

## NRPF Storytelling

The following stories were facilitated by the Old Fire Station.

### Story 1: Fully, Freely Alive

When I come to Oxford in 2019, I didn't have anyone. I was sleeping in the road, the park. Some Kurdish people, from my country, they live here. Same culture, so they help. They give me food. One week I sleep there, one week another place. One guy said to me, 'Go to Asylum Welcome. If you want help, they can help you.' And I go, straightaway. When I talk about my situation, they helped me, gave me ten pounds, and then food. They supported me, for money, food, finding a GP.

Then, when lockdown happened, I didn't have any place to go. The different people I'd been staying with, when Covid comes, they say to me, 'I cannot support you anymore.' Everybody who is homeless at that point, when Covid comes, is given a place by Oxfordshire Homeless Movement. Some in Canterbury House and some in the hotel, the Travelodge. It was nice there; I was in the Travelodge for two months. There was food. It was safe. Then Canterbury House. There you see a lot of people. Different people, different languages. It was good. I was in Canterbury House four or five months. But that closed because this place was for students, and they were coming back.

So then, Asylum Welcome, they sent me to Connection Support. They said, 'We'll find another company for people in your same housing situation, so you don't need to worry. So you will not be homeless.' And Connection Support helped me. They gave me money. When I needed an interpreter, they got an interpreter for me. He explained things for me, he speaks a similar language.

So then they sent me here, and now I have a house. I live with two others – one Kurdish, one Afghani. We have a similar culture. So we are happy living together. And I don't think we're gonna be homeless anymore. We don't like to be homeless.

Back home, we run away. Staying in Iraq, it was risking my life. So that's why I run away. I don't think anybody's happy to leave home. We come here to be fully, freely alive. We didn't know we'd be homeless here. We are homeless because we don't have nothing. And we came to UK to be free – but we turned out not to be free, just homeless. But now this company, they support me. I appreciate it. If they didn't, I'd have to stay out on the road. In parks. So now I really feel happy. We have come to home.

We feel free. And they support us. They help whenever I have any problems, we have contact. They don't tell you, 'Oh, you have to leave the room at this time, and the house.' No, they just say to me, 'This is your house, this is your room. Any problems with the house, let us know, we're gonna come to fix it.' Before, staying with different people, I would have to call a friend. 'Are you home? I want to come back and sleep.' Or when I needed to shower, I couldn't because maybe he wanted to. You know? Before, even people who helped me, they have a life. They have to do something. So I have to stay outside, waiting to sleep, waiting to shower. Now I know when I want to come back to the house, I can come back. Now I have a room. Now I am in control of my situation. My life is completely different now because I have house. I'm free to come in, free to go out. Eat when I want, cook when I want. I want to do it, I do it. It's important for me because now I'm really happy – I feel free. It's been really better. Having your home means that you have a much fuller life.

And then if we need something, they let you know, all these people, the staff, they have good contact with me. I'm not very stressed now, about having a place. Because if anything happens, these people, they let me know. So I'm not thinking for future, 'Am I gonna be homeless again, and sleep in the park?' This for me was very difficult, thinking I might live again in the park, or the street. So, it improves my mental health, not to worry about the future again.

These people, the staff in Connection Support, they help, they're working hard, they're professional – but also, they speak to me nicely. Even the managers, they've dropped me off in Banbury for an appointment, taking me by car. I don't feel like they're just doing a job, you know, I think they're kind.

They're kind. They call you up and ask first, 'How's it going? How's life?' and everything. And then they say, 'Tomorrow you have this appointment. Can you please do it?' Not just straightaway telling you what they want or what you have to do. When people respect you, they speak to you nice, you feel happy. For me it's important. I'm happy with these people.

## Story 2: Get Ready for a Bright Day

I fell ill just before the pandemic. I was hospitalised for quite some time and when I came out, I didn't have anywhere to live. My GP advised me to go to St. Mungo's. They helped me a lot, they gave me accommodation. It was a university campus, but there were no students because of the lockdowns, so the council was putting people there. I was there for some time. Eventually the council was relocating people, but I couldn't fall into that programme because I have no recourse to public funds. That's when Connection Support took over, filling that gap. They gave me a place to live. We had to move a few times, but eventually they put me here in Thame.

The stability of having somewhere to call home, the convenience of like bus passes, and the £50 that I get every week, have made quite a difference. Things like phone bills, toiletries, you know, I can now afford. And the house feels like a home: there's a living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, garden. My favourite thing is the gardens, front and back, there's lots of flowers, everything. I'm looking after it, mowing the grass, weeding. I'm trying my best. I don't have all the gardening equipment, so I borrow, I'm getting to know the neighbours. I asked for a lawnmower, a trimmer, and things like that. Most people are friendly. There will always be one idiot here and there, but it's been very good. People are clever in Oxford, very switched on. And they're not pompous about that. You can easily be conversing with a doctor, or a specialist and you don't even know because of how polite they are, how humble. People are quite easy-going, especially in Thame.

I work with Asylum Welcome as well. Aspire, Asylum Welcome and Connection Support are all working together on this project. They sort of complement each other. If you need things like food, you know, Asylum Welcome give people hampers. Monetary assistance as well, and legal advice, pertaining to immigration status. I think Connections is there to be support workers, and then Aspire are maybe the providers of the house, and the equipment, the white goods inside and things like that. So, they're working very closely together, you can't really tell who's in charge of this and that, but they're all helping. If there are any issues, any problems, Connections would know how to solve it, or who to refer, to get it solved. They also mediate in a lot of things. I've got health issues, so I always go to the hospital and things like that. They facilitate if you need transport, to and from, that sort of thing. The only thing that I think could have gone better, is to vet people they're going to put together in the same house. You know, to check if people are compatible. Because it can be a hot pot, people are different in their habits. Coexisting can be quite difficult. I was given a house that was almost new, everything had been done inside. People look at that sort of thing, the importance of a clean house differently. But where I'm living it's alright.

Connections, they don't do a lot of wrong things! They're very good at what they do, very helpful. Sometimes, if you're dealing with any support organisation, they may not be punctual about responding to your problem. But at Connections, they're excellent, they really are *support* workers, you know? They support you 100%. They put the emphasis into the clients, which is quite remarkable. I run out of things, depending on what time of the month it is, sometimes the money that we get is not enough, because maybe your phone bill goes out, you know. I've been in situations without money for groceries. And if you ask them to chip in, they've always been there. I've never gone without in situations where they can help. They are there and they don't avoid you, they don't say, 'Oh, we helped you last month, or two months ago.' Anything that I need, anytime, even when they're not supposed to be working, even on weekends, if I have an issue, they've always been helpful. With other organisations, you can't blame them, when it's their time off, it's their time off, they don't want to be disturbed. But with these guys, I've noticed they're always there. Once I lost my keys on a Sunday, and someone came to give me another set. That's how they are.

They treat their job passionately. I've noticed that they help you as if you're paying for that service, you know? Normally for people to treat you right, probably you will be paying something, but that level of professionalism, I see it in Connections, even though it's them that are helping us, you know, it's charity, isn't it? It's remarkable. I didn't know it could get this good. I think it's important because, at the end of the day, people who are in the same predicament as me, most of them do not really want to be in that situation. I don't really want to be helped; I'd like to be independent. That kind of service that they offer gives people who are willing to extricate themselves from their problems conducive environments to address things. I'm working towards my papers, my immigration, I am trying to come up with something that I will do when everything is alright. Their support provides me with a good space to get ready for a bright day.

A bright day is relative. To someone with a million dollars, a bright day could be the day they become a billionaire, you know. A bright day, to me, would be one where I can provide, where I can stand on my own. There is pride and a sense of achievement in being autonomous. It doesn't always leave you with a good sense of pride if you only receive and never give, you know? I've got causes close to my heart; I want to be in a situation where I can actually help out. So that's a bright day, when you can stand on your own.

I do a lot of research. I love reading. I'm a reading person, you know? I start books but I'm not always good at finishing! I'm always into a lot of topics, I enjoy things like space exploration, artificial intelligence, global issues. I've been following closely how they're developing electric vehicles, how they're harnessing energy. I'm a qualified engineer, so I know these things. I qualified in Africa, I'm from Zimbabwe. I studied electrical-mechanical and automotive engineering. My father was an engineer as well. He actually studied here and then he went back to Africa, this was in the 60s and 70s. He died early, but when I was growing up, I was just fascinated by what he always had around. He could make things out of nothing. That's how I acquired the taste for engineering.

There's places I read about where they don't even know what's going on with the environment, you know? They are abusing the environment, not because of their liking, but because of ignorance. Certain communities are deprived of even the tiniest bit of knowledge. Even certain parts of the developed world. And then things like, in Africa, there is a lot of infant mortality, because of poor sanitation, poor access to cheap generic drugs, things like that. I'd like for people who can help out to know more about where there's an issue. Just education itself. I think everyone deserves education, regardless of what they intend to use it for, at least the basic education. There are regions of the world where certain people are deemed a waste. There are certain areas where a girl child cannot even access the basics. These are issues that are close to my heart. One day, if it all works out, I'll be an advocate on a lot of issues. One day I will!

So, the housing has given me a second lease of life. Shelter is one of the basic human requirements, isn't it? The place that I'm living, it's more than a shelter, it's become a home. So they provided me a home, they provided me a theatre to express myself intellectually. I didn't know that charity organisations could be really charitable, I've always been sceptical about that. There might be bad apples out there, but with the organisations that have supported me, it's still a working concept, charity. Connections has done me a big favour. Because sometimes you think, 'I don't deserve it,' and things like that, so it's very reassuring when other people say, 'Let's make this a stepping stone of your greatness, let's help you to achieve whatever you want to achieve in life.' It's phenomenal. It's nice.

### Story 3: Put Me on Firm Ground

I was homeless, being accommodated by St Mungo's at Canterbury House, but their contract was going to expire, and I was very concerned. I didn't know where I was going to go. I had particular needs and requirements, I'd become very withdrawn in myself, so I was having problems socialising. Shared accommodation was out of the question in my case. I was very poorly as a result of the serious health problems I've got. I found myself with type two diabetes, I found myself having a lot of problems with pain. I've got a degenerative bone condition called osteoarthritis, I struggle with it on a day-to-day basis. The workers at St Mungo's referred me to Connection Support, because they felt my case was a deserving one. Connection Support were trying their utmost to alleviate my anxieties and stress, and they worked with me, they had a vision to accommodate me. Now I'm heading towards a year of being with them, and it's still a novelty to me, it's just great.

