



6 May 2021

To the Home Secretary, Priti Patel,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the Government's New Plan for Immigration, published in April 2021. We have responded to the public consultation (closing 6 May 2021) within the narrow confines of the online consultation form. But given the constraints of the consultation process, the design of which fundamentally inhibits meaningful feedback around several crucial areas of immigration reform, we would also like to also submit the following into consultation. Our concerns and suggestions are based on over 20 years of collective real, practical and front-line experience working with displaced communities.

The Government's New Plan for Immigration threatens the fundamental right, enshrined in international law, to seek asylum and will make life harder for those people who do seek asylum in the UK. The system needs reform, but the reforms must be focused on making the asylum system fairer, more consistent and more efficient by ensuring the Home Office decision-making is fair, clear and reliable.

The reforms must NOT prevent people arriving through irregular routes from claiming asylum. The route through which someone arrives has no bearing on whether they have a valid claim to asylum or not. It is not illegal to seek asylum. The right is universal irrespective of means of travel. In addition to undermining the UK's commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention; the proposed Plan also fails to recognise or address the shortcomings within the current Home Office processes; reflects a position of mistrust towards those seeking safety; and ignores the potential of displaced people to lead active and fulfilling lives in the UK when given the right support. Under these proposals, nobody benefits.

The Plan promotes the view that asylum seekers are an imposition, a threat, not to be trusted and are not welcome here. This is in complete contrast to our experience of our local community and the agencies and partner organisations we work with – who are eager to support displaced young people to find a safe home within our community, who are willing to receive these young people with compassion and understanding and are determined to support them to realise their full potential in their new lives in the UK.

Big Leaf Foundation is a small charity working with displaced young people aged 16-25 living in Surrey. Our aim is to provide a nurturing programme of activities, projects and events that focus on combating social isolation and improving wellbeing for the young people we support. We gained charitable status in December 2018 and now support upwards of 70 displaced young people through our programmes each year.

The young people we support have all been forced to leave their homes – many fled conflict and persecution, some were trafficked, some were kidnapped from their families and forcibly trained as child soldiers, and others were promised the dream of a better life and smuggled to the UK at huge cost to their families.

Over the past year, we have worked with young people from Albania, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Libya, Niger, Sudan, Syria, Vietnam and Yemen.

The majority of young people we support arrive as UASC. Each has a unique story of how they came to the UK but the challenges they face once here are similar.

Separated children arrive alone and have to navigate their new lives, and the long and complex asylum system, without the support of family or friends. Even for those who come with family, the experience can be overwhelming, confusing and incredibly difficult.

Cut off from everything that is familiar to them, displaced young people are vulnerable to loneliness, isolation, anxiety and boredom. They face huge barriers in accessing legal support, education, employment and, most importantly, in finding a community.

Some are living in limbo – awaiting a decision from the Home Office as to whether they'll be allowed to remain in the UK or if they'll be forcibly returned to the countries they once fled. For these young people in particular it can be impossible to imagine any kind of a future.

But despite these challenges, and the trauma and anxiety about family or friends left behind, the young people we work with are strong, resilient and determined, and given the right support can thrive in their new communities.

When an asylum system works well this is what happens:

T is a young Eritrean. He was under 18 and alone when he arrived in the UK and at first was quiet and difficult to connect with. He had traumatic experience of displacement and the long and dangerous journey that brought him to the UK.

He was initially placed in adult hostel accommodation but then (thankfully) due to his young age was moved into a supportive foster care placement. In this environment he was able to

settle, grow and build confidence. He was supported to access appropriate legal advice and his asylum application was processed relatively quickly.

T was also referred to Big Leaf. He participated in our vocational skills programme, building his English and gaining valuable work experience. This gave him the confidence and experience to secure a part-time job while also attending college.

T was determined to succeed. He studied hard, learnt to drive, and after several applications and interviews, has now secured an apprenticeship in his chosen trade. He's working hard and looking forward to his future here.

His success is, of course, mainly due to his own determination and hard work. But the high level of support he received from his foster carer (because he was placed in age-appropriate accommodation) and his care team, together with appropriate and timely legal advice and the quick processing of his asylum claim were significant factors in his successful resettlement.

T continues to attend Big Leaf projects providing support and acting as a positive role model to other displaced young people in our community.

When an asylum system works badly this is what happens:

S was 16 when he arrived in the UK as an Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child. But the authorities initially doubted his age. He was designated an adult and moved between two different hotels. He was eventually moved back into local authority care. He was then subjected to an age assessment which supported his initial statement that he was in fact just 16 years-old.

Being immediately doubted upon arrival; being placed in adult accommodation with no appropriate looked-after-child support; and being denied access to education while his age-dispute was resolved had a huge impact on his mental health, with increased anxiety, sleeplessness and suicidal thoughts.

He missed several months of education and was unable to access the proper support that he was entitled to as a child.

The full long-term impact of this experience is still to be seen. But we know from other young people that we work with, that building trusted relationship in the very early days of resettlement is key to their ability to feel safe and to lead fulfilling and active lives within their communities. S's experience was of mistrust and of the denial of his rights as a child.

He, like many of the young people we support, is still awaiting his substantive interview, more than 18 months after arriving in the UK.

The anxiety caused by the incredibly long Home Office delays has an effect on displaced young people's ability to cope with the devastating events they have experienced in their home countries and the often-traumatic experience of their journeys. These young people are living in limbo, having neither 'finished' their journey nor being able to settle properly in their new life.

Create a plan for immigration that supports the former and everyone benefits – the individual themselves, the community around them and the government. The person is free from persecution, safe and able to lead a fulfilling life; the community has a new and active participant who contributes to the richness and diversity and skills within that community; and the burden on the government is eased as the individual settles into work and becomes self-sufficient.

Treat people with kindness and dignity, make the system fair, clear and consistent. Respect the fundamental right of people to seek asylum. Understand that people seeking safety can and do make a meaningful contribution to our communities when given the right support. Then create a system that gives them the right support. Most of all build a system that you yourself would be happy to walk into, to send your children into, should you ever be forcibly displaced through no fault of your own.

Regards

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