



Voices of lived experience

The impact of seeking
sanctuary on mental
health and wellbeing



Mental Health
Foundation



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Who we are



The Mental Health Foundation, established in 1949, is the UK's leading charity for everyone's mental health.

Our vision

Our vision is good mental health for all.

With prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive.

We help people to understand, protect and sustain their mental health. We drive change towards a mentally healthy society for all, and support communities, families and individuals to live mentally healthier lives, with a focus on those at greatest risk.

Our approach

Our approach is a public mental health approach to prevention, finding solutions for individuals, those at risk and for society, in order to improve everyone's mental wellbeing.

The practical things we do

Community and peer programmes: we test and evaluate the best approaches to improving mental health in communities and then roll them out as widely as possible.

Research: we publish studies and reports on what protects mental health and the causes of poor mental health and how to tackle them.

Advocacy: we propose solutions and campaign for change to address the underlying causes of poor mental health.

Public engagement: we give advice to millions of people on mental health.

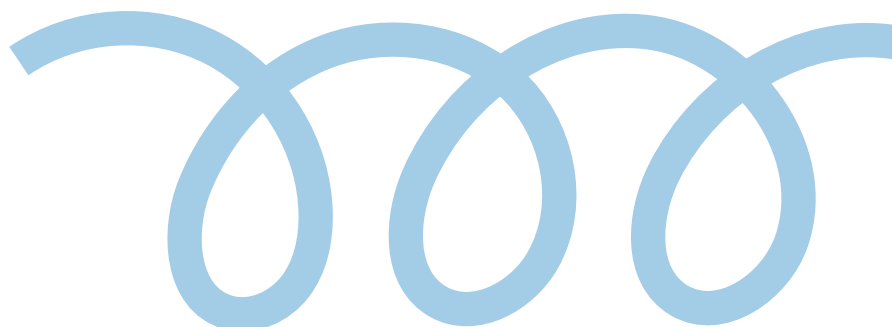
We are the home of **Mental Health Awareness Week**.



City by city, community by community, City of Sanctuary is building a more welcoming UK for people forced to flee their homes.

City of Sanctuary UK coordinates, supports and grows these networks of welcome. From community groups to schools and universities, local councils to libraries and theatres, they work with individuals, groups and organisations in every area and in every sector to encourage inclusivity, solidarity and compassion for people from a forced displacement background. From

coordination, collaboration, practical training and opportunities for people with lived experience of the asylum system, to vital resources and unmissable webinars, they do all they can to support and grow these networks of welcome. City of Sanctuary's Sanctuary Awards recognise and celebrate the organisations that go above and beyond to welcome people seeking sanctuary.





Introduction

Living in the place you were born or chose to live is a privilege that more than 110 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide are deprived of, as reported by UNCHR in 2023¹.

Wars, natural disasters, and persecution force people to leave everything behind, flee and seek sanctuary in a new land. These events and the subsequent experiences of seeking safety can be traumatic. Many live with constant stress, and poor mental health and wellbeing. This makes starting a new life in a different country even more challenging.

Wellbeing, in this context, is of vital importance as it provides the necessary tools for building a future. Wellbeing encompasses not only mental health but also extends to physical health, social, and

economic factors, all of which contribute to a person's overall quality of life. Forcibly displaced individuals often face a range of challenges beyond just mental health issues, such as access to healthcare, housing, education, and employment. Hence, the term 'wellbeing' acknowledges that their overall life situation is affected.

The challenges experienced by forcibly displaced individuals can be compounded by the impact of immigration policies and unwelcoming public discourse. In this context, Wales has made a strong commitment to become a Nation of Sanctuary, guided by the Nation of Sanctuary Plan (2019)², ESOL Policy for Wales (2018)³, and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) (2015)⁴. These initiatives aim to provide support, care, and compassion to people seeking sanctuary in Wales, facilitating integration into host communities.

Perthyn



The Mental Health Foundation launched the Perthyn Project in 2019 in partnership with the British Red Cross, funded by the Tampon Tax.

It aimed to increase the emotional literacy and resilience of people seeking sanctuary in Newport, Wales. The next iteration of the project partnered with REACH+, piloting our modelled training approach to train peer leaders to lead peer support groups, online with participants living in Newport, Cardiff, Swansea, and Wrexham, during the COVID-19 pandemic, funded by the Welsh Government.

Perthyn means belonging in Welsh, and both versions of the project resulted in individuals with lived experience feeling empowered through new skills and friendship, and a safe space to explore their emotions.

The current phase of Perthyn partners with the City of Sanctuary UK using a learning partner approach with funding from the Welsh Government and Mental Health Foundation's Covid Response Programme.

Aims

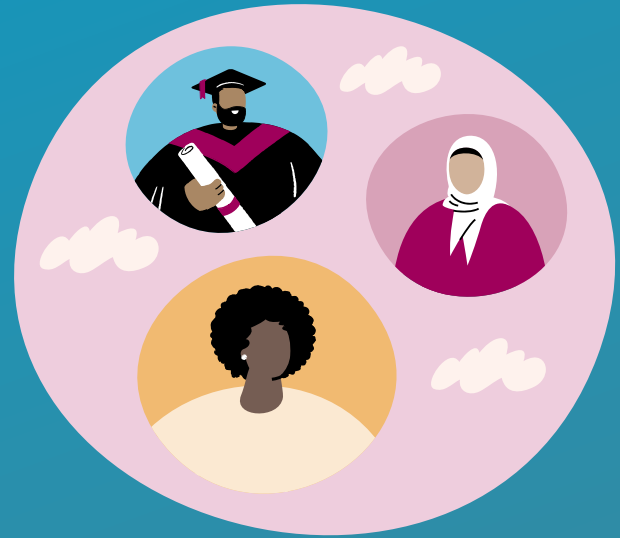
- Embed mental health and wellbeing prevention approach within the City of Sanctuary Network
- Introduce evidence-based Perthyn in the form of new peer support groups
- Co-produce digital resources for people seeking sanctuary and those supporting them

This research is an integral part of the project and underpins our aims, exploring the wellbeing experiences of individuals seeking sanctuary in Wales and the people working with them. The report delves into perspectives on wellbeing in the context of forced migration, factors that impact wellbeing both positively and negatively, and recommendations for improvement.

This report offers a unique perspective through a personal narrative shared by a peer researcher who has lived experience of seeking asylum in the UK, testimonials from people seeking sanctuary, and insights from people who work with them. In tandem with these personal accounts, the report also draws upon research literature to provide evidence and context.

In this report, we use the term 'people seeking sanctuary' to refer to forcibly displaced individuals, including asylum seekers, refugees and people who have been granted a temporary form of leave as the result of an asylum or human rights application. This term focuses on people first as opposed to their immigration status and emphasises their quest for sanctuary (safety and protection).