I was called up for surgery by the NHS, to alleviate my problem getting about. I had lost a hell of a lot of my mobility and I was in constant pain. After I had the surgery, while I was in hospital, Connection Support kept on calling me, checking on me, advising how far the steps to get me a place had gone. After I'd come out of surgery, I would be going into an accommodation. I was concerned about how I was going to manage this; I was concerned about how to furnish the place. But they didn't offer me a half measure, they offered me the whole package. I was thinking my first priority was a bed, but the day I walked in there, there was everything: furniture, pots and pans, kettle, microwave. There was soap in the bathroom, food in the fridge. My bed was made! And I didn't have to lift a finger, it was just there, like somebody waved a magic wand! To say I was elated is an understatement.

When you're in your darkest moments in life, you're trying to grab hold of something to hold on to. My mother was an ardent Roman Catholic, so I went to church with her as a child, but as I grew up, I grew distant from the church. But in my darkest time, I found solace in religion. I started going to church and it helped un-ruffle my ruffled feathers. I prayed after I got this accommodation, I said, 'Thank you Lord, you've reaffirmed my faith in you.' In this new place, I'm free to say my prayers anytime without interruption. It's given me the ability to do so many things that I couldn't before. Being homeless is quite a desperate thing. Even little things, like you've gotta be careful what you eat – you can't afford to have a bad stomach, because you've got no toilet!

Imagine the difference it makes for you to have that. All courtesy of Connection Support. It's given me a new lease on life.

I'm grateful I was chosen, and I just wish this help could be extended to other people in my situation. We all need it sometime or other. A few years ago, I wouldn't have even thought I could be homeless. I was working, I was financially stable, and everything was alright, my health was good. There was a period where I was doing so well that every few years, I'd buy myself a new car. How vain I was then! I felt like, if I've got it now, I'll always have it. I didn't think life would take such a bad turn for me. A homeless person, because of the depression and stress – you find yourself drawn into doing things that you shouldn't, abusing alcohol, abusing drugs. I used to be quite judgmental, I used to say, 'Oh, you can't help a person like that.' But then I found myself drinking a lot, and now I look at things differently. It just took a few issues to bring me down to that level, and it's made me realise how fragile life can be. From being in that dark, dark place in my life, I'm back into the light now.

I used to feel very embarrassed about being homeless, but I'm not anymore, as a matter of fact I'm just proud of what I've got, you know? I can make myself a meal. I can make myself a sandwich in the middle of the night if I so wish to! When you're homeless, you can't do that. I am grateful to God, but I'm also grateful to the people who have made it possible, to Connection Support, Aspire, St Mungo's. And there's Asylum Welcome, they provided the go-between for us to meet at the time. This was at the height of coronavirus, we were still isolating, so they went to great lengths to make sure we met safely. For me, it was like, 'Wow, look at these people taking so much time and effort just for me!' I felt really special. It's had the effect of improving my self-esteem. When you are in that dark place in your life, your self-esteem is no longer there, you just don't feel self-worth at all. You feel really desperate, but this has been smoothing those kinds of thoughts out of my system. It's had the effect of taking away the abrasiveness in life and replacing it with some meaning and calm.

Now I can relax mentally and try and piece together my fragmented life. I'm trying to sort out my debt status. It hangs over me like a hangman's axe, you know? I am looking to Asylum Welcome – their legal expertise and knowledge is second to none. If I get that sorted, I might be able to take a job. I've got to become a productive member of society, it's important to me. I am in my sixties now, but I feel that I still have a lot to give society and a lot more years to do it in. If you'd asked me two or three years ago, I would have told you, 'Mate, I'm thinking more about dying than living!' That's what happens to you. At that time, I was feeling death is merciful. I think generally a lot of homeless people feel like that in a way, you know. But I'm out of that hole now and I'm really looking ahead. I actually don't even feel sixty anymore, I feel forty!

I don't have the means to be extravagant, I'm not extravagant in any way. But my life is so easy now that I feel like I'm living the life of a football star or a film star! It's gone a long way to helping ease my mental stresses. I might be able to overcome the things that really affect me, for example, the anxiety. It's not that I want to rest on my laurels and just live as a kept person and not do something for my future, but it's given me a fighting chance to try and sort myself out so that I can move on. I'm just one person that they've given this help to, but I can expand on it and give back, and then they'll be helping a whole society. That's the reason I want to get better, and try and move on with my life, so they can help somebody else as well. That little word 'help', it's got a big meaning. I was hanging on a cliff, and I'm not any more. They took me and put me on firm ground.

They're doing the work of society, taking a chance on somebody like me, to pick them out of obscurity back into mainstream society, and give you a chance to do that all on your own. I say 'all on your own,' but they help you every step of the way, they make sure that you don't stumble and fall. Their communication is very good. I've got an open line to them anytime. My caseworker at Connection Support actually makes a point of coming to visit me at least once a week. I always look forward to that, I prepare my cups and biscuits, you know, it's a social visit as well. For the past seven years, I've hardly taken notice of my birthday, but now, first thing that morning my phone rings, 'Happy birthday!' It's all those little things that really matter.

It's very empowering, you know, it makes you feel valued. When you're in that dark place in life, you don't have good self-esteem, you sort of want to remain in the dark, out of everybody's way, and just hope that you're going to survive, and if not, well, it will be merciful. That's all that you hoped for then. And all of that has changed for me now.

## Story 4: Walking the Whole Way

The NRPF project is designed to help people with no recourse to public funds. Those individuals are typically at the bottom of the pile, when it comes to accessing services. Covid kind of changed everything. During the pandemic, the government had a scheme called Everyone In, which included this group. That raised a lot of questions across the charity sector in Oxford – why does it take a pandemic to help these people? And so during that period Oxfordshire Homeless Movement, who are the funders of this project, began conversations with various partners like St. Mungo's, Connection Support, Asylum Welcome, Aspire – lots of different charities got their heads together to really think more long-term about this group.

It's really all tied to their immigration status. Anyone who has any kind of complicated or difficult immigration status – I suppose the classic example is a failed asylum seeker, who is then appealing their claim. These are people who could have been here for decades, may have been working, may have had marital breakdowns, family breakdowns, something with their mental or physical health. Some have been affected by Brexit and the settlement scheme. Some have more complicated things like criminal convictions impacting their ability to stay. All of them, for one reason or another, don't feel safe to return home. We help single individuals, we don't have the scope to help families. And typically those individuals are men. A lot of them came as teenagers, as unaccompanied minors. They went through the social care system until they were too old. A number have been here for 10, 11 years, and very much identify as British in many ways.

So it's that group of people we're trying to help, specifically the ones at risk of homelessness. There are different levels of no recourse. Most don't have the right to work, which is the main issue. They can't apply for housing benefits, or universal credit, any form of financial support really. A really difficult situation. A lot of them have been waiting a very, very long time to hear back about their status, and are facing the choice of whether they continue to fight against their asylum refusal and appeal it. A lot of people are successful later in overturning their refusal, so there's not much confidence in the justice of the asylum system. That system encourages people to think about returning to their home, if they have had a refusal. If not, they have to find a way to support themselves. Not being able to work makes that very hard. But we're pretty sure most people do work, it's just cash in hand. Which can put people in difficult, exploitative situations.

I studied refugee protection and forced migration studies, and through my other job I've worked with refugees and asylum seekers in Iraq, Greece, Lebanon, at different stages of the journey. I've always had an interest in the end of the journey, people finding their sense of home. So for me, this role was really about helping people who were looking to find their legal roots as well as their life roots in a city that I call home. The other thing that excited me is that it's a partnership model, working with other organisations across Oxford. There are not many projects like this one – I know lots of people around the country are interested in this project as a pilot, seeing how it develops. It's quite exciting to be part of something that really is quite different, and quite unique in the level of support it offers a group of people that every council, every town, every city struggles to know how to help. The project has been set up initially for five years. It's the most stable, long-term project available to this group of people that has probably ever existed in Oxford. It's quite a high level of support, which means it's quite expensive. And it's helping a small group of people for a relatively long time. It's easier to get funding for projects that help hundreds of people – you can put that in your statistics. This one, realistically, over the five years, may help 30 people. But some of those people will be housed by us for a long time. And it affords them stability they would never have got elsewhere. So it's unusual in terms of the charities being brave enough to do it.

I'm the project manager, I'm doing the coordination, big picture, trying to keep things going. We have a team of support workers who are day-to-day working with the clients, but I have had a few opportunities to do some support work myself. If you build up trust with people, if you spend time with people, you end up hearing about their lives and stories. And that's a real privilege. The guys that we've been able to house, I have seen a huge difference in their lives compared to those we haven't housed yet. Those guys, their mental health is worse, they're anxious. Some of them are sofa surfing, but it changes every couple of nights, it's very insecure. The impact of that is obviously very distressing. Compare that to the conversations I have with those who have been housed now for several months. And in pretty nice homes as well, we try to make them homely, make sure it doesn't just feel very basic. Several of them have shared that it just makes them feel human again. One of them was describing to me the privilege of being able to make a sandwich whenever he wanted to, even if it was in the middle of the night. That's been really lovely to see. But you then always feel pained by the people you haven't been able to help yet, in that way. That's probably one of the issues with the charity sector in general. You're always aware of what more needs to be done.



All of our support workers so far have had some experience of no recourse themselves. So we've had support workers who are very well equipped to work alongside this group of people particularly. Having some long-term trust with the clients is important, because a lot of these clients, you know, they've been passed from support worker to support worker, organisation to organisation, like a human baton. It's really important to remember the clients are people with rich lives. They're not just victims who need our help. A lot of them have had very distressing, but also very fascinating lives, and different reasons that have brought them to where they are now. Also very different hopes for the future. I think, as a project team, it's important that we are all of a similar mindset, in how we view these individuals. That outlook is one of compassion, one of understanding. The hostile environment policy is the outlook of the Home Office. I suppose there is a reaction to that, trying to be the opposite of hostile to these people, trying to offer them an experience of compassion, of listening. Personally playing that role, it's really difficult. Sometimes you feel like, really, this project shouldn't have to exist. I would much rather that the policy changed and there wasn't any need for this. Because ultimately, it's designed to make people destitute and then go back. So I would love it if it didn't have to exist.

