



REFUGEE
YOUTH
SERVICE

REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

2023

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INTRODUCTION

It has been another successful year for Refugee Youth Service's (RYS). Our work throughout 2023 continued to focus on the UK, in response to the alarming number of age-disputed children housed in Home Office hotel accommodations meant for adults. As a result, we launched a new piece of work called the "No Children in Hotels" project. Meanwhile RYS continued to roll-out its Journey with an Unaccompanied Child capacity building training programme, reaching new parts of the country and individuals from a growing range of professions and occupations.

This took place in an increasingly hostile political context, with the *Illegal Immigration Act* (termed the anti-refugee laws) receiving royal assent in July. The government's plans to send 'illegal migrants' to Rwanda to make their asylum claims were hampered when the Supreme Court deemed it to be illegal, however at the end of the year the Safety of Rwanda Bill sailed through its second reading in the House of Commons. A range of experts from different sectors and professions have commented that there is little point in having a supreme court if a government can simply create new legislation to override a ruling that is not in its favour. One senior lawyer compared the government's action to legislating that 'black is white, and white is black'.

RYS continued its role as an intermediary funder for Comic Relief as part of its Across Borders grant originally secured in 2020. EPCAT France, which entered its third and final year of funding under this grant, continues to provide emergency support to unaccompanied children on the move in northern France. Additionally, RYS continued to support its sister organisation Velos Youth in Greece, with funding and in-kind support. Notably the Living the English Language programme, started at the end of 2022, has been a huge success. With support from RYS, Velos Youth has built a library at its day centre in central Athens, and is operating a comprehensive English language teaching programme.

This comprehensive annual report delves into the intricate details of each initiative, emphasising RYS's direct engagement with children and young people in the UK. As we conclude this report, we invite you to explore RYS's aspirations for the upcoming year. These ambitions reflect our ongoing commitment to adapting and evolving in response to the dynamic needs of the refugee youth arriving in the UK.

OUR STORY TO DATE

Refugee Youth Service (RYS) supports unaccompanied children and young people to restart and rebuild their lives where they are, or safely and legally reach an alternative destination that is in their better interests. Our work aims to resume childhoods, bring an end to perilous journeys, and foster a smooth transition to adulthood. This is achieved through a range of activities which take place within safe spaces or as part of community outreach and street work. A holistic approach is taken to meet the broad and unique needs of unaccompanied children and young people on the move.

The organisation was founded in the Calais jungle in 2016 where it supported over 1000 children through the provision of a safe space and wrap-around services. In 2017 RYS expanded its work and opened the first ever safe space on mainland Greece for displaced children and young people on the move. From 2017-2021 a team of 20+ staff supported on average 1200 young people per year across the two countries.

To achieve this RYS founded a new sister organisation in Greece, Velos Youth, which is now largely independent from RYS with its own local mission and diverse funding portfolio. Velos Youth received the Ockenden International Prize in 2021, in recognition of its work supporting young people to become autonomous.

Collectively, these organisations have

built the skills and capabilities in child protection and youth work of over 50 individuals with lived experience of forced displacement, and have directed approximately £4m towards the welfare of displaced children and young people.

Following a strategic decision to reposition itself to support unaccompanied children and young people arriving alone in the UK, RYS handed over its operations in France to ECPAT France in 2021, along with a three-year grant. Subsequently, RYS introduced its capacity-building training initiative titled "Journey with an Unaccompanied Child," which has since been delivered to over 500 individuals who support unaccompanied children and young people in the UK. The training imparts the expertise garnered from eight years of fieldwork, enabling professionals, practitioners, and communities to offer optimal care to children arriving alone in the UK.

In the summer of 2023 RYS stepped-up its work in the UK in response to the hundreds of age-disputed children living in British Home Office hotel accommodations. The 'No Children in Hotels Project' is creating a significant and lasting impact on the lives of children who would otherwise be forgotten about. This annual report includes the project's key successes, developments and ongoing challenges, and shares RYS' plans for the future.

NO CHILDREN

IN HOTELS

PROJECT



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PROJECT METHODOLOGY

In the specific context of children seeking asylum in the UK, age is increasingly being wielded as a tool to exclude them from the support and protection that is rightfully theirs. A substantial number of children face the ordeal of having their ages questioned by border officials upon their arrival in the country, subsequently being erroneously categorised into the adult framework.

Despite the British government's repeated claims of widespread instances of adults falsely posing as children, research from a number of well-established independent organisations has contradicted this narrative with facts and evidence.