Key



Peer Researcher

Participants

People with lived experience of seeking sanctuary



Supporters


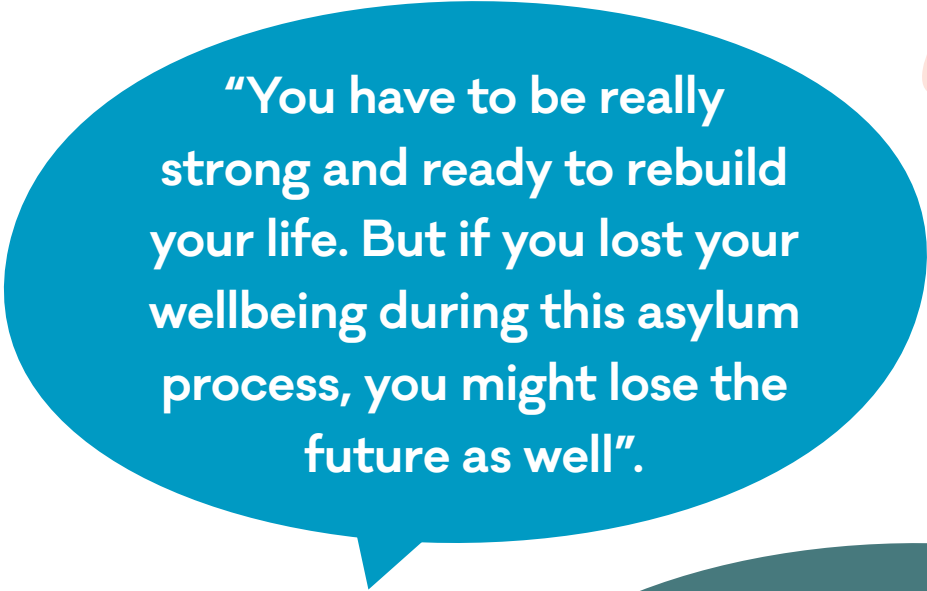
People that support people seeking sanctuary

Evidence


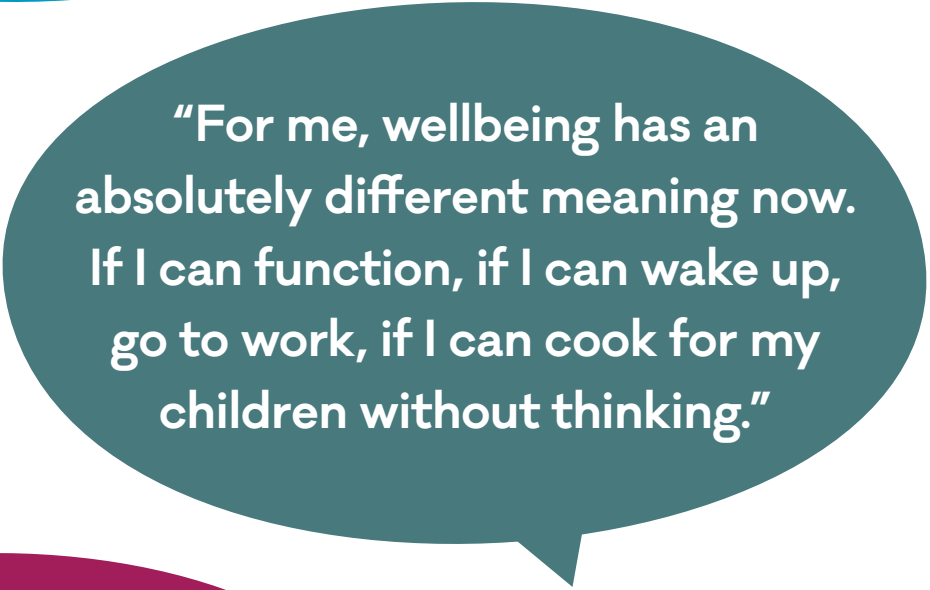
Evidence from research literature




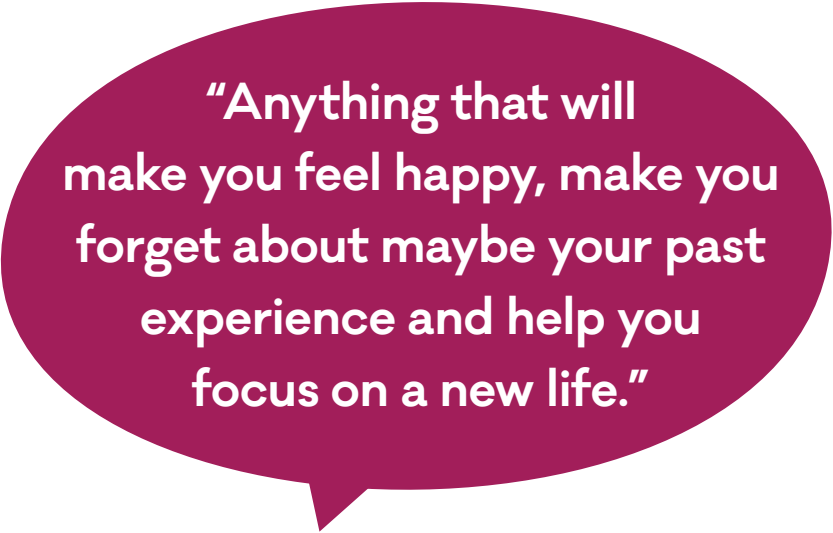
Wellbeing through a lens of forced migration



“You have to be really strong and ready to rebuild your life. But if you lost your wellbeing during this asylum process, you might lose the future as well”.



“For me, wellbeing has an absolutely different meaning now. If I can function, if I can wake up, go to work, if I can cook for my children without thinking.”



“Anything that will make you feel happy, make you forget about maybe your past experience and help you focus on a new life.”

Wellbeing, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy” and relates to both physical and mental health⁵.

Wellbeing bears a degree of commonality across different population groups. Mental wellbeing encompasses thoughts, feelings, and coping skills. Positive wellbeing allows individuals to reach their potential, manage stress, be productive, and contribute to their community.

Alongside universal commonalities, wellbeing is experienced on an individual basis. It is also shared and mutually constructed within groups, including those forcibly displaced.