But since it does, just having that kindness, that compassion, at every stage, in every interaction, is so important, working with this group of people. And also honouring what's important to them. There's one client I've ended up regularly taking to the dentist, every month or so I drive him. We have now fixed the initial problem, a difficult root canal. But he rang me yesterday, and he really wants his teeth to be whitened because he's got discoloration, which is clearly causing him distress and affecting his confidence. In the charity sector, when you're supporting people financially, you think, 'There's what's needed, and there's what's wanted.' But I've been reflecting on it, and this is clearly really important to him. Every interaction I've ever had with him, he has mentioned this, it's on his mind all the time. So stopping to really reflect on how he is viewing this, rather than me. Can we help him budget towards that? It doesn't have to be that we fund it, but we can still help him work towards that and give him that free will, that dignity.

It's a very difficult project, I think, to really capture neatly, like anything involving people's lives. But I think it's been a good first year. I think giving people some sense of a constant, even if they continue their interactions with another service, having a constant who is going with them to appointments, who can ring them up and check in, someone who's really walking the whole way with them – that's important.

## Story 5: Hopefully, Hopefully

I'm from Afghanistan. I have been here in Oxford, UK, for almost eight years. Coming to Oxford in 2015, it was not my choice. I was sixteen when I came. A lorry driver brought us. He didn't know that we were in there. At first I was travelling with my brother but then I had to leave in the lorry so I came here with some other friends made on the way. They're still in Oxford, some of them. My brother is in Birmingham. At first, I was just thinking, 'So this is England'. I had seen it in pictures, but I didn't know how it was going to be. But it's really nice, honestly. People are good.

I've been staying in this property five months or something. There had been kind of immigration support a long time ago, when my asylum case was going on. Then I had to leave the place I was living, because they refused my case, and they didn't want to give me any support. I was getting support through my friends, my brother. I lived with my friends during corona. Before that, I lived in so many places. I moved to, like, ten other places. I didn't have a house. I was worried about everything because my case was refused. I had too much stress, you know, about so many things.

That's when I was I spoke to Helena, who used to work with Asylum Welcome, and she tried to find me a house. When I came here 2015 she was working there. She helped me more than anyone. You know, whenever I had a problem I just called her and she tried to solve it. She spoke about Connection Support. After that they brought me to Canterbury House. I stayed there five or six months, and then to here.

This is really different. In Canterbury House, there were so many people living there, you know, it's a student accommodation building. It was overcrowded. Here is much better – it's a house, and I have two other friends here. We have known each other for a long time, so there's freedom, good communication with the people you live with. The place is in a quiet neighbourhood as well. Inside, the kitchen, the toilet – everything is better. Everything is good here. The first day we opened the door to this house, I think it was a sunny day. Nice weather, and I felt nice coming here.

Connection Support is good for us. They found us this house, and, you know, they support us with money, also. And with so many things inside the house, water, if you need an iron, et cetera. Anything we need for the house. Without that support I think it would be hard. Especially at the moment, I'm not allowed to work. My appeal case is still going on, so I have to wait. So it would be a problem – it's so hard to get a house, if you don't have money. You have to stay with a friend, otherwise continue to be in a homeless sort of set-up.

When I think about my future, the first thing I need is a decision from the Home Office about my asylum appeal. I want to do so many things, I want to make life here normal, you know, like people do in Oxford. I was studying, a long time ago. At City of Oxford College and Abingdon College. I was just studying English and Maths. It was quite new, you know, I had to improve my English. I just studied for two to three years. And that's all. Because, you know, once your case gets refused, then the Home Office they don't give you support anymore. At the time I wanted to study. I still want to learn, you know, I watch videos on the phone. But going somewhere, like college, I don't know – the time has already passed, you know?

In a normal week, I meet with my friends. Because there are so many people from my country. Some older, some younger. You know, when you meet someone from your country you have this connection. I met my friends through cricket, and also from college. We play football sometimes, we play cricket. Especially if the weather is nice. I'm good at cricket. We have a team, we play one or two matches a week, Saturday or Sunday. We play so it finishes in one and a half hours, same as football. The older people, they play test match, which goes for five days. I would never play that – who's gonna waste five days?

I'm planning to stay here. I like Oxford very well and I know so many people here, and I've been in Oxford since I was younger. I like this place. I think in my life, this is the first place I feel is my home. Not even in my country. Because everything is good. When you come here, you find everything is different. You have so many things here. We don't have much there. You know, the facilities, the support you get, and that no one can force you to do anything here. You have a government, they help you. In our country it's not like this. If you have power, then, you know, you can do anything. Compared to where I come from, there is much difference.

Like Connection Support. They have all the things that we need. Even when we had to move, you know, from one house to another house, they offered us a car, a taxi, so we can move our stuff. I think this was a good thing. They help me with everything. They answer very quick, you know, if you have any questions or have anything to say they answer. If I have something to ask then I ask them, and they help. If they can help, they definitely help. Especially in the situation I was going through, it meant everything for me. If they didn't help me, it would have been something very different. I was living with my friends. You know, my friends help me all the time. But I had a chance to be homeless.

When my asylum case wasn't successful, obviously I felt so sad. But the only thing I had to do is wait, so that's what I did. And hopefully it's going better now – especially at the moment, with the situation in our country. And I have a new solicitor, this solicitor is better. My brother had the same solicitor a long time ago, so he took my case there. And once I get everything sorted out, then I will have lots of ideas for what to do here. Hopefully soon, hopefully, hopefully. I'm just gonna wait.

## Story 6: Circles, Squares, or Rectangles

I'm from Nigeria, I moved to the country in 2011 as a student. I previously worked in Tesco and Waitrose. Then I made a decision to make a career change. I couldn't find fulfilment in what I was doing. I just sat down one day in church, and I started to ask myself questions like: What do I want to do in my life? What are my talents? That's how I managed to find myself. I did a bit of research, and realised that I was really passionate about making a difference in people's lives. Looking at the way I support my family, my brothers, my friends as well. I'm a Christian and I devote time to my church. I've volunteered quite often, in the food bank and as a youth worker. I think that that gave me confidence. While studying at uni, I did not really understand the social settings and services in the country. So that volunteering, it was eye-opening. It made me see what people were going through, in poverty, or alienated from social services. These are the things that I looked at, that helped me figure out, deep down in my veins, making a difference in people's lives is something I should do.

I did a bit of research and saw that's in line with what social workers do. I felt really proud and excited to work towards that. One of the steps I took to start that career change was dropping down my hours to have time to volunteer. I did that for about three to four months. Also I had a few colleagues that I was managing at work who told me, 'I always love it when you're in. If I have any problems, I can always come to you.' I held on to that, that's really good feedback. And that gave me the confidence to start applying for jobs. So, I applied for a job with Connection Support, and I was offered a role working with the NRPF group.

When I got the role, I was very happy, and proud of myself for making changes, making that start. Because I was also NRPF, which means no recourse to public funds. So, I have empathy towards people who are in that situation. Shared values were one of the main reasons why I applied for the role. One thing that I've realised on the project is that we all, as project workers and the project manager, have shared values. I have lived experience through the visa route, another colleague had lived experience through the refugee route. We are all passionate about the NRPF client group. We put that passion into the work and we use it to deliver and support the clients.

The first day I started, I knew this was the job for me. The manager was really helpful. I would use the word chilled. That's one thing that I always look for, in my manager, a person that doesn't really put pressure on you, someone supportive. And that's what I got from her. It was the complete opposite of what I've experienced in the past. There are things I've gone through personally, with my family, since starting this job. I had premature babies, twins. The support I received is something I never would have imagined. Just having a manager that understands, you know, this is a life situation, who doesn't make you feel bad that you need to be off work. My babies were in the hospital for a very long time, and my manager was very supportive. That really made me feel relaxed, because it's not an easy thing. In other organisations where I've worked, even without the babies, maybe just a little sickness here and there, you already get warnings and stuff. But the support here means that I'm not working under pressure. And when you're not working under pressure, you're able to deliver. Your mind remains focused on that shared value, on that vision.

My job is more or less like a support worker. One of the main things clients are going through is housing and immigration trouble. If you can help them with that, every other problem is quite easy. So we have a client journey with that NRPF group: housing first, then support them with other issues and needs. For example, if the client has physical health or mental health needs, looking for where they can get the right support. I've got clients who want to join a religious activity, supporting them through that. I've had clients who are trying to resolve debt, supporting them through that. Also advocating and liaising for clients on their immigration issues. We're helping them build living conditions that are suitable after they've been housed.

I try to see clients at least once a week because it's much easier to maintain relationships that way. If I'm unable to see them I will always make a phone call. Most of them, while they're still waiting for an update on their immigration status, they literally have nothing they can do. So, it's all about just checking in. Definitely status affects client experiences. Once they have a visa and the right to work, they might still be an NRPF. But there will be clients on the asylum route, who are just putting in an application to the Home Office to say they're seeking asylum. Not having a right to work, not having a right to benefits, that means they're stuck. And most of them live in that uncertainty. I know the Home Office agrees to respond in about six months or so, but it's never the case. It gets to six months, they don't hear anything, they start to worry. And that's where we as a project come in.

One thing we've found recently is that we have clients rough sleeping, which makes everything more difficult. One gentleman has been sleeping rough since February. We saw him last week, and I could tell just from looking at him that his physical health is deteriorating. The plan at the start of the project was to provide 12 properties, and we've got to that max now. So, we need to look outside the box. I made a referral to St Mungo's and I'm hoping they'll help him. I've had another client who has gone through serious issues with neighbours, harassment and antisocial behaviour, which is really difficult. I've tried to support him through the situation very nonjudgmentally. You could easily become judgmental and say, 'Is it your fault?' But we've managed to swap houses for him. That's been very uplifting for me because I can see how I made a difference in someone's life. That's one of the things that keeps me going. I'll chat with a client who has a problem, we sit there coming up with ideas of how to resolve it, and you can see the change in their behaviour, even their physical experience, as they can see hope. They start believing there's a way out of this. It lights up my heart, having those experiences.

