

NRPF Storytelling - interim Storytelling Report, August 22

Introduction

Storytelling is an evaluation approach based on the Most Significant Change technique, which involves collecting stories from participants about their experience of a project, and then analysing these stories in a participatory way to understand what we can learn from them. Over the course of the No Recourse to Public Funds project, the Old Fire Station are working in partnership with Connection Support to lead a Storytelling evaluation, which will help to capture and understand the impact of the project through collecting and discussing people's stories. This will inform part of Connection Support's wider monitoring and evaluation for the project.

To support learning following the initial 16 months of the project, the Old Fire Station Storytelling team collected stories from 6 people involved in different ways in the NRPF project, including both staff and clients. These individuals had conversations with a story collector about their experience of the project and what it has meant for them personally. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights into impact and significance, while keeping their 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words. On August 15 2022, colleagues from the NRPF project, along with wider project partners, came together to discuss the six stories collected and what we can learn from them at this stage of the project.

The session was divided into two discussions. The first focused on people's first impressions of the stories – what struck them on an initial reading – as well as any themes that seemed to be emerging. The second involved each group in the session focussing on a different aspect of the project:

- Providing secure accommodation
- Collaborating and working in partnership
- Supporting people to be independent

This brief report outlines the key learning from these conversations, which will inform the development of the project going forward.

What struck people on reading the stories? What threads and themes are emerging?

Reflections on the Storytelling approach

- People were struck by how human, authentic and person-centered the stories were. They are able to reflect the complexity of people's lives and contextualise their experience of support.
- The stories were also able to reflect long-term impact, something that could be utilised more over the course of the project to capture people's stories at different stages.
- The Discussion Session provided a valuable opportunity for partners to come together, pause, and reflect on their experience and learning to date.
- The stories don't currently capture the challenges and what hasn't gone well.
- Going forward, there is a need to capture the voices of more women clients involved in the project.

- It would also be good to capture people's experiences at different stages in the project - perhaps some individuals stories could be collected multiple times over the course of the project.
- The discussion raised questions about how the project could collect stories from people who are still waiting, or who have had a less positive experience, and how it might create an environment in which critical feedback feels safe.

Threads and themes emerging

The wide range of experiences that had led to people becoming 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...When I come to Oxford in 2019, I didn't have anyone. I was sleeping in the road, the park. (Story 1)

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. (Story 3)

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 we were there. (Story 4)

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. (Story 6)

The devastating effects of homelessness and having 'no recourse to public funds' on mental and physical health, in particular the impact of indefinite delays.

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, or 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 to continue to fight against their asylum refusal and appeal it. A lot of people are successful in overturning their refusal, so there's not much faith in the justice of the system. (Story 2)

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. (Story 4)

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.' (Story 1)

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. (Story 6)

The central role of housing in creating stability.

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 a house. (Story 1)

Here is much better – it's a house, and I have two other friends here. We have known each other 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. (Story 4)

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. (Story 5)

So the housing has given me a second lease of life. Shelter is one of the most basic human requirements, isn't it? (Story 3)

The importance of professionals working together to meet a range of needs.

And so during [the pandemic] 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 long term about this group. (Story 2)

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. (Story 1)

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...So they're all working very closely together, you can't really tell who is in charge of this and that, but they're all helping. (Story 3)

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 then 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. (Story 6)

That comprehensive, long-term support made people feel valued, and improved their health, confidence, self-esteem, and independence.

For me, it was like, 'Wow, look at these people taking so much time and effort just for me! It's had the effect of improving my self-esteem. When you are in the dark place in your life, your self-esteem is no longer there, you just don't feel self-worth at all...Now I can relax mentally, and try to piece together my fragmented life...I've got to become a productive member of society, it's important to me. (Story 6)

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. (Story 1)

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 am 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. (Story 3)

Like Connection Support...They help me with everything. They answer very quick, you know, if you have any questions or have anything to say they answer ... 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. (Story 4)

Listening, and treating people with kindness, respect, and sensitivity is fundamental to building trusting relationships and providing effective support.

These people, the staff in Connection Support, they help, they're working hard, they're professional – but also, they speak to me nicely ... When people respect you, they speak to you nice, you feel happy. For me it's important. I'm happy with these people. (Story 1)

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! (Story 5)

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. (Story 3)

I would love it if [this project] 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. (Story 2)

Effective support can then become the basis for a full, free life, for developing a sense of home, and for thriving rather than merely surviving.