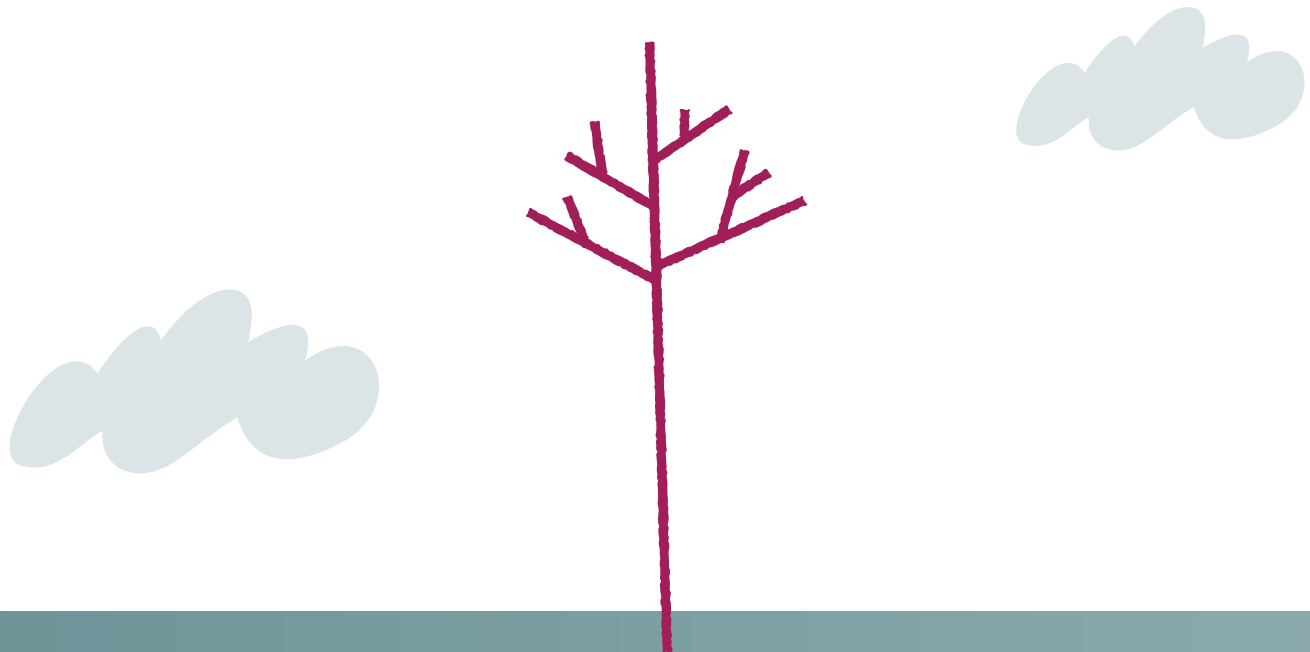
In this research, the participants’ sense of wellbeing during the period of displacement and resettlement evolved to incorporate the following dimensions:



Although the Home Office provides the basic essentials, the findings indicate that people seeking sanctuary have a broad range of needs that are often not met.



**What has a
negative impact
on the wellbeing
of people seeking
sanctuary?**



The hidden struggles: The burden of the lengthy asylum decision wait and uncertainty

Loneliness

"We are nothing. They treat us like cows"

Implication of discrimination and lack of public awareness

Navigating inadequate transport and forced poverty

Language barrier

The hidden struggles: the burden of the lengthy asylum decision wait and uncertainty



*"You sigh, finally feeling safe. Yet you are now haunted by the memories of war, the destruction of your home, your friends and family left behind in danger. **You lost your past. And you do not have a future. You are in limbo.** In total darkness. In a dark room where the door of the past has shut but the doors of the future remain closed. You are waiting. Waiting for someone to decide on your future, your children's future. It might take six weeks. Or six months. Or six years. You don't know.*

*The uncertainty weighs heavily on you. This uncertainty is different from the uncertainty you have when staying in your own bed, in your own house, with your friends living not far away. **This uncertainty is so powerful that it takes control over you.** Fear makes your nights sleepless torture. They might come and take you away from your current accommodation. Any time of day. And even night. Even mistakenly."*



PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



"As if you are in prison... you're **stuck in a frozen asylum process**. So, you don't have that freedom to work, to study, to change your accommodation."

"The big problem is because they don't process our cases. The people **just waiting and waiting for a long time**. No change. We lost hope. All of us."

"The time we had to wait has caused a quite **traumatising experience**."



"I don't think there is enough focus on the waiting for Home Office decision. It's much more than waiting for a job decision when you are told usually the same day yes or no. That's usually the same day not six months. I think of the cost of that for NHS or other support services."

"It's almost weird to not be struggling with your mental health because that is the natural reaction of being stuck in the system with no control and no personal agency and everything else combined. It's inevitable. There are times when people are talking about really difficult experiences, and you still need to be able to respond."



The experience of waiting for asylum decisions can be best described as a state of 'inbetweenness', liminality, or a lack of ties to any particular place⁶. Injustice, prolonged uncertainty and limbo significantly impact the wellbeing of people. The process of navigating the UK asylum system itself is inherently stressful and strips individuals of agency⁷. The lack of control over the future, and the inability

to envision it, leads to feelings of insignificance and dehumanisation that are crucial for wellbeing. 'Envisaging a future is fundamental to feeling human and having a sense of self'⁸. Waiting for a decision not only undermines the capacity to prioritise health but also hinders the ability to develop strong social ties or plan for the future. People seeking sanctuary, often victims of systemic injustice, face complex challenges in restoring justice even after resettlement⁹.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Be mindful and aware of the impact** of the delay in asylum decision processes, the lack of transparent communication within the immigration system and regular updates to individuals awaiting decisions, and limbo and powerlessness connected to this.
- **Enhance formal and informal mental health support** during the waiting period by providing targeted mental health support to individuals experiencing the traumas of a prolonged asylum decision wait.
- **Advocate for policy reforms that streamline the asylum decision process.** Engage with policymakers and stakeholders to address the root causes of lengthy delays and the associated mental health issues.

Loneliness



*"Imagine relocating to a new place where you find yourself completely isolated, not knowing anyone around you. Overwhelmed by fear and mistrust, the thought of forming connections with people becomes a challenge. You also cannot connect with your family and friends back home. Incredible guilt and shame are eating you away. You cannot support the people you love. You cannot get support either. Your past experiences haunt you relentlessly. You do not respect your new self, your new identity. **There was me and there was an unfair world which I did not want to connect with.**"*

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



*"The problem was **how I would stop the feeling of loneliness**. When I came here, I was lonely, I couldn't see people. Even when I see people, I was scared, with a lot of shame through my head."*

*"After I came here, **I got stuck in here** and I haven't seen my parents for 11 years. My father passed away. I couldn't do anything for him, any single thing. My mother living alone there."*

*"When we move here, **we don't have anyone**, we don't know nothing, like different culture, different places, different people, everything."*



“Obvious themes through all their artwork are **loss** and **the experiences of their journeys**. You see **loneliness**. The reality of their lives is still incredibly raw.”



Loneliness emerges as a prevalent concern among individuals seeking sanctuary, often exacerbated

by infrequent contact with family and friends, with more than 50% of refugees lacking relatives in the UK¹⁰. The compounded effects of language barriers, cultural disparities, and lack of social networks further contribute to the isolation¹¹.