There's been downs in the work, as well. I've had client issues, where I've been trying to build a relationship and something didn't go right. But I keep positive. I just think, I tried my best to build the relationship. If the client says they don't want me to support them anymore, that's fine. It's a good thing if they find someone who they can link with to support them, and if I'm not that person, I don't hold any grudges. Emotional support and practical support, they're kind of the same thing. I remember when I was doing volunteering, one of the things I picked up was the person-centred or client-centred approach. That still resonates. It's all about the clients. It's not about me.

With the first client that was assigned to me, I remember I was a bit worried how I was going to build that relationship. The first day I was a bit shaky, but I walked in, and we had a good chat. I think one of the ways I was able to manoeuvre that was by not starting with talking about work. I just let him pour everything out. I sat there and gave him listening support – only to find out later that listening support is a top skill! On my drive home, I was very, very happy. Now I use that anytime I'm scared of building a relationship with a client, I just think, 'We're having a chat.'

I found myself that day I decided to make a change, but I'm still finding myself, it's a process. It goes in circles, or in squares, or in rectangles, it's a continuous project. And it has been very rewarding. What Connection Support has given me means I don't even think whether I made the right decision to change careers. I can easily say I made the right decision. I'm not looking back.



## Story 7: Out of the van

I'm an electronics engineer. I got my degree from university in Algeria. I did everything. I woke up seven in the morning, went to school, studied until five. I was nearly 22 or something. You don't sleep at night, studying and preparing for exams. I studied in Algeria. We didn't have a proper Bibliotheque. They got books from the Soviet Union! Very old books, they were quite good, but maths and physics is very complicated. The day you get your degree you think that in the future you will have good work, nice house, nice car—a normal life. You don't imagine that age 43 will be one of the worst parts of your life.

I am an asylum seeker. I am not allowed to work or get public funds. I was living in a house, in a room with a friend. He had a new-born. And to be honest, I should have moved out even before Covid. But because of Covid I stayed longer. My friend has another kid as well, and this year he needed room for the new-born, so there was no room for me. I ended up homeless. I was sleeping in a van for nearly four months and I had to keep the windows open for air. I got cold. The area is not that safe. People are working at three in the morning, four in the morning. But I got used to it. It's how it is.

I approached Asylum Welcome. They couldn't help with housing, but they made me an application for Connection Support. I had some stomach problems and Connection helped me to move to a hotel for three nights. I took a shower. I relaxed. The first night I couldn't sleep. It was so comfortable, I couldn't sleep! Honestly! It's beautiful. But I was sick. Connection Support got me in contact with St. Mungo's where I stayed two weeks. I thought maybe something better will happen to me. Later Connection Support moved me to a room at Edge Housing. Connection staff helped me a lot for four months especially mentally as they supported me to see the bright side of this world.

Being homeless wasn't a choice. Mentally and physically you get weaker every week. You wake up in the morning and you sleep in a van. You go wash yourself in a coffee shop. So when Connection offered me this chance to have my own room through Edge Housing, I was so happy. We're four people in the house. We've got a kitchen, we pick apples, and Connection is providing me £50 a week for food and bus pass every three months. But this £50 and bus pass only started when I moved to the room. It's not easy, but it's better than where I came from. I came from nowhere, man. Especially when you start getting ill. But I can see brighter future now. This time I will sort out my issues and never come back to the street. And maybe someday I'll work with Connection and help other homeless people.

When I got used to the van, I felt safe, which was not actually safe. And when I was in the hotel, I would feel worried. Why am I in a nice place? I couldn't even sleep that night. As a human, I think we change, you become nearly like an animal or something. When I went to the hotel everything was quiet. Everything was nice. I was scared. I was thinking with myself, 'What's wrong with you man?' But as a human, you should have at least somewhere to stay when it's cold or hot, and something to eat. Especially for people like me, when you have no access to public funds, and are not allowed to work. How are we going to see a way, without organisations like Asylum Welcome, Edge and Connection Support?

## Story 8: Fearless

I was homeless, staying in a park. I used to live with my girlfriend. But we broke up because she went back to Germany. It was no choice to be homeless, I had no passport, I couldn't go with her to Germany. One of my friends found the number to contact Connection Support. He said they would help me, but the number didn't go through. Next day, I was in South Park. It was six o'clock in the morning. It was very cold. One guy passed me with a dog. He was seeing me and he came to me and said, what are you doing here, it's cold and early? I explained I don't have a place to stay. He had a sandwich. He gave it to me. I said thank you. He went to the shop and bought more food and drink to give to me. He asked me my name, where is my location, all my details. The next day someone from Connection or Asylum Welcome came to see what was going on. They say to me, we gonna find you a place as soon as possible.

The first house was very far from Oxford. I've been in Oxford since 2015. I've got a lot of friends here, and my GP is on Cowley Road, so it was hard to come from far away to see the GP, or Asylum Welcome. Five months I was living in this place far from Oxford. I moved to my friend's house and stayed there instead. Then in July 2022 Connection Support contacted me and said we have good news for you. I know you've been waiting for a long time. And they say there is this one house in Garsington. This is a very good location. It's a two-bedroom house. We have a living room zone. And we have a garden zone. So it's good. Good and big space. Everything clean. I moved there straight away. I'm very happy.

Now I've gotten my place I can do future life. When you're proper homeless, there is no way to shower. No kitchen. No washing machines. It's cold and there is no safe zone. When I was homeless, I was just sitting all day, waiting, because there is nothing to do. But now, there is too many things I can do! I have a day and a night now, for example. In the night you can get a rest and watch TV, there is movie watching, you can make yourself busy. After sleeping all night you can go out and run, make breakfast, and in the afternoon you can come to town, or see the GP or Asylum Welcome. Everything is happening step by step. When I was homeless, I couldn't do anything. Now, I can be fearless.

If I need anything, or have any problem with the house, I can contact my support worker from Connection Support. They support me straightaway. They know how to speak to us, so they can understand us. It's making my life easier. I've been planning more for the future, but I'm still waiting until I get my case from Asylum Welcome for refugee status. So still there is too many things left to worry about. But now, with a place to live our life, we are fine. If I get my passport, one thing that I have to do is get my driving licence and look for work. But it's very hard, waiting for refugee status. I like to have my own bank account. But if I go to the bank they ask me about passport or proof of address, or driver's licence. So all this is connected with my case. The judge is gonna see I've been homeless and now I have this place and what has changed from that time to now. Maybe it will work. Then I can find work, get a place to rent, and everything is gonna be perfect.

## Story 9: Humanity is for everyone

I came here like a refugee. I fought off the government in my country, and I came to this country for more hope. For many years I slept in many parks and streets, 17 or 18 years. Between 2004 and 2014 I was sleeping rough, have no money, only few pounds a week from the Home Office for about six months and then started getting food vouchers for 3 years. Many times, I told my solicitor I want to work because I can work, please give me permission. I was in my country active. I want to go to work, for economic is good, for everything is good. They just give you one piece of card, write down the reference number and my name and my date of birth, and my one sentence in middle of the card: you are not allowed to go to work.

I think 2014 was the first time I was granted refugee status. But in 2018 my mother wasn't well. I travelled back to my country and after 6 months my mother died while I was in my country, if I did not go to see my mum, I wouldn't have forgotten myself. When I came back here in 2019 they took my BRP residency card and revoked my refugee status. I didn't know I shouldn't be travelling to my home country while having refugee status. I couldn't read or write English. Nobody explained it to me. And I saw others go to my country and back, no problem. When I came back in 2019, they took my documents.

After that I became homeless again until March 2020. Every two days, three days maybe, I eat something. And the weather was very, very, very cold. I know a lot of people died in the street. One day somebody found me in front of Asylum Welcome. Because the Covid coming, the government said nobody must be in the street. That's the reason St Mungo's picked us up, every homeless. They put me in a hostel. I got something to eat and somewhere to sleep. Every single minute there's some fighting, some argument – in the night, in the day, anytime. Is like a zoo. Believe me, like a zoo. Smoking, using drugs, everything. It was horrible. You got one blanket and one plastic mattress. I was there about nine or ten months on the floor. All day drug people and drunk people come in. They don't care about somebody like me. I couldn't sleep at all in the night. Eventually I was moved to Travelodge in Abingdon Road and I stayed there about six or seven months, I don't remember exactly. Over there was very good. After that we went to Canterbury House. There the people were very good to me. The staff were kind to me and the manager as well. They always tried to help not just me but everyone. They helped with accommodation, immigration issues, police issues. Any problem they try to sort it out. St Mungo's, I won't forget you. They took me and put me in the Travelodge. I say thank you very much. I was very lucky, this time somebody can offer me help and look after me.

When covid restrictions were lifted I had to find another accommodation so I had to choose between two plans, A or B, plan A was to move to a flat if I have status which I didn't have any ID and no status at that time so this plan was destroyed, and plan B was to share accommodation with somebody else as I do not have status or ID. We went to plan B with Connection Support helping me. They put me in a shared flat with Enus, he was my neighbour in Canterbury House, and Enus, a Bangladesh guy. He's good man.

Enus is like me. He came to England 18 years ago. Like me, nobody support him. But he goes to mosque for prayer. People helped him there. I couldn't find nobody to help me the same as Enus. First year somebody helped me, after that, nobody. I had a lot of problems and the result for me every year I'm becoming weaker, weaker and weaker. And now I got a lot of illness – heart problem, diabetes, kidney problem, back problem, leg problem, mental problem. Why these illnesses happened to someone like me? I got Corona from my house mate. I didn't see nobody except Roushin when I got Corona. The food bank gave me food and I made soup for me and Enus. I called the GP at that time, and they told me to take only paracetamol and for 23 days I took paracetamol. After that I went to test myself for corona again. They said, Corona is gone. When I did first two vaccinations, I was good. My heart was good. After third vaccination, my heart got troubling. One day I feel my heart burning. I saw my doctor and they sent me to hospital. I got tablets for my heart.