Findings from one 2023 report titled *Disbelieved and Denied: Children seeking asylum wrong treated*

as adults by the Home Office (H4RN & Helen Bamber Foundation) revealed that in 2022, more than 800 children were inaccurately treated as adults by the Home Office. This resulted in them being placed in solitary accommodations alongside unknown adults or detained in immigration facilities, denying them the extra care and support they need, and putting them at significant risk.

RYS is therefore supporting as many children as possible to challenge the age they have been given, and enter the appropriate care setting. RYS provides emotional support during this process, and access to legal support where necessary. The project takes place across Berkshire and London and can be broken down into the following three domains.

ACCESS TO RIGHTS

Outcome

Children are moved from dangerous and unsafeguarded living situations, into suitable children's accommodation/care structures where they access their rights as children.

Activities

1. Identify children and provide them with information on their rights
2. Refer children to the local authority responsible for transferring them to suitable accommodation and starting the age-assessment process
3. Refer children to pro-bono lawyers and support them until all attempts to access their rights have been exhausted

IMPROVED WELLBEING

Outcome

Children feel reduced loneliness and isolation, and improved wellbeing. Children start to feel part of the community around them and cope better whilst their cases progress.

Activities

1. Regular presence of and communication with an RYS Social Worker
2. Regular presence of RYS team members/session workers who have lived experience of forced migration and the asylum system in the UK
3. Development of the child's support network through direct referrals and sign-posting to local services and activities (e.g. youth groups, sports clubs and libraries)
4. Delivery of group activities away from the adult hotel accommodations, where children can build connections with other children suffering similar circumstances.

CAPACITY-BUILDING

Outcome

Increased capacity of local place-based services (e.g. youth groups, sports clubs and libraries) to support unaccompanied children.

Activities

1. Facilitate children's access to local activities and services, some of which have not been accessed before by children living under such challenging and unique circumstances
2. Support services and activity providers to work through any identifiable access barriers, such as language and bureaucratic issues (for example the absence of a legal guardian)
3. Deliver RYS' Journey with an Unaccompanied Child capacity-building training to these groups, to help them understand the journeys and common experiences of unaccompanied children, and how they can best welcome and support them.

IMPACT

The project was officially launched at the start of April 2023. Six-months on RYS is proud to present a number of significant successes and developments, including both operational and programmatic elements, and quantitative and qualitative data. Above all we are happy to share the case studies of two particular young people, which whilst having very different outcomes highlight how RYS interventions are creating significant and lasting impact in the lives of young people.

So far the project has supported a total of 10 young people, with each initially visited weekly at their accommodation. Of these 10 young people, three referred themselves, one was referred by the accommodation provided and the remaining six from four different non-governmental organisations. Referrals initially came in slower than expected, and therefore significant time was spent on promoting the service now provided by RYS. This took place via social media, direct communication with organisations in Berkshire and by visiting hotels and making staff aware of our presence. By the start of September, however, the project was running at full capacity and the decision was taken to stop accepting new referrals.

The table on the following page gives a case-by-case overview of RYS' interventions and outputs throughout the period. Interventions vary from young person to young person according to their needs and to the duration of time they have been supported by RYS. Of the young people supported so far, one has been successfully recognised as a child, four have their age-disputes ongoing, whilst four unfortunately were discontinued on the advice of lawyers or because young people could not face the strain of court action.

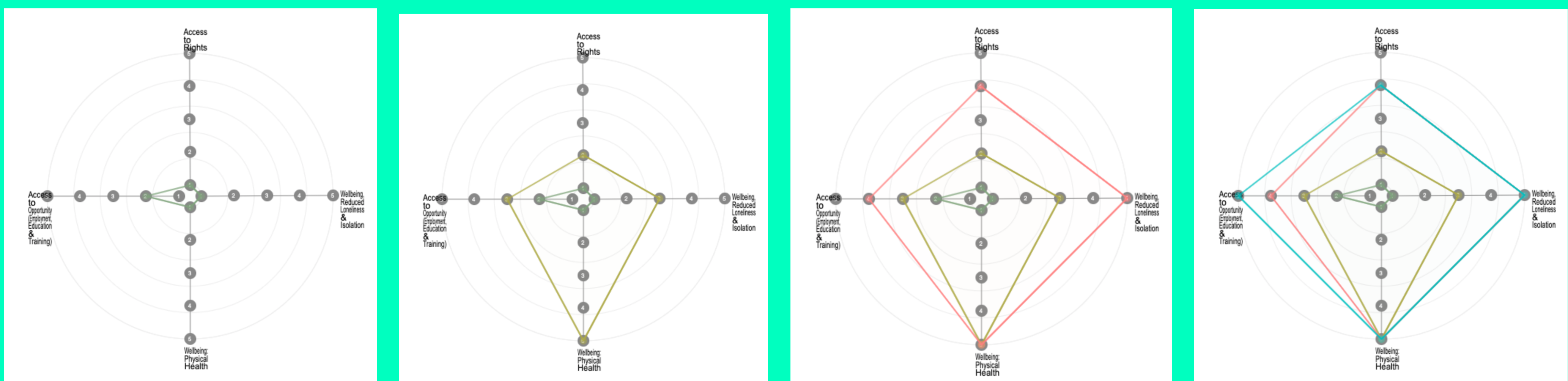
As the data below shows, even where age-dispute cases have not been resolved, young people have taken major strides in other areas such as health, wellbeing, education and integration.