It is essential to highlight the interplay between loneliness, feelings of alienation, and the public narrative⁸. Living in isolation can make the public narrative seem more extreme, and the

public narrative itself can intensify feelings of isolation. Hospitableness has the potential to alleviate the experience of loneliness among people seeking sanctuary and to strengthen emotional bonds and connections, fostering a sense of belonging and social inclusion through the cultivation of a shared family-like culture¹².

Importantly, the impact of loneliness extends beyond emotional wellbeing. It significantly affects mental health, potentially leading to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, exacerbating the challenges they face during their journey to find safety and refuge.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Foster community connection** by implementing community-based programs to encourage integration, interaction, and socialisation.
- **Promote social hospitableness and support networks** by collaborating with community organisations to create safe spaces for emotional bonds and connections, building friendships.

“We are nothing. They treat us like cows.”



“I can vividly recall the moment when my world came crashing down. Life had been proceeding as usual, and then, in the blink of an eye, I found myself questioning my very identity. I did not know who I was.

I was trying to understand, what I was doing here, why I was here.

*Not needed. Not valued. **Why now I am nothing?** Why should I ask for free food and clothes? **I can work and I can fend for myself.** This weighed heavily on my heart for seven years while I was waiting for the decision on my asylum claim. I wanted to work, to contribute, and to provide for myself, even in the face of adversity.”*

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



“We feel we are nothing. They don't give us a right, any right. Our right is just to eat, to get that £40 a week to eat and sleep. We feel like we are not human.”

“You lost your boldness. You don't have confidence. I was a very outspoken person, I used to control crowds of over 5,000 people. But it takes me time to even speak in front of 10 people now.”

“I have lost myself. I can't find myself now. I'm really, really depressed about it.”

“They have to change this because we have kids. **They don’t grow up like other children.** They grow up like ... This is not your home. It means they don’t have a home. OK, don’t feel for us. We already ruin our life. But how about our kids? **They don’t deserve this.**”



“When we were developing the training they said, **‘We really don’t want it to be a constant narrative of pity and misery.** We want to include some other kind of counter-narrative. We want to show us being musicians or show our skills and do other things not just being in this one label all the time.”

“After they get a refugee status they can be dropped in an enormous sense of grieving and loss because **they realise what they have lost but haven’t yet moved to the future.**”





People seeking sanctuary often experience emotional turmoil as protracted waiting periods

and stigmatising narratives deeply affect their identities and self-worth. Restrictions imposed by the asylum system and the lack of meaningful activities hinder fostering a sense of belonging¹³. This complex issue forms a vicious cycle, where portraying strength becomes both a coping strategy and a challenge in expressing psychological needs, seeking assistance, and having others recognise those needs¹⁴.

Stigmatising narratives further undermine refugees' confidence in their abilities by portraying them as weak, lacking skills or potential, and as victims. These narratives persist not only among individuals with anti-refugee sentiments but also by well-intentioned actors such as charity organisations that dehumanise individuals by reducing

them to mere objects in need of basic necessities like food and clothing, rather than acknowledging their need for social nourishment^{8,15}.

Moreover, maternal mental health challenges have a significant impact on children's emotional and developmental wellbeing. Despite the heightened risk of depression, women seeking sanctuary often prioritise their children's safety, potentially neglecting their psychological health and overall wellbeing to appear strong in their children's presence^{14,16}.

Additionally, refugees from higher educational and socio-economic backgrounds in their home countries tend to experience poorer emotional wellbeing during resettlement, potentially due to the significant losses in income, wealth, status, and self-esteem, resulting from downward social mobility¹⁰.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Empower individuals seeking sanctuary by promoting diverse narratives** that highlight their strengths, skills, and contributions. Collaborate with media outlets, community organisations, and advocacy groups to share stories that showcase their talents, skills, and resilience.
- **Address the complex psychological challenges** by implementing comprehensive wellbeing support programs.

Navigating inadequate transport and forced poverty



*“Living in a perpetual state of waiting mode is extremely hard. It feels as though you are trapped in a cage, surrounded by your traumatic memories, uncertainty, loneliness, and fear. While you may know what to do to support your wellbeing, the confines of the cage restrict your progress. You have no rights. **You cannot work and support yourself.** With such a small daily allowance, you are forced to make difficult choices between purchasing food or a bus ticket.”*

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



*“If you don't have enough money, **how can you do wellbeing activity?**”*

*“If you want to get some mental health support, someone might tell you to go to the gym or do something that you enjoy. But **you can't do that on asylum support.**”*

*“Can we go to Barry for swimming? No, **the bus ticket is very expensive** for me. All the time an asylum seeker walking or on the bike.”*

"We **can't reach places**... there are so many courses, so many places you could volunteer and keep yourself active and productive and take your mind away."

"Transport here is a problem."



"One of the big barriers is we need to be able to provide people transport. As there are no bus services or they are just awful. Let alone the financial aspect of covering that. If you live on the far side of town, it's a long walk."





This daily struggle highlights the profound impact of limited financial resources and the restrictions imposed by the system. The lack of financial support and inadequate access to transportation exacerbate

the already burdensome circumstances faced by individuals in this situation. The choice between basic sustenance and the ability to travel becomes a constant dilemma, intensifying the feeling of being trapped and further perpetuating the cycle of poverty and dependence (10).

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Improve access to transportation** by providing affordable and accessible transport options, for example, reduced fares, and free or discounted bus passes or covering travel expenses.
- **Establish community-based transportation services or bicycle programs** that cater to the unique needs of individuals seeking sanctuary, particularly in areas with limited public transportation.



Language barrier



*“When I arrived in Wales, the English language was the only ‘person’ I knew. It became the key that unlocked the doors of my new home. It helped me greet my neighbours and make new friends. It helped me find educational opportunities for my children and talk about their progress with their teachers. It helped me use public transport and explore places around. It helped me talk to my GP and get help. It helped me volunteer and give back to the community that welcomed me. It helped me study and improve my knowledge and skills. It helped me survive. **The English language shaped my journey and made me the person I am today.** It became more than just a means of communication; it became an integral part of my identity, intertwining itself with the threads of my life story.”*

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



*“You feel you are lost. You feel you know nothing. **You can't orientate yourself you can't speak.** You feel you are in the jungle, and you don't know where the way out. Everything you are told you just nod your head. Yes, yes, yes, yes.”*





“They don’t know the English language to express and describe their feelings.”

“Poor mental health will affect the ability to communicate in your first language let alone a second language. I’ve known guys who speak English really quite well but when stressed that bit of the brain shuts down.”