At this point, the result of 17 years life in the UK has come up. I am alone and I'm thinking too much. In the night I couldn't sleep very well. I get nightmare very often. Why I must be at this age, thinking about the suicide. I don't know. Because I am alone thinking too much. I couldn't control myself. I couldn't focus. I am out of the normal life. I forgot my name, many times, when I got the nightmare. I forget many things. We have a saying in my country, Neushtarou Bad azmer saharp, the meaning is that when after somebody dies, you bring him the medicine. Better give the medicine to him before he dies, especially for example if someone's young or has some hope. I had no hope, as I couldn't see my family 17 years, It's so difficult. I don't know who made something this immigration rules.

After started getting help from Connection Support in June 2021, this is the first time I felt there is somebody who really cares about me. Connection support paid me £50 a week, plus bus pass for many months. Foodbank was delivered to the flat. Beginning of 2022 I was granted a leave to remain. Roushin helped me to claim Universal Credit, the PIP, unlimited workability and all these benefits were awarded to me. Roushin put me on the Housing Register. And I got this flat through a housing association, SOHA in 2022. In February 2023 I moved to my own flat. Now I got a flat for myself, I have my own tenancy. Connection Support are helping me with the bills and other pieces and want me to apply for citizenship early 2024. It's a nice flat. I can relax sitting here, comfortably, and watch TV, or speak with my family. I am happy now. But I am alone in the night, in the day, in any second. This is the first time I lived on my own. I miss my family. I miss my wife. I need them and they need me, especially when atmosphere in my country is not very well. My wife, my love, I told her: now I can bring you here. I wish one day to be together again with my son, daughter and my wife. Then I can say my life is back to normal, how long I must wait for this to happen? Right now I'm waiting for a year to get this wish to happen, after I get granted a British Citizenship.

I must say thank you to Roushin, for everything she has done for me, because she looks after me like a brother and because of her I started to improve my life. I must be very lucky to get to know her, to be honest with you. My question is that if this support wasn't with me, what would have happened to me? This weather is cold, 100% I would have died. Because of the accommodation and support I am receiving, I started to remember names, places that I forgot for many years. I saw Roushin more than my wife, more than my children. Roushin for me now like a great person. Because she feels my life and she always helps me. Anything she can do, she did.

When Corona started, everybody kind to each other, because this is crisis for everyone, like now with the Ukraine and Russia. Everyone came together to help Ukraine. This is humanity. Humanity is not for one person. Humanity is for everyone. So I'm talking to the government, please. I know England got its problems, but you accept me. Accepted someone like me, an asylum seeker. Please help more asylum seekers, to give them life, to give them normal life. Not leave them with nothing. Please give to Connection Support, because if you give help to Connection, they can help more people like me.

## Story 10: The hybrids

The people who helped me, at Crisis and St Mungo's – they are half human being and half angels. I call them hybrids! You feel when people think 'I just do my job and that's it. It's five o'clock, I go home.' No. They're doing something extra, you feel the heart, you feel the soul. Because anytime, if it's morning, evening, night-time, if I have any problems, I can ring and they jump.

They helped me when it started, the pandemic. Where I worked closed. I don't have enough money for rent and the landlord gives me two weeks. It was like the Wild West, I had nobody. My only option was stay on the street. My bank account was closed, and after a few weeks my ID was expired – my passport, no money means no chance to get a new one. I had nowhere to go, all doors were closed, everywhere.

And one day, a hybrid collects me from the street and they put me in a hotel. The hybrid people, they helped me. I think they are 75% angel and 25% human being, because they made me a bank account, they give me a room in a hotel, they helped me with clothes, with food. Connection Support went with me to the embassy in London, so now I have a passport. They went with me to hospital.

They changed my life, because when I was in the streets, I thought very seriously to commit suicide. I go in the forest and that's it, finished with my life. But then came the hybrids, and they changed my life completely, they give me hope, they give me power to move, to make one step, baby steps, slowly, slowly, slowly, but I think now it's going to be like Neil Armstrong said, 'One small step for a man, a big step for humanity.' And now, I hope next week, I start working again. It's gonna be completely different.

In my country, in Romania, I live in a village, I have a horse. I had a house on a hill. Sometimes when the cart was overweight, to let him to breathe a little bit, we stop. And after, I say, 'Come on, let's go together.' And I take the chain. When he saw me, we work together, it was more powerful. And that has happened with me. When I saw somebody trying to help me, they give me like a push, and after, you know, I feel ashamed to disappoint these people. I know they're doing their job, but they do it with heart, they do it with soul. Even if you are a joker like me, they do a good job. When they say 'What do you need?', I say 'I need a jacuzzi!' Okay, no chance for jacuzzi, but they do everything they can to help you.

You know, to be honest, when I lost my job, I was a little bit depressed. I don't have trust in anyone, I was just living on the streets, like that, shoplifting. When you have money, everybody is your friend, when you have no money, 'Bye-bye.' Nobody chooses to be homeless. But people didn't care I was homeless. They didn't care that I sleep in the street, or maybe I eat from bins. So when I met such friendly people and, you know, they aren't interested in your money, or if you have nothing, I was surprised. Slowly, slowly my mind started to change, I jump a little bit the depression. They treat me like a human being, and slowly I start to feel me again, like a human being. Because when I was on the street, the way I was talking to myself, 'I'm rubbish, I'm good for nothing, what's happened with my life?' It's no joke when everything is closed to you everywhere.

That's why I say the hybrids gave me again hope. They push me, actually, because the first time they saw me I was extremely introverted, you know, I don't want to see or speak to no one. Just stay in a room, watch TV. And slowly, slowly, once again, these people are trying to do something with you. I was like a wild animal, you know, like a wild dog. And slowly you make him stay. I saw that these people were working hard to help, not just to give you a room, no, they make contact. They found me a GP, and they give me treatment, everything, and they ring me to ask me, 'You take your medicine today?' And after I started thinking, 'Look, these people will really try to help you. Don't be an idiot.' Because I was very sceptical before, I didn't think something like that can happen. They give you rooms and that's it. And they're gonna treat me like rubbish. I saw no, they don't treat me like rubbish.

Before, I had some problems with alcohol, when I had no job or nothing. And they asked me if I have a problem with the alcohol. I said, 'I'm not alcoholic, but I like to drink.' They asked how much and I say, 'How much I can take!' So they sent me to a centre in Cowley Road. And they give me gum to stop smoking, because I'm a smoker. I try, but it's too late. I am 46 now and I started when I was 15. My father, he was a heavy smoker – he stopped smoking, and after two months he passed away. Only 43, young. That's why I'm scared to stop smoking!

When you feel somebody is helping you, you're able to do more. When you see something like that, that means you don't feel alone. I don't support Liverpool, who sing 'You'll never walk alone', I support Chelsea! But you don't feel alone. Any time, you can ring for any problem, and they help you, they jump, they jump like kangaroos! These hybrids are different, they feel like a family. Really. They're looking after me like a family. When it was my birthday, they gave me a card. I was nearly crying. After, in my room, I start to watch TV, but then I open again the card! I read again! I read it again and again. Even now I have it in my room. That meant more than if they gave me £1,000. Really. If they gave me £1,000, I wouldn't be so impressed and so happy like when they give me that card. It was something, it's something from here, the heart.

## Story 11: You are free

I came here from Afghanistan in 2015, when I was 16, and until 2022, I was waiting for my asylum case decision for many years. I couldn't even work. I couldn't do anything, no study, nothing. I went to so many interviews, you know, with the home office, court, it just gets... I was worried, always, my asylum case was just going in circles, and they refused me few times until last year 2022. Then they finally accepted and gave me status because of what was going on in my country Afghanistan as so many people were taken to the UK. Now, I'm just feel relaxed. I can work, I can build my life for the future, and it's much better.

The main thing that changed is my thoughts, you know? You feel depressed when you are waiting for something important in your life, especially when you can't work. I waited eight years. Then when you get this positive decision about your immigration case, you feel relaxed inside your body, your heart, your brain, everything felt so good! It's like you are inside the jail and you have been released. You are free, that's how I felt when I received my status.

Now, I can get a nice job, I can study, I can buy stuff, anything I want. And I can go on holiday, I want to see the world, a different environment, and different cultures. Before I was just stuck here in Oxford for few years. I really wanted to study but I couldn't because of my situation and now I just want to start my journey in this life. There're few things in my mind which I want to do, I'm going to choose something that I'm interested in doing and I can make money as well in the future. I'm thinking about becoming a plumber, a qualified electrician or gas inspector, things that are kind of working with your hands. I do a part-time job at the moment, in a café in Marston, Oxford. My friends work with me, and we have good time. I do delivery as well, everywhere around Oxford.

I would like to become a taxi driver soon. If you've lived in many places in Oxford, It'll be a bit easy for to pass the driving test – when I came here to Oxford, I lived in Blackbird Leys, then I moved to Summertown, After that to Botley Road, all around Oxford. Plumbers and taxi drivers, I think they're always needed whenever you're in the UK.

I have my own flat in Barton now, I have got it from Soha under their Direct Match Let project, I have a living room, one bedroom, kitchen, toilet, storage. And there's a nice park outside my living room window as I live on the ground floor. My flat is fully furnished now, likes my own home country's style. We sit on the floor. When I got the flat and because I was under 25, I received £3,000 from the council under the fund called "Unoccupied Young People Settlement Programme", so I bought new stuff for my flat to make it looks like a home in Afghanistan. Compared to when I lived before in a shared house with housemates, you must share everything with them. Sometimes you'd like something to be in a certain way, and your housemate would like it in a different way, so it doesn't work out all the time. Living alone you can make it your own place. The neighbours here in Barton are so nice, they don't make noises! They are families, they have kids. When I see them, they say 'Hello, hi!', we talk. No drugs or alcohol. I don't see neighbours running many parties, you know, It's calm area. And the place is quite open and green outside my living room window, it's so nice to live in my own flat.

Now I live alone I can bring food and cook whatever I like, when sharing a house with other people you know it's never the same. I cook, not every day, but like two, three days a week. Different food from around the world but mostly the way we cook back home. When you eat your traditional food from your country, it makes you feel good. Lamb with rice and salad and yogurt. I cook for myself, for my friends. I have so many friends, like more than 50 friends, from Afghanistan, Kurdistan, from England, from Pakistan, from Europe, from everywhere, from all over the world. I have friends from school, from college, and from cricket club.