I want to do so many things, I want to make my life here normal, you know, like people do in Oxford. I was studying, a long time ago. (Story 4)

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. (Story 1)

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!' But I'm out of that hole now and I'm really looking ahead. I actually don't feel sixty anymore, I feel forty! (Story 6)

The place I'm living, it's more than a shelter, it's become a home. So they provided me with a home, they provided me with a theatre to express myself intellectually...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 achieve what you want to achieve in life.' It's phenomenal. It's nice. (Story 3)

Discussion 2: Three areas of focus

Each group discussed a different area of focus, how it was discussed in the stories, and learning from this going forward. These areas were:

1. Providing secure accommodation
2. Collaborating and working in partnership
3. Supporting people to be independent

1. Providing secure accommodation

The stories reinforce how central secure housing is in giving people a sense of stability, and enabling people to feel valued respected, and able to move forward with their lives.

Some key points of discussion around providing secure accommodation included:

- There are challenges in balancing the needs of those who are waiting to move in, with the stability and comfort of those now securely housed. Questions were raised around how to ensure people don't become 'too comfortable' once housed and are supported to continue addressing issues relating to immigration status and work, and develop full independence.
- Related to this point is a question about managing the process of moving people on – how and when to do this.
- This led to suggestions that the wording of the licensing agreement was central to managing people's expectations, as well as the need for a generalised behavioural policy.
- It was suggested that St Mungo's could offer training to the NRPF team in managing moving people on and having difficult conversations.
- The discussion identified the need for more emergency beds, as well as the need for more long-term options for women.
- The stories also reflected different experiences of Canterbury House, which led to a conversation about whether this was experienced as secure accommodation for all.

2. Collaborating and working in partnership

The success of the project to date is in large part a testament to the collaboration and care of partner organisations. Some key points of learning around partnership to date include the following:

- The stories showed that some clients had a comprehensive understanding of the collaborative nature of the NRPF project and the different partners involved (whilst others to a lesser extent).

- Introducing clients to the project through a partner they already had a relationship with helped to build trust quickly.
- Collaboration between partners was underpinned by good communication, regular meetings and excellent project management.
- There was clarity amongst partners about respective roles and responsibilities on the project.
- Regular meetings meant work could be discussed in a client-centred way, resolving dilemmas between individual organisations in ways that best meet the needs of clients.
- It was also seen to be important that people's needs were prioritised over simplistic professional targets, and that this required good communication and flexibility.

3. Supporting people to be independent

Across all the stories people express a desire to live independently. Some people describe feeling independent and free for the first time, and the new agency that secure housing has given them – from being able to make a sandwich in the middle of the night, to being able to pursue new interests, and opportunities to contribute to society going forward. Some key discussion points around supporting people to be independent included:

- The discussion addressed the question of how those supported by the project cope with independence after they have been moved on from direct support – in particular with keeping up with ongoing responsibilities such as bill paying.
- This led to a question of whether anybody had received 'too much' support, and had become dependent on charitable organisations to the detriment of their own independence.
- Participants also suggested that it would often be beneficial for individuals receiving support to have a better understanding of the immigration and asylum process.
- The discussion also covered the impact on others in group accommodation of a lack of independence on the part of one individual.
- The stories illustrated how when people's basic needs are met, they are more able to focus on seeking personal fulfilment and contributing to their local community and society.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The stories bring to life what the NRPF project has meant for those involved over the first 16 months of delivery. They show the devastating impacts of homelessness and NRPF on people's lives, and the central role that secure housing can play in helping people to find stability – control over their lives, social connections and somewhere they can call home. They show the degree of detail, thought and care that has gone into providing support that feels welcoming, human and responsive to individual need, and that this has enabled people to feel supported, valued and seen. Underpinning all of this is a commitment from all partners towards collaboration and person-centred ways of working. The Discussion Session brought to light some of the challenges for the project over the coming phase – how to manage people moving on from services, ensure there is housing available to respond to need, and how to support people to become more independent.

The process has also shown the power of stories in communicating people's experiences in their own voice in words. There is a need going forward to capture a wider breadth of experiences from different stages in the process, and from more diverse demographics.

Over the coming few years we look forward to continuing to collect and learn from the stories collected, and using this to understand the impact of the project through the voices and words of those at its very heart.

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 Oxford 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 the dentist, 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

With thanks to:

The storytellers: for sharing their stories.

The story collectors: Sarah Cassidy, Simon Garrood, and Will Long.

The transcribers: Caitriona Dowden, Steve Hay, Emma Joynson, Isabella Lill, and Sarah Wilkinson.

The story editors: Sofia Smith-Laing has edited all the stories to date.

And all who attended the discussion session: Temitayo Adepoyigi, Roushin Bagdash, Fatima Beshir, Eva Brown, Simon Dawson, Karen Ferguson, Dipen Parekh, Elouise Powell, Yana Sofronieva, and Ellie Alway-Thomas.

Written by Will Long and Sarah Cassidy, Old Fire Station, Oxford, August 2022