speech Majd emphasized the importance of his participation in a local youth group that is equivalent to the Scouts in the UK.

With great excitement Majd told us that it was precisely his involvement in this group that helped him learn the language – with a unique local dialect - and ultimately to feel at home in Belgium.[9]

- **Generate *tailored* volunteering opportunities for the young people that match each individual's interests.**

In the summer 2018 some of the young people we met attended the National Citizen Service (NCS) programme over a period of three weeks. During this time they were exposed to all sorts of outdoor activities (e.g. rock climbing and canoeing), self-development, and voluntary activities based within the community. Those that attended the NCS (it is intended for those between ages 16-18, so not everyone was able to attend it), absolutely loved it. They came back energized and happy. We noticed a significant improvement in their English and they have developed new relationships with young people that live in the same region. NCS was available only over a period of three weeks. The young people we spent time with expressed interest in regularly participating in similar activities, including tailored volunteering.

- **Ensure young people living independently have free, regular and reliable access to the internet.**

Councils experience very real budget constraints and we are aware the Home Office UASC Grant does not fully cover the costs of caring for many of the young people. However internet access is essential for each young person's well-being; their social, emotional and educational development. Young people in family-based placements routinely have internet access. To create equity for young people in independent placements, one council includes Wi-Fi as an essential requirement in the accommodation procurement process. This means providers have a duty to provide it as part of their package. This benefits all young people living in independent accommodation provided by the local authority, not just the young people who seek asylum here.

- **Generate culturally sensitive training, as well as training on the asylum process, and encourage practitioners and carers to attend prior to beginning to look after young people**.

Diane, a supported lodging provider who cared for two young men from Vietnam, told us how important and useful training she went on was for her. She said that prior to it she did not know, for example, that she could have been with the young people at every step of the asylum process.

[9] Majd Khalifeh wrote a book about his experiences. The book, *Herboren* (Reborn), is currently available only in Dutch.

She also talked about her lack of knowledge of practices and conventions common in places the young people come from - which at times, as we already said, can have a significant impact on their future.

- **Ensure young people understand the role and responsibilities of carers and other professionals in their lives towards them, make sure that they understand the content of what is being discussed when it relates to them (e.g. during a visit to see a doctor or the solicitor). Be creative and flexible in communication in informal settings**.

This can be a challenge, especially when ability to communicate in the same language is limited. Some carers we talked to told us that they have developed various techniques in order to communicate with the young people. In addition to using images and google translate, some tend to mime or 'act things out'. For example, eating and drinking can easily be demonstrated.

*Advice from carers to carers, in their own words*

*…on how to make caring for a young person smoother and easier for everyone*

- 'if you're not used to dealing with people from other countries …try and immerse yourself with some of the people first. Like if I was wanting to take a refugee, and I knew for example, I would make contact with the mosque, I would go and shop at the Halal supermarket.'
- 'A lot of it is [about] breaking down that barrier… just because somebody isn't fluent in English doesn't mean you can't communicate with them…you find a way. And it's not as hard as you think, and the rewards from it are really good because one of the best things you can offer them is English.'
- 'Try and do a little bit of research into their country... try and understand where they come from…for us it has been massive learning curve, but enrichment, it is not one way'.
- 'Hook up with other carers and support each other'.
- '…sometimes you have to go with your gut instinct… we used to have this 15 year old boy who used to wake up in the middle of the night screaming and crying in fear, so as a human being I went to him'
- '…be loving, yourself, firm, be inclusive…'
- '…I can only do what I have done with my kids…we are not disciplining, but just trying to be helpful. So we sometimes may say, "if you wanna do well, that's not a very good vocabulary to use", for example…for us it is a more about "if you do that, then people may think…", it is not about strict rules.

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Welcoming
Young Refugees

c/o Migration Yorkshire, Enterprise House, 12 St Paul's Street, Leeds, LS1 2LE
Tel: 0113 5351048  E-mail: wyr@migrationyorkshire.org.uk
Website: www.welcomingyoungrefugees.org.uk  Facebook: @WelcomingYoungRefugees