I play cricket for East Oxford Team. It's so nice, it's exercise , and mind-refreshing too, and you see different people, you make different friends. I'm both a bowler and a batter. I'm not good like an international player, but I am good! My favourite is T20, where you play 20 overs, I only watch 50 overs when it's World Cup. It takes a long time, all day you need to watch. We play one match a week on Saturday in the summer, and we meet people from different cities every week. We play in Didcot, Brackley, we play in Oxford. We always have matches in the countryside. So, you see different places. So beautiful. Our club are in division two, then there's division one and then we play county. So hopefully we go up this year – if we win this season, two teams will go to division one, when you win division one, you play with county, and then you get paid as well. And in county, you play with international people, from England, from India, different countries, so you get a chance to play with them. So that's hopefully going to be in the next one or two years.

I think Oxford is such a nice place to live in, the people and the city itself. When I first came to UK, they brought me to Oxford, and since that time, I've been living here. I visit my brothers in Birmingham. They visit me, I visit them, but I go there more because they're older. In my country, younger people need to respect older people. So, if they come to you once, I go to them twice. When I visit them, I can't stay there long, I want to come back to Oxford. Maybe just because I'm used to it. The people are nice in Oxford, so respectful, educated, and there's less crime than other cities in the UK, and better services here, I think. Even with my asylum case, there are so many people who helped me a lot. Helena, at Asylum Welcome. And my key workers, you know, social workers, and my friends as well. My case worker Roushin from Connection Support helped me for the past two years, she helped me with everything – with my immigration case and housing me for two years, and when I moved to my flat in Barton, she and Fatima did everything for me. When you do something for the first time you don't know what you're doing. They put all bills under my name, helped me with the council. When I get stuck with something, I ask them. They're very good. Connection Support, their responsibility was to help me while I was waiting on my decision on my immigration case, and until now they're still helping me, especially Fatima. I think she's honest and truthful. She helped me with so many things.



Connection Support have always, always helped me. With money, stuff for the house, they helped me with most important things that we need in our lives which is having a place to sleep at. The main thing, I was worried about my asylum case all the time. I used to get depressed a lot because of that and thinking what's going to happen to me if my asylum claim gets refused again. I was just stuck in that time, you know, I couldn't work, I couldn't do so many things. When I got my status, I didn't need that intensive support. I said to myself that I'll handle everything, and I'll sort it out. I might need help in the future. It's sorted out now, and my house is sorted out as well, I've got my driving licence, I have a job. At the moment it's alright, the main things have been sorted out, so for the small things I don't need support moving forward. Now I can work, I can do whatever other normal people can do, I'm young, so I need to build my life. Connection Support don't need to worry about me anymore.

How much God likes me, I'm just trying to live my life, and to have a nice job, you know, to make money, to have a family, a wife, children. I like to pray and read Quran. When I was young, I didn't really care much about studying the Quran, but I couldn't understand it and I couldn't focus on it, I just wanted to play and have fun. But once you become a man and start to read Quran seriously, then it helps you in this life, it makes you better person. It gives you discipline about what can you do and can't. But also prepare you for the next life because you believe in God. You know, I love all people. When you go to the mosque, you see different people, different skin colours, from different countries. You just feel brotherhood, you know? Even if you don't know someone, even if you have never seen him, you just feel like his is your brother.

## Story 12: Start from one

I've been getting help from Crisis and Connection Support, and Asylum Welcome. I had a friend, Crisis was helping him out. When he heard my problems he said, 'Come on, Crisis can help you.' They connected me to Asylum Welcome, and Connection Support. So one help become two helps, you know?

I don't know how I can explain it to somebody else. If we're not in his shoes, you can't feel how hard it is. But these organisations, they've been everything for me, thank God, they've been helping. Connection gives me a place to sleep now, they pay my rent. I had no job – I was going to sleep on the street. But now they pay my rent, they give me some money for food, they pay for my bus ticket. I survive. My depression is calming down. If Connection didn't come, I was gonna be on the street, that was madness. But I was lucky and I got help now, thank God.

It's not easy. If you don't have nobody, it feels so hard, you know? Sometimes I feel like I don't want to talk to nobody, I switch off my phone, I want to be on my own. You feel like you don't belong anywhere. But help like this keeps you going. You believe that maybe something will come. I didn't know I was gonna get the place to sleep, and I got it, so maybe something else will come. That's what I keep believing, that something can be good one day.

I was so depressed, I used not to sleep. Where I was living before, the lady downstairs couldn't walk. She had a dog, so the dog peed in the house. The house smelled. This smell, you've never had a smell like this. She can't walk the dog, so the dog shits in the garden. If you put your clothes to dry on the line, they smell! I don't know what I'm stepping in. This house it was killing me. So when they gave me a place, I was so happy, I couldn't believe it. It was a Christmas for me. Now I sleep like a baby every time. Since then, I've been feeling better. The place where I live now is a nice clean place, it has a kitchen. I'm near the park. Sometimes you want to be on your own without nobody there, just in a quiet place like the park, and you sit there on your own, that's helped me a lot. Even my depression is calming down now. It's getting better.

If somebody like me has nowhere to sleep, nowhere to go, and people who don't know you, they help you, if you don't appreciate that, there has to be something wrong with you! Because where would I be? Without organisations like this life could be harder. And if you don't have help, you think too much, you think a lot of stuff, you know? Stuff like, 'If I die tomorrow, nobody gonna feel sorry.' I was thinking to do something to myself. I was fed up. I thought, 'If I die now, nobody gonna be sorry because nobody knows me.' But they are there, Crisis, Connection, they help people, and they listen. Talking to somebody makes you feel much better.

Life is hard, so hard. My friend who directed me here, he was sleeping on the street, he's been alcoholic, only 28 years old. But he's been taken away for rehab, and now I think he's gonna get help. Crisis is helping. He's got no family as well, he was like me. Sometimes I don't know how I do it. If you have no family, nobody you know, no one to run to if something happens to you, all you can do is go to your room and cry and then go out and pretend that everything's good.

I was 16 when I lost my family over there. Every time I think about it I cry again. You get tired of crying and you cry inside your heart. Life has not been easy for me. But I thank God I'm still alive. I've been here almost 20 years. It's been hard. When I came here, I did expect that everything here would be good. When I came when I was young, a man tried to rape me. But if I'd stayed there I would be dead, a long time ago. What is there? There is nothing there. When I come here, they give me life. It's hard, but organisations like this, they bring smiles to people's face, they make us believe that there is hope. I believe that one day is going to be better, one day is going to be better. I keep on thinking that.

I'm not in the best place, but I'm not where I used to be, you know? I got a nice place, they give me some money for food, I can sleep without thinking too much. And the medication I take, it's good as well. To go to ten, you have to start from one, this is my one. Somebody has to take pain, somebody has to be happy.

Sometimes I think maybe if I die I meet my Mum and Dad, maybe they are there. I'll never see my family again, that makes me cry. But it's my life, so if I do something wrong to myself, when I've got people giving me hope, God will never forgive me. They don't know me and they help me like that, that's a good heart you know? People to love you, not because you have a lot, not because they have attachment to you, but they just love you for you, and help you for you. That's good. It's been really good, I appreciate it. It's not easy dealing with different kinds of people, different mentalities. And some of them you're helping and they're taking their anger out on you. Everybody goes through different kinds of struggles and if you have your family, you can go and talk to them, but if you don't have family, like me, and an organisation helps, you take them as family. All that disbelief I had, thinking 'If I die, nobody's gonna feel sorry for me.' Now, I changed it. I say, 'If I die tomorrow, all the people helping me...' I can't say now that I don't have no family.

### Story 13: There's gonna be change

When I arrived to this country they took me up north to Middlesbrough. I came by lorry, in the back of the lorry. It was scary, but I mean, I have been through many things and this was just one of them.

I moved to Middlesbrough, then to Wakefield which is close to Leeds. Oxford was the third place. Sorry, the fourth place. I have been housed in Sheffield as well. In 2016 I was homeless for two months and I went there. Then from Sheffield I went back home to Iraq. I'm from northern Iraq, a region called Kurdistan.

I came back to England in March 2019 and I ended up here in Oxford. It was between London, Birmingham and Oxford, and they say there will be more opportunity. And obviously I heard about Oxford University, so I was like, it's gonna be a very educated place. You could meet or find the right people in the right time.

I was homeless, living in a park on Barns road. For a week I was in the sleeping bag, and then the Kurdish community helped me. I was with one gentleman for a while, for like seven or eight months until Connection Support housed me in Garsington. Asylum Welcome helped me as well. I'm grateful, because sometimes lives are up and down. You just have to look back and then you just realise you have everything now. They helped me a lot. Now I'm happy and I'm doing things in life.

Life is like a challenge. I like a challenge, I don't like something easy coming and easy going. From nothing to something is always good. Life is about how long we're gonna live. No one stays forever, I mean, I take it easy, so whatever - I try my best and we see how it takes us. I lost my father, and it was hard. It's hard to talk about when you lose someone you love. I hadn't seen him for long, for six years. And parents, parents are different. Families are very, very, very important.

I'm still not allowed to work, but it's kind of in process. I've got solicitors, like immigration advisors. And then yeah, it's a bit slow because it's legal aid, it's not private. So until I can work, my next step is just doing some casual things in life, just keeping myself busy. And then after, I could find my way. It's gonna be another change in my life, hopefully. I've been in this country over nine years, and I don't know what is gonna happen. What do you expect from me? If I don't work, what would I do? It's kind of hard when you do nothing.

I had some mental issues before, I was panicking or waking up. And the flashbacks are still happening. I am on medication, but I kind of want to throw it away, I don't want to get used to it. There's good people around me, I can talk to them. So yeah, it is just balance. I go to the gym, and sometimes I play football – Sunday league with my friends. I try to keep myself busy.

It's all about you in the end. You do not have to let yourself down, because it's life. All this time I was still okay, I knew there was a chance. Nothing happened – it's not forever, sad is not forever. I'm not jealous, you might get your break early and you're living your life. I live mine. We're all in the same queue, so it doesn't matter. There is gonna be change.