Learning English is essential for empowering people seeking sanctuary. The language enables a transition from dependency to autonomy and opens the doors to employment and education opportunities and access to health and welfare services. Proficiency in English is crucial for integration and

avoiding social isolation. However, many face psychological challenges due to past migration experiences, leading to distress and social anxiety, hindering their language learning process. Refugees with limited English proficiency may experience poorer mental health outcomes, affecting their integration into a new country and access to essential services^{10,17}.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Tailor language classes to the specific needs** and experiences of people seeking sanctuary to enhance language support programs. Customised language support programs can significantly enhance their learning experience.
- **Implement trauma-informed practices in the language classroom** to address the psychological challenges hindering language learning. Recognise the interconnected nature of mental health and language acquisition.

Implication of discrimination and lack of public awareness



*“Danger – displacement - safety. Where are you from? Why are you here? You feel enormous shame. You are here not for money, jobs, or houses. It’s for something far more essential—protection and safety. **The price we pay for refuge is quite high.** Would you prefer a war to come to your homeland, take your house, and your friends, and ruin your life so you can move to another country to get benefits? Yet, despite the legitimacy of your right to safety, shame engulfs you like an unwelcome cloud.*

How can you explain to your new neighbours that you do not work as you have not been granted the right to work? The struggle to articulate the complexities of our situation weighs heavily on our hearts. While the majority of people are welcoming and understanding, that sense of shame persists. It’s a burden we carry, an unspoken feeling of inadequacy even when surrounded by compassion and empathy.”

PARTICIPANTS’ TESTIMONIALS



“There are people, who don’t know you, or don’t know why you are here. They think that you just steal their money, their jobs, their houses.”



“People have been involved in our project for quite a few months, sharing their creativity. Some of them decided to up and leave. It wasn’t for them anymore when the far right decided that they didn’t want this happening. They came across swastikas on the back of vans ... arrived at the gates... There was a drop off because there was local opposition, a far-right fear factor.”

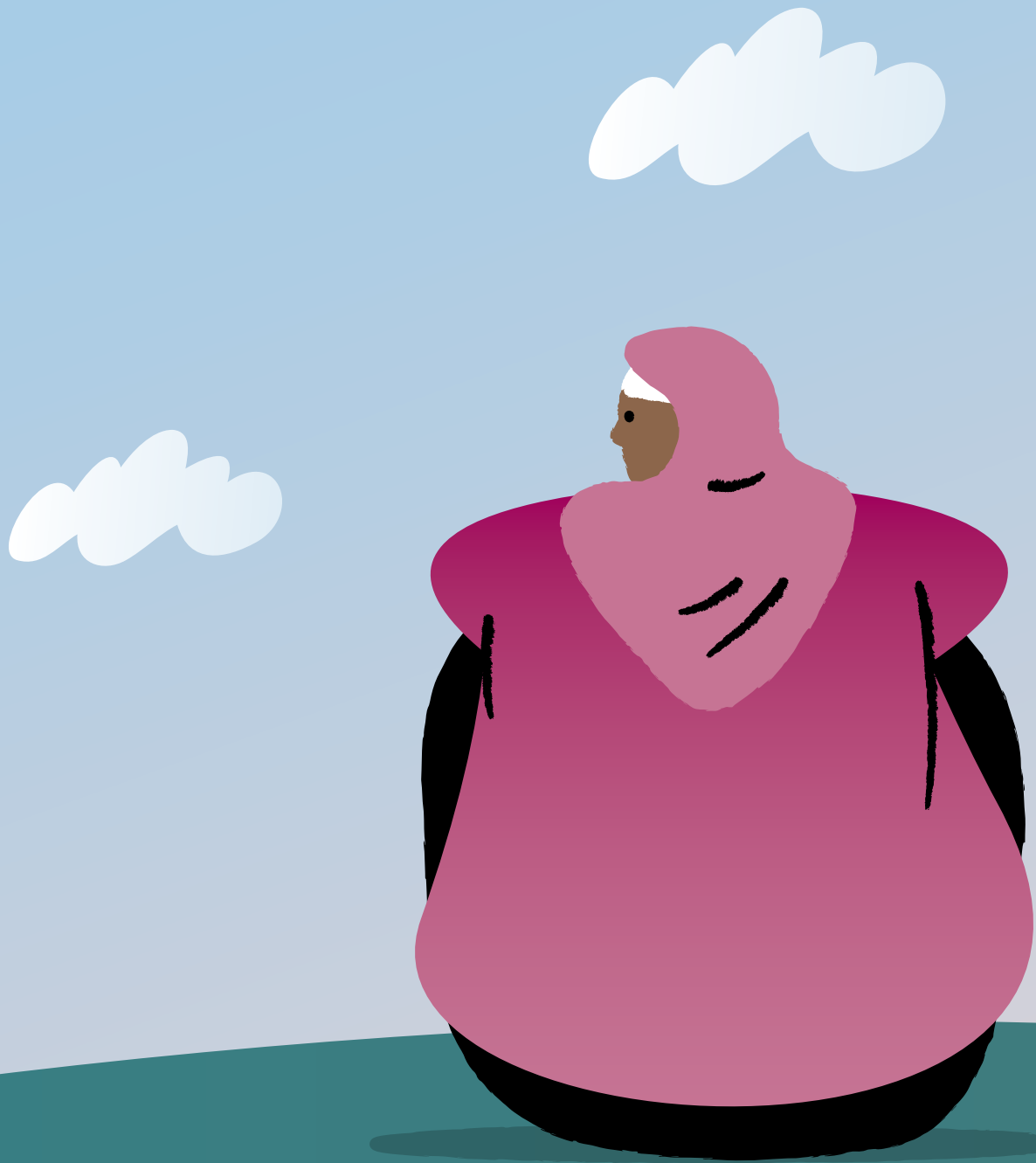


Being a victim of verbal or physical attacks can result in poorer emotional wellbeing, unfair treatment, and negative self-image¹⁰. However, people seeking sanctuary tread carefully when recounting their experiences with racism

and discrimination based on their immigration status. Many avoid directly accusing racism or discrimination, often presenting reported incidents as trivial or downplaying them, or relating their experiences to aspects of their own identity to avoid criticising the host society and jeopardising their status as a person in need of protection¹³.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Promote understanding, empathy, and awareness** about the experiences of people seeking sanctuary. Collaborate with local schools, community organisations, and media outlets to develop and implement educational programs to dispel misconceptions and biases.
- **Provide culturally competent mental health support** tailored to the unique needs of individuals seeking sanctuary to address the psychological impact of racism and discrimination.





What has a positive impact on the wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary?





Building bridges through creative expression and community engagement

The transformative influence of volunteering

Exploring recreation opportunities



The role of charities and peer support

Building bridges through creative expression and community engagement



*"When I arrived here, what I craved was **meaningful human connection** and **a sense of purpose**. Loss of my social status, coupled with feeling unworthy and insignificant, and with the overwhelming wave of new emotions, felt like a ticking time bomb within me, ready to explode at any moment.*

Engaging in various community projects became a lifeline for me, offering a way to navigate through my emotions, establish meaningful connections, and rediscover my own identity. Through these endeavours, I found solace, support, and appreciation, as I embarked on a journey of self-discovery and reconnection with the world around me."