PROJECT OUTPUTS TABLE

APRIL - SEPTEMBER	COMMUNICATION				SUCCESSFULLY REFERRED TO:							ACCOMPANIED TO:			OPINION STATEMENT PRODUCED?	
CASE NUMBER	VISITS	REMOTE	ASYLUM LAWYER	AGE-DISPUTE SOLICITOR	HEALTH SERVICES	MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES	LOCAL ACTIVITY PROVIDERS	FURTHER EDUCATION	LAWYER	HEALTH SERVICE	LOCAL SERVICE/ ACTIVITY	OPINION STATEMENT PRODUCED?	AGE-DISPUTE STATUS			
001	7	24	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	ONGOING			
002	4	55	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	UNSUCCESSFUL			
003	5	17	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	UNSUCCESSFUL			
004	4	9	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	ONGOING			
005	3	52	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	ONGOING			
006	6	18	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	ONGOING			
007	2	8	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	SUCCESSFUL			
008	2	18	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	UNSUCCESSFUL			
009	1	5	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	UNSUCCESSFUL			
010	3	5	Y	N/A	N	N	Y	N/A	N	N	N	N/A	N/A			
TOTAL:	37	211	6	5	4	2	6	5	4	4	2	4				

In order to track outcomes and impact, as well as the above outputs, RYS introduced the *Lamplight* case management system to the project. Lamplight has been used by RYS in other locations and was deemed to be well suited to the project's needs. Every interaction and action is recorded on the system, allowing RYS to maintain a full case history for each young person, as well as produce reports and data that evidence the breadth and depth of the support provided.

Most notably, the system employs an outcome tracking tool with four different 1-5 scales that become points on a diamond (see Appendix 1 for full details). The project's Social Worker periodically reviews the progress of each young person, from which a diamond is drawn, and re-drawn. Over time this creates a visual representation of the progress of each young person, which can be presented to them and acts as a motivational reminder of the progress they have made. The diamonds below show the progress made with one young person over a period of five months, whilst the table beneath them gives the aggregate impact data for all young people across the four outcome areas.



OUTCOME AREA	AVERAGE CHANGE	% W/ INCREASE	% W/ NO CHANGE	% W/ DECREASE
ACCESS TO RIGHTS	2.3	100%	0%	0%
WELLBEING: ISOLATION & LONELINESS	1.6	71%	29%	0%
WELLBEING: PHYSICAL HEALTH	2.0	67%	23%	0%
ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY	1.3	100%	0%	0%

As the table shows, the approach developed and deployed by RYS over the 6-month period has been hugely successful, with the majority of young people moving forward on all four scales.

CASE STUDY

BACKGROUND

Keje is an unaccompanied child from Eritrea, who had been assessed as 3 years older than his actual age upon arrival in the UK. He was introduced to us in May 2023 by his solicitor, who was concerned about his mental health and general wellbeing.

Because of the age-dispute, he had been living in an adult hotel for 7 months, during which he never left his room because he was scared of going outside. He initially went through some serious troubles sleeping, caused by aggressive behaviour by other residents in the corridor of the hotel, which kept him up to physically hold the door shut.

During our first meeting with him, we found a safe space to talk about his concerns, needs, and struggles. He confirmed to us the solicitor's view about his feelings of isolation. In addition to feeling hopeless as a result of being denied his rights as a child, his mental health was further affected by what the social worker said to him during the age-assessment process: "You look older than my son who is 30".

INTERVENTIONS

- Maintained regular contact, either in person or over the phone;
- Held face-to-face individual meetings to monitor safety and provide emotional support;
- Raised his safety concern with the hotel manager who explained that the door locked automatically from the inside, enabling him to finally sleep through the night.
- Introduced him to other age-disputed children in the area, and organised outdoor group activities, including walks, playing frisbee, card and board games;
- Referred him to a youth football club and shared information about free services in the area, as well as spaces to hang-out, such as the local library;
- Maintained regular contact with his solicitor and provided a witness statement detailing the reasons why we believed him to be a child.