## Story 14: The key that opens the door

I've been through a difficult life, and this is a long story. I came to the UK five years ago, and I've been working hard to provide for myself and my family. I came here because I'm with haemophilia – my blood doesn't clot. And if I have an accident or anything, I'll probably be dead. It's not an easy life. Because no matter how strong you are, your body is weak. I come to this country to change my life for the better, because my country is not supporting me with medication. No matter how much I love Albania, I left for a reason. As a human being, you need to find a better way to live.

When I was 15 years old, I hurt my knee on my way to school. After five years the doctor tell me it's been broken all this time. My knee was swelling and I was in a lot of pain. I cannot bend it because of the haemophilia. It's been very hard for me working with the pain and working for people who pay me less. But I've been happy, because I have work, and money to survive. And finally, in December of 2022, I have full knee replacement.

Everyone has a moment in their lives where they don't have a choice, so you might have to do the wrong thing. I did apply for the visa. I go to the capital city, Tirana, and they told me I had to wait one year and pay like £1,000. And after one year, if you don't get the visa, you lose your money. I come from a poor family. But it's not about the money, it's about myself, and how I'm born in this body. Born with pain and suffering. I had a brain haemorrhage from the stress of people thinking I'm useless because I'm disabled. I was in a coma for 10 days. I had to have brain surgery. You can see the scar. So I came here the illegal way.

When people don't believe in me, or they think I'm not worthy to do anything, it's been more painful than my physical condition. I've been a very successful man, and I will be very successful man, and I'm fighting every day to become a better person. You don't need to judge anyone who has a disability, because that can destroy someone. I felt like I'm not worthy because of my disability. But I'm glad I'm breathing. Despite all these years, all this suffering, good people have helped me. My doctor, she is the most wonderful person who I met in my life. And I met a very, very good British family who I stayed with that are the most amazing people.

Some people think I come to this country to get benefits, but I can earn good money. I never taken benefits. Never one penny. At the same time, the government is starving every Albanian, and we are called criminals. But I don't think every Albanian is a criminal. Look at me. I was born how I am and I'm working five years in this country. I am driven by a purpose. I want to become the best man I can. If the UK gives me the right to live life, I can find any job and do what I'm free to do. I can provide, and I can tell this country I'm worth enough. I never wanted to get the benefits or anything. But my life and my condition is how it is now, and will be forever till the moment I die. I'm just trying to get right, to have a second chance for my life, because everyone deserves a second chance.

When I came to Oxford, I met someone, and we were in a relationship for two and a half years. But she disrespected me. She slapped me. I'm still talking with her and having coffee with her because I forgive her what she did, but I'm not going back anymore. She told me she would help with my visa. But I don't need a visa to be with someone. I don't use people. I don't need to be with someone to be legal in this country. She loved me and I loved her, but I didn't get the respect I wanted, and every penny that I earned I spent in that relationship. That is the reason why I was sleeping outside for two months.

Sometimes you just need someone to say a good word, like I'm proud for you, or I'm happy for you, everything's going to be alright. I never hear this stuff in my life. And this made me become very strong mentally. If you don't have no body and you don't have these things to support you, you need to tell yourself every day: You are worthy and you deserve the best and you can do it. You can do anything. This is what I tell myself every day. And while my body says no, I say yes. I can do it and here I am.

When I spoke to Asylum Welcome, they linked me with Crisis, who put me in contact with Connection Support. Eva From Connection Support has been the most kind and warm person. She listened to my story and everything. I'd been sleeping in a tent for two months, not taking my medication. And they got me a place and tried to help me with some money. I asked them for help and they supported me. And this is very amazing because I usually don't accept someone's help because I come here illegally. But sometimes everyone needs help, no matter who you are.

I've been grateful meeting these people from Connection Support. They're helping me with a lawyer to pursue my asylum claim. And I hope I will get the rights to find a job, because if I get more and more older, the haemophilia will be more and more hard. I see my body every day and I don't recognise sometimes where I hurt myself. I just see the bruises in my body, maybe from simply touching the table like this. And I think – I'm ill now, but in the future, how will I be? I want to work now, so I can have a good stable life in the future.

Now I have a room, and Connection Support are giving me £50 a week. They are there for you. You feel like you are not alone. And it's been very helpful for my mental health because I often think I'm on my own. But now I have these people and I feel good. I feel like home. They're giving me the most beautiful thing, which is not money, or the house, or the material things, but this kind of love – the feeling of family. You have someone to help you move on and take more steps. I'm like the little child doing their first steps. I don't know how to say thank you. But it's helping me emotionally. It has given me the strength not to give up. Connection Support gives you that belief. It's like a key, you open the door to move forwards. It was a real turning point in my life. They showed me that nothing is impossible. If you believe, you can get it. And now I have very good people around me. It's like we say in Albania, 'Tell me who are your friends and I'll tell you who you are.' If you have amazing people, like Connection Support, your life is changing for the better. You think differently. You think positive. And you feel powerful. Not the kind of powerful that destroys things, but the power to not give up.

## Story 15: Survivor

I never thought that I'm this strong, because of what I went through. I don't know how I overcame it. The problem that we have, especially us people that are coming from abroad, we're being exploited. When we got to this country, fear was instilled in us. When I was working, the only language that was spoken to me was: We are going to send you back to your country. We are going to report you to the Home Office. I didn't know my rights. But even if I'm a migrant, I have rights. There are so many people that are maybe in a similar situation. It's so sad, because some they end up taking their lives. If I didn't meet Connection Support, I always ask myself, where could I have been?

When you are on a visa, there are rules. Even if I can go to people's houses and say, can I just do laundry for you, I'd be breaking my visa. So there is no other way. I'm not allowed public funds, so if you are faced with a situation, it's so challenging that you need someone with a big heart and a support system. A support system from organisations like Connection Support, the community, the church, and family.

When I got to this country, the company that brought me here had me doing care work. It wasn't paying much, and I was bullied and exploited. When I lost this job, 15th December 2023, it was a blow to my life – I had no income, no savings, no nothing. My money had been from hand to mouth. It went on rent, food and transport. That was no life. One lady I knew through caring, she was kind enough to keep checking in on me. She even got her son to get me groceries when I found it hard to feed myself. I remember it was 10 minutes to 10 at night. She called me and said, my son is outside, meet him! He's got your groceries. I was shocked by how much stuff she bought for me. I was in tears.

During this time, I got in contact with a gentleman I'd met when working. He'd helped me when I was stuck in a village. The company had dropped me off there, I had worked a one-hour call, but then there was no transport to my next call. I was going to walk the seven miles, but this gentleman offered to drive me to my next call and then home. It was hard to trust a stranger, but I had no other choice. During the drive he told me about Anti – Slavery Initiative Oxford. When I got in contact with him again, he put me in touch with them and through them I eventually spent two weeks in a home with a host family. It gave me hope. It was my first time staying with strangers, but I never encountered any problem.

The Anti – Slavery Initiative Oxford got in contact with Connection Support, which is how I met Yana. When I met her, I was broken. I was about to start my two weeks with strangers. I didn't know what the future had for me. I couldn't even construct a sentence. But Yana, she kept on assuring me that everything would work out. We're going to get help. Connection Support found me somewhere permanent I could stay after the two weeks. I was excited to have accommodation but at the same time, I didn't know how the accommodation was like. When I was working with the company that brought me here, they moved me from Milton Keynes to Swindon, where six of us shared one room with only one bed. But when Connection Support showed me my new room, I couldn't believe it, I had a room all to myself! For the first time in history, this place, I'm going to call it home. I know it wasn't permanent, but I needed a place where I could just think. I couldn't even recognise myself at the time.

Connection Support came to my rescue. I really appreciate the help that I'm getting because right now, I've got accommodation, they helped me with transport, which is a bus pass, they even introduce me to the food bank from the pavilion. I am so grateful. And Yana is someone who keeps on assuring me that things will fall into place. I've achieved a lot, especially mentally, when I got here. I can see myself like a better person. The accommodation on its own made me see a better future ahead.

Every help that I'm getting from this organisation, it comes a long way. Yana referred me to other people, like Asylum Welcome, to see an employment adviser who could help me with my CV. At the time I was doubting my CV, as I wasn't getting any responses. But the person checked my CV and he said to me, from what I can see, there is nothing wrong with your CV. And through my conversation with him, there is nothing wrong with you. That was reassuring.

When I was in Africa, I used to go to gym. But here, I go for a run and then do my workouts. I can do anything with a chair. Because the bottom line is to keep me fit. I've also joined the knitting group on Fridays at the pavilion. In my entire life, I've never done knitting, but through the ladies there, they taught me how to knit. We knitting blankets for people from Ukraine. I'm around elderly people, but they're full of life. They ask if I've had any luck with jobs. And they put a smile on my face. So far, I've done about 20 pieces. We make small squares, and then every Friday there's another lady that joins them to make a blanket. It's interesting. I didn't even know that one day I can knit!

If I wasn't doing those activities and stuff, I don't know what could have become of me. I may be a victim now, but I'm not going to let that ruin me or define me. Even now, like when I'm still job hunting, I refuse to take myself as a victim. I consider myself as a survivor. Because if I manage to survive seven months without a steady income, you can't say that you're a victim, you're a survivor.

The only challenge that I'm facing right now, of course, is getting a job. But I know something's going to come up. I just want to think of positive things because that's the only way to survive. If I think of the negativity, then one day I won't be able to get out of my bed. But what I like to do is: I run, refresh my mind, come back home, take a shower, and tell myself that now I'm ready to meet the world. I remember when I was growing up, my mother used to say one thing that you must do is to take care of yourself. Perhaps my story can help someone who's going to be faced with a similar problem, because there's always light. If you dust yourself off and keep going, something's going to come up.

## **Story 16: Being positive is not easy**

If you do any job, there should be something important, something you enjoy. If you don't enjoy the job, just don't do it, do something else. Sometimes I think I should do a different job because everything will just flash back. But, where I started and where I am now, it's just a huge difference. I get the opportunity to help other people in need. For a person like me, I came with the similar situation, probably same as some of my clients. Dealing with vulnerable people, sometimes you can't enjoy that. But sometimes, because it's a part of the job, you have to accept it, and this is how you become a better person. I mean, I could explain little bit about what I do ... I work for Connection Support and I'm a support worker on the NRPF Project. I started in September 2021, left in May 2022 for another opportunity and then started with Connection again in September 2023. And I'm still here. Being a support worker is the most difficult thing because it reminds me of where I came from.