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



*"This project is like a sanctuary for us. They always **appreciate the work we do...** this kind of thing really means a lot to us."*

*"The art project was the best thing that happened... **we need to make sure that all asylum seekers have access to creative expression.**"*



“The art project was a point of engagement and creativity ... dumped at barracks... surrounded by high fencing ... we had an aim – an exhibition. They were able to speak to the community and given a voice. These are guys who arrived in the UK with T-shirts on their backs. The sketchbooks that they had poured so much of their own reflections into were too valuable... The artwork really showed ... what it was to escape persecution. It completely changed my outlook on everything. ... **Everybody needs that place of grounding.** It’s certainly been a life-changing involvement. These guys have crossed deserts. They have navigated vast mountain ranges. They have survived torturous seas. They arrived here. And wanting to contribute to our society. **Superhumans with so much to give. Are we really that’s short-sighted that we can’t realise?”**

“We do everything through the lens of co-production. We made a podcast and won an award for it. People were coming up, and speaking to us, wanting to know more ... that was really special to hear. It showed that within those co-production projects, **celebrating their achievements** as a group and actually **being recognised** through that means so much to people. They have generally made that kind of **sense of family** within the network. ... that really improved their mental health. Just being able to speak out, campaigning and voicing the issues ... all of that felt like things that **make them feel really valued.**”

“Funding is very limited, only our budget. So, we have to do a lot of a lot of work trying to source the funding.”

“We’re really conscious of sustainability, as much as what can happen once we stop so that things don’t just shut down when funding shuts down because that really annoys.”



Engaging with the local community through music and collaborative art projects has a profound impact on wellbeing, skill development, and finding meaning. These creative activities provide safe spaces, foster inclusion, shift power dynamics, and empower individuals, even when language skills are limited^{18,19}. They combat loneliness,

boost confidence, and enable personal growth²⁰. Participatory approaches empower individuals to take control of their own experiences and decisions, enhancing their confidence and self-worth. Sharing experiences and connecting with others, developing skills and knowledge, and addressing concerns to those in power are key factors contributing to improved mental wellbeing²¹.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Enable access to creative expression**, such as community-based art projects, music programs, collaborative initiatives, and programs that develop skills.
- **Invest in long-term funding** for programs that focus on mental wellbeing.
- **Promote co-production approaches** that encourage participation in the planning, execution, and evaluation of community projects. Recognise and celebrate their achievements.
- **Create platforms for collaboration** between individuals seeking sanctuary and local communities, fostering meaningful connections and mutual understanding.



The transformative influence of volunteering



"Volunteering served as a catalyst for change in my life. It motivated me to break free from the isolation I had experienced for years. It motivated me to get out of bed and step outside my house.

*For the first time since arriving in the UK, I could speak to people, I could share fragments of my personal story and have some small but meaningful responsibilities in the charitable organisation I volunteered for. This newfound **sense of purpose and connection** was truly empowering. It marked a pivotal moment in my journey. These experiences not only fostered a sense of belonging but also provided a **platform for personal growth** and the development of a supportive community network. However, it saddened me to see numerous highly educated individuals who could not find relevant opportunities, rendering their skills wasted. Locating volunteering opportunities in a new place, particularly in a small town, or when transportation cost is involved, were significant challenges as well."*

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



"I kept myself busy all the time. I volunteered ... giving from my time - actually from my stressful time - to help others. But the return back for me was I built a little bit of resilience for myself, and all my day I was busy."

"Learning helps your wellbeing because it **gives you a positive view of the future.**"

"I would feel that **I'm alive and happy when I am volunteering**, and helping others, and the feeling that there's **a good outcome** from my work."

"It's very **important for the new arrivals to involve and not to isolate themselves.** And to be like involved in local communities and networks."



"There was one particular refugee ... who was very good at engaging with the local community via the volunteers that went to the camp... and that was the start of it. And **later this person set up their own charity.**"

“My bike volunteers repaired six bikes today. **It gives them that sense of purpose.**”

“These people struggle with work and have a lot of letdowns with interviews. A lot of them are really qualified, so it’s really demoralising. We’ve done a lot of work giving them opportunities to sit on interview panels, to give them a bit of understanding of how the interview process works. They’ve got a lot of skills. **We do encourage other businesses to offer internships to people with lived experience.**”



Engaging in volunteer work empowers people seeking sanctuary by developing a range of skills, fostering social connections, and facilitating community integration. It cultivates autonomy, a positive self-perception, and optimism. Through

volunteer activities, individuals have the opportunity to experience a sense of inclusion, turn empty time into meaningful moments, contribute positively to their community, and fulfil their fundamental human need for personal freedom, self-identity, creativity, safety, and participation²².

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Broaden volunteering opportunities** for individuals seeking sanctuary to acquire new skills or further develop existing skills enhancing employability and personal growth.
- **Collaborate for equity** with local authorities and organisations to identify and remove barriers to volunteering. This includes addressing transportation costs, language barriers, and awareness gaps, and ensuring equitable access to volunteer positions, particularly in small towns.
- **Support and celebrate volunteers.** Secure funding and resources to support and strengthen existing volunteering programs. Create mentorship programs and celebrate the contributions of volunteers.



Exploring recreation opportunities: Sports, nature, day trips, places of worship and third places



"The waiting period for a decision on my asylum application proved to be an incredibly challenging time. Uncertainty, the loss of status, forced poverty, fear, shame and guilt were constant companions in my daily life. However, amidst this hardship, bright spots emerged in the form of day trips. They were the days to be waiting for. During these days, I could briefly set aside my troubles, and disconnect from my asylum accommodation and those institutions connected to my status – places that always had been a reminder of my trauma and my immigration status. These momentary escapes from the heavy immigration-related burden to new locations provided a much-needed breath of fresh air. These journeys offered a chance to experience a temporary sense of freedom and normalcy and to momentarily transcend the difficulties of my asylum application process and rejuvenate my spirit. Nevertheless, it was undeniably difficult to afford those trips."



PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



"Going to the gym **makes me forget my story**, I don't like thinking about it."

"A lot of things happen. But I just **find the way to get myself back on track by attending my church**. I am so happy when Sunday is coming, because I know I'm going to church."

"I have very good church people around there. I'm going to the church here and they are very helpful, they are like family. **They are talking with us.**"

"One charity church also helped me. And I also understand **that helped my wellbeing** because I needed food, because without food you will not think."

"I would say travel. Seeing new places. We have been to a castle and community football. The nature as well."





“It’s a sense of escaping. Exercise, those occasional trips on college holidays, getting out of the city and seeing something different, all give **a bit more of the community feel.”**



For people seeking sanctuary, domestic dwellings can be challenging spaces, causing feelings of fear, uncertainty, isolation, and liminality due to immigration status. Institutional settings further intensify these experiences, deepening the exclusion. Therapeutic landscapes offer emotional solace, belonging, and (re) connection with one’s identity²³. Places

of worship provide people with a sense of belonging to a community, meaning in their lives, solace, and creating opportunities for acts of kindness towards others. Sport and leisure activities foster integration, social connections, trust and belonging²⁴, however, it can be hard to access due to transportation and financial obstacles. Walking, while a financially accessible health-promoting practice, can create a sense of feeling ‘othered’⁷.

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Develop recreational initiatives**, such as day trips, sports, and nature outings, with a focus on affordability and accessibility.
- **Foster community partnerships** between local community organisations, sports clubs, and recreational facilities to enable access for individuals seeking sanctuary by offering discounted rates, waiving fees, or organising community-sponsored events.
- **Develop safe spaces** for therapeutic recreation and activities that prioritise emotional wellbeing, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging for individuals seeking sanctuary.

The role of charities and peer support



*"Looking back on my early days of arrival, I can see a huge gap in my integration process. For various reasons, I did not connect with any charitable organisation for a couple of years. I was ashamed of my new immigration status. I could not accept a new reality. At the same time, under the influence of psychological trauma, I lacked the willpower to learn to navigate this new chapter of life on my own. Now, **I realise how invaluable it is to connect with people who share similar experiences.** It would have been comparatively easier to understand the new way of life and get support."*

PARTICIPANTS' TESTIMONIALS



*"This charity helps a lot of people, raises them to achieve their goals and get confidence. They support us with accommodation, food, everything. And they are kind-hearted. **They really do help.**"*

*"So many people don't have anybody, and **this kind of support raises the people who are suffering.**"*

“When I lost my sister, they were there for me. They comforted me. I knew I had a family here. **I was not all alone.** Just imagine experiencing that shock alone.”

“When we talk about our story, **we encourage one another.**”



“The key thing is **building relationships in the community.** This is what we do here.”



Charitable organisations and peer support play a crucial role in providing practical and material support to people seeking sanctuary, including shelter, food, household essentials, and guidance. This contributes to meeting the basic

needs. Knowledge sharing, informal advice on the asylum process and navigating life in the UK, providing emotional peer support, and addressing homelessness and destitution - all serve as an invaluable contribution to the fulfilment of human needs for protection, understanding, participation and freedom²².

Taking action: how you can make a difference

- **Identify and connect** with isolated individuals seeking sanctuary who may be hesitant to seek support from charitable organisations. Collaborate with community leaders, cultural centres, and Third Sector organisations to actively engage with isolated individuals to build trust.
- **Raise awareness** of the impact the forced migration has on wellbeing and **reduce the stigma** associated with new immigration status.
- **Build peer support networks** that offer emotional support, knowledge sharing, and informal advice to address specific challenges, such as the asylum process, housing, and emotional well-being.




Nurturing wellbeing: insights from project participants



We asked the participants of the project:

What can support wellbeing during the journey of seeking sanctuary?



Their valuable insights have been categorised into four key themes:



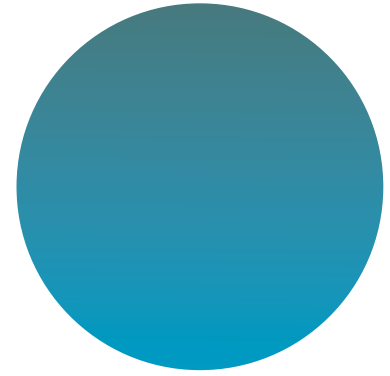
Integration and community engagement

Wellbeing support

Advocacy and policy change

Work and volunteering

Integration and community engagement

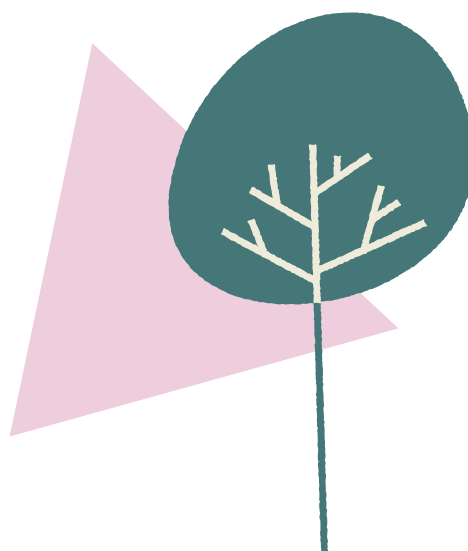


Participants emphasised the importance of building inclusive and flexible communities.

- “Give space to put the roots.”
- “The key thing is having relationships in the community.”
- “Drop-ins are great. But we don’t just want to be siloed who want opportunities to happen.”
- “Very important for the new arrivals not to isolate themselves and to be involved in local communities and networks.”
- “Think about these people. They’re really brave, strong, resilient people. They are able to have new roots and put them in this community again. The decision-makers have to be more inclusive and flexible just to give us a space in this community.”



Wellbeing support



Participants highlighted various support mechanisms essential for wellbeing - key points include:

- "It's not only about the way we rebuild our lives. We need to reset the way we think."
- "Personalise people to their issues."
- "Creating more social spaces for people to meet."
- "Support with day trips (camping, beach, old sites, tourist beauty spots)."
- "If you understand the processes around you, you will feel better."
- "If people can achieve aspirations, they can be happy."
- "More free and sports activities."
- "Creating clothes bank."
- "Giving gym/ leisure centres passes."





Advocacy and policy change



Advocacy and policy change emerged as crucial factors affecting wellbeing. Key recommendations include:

- “For the organisations, always put the differences of people in mind, treat people fairly, and avoid discrimination.”
- “Government should engage people. You might be a teacher, a business person or an educationist. You shouldn’t be left like that because this kills a lot. You know, the morale is no more there.”
- “The government should give opportunity to everyone, without any form of discrimination. Asylum seekers do not have the right to work in this country. They do not have an opportunity to go to higher institutions unless in certain circumstances. They cannot drive. People are deprived of so many rights and opportunities. And if those things are sorted, definitely the level of wellbeing would highly increase.”
- “The Government needs to see us as human beings, instead of seeing us as numbers.”
- “Provide longer-term funding for charities.”
- “Better bus services.”

- “If the Home Office processes our cases properly, everything is going to change. As you get your answer, you can work, and you can start your life.”
- “Raising awareness and educating public services, businesses and communities on understanding people seeking sanctuary.”





Work and volunteering



Work and volunteering were highlighted as key contributors to wellbeing. Key points include:

- “The most important thing is that I can work.”
- “If I’m busy with work, I’m not going to be busy with thinking about other things and thinking bad and get an issue. Stay at home, stay at home, stay at home, like in prison. It’s staying at home, not doing anything.”
- “Asylum seekers do not have a right to work in this country – a big effect on wellbeing.”
- “Giving people an opportunity to work and help people.”