In the beginning, I just arrive in the country and I didn't know anyone. I didn't know how to speak English and I didn't know what to do. I was in Home Office accommodation in Birmingham and then Cardiff. I was volunteering with the Red Cross, they had a refugee support and they referred me to Sanctuary housing. That's how I got accommodation, while I was doing my submission. It was such a great help. When you're waiting for things, like settled status, it's a lot of time. I was planning my head, to exercise my brain rather than just get myself depressed. I was taking English and maths online courses and practising my English so it can help in the future. Also volunteering with organisations to help others, to gain experience, I just got involved. For me, I'm really glad I did such things, I have no regret. After I got my status, I heard Asylum Welcome were recruiting for a part-time job. I applied and was successful. I was with them for a while then got a job at Connection Support, so this is how I got started. Everything has paid off, because I had to stay positive. Being positive is not easy, but you just need to work hard.

Asylum seekers, basically, they have no right to work, no public funds, they cannot do anything. If someone doesn't help them, they will be on the street. The NRPF Project, this is 'no recourse to public funds', is for these people, as long as they meet the criteria. While they are gathering documents and completing submissions, they need temporary help. I currently look after about 9-10 clients. So with the daily support, I manage accommodation, register with the GP, open bank accounts, get them involved with Asylum Welcome – anything to make sure they're in good hands when they move on from the project. I would say that Connection is a really amazing organisation, they give opportunity to open doors for a lot of people. I can also refer my clients to other organisations, like the Old Fire Station and Crisis. Participating in such things for a good cause is always beneficial for me. Learning, gaining more experience and knowledge is important for my own benefit, not only for others. I can learn how to manage myself and how to deal with problem solving issues. If someone comes to me, I know how to help.



One client was very difficult. He was not a patient person and was going crazy waiting for his status. He was shouting and disrespectful, a few times I had to raise it to my manager. But that doesn't mean that I will leave that person alone, I'm still gonna help him. Mentally, I went to zero and sometimes in the night I was thinking 'How to communicate better? How to build a relationship with the client?' His mental health I deal with, I had probably the same in the past. When the relationship breaks down, it's so difficult to bring it back, but somehow I did bring it back. It's the most important thing – building relationships and communicating with the clients. He got his status and then he moved on from the project. In the end he felt how bad he treated me, even though I was just supporting him.

With a little support you can make big difference. For me, it's important to improve someone else's life, because they are vulnerable. If someone like me in such an organisation doesn't come to you, what are you going to do? Would I let you die in the street? No. Man, no one chooses to be vulnerable, to be on the street and suffer mental health too. I'm probably still suffering from what happened in the past and I do things that will make my mental health stable. I'm glad to have a few people around me so I can keep my head clear. Connection has given me the environment to have good communication. I have mental health training to keep myself balanced, which is important in my daily life. Connection offers meditations and some other things. I can discuss my mental health – it's such a benefit.

Being a support worker, mentally I try to not take anything from workplace to home. To make my mind clear and to not think about it. But sometimes it's not easy, it would just come to my mind. To keep me stable I exercise, like play football or go walking. I especially like running. I never took any medicine, sport is the best thing and something I do enjoy. If you want to go for a run or walk in the park, don't sit and say 'Yeah, I will do it', but then you don't do it, just get out there! Is really difficult starting, but as soon as you finish, you feel amazing. At Connection I'm in a running group and go to staff gatherings. There is a team spirit, an opportunity for volunteering to gain some experience if I don't have any. Or, if I'm happy to help, to do something that I enjoy and want to learn from. If I didn't do exercise, communication, volunteering and getting to know more people, if I didn't do any of this, you never know where I will be. I would probably still be in the street, or dead or something.

Without having status, there's a lot of things you can't do, like having a driving license. I've got my driver's license now and I drive around for work because of course I need to visit clients. I'm also able to visit my friends, so it's making my life better. It's not easy coping with life sometimes, I just have to get used to it. I have to stay away from the people who make me feel bad all the time, or they make me feel that I'm not good enough. I have to believe in myself. Since I started with Connection Support, I've learnt to be more positive and be careful to not take everything personal. I make sure I take care of myself, otherwise it will affect my mental health. I just relax and whenever I struggle with something, I go to my colleagues and I always get opinions, so I can do things in the best way possible.

Through Connection, there are really good opportunities to keep myself balanced. If I need meditation, wellbeing, good mental health – I know where to go because its already provided. It's also free, which is really important. We sometimes have meditation events for all the staff, so doing it together as one. We have upcoming football charities too and raise money. A few of us, we gather together and participate as a team, it's such a good thing. I did two half marathons for Sanctuary housing and raised a good amount of money, like over a grand both times, and for such good cause. When you get help with something, there's always the mentality to want to give something back. Connection Support cares about me. If the organisation doesn't care, there's just no reason to stay. I mean, if they don't care about my wellbeing or mental health or anything – I'm just dealing with everything by myself, I'm just standing alone.

## Story 17: When you're there for somebody

I'm a senior support worker for the No Recourse to Public Funds project here at Connection Support. Our role is frontline, working with the clients to help them overcome issues, resolve their immigration status and move on when ready.

No two days are alike. One day I'm talking to an MP (Member of Parliament), the next day I am buying a mop and a bucket and cleaning rooms. It's just part of the job! I don't find it tricky or beneath me. At the end of the day, I am here to help, not judge, show authority or tell clients what to do.

I used to be an administrator for the HR team at Connection Support. The No Recourse to Public Funds opportunity came up and I thought "maybe it's time for me to change my life direction, do something different?". I still use my admin skills, but it's a very different experience.

I've always been interested in people, what makes them tick, how to build rapport, get to know them and help. Some of the clients are very mistrustful, it's understandable, they have been let down on so many levels, like every person, they have good days and bad days. Sometimes we all have a bad day and that's perfectly normal. Deep down, we are all the same, we have our aspirations, that makes the job interesting.

We support clients with no right to work. Sometimes, they have been in that situation for many years, and that is a struggle they have to overcome. I have been through immigration myself, but my process was never that challenging. I was able to work, I had recourse to public funds. I was compelled to help those people and work with them, because it's unfair. The trauma with some of them, what they've been through, is incredible.

We try to get to know the person and establish together what they need and how we can work towards that. We talk a lot, we meet a lot. Every individual has different challenges to overcome, it is not always easy. Sometimes people don't want to let you in or are stuck in their ways. Sometimes it's the age of the people we support. The most important thing is that we're there to help. Challenges are part of everyday life, but nothing is impossible.

We've had people who are still with us since the beginning of the project and only now, just now we see a glimmer of hope that their immigration status can be resolved. It takes time. The system does not work quickly. It's not built to be understanding, unfortunately. There are people who have applied to the Home Office, numerous times, but those applications have failed for one reason or another. For the person receiving that rejection letter, it's the end of the world. Those people don't want to rob somebody or receive benefits. They just want a place they can afford and a job to provide for themselves.

Even in their hour of need, people don't ask you for much. That has been an eye opener. Just because they're not saying anything doesn't mean that you don't see the pain. There was a person living in a van, and I thought "I'll just jump on the bus and go and see how he's doing". It broke my heart when I saw him because he was not in a good place. I said, "what can I do for you", and he said, "can you just buy me a cup of coffee?" It stayed with me, and it must have stayed with him. To this day he says, "you saved my life". Somebody might say "Oh, you're being dramatic!", but he wouldn't have lasted if he were to continue like that.

You always want the best for people, but at the end of the day they're adults. You can't take their choice away. You are hoping in time, they understand that you're not there to harm them and only want to do what's right by them. You just keep showing up, don't give up.

I learned a lot about my people skills, de-escalation skills. I've always been an empathetic person. But seeing that first-hand, I not only sympathise, I can see the world through their eyes. I'm very grateful because, yes, life is challenging, but the most important thing is to be grateful for the little things in life. We've been granted another day, cherish it! Even if I have a broken zip on my jacket, I still have a coat, some people don't have that!

Many of our clients have received status in the last year. As lovely as it is, it is also very overwhelming for those people. Can you imagine being in that situation? You haven't seen your children and your family in 20 years? Suddenly you have the right to go and see them and come back. What do you do with yourself? It's a feeling of euphoria and "oh my goodness, what happens to me now?" It is chaos until everything settles.

That's the beauty of the role, the reason why we're never bored!

Upon resolving their immigration status, clients have a certain time frame to move on from the project. Sometimes it is extra challenging when the Home Office doesn't deliver their documentation in a timely manner. Our work together is based on communication, understanding and flexibility.

We don't support more than 21 clients at any given time. I have about 10 to 11. It is a lovely team. I'm grateful and very lucky. The three of us, we complement each other with different blend of qualities that we bring to the table. The job is challenging, it's important to have the right people around you. Nobody wants to be the person asking for help, but sometimes you need it. How can you support other people if nobody's supporting you? I'm there for them and they're there for me.

Our old office used to be in Cowley. It was a totally different environment. It was pre-Covid and I look back at those times fondly. There were people coming in and out of the office, and there was always a laugh. Connection Support is a larger organisation now, has a larger and more – modern office space in Oxford, a different type of environment, but still offers the same flexibility and sense of belonging. There are many different projects in the organisation, but there's always somebody to say "hello" to, catch up with, help you with advice.

I am a sensitive person and tend to take things to heart. It has been a work in progress, finding the off button, I care immensely. Always keep your professional boundaries, we're not friends, I am here as a support worker. I learned that in order to preserve my ability to help, I need to stop and switch off mentally. Somebody wise told me once that I need to learn to compartmentalise. When the day is done, you don't stop caring for those people, but you need to look after yourself too. Life doesn't stop, and you have another life outside of work.

The world is a harsh place and it's important to be grounded, to be in the present and help each other. Maybe I'm biased, but this is one of the greatest projects at Connection Support. It has a great meaning, I'm really happy to be here. It's such a wonderful feeling, to be there for somebody. To be there, when they have nowhere to turn and you're able to help.

The No Recourse to Public Funds project is not funded by a statutory organisation, so there is always a question of funding. I do hope that now, in year four, our funders, present and future, can see the results and how great this initiative is, because it really is. I hope we can continue for as long as we can, we are needed, we make a difference.