Conclusion



The journey of seeking sanctuary is a complex tapestry woven with challenges that deeply affect individuals' lives and overall wellbeing.

As we explore wellbeing through the lens of forced migration, it becomes evident that this journey profoundly impacts the mental, physical, and social dimensions of health. Displaced from their homelands, these individuals face the challenge of rebuilding their lives in unfamiliar lands. Within this context, wellbeing emerges as a fundamental cornerstone, providing a roadmap for resilience, belonging, integration and hope amidst adversity.

Understanding wellbeing in this context reveals a diverse range of needs. The "Wellbeing Flower" symbolises these needs: from basics like food and shelter to safety, belonging, self-worth, hope, and acceptance. Each aspect is vital for the overall wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary.

However, amidst these aspirations for wellbeing, challenges cast heavy shadows. Prolonged asylum decision waits and the consequent uncertainty weigh heavily on individuals' mental health and sense of self. Loneliness, stigma, and restricted opportunities further compound the struggle, hindering the journey towards wellbeing.

Addressing these challenges demands collective action. Engaging policymakers, fostering community connections,

advocating for policy reforms, and extending support networks emerge as critical steps. Providing access to creative expression, promoting volunteering, and offering more recreational opportunities are pivotal in fostering inclusion, skill development, and community engagement.

It's crucial to combat discrimination and raise public awareness too. Changing the narrative to acknowledge the strengths of individuals seeking sanctuary and promoting empathy is key to creating a more inclusive society.

The insights shared by project participants emphasise the transformative power of community connection, wellbeing support, advocacy, and meaningful engagement through work and volunteering. These voices call for compassion, systemic changes, and inclusive actions that nurture wellbeing and sow seeds of hope for individuals seeking sanctuary.

By using these insights and taking proactive steps to tackle challenges while amplifying support, we collectively move toward a more compassionate, inclusive, and supportive environment for people on the difficult journey of seeking sanctuary.

About our research

Research approach

Our approach to this study is rooted in a profound understanding and respect for the emotions and experiences of people seeking sanctuary. We acknowledge the immense challenges they face, the adversities they have encountered, and the lack of control over their lives. Recognising that discussing wellbeing can be difficult for these individuals, we designed our project, especially the data collection process, with a strong emphasis on creating a positive and meaningful experience for participants.

In consideration of the stigma sometimes associated with the term “mental health”, we made an ethical choice to emphasise the concept of “wellbeing” to foster a more inclusive, compassionate and holistic approach to supporting individuals seeking sanctuary.

We aimed to create the project with the participants at its heart and in a way that would be sustainable and beneficial to the participants long after the project timeline ends. Our goal was to celebrate the resilience, facilitate mutual learning, and leave them with positive memories of our collaboration. Our approach extended beyond gathering data – it was about building relationships, sharing knowledge, and co-creating resources to support their wellbeing beyond the project’s timeline. We also aimed to build a network that on completion of the research would further co-produce the digital resources to support wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary.

Research questions

Our research aimed to contribute to a better understanding of wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary. We framed our research around the following questions:

- 1. Defining wellbeing:** What does wellbeing mean for people seeking sanctuary?
- 2. Impact factors:** What does positively and negatively affect wellbeing in the context of forced migration?
- 3. Enhancement strategies:** What can help improve the wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary?

The research process

Data collection took place between July 2022 and February 2023 and included both in-person and online sessions to accommodate the needs of the participants in different locations in Wales. We conducted four semi-structured interviews with professionals closely engaged with people seeking sanctuary and four workshops with individuals who have lived experience of forced migration in Wales.

In total, 25 participants, aged 18 and above, recruited through trusted leaders, took part in the workshops. They originated from various countries including Afghanistan, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Syria, and had diverse immigration statuses related to forced

migration. Their time spent in the UK varied from one year to more than ten years.

Our peer researcher was equipped with lived experience of seeking sanctuary, cultural knowledge and the ability to communicate in plain English. This helped facilitate workshops and gather data. Through a metaphorical representation of a tree and a flower, participants discussed what wellbeing meant personally to them (flower petals), what makes them feel strong (a tree with blossoms and leaves), what makes them feel weak (a tree without leaves surrounded by stones) and their hopes and suggestions on improving their wellbeing (advice to a gardener).

Upon the initial interpretation of the results, we contacted participants to share findings and confirmed the accuracy of the interpretation. The outcomes will contribute to the development of a digital wellbeing resource for people seeking asylum and refugees.

While this research highlighted several key aspects impacting wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary, these findings represent a fraction of the multifaceted experiences - both positive and negative - that individuals navigating the journey of seeking sanctuary encounter in their pursuit of safety and stability.

Ethics

For individuals seeking sanctuary, participating in research can be distressing and induce feelings of insecurity due to the impact of psychological trauma, a lack of understanding of the research process and/or language barriers. Conducting

research in this context raises ethical challenges. To address this, we took several steps:

- **Minimised risks and harms**
- **Created a safe and transparent environment**
- **Ensured genuine respect**
- **Considered life experiences and trauma**

We recognised that our participants may feel a lack of confidence, trust, and safety throughout the project, especially when faced with English language barriers. To address this, we adjusted our approach to obtaining consent and made it truly informed by:

- **Using plain language and visuals**
- **Presenting information in subsections (understand, read, agree)**
- **Emphasising anonymity and voluntary participation**
- **Giving a choice of partial consent**
- **Offering additional time to communicate research aims and process, and to provide explanation of words if needed**
- **Considering language use, especially when talking about people's lives and immigration status**

Before the workshops, we sought input from people with lived experience with English language proficiency equivalent to level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages²⁵ to enhance the clarity of the documents.

We closely followed GDPR guidelines to protect participants' privacy. We vigilantly monitored for signs of distress or upset. We ensured access to psycho-emotional support following the workshop.

It's important to note that we did not promise immediate changes. Instead, our focus was on fostering enriching and kind learning environments, equipping

participants with tools to enhance their wellbeing. This approach aimed to balance the need for valuable research insights with ethical considerations and participant support, ultimately creating a respectful and empathetic research environment.



Acknowledgements



Our heartfelt gratitude to our participants who volunteered to take part in this project.

It is with great respect and admiration that we acknowledge the passion of people who found their new home in Wales to share their experiences despite the challenges they may have faced.

We truly feel honoured to have shared the research journey with brilliant, supportive,

and passionate people who support people in rebuilding their lives in Wales.

This research project was funded by the Welsh Government and Monday Trust through MHF's Covid Response Programme.



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February 2024

Recommended citation: Mental Health Foundation (2024). Voices of lived experience: The impact of seeking sanctuary on mental health and wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundation, UK.

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