OUTCOMES

The witness statement we issued was crucial to provide new evidence for Keje's age assessment appeal, together with a witness statement from another independent social worker. The judicial review was successful and the Local Authority eventually accepted Keje's age. By this time, he had already turned 18, but because he was incorrectly assessed as an adult whilst being underage, he is now entitled to leaving care support until he is 25 years old.

Keje's solicitor said he reported feeling much better after our involvement in his life. The time spent playing games at the local café, acquiring new skills, exchanging ideas, and getting to know the surrounding area together improved his mental wellbeing and self-confidence. When, right after a group activity at the park, he was asked to rate his happiness on a scale from 1 to 5, he said: "Obviously 5!".

CONCLUSION

Keje's case shows the importance of early intervention and support for age-disputed children. Keje was very isolated and scared when he first came to us, but with our support and partnership working, he was able to build relationships, improve his well-being, and access the care he needed. Keje is now living in supported accommodation for young people, where he will have a personal adviser and a care plan, a periodic assessment of his needs, and regular visits from children services. We are delighted that we were able to make a positive and long-lasting difference in his life. Keje's smiles and gratitude towards our work is what gives us the strength and motivation to keep standing alongside unaccompanied age-disputed children and advocate for their rights.

"THANK YOU VERY MUCH. I WILL NEVER FORGET YOUR GOOD DEEDS."

"THANK YOU FOR TAKING CARE OF ME AND HELPING ME. I REALLY APPRECIATE YOU. I AM VERY COMFORTABLE NOW."

OPERATIONAL PROGRESS

The project itself has also undergone a number of developments since securing its initial seed funding from the Blgrave Trust. Most notably the project has secured funding from two further sources; The City Bridge Foundation and the Hilden Charitable Fund.

With these extra resources RYS has been able to enhance the delivery of the project in Berkshire as well as begin the expansion of the project into London. Specifically, RYS has undertaken the following:

1. Recruited five session workers in different locations across Berkshire and London. Three of these session workers are able to speak languages spoken by the children: Arabic, Farsi, Pashto and Urdu.
2. Established a relationship with Clear Voice interpreting services, for when remote translation is needed, or a session worker with the right language is not available to join.
3. Developed a partnership with Slough Refugee Support, to provide cultural mediators (in-person) for a fixed hourly rate.
4. Incorporated a weekly casework supervision meeting, facilitated by an external professional with 25 years of experience in statutory and non-statutory social work and child protection roles. These meetings are an opportunity to review actions taken and discuss how cases can be progressed strategically.
5. Expanded the provision of reflective supervision with a licenced psychotherapist to staff engaged in direct casework; an essential offering for maintaining staff wellbeing.
6. Launched recruitment for a second, London based, Social Worker.
7. Developed partnerships for referrals (in and out) with 20+ organisations across Berkshire, Hillingdon and Hounslow.
8. Laid the foundations to host student Social Work placements, in partnership with Kingston University.

CHALLENGES

As already highlighted, the project quickly reached capacity, even with additional hours worked by the Social Worker. The number of hours required for casework related activities per young person, is on average higher than initially anticipated, however there have been other unexpected factors that have contributed to capacity issues. The most notable of these is the moving of children from Berkshire to further away locations, including Horley and Hatfield. Of course, RYS maintains its support when children are moved from one hotel to another, and if possible continues to visit them if time and resources allow. It was determined that these locations were narrowly within these constraints, however the travel time to visit young people there equates to around 4 hours/half a day. This has a significant impact on the weekly schedule if attempting to visit on a weekly basis. The hiring of a London based Social Worker will help to combat this, whilst RYS will have to continue to make difficult decisions about whether it is feasible to continue to regularly visit children that are moved to inconvenient locations, on a case-by-case basis.

RYS' capacity to regularly run group activities with young people has also been restricted by this geographical spread. The ability to run these was always going to be dependent on a small number of young people being located in the same city. This was briefly the case in Slough, and three young people took part in activities in the park together on a few occasions. However, as the project has evolved and the geographical spread increased, it has not been possible to maintain this. RYS has however determined that these activities are not a priority at this time, and in their place more effort has been made in connecting young people with local activity providers.

The intensity of cases, most notably and the frequency of serious mental health concerns, has also been challenging. Whilst self-harm and suicidal ideation were anticipated, the rate of which young people suffer these is alarming. RYS staff have received images of self-harm, and frequent communication from young people expressing that they want to die as a result of their situation, and that they have the intention to end their lives. On one visit, a young person self-harmed in front of RYS staff members. The experience of RYS staff ensures that the appropriate actions and referrals are taken, and the correct recording and documentation is completed. The trust built with RYS staff has gone a long way in encouraging children to take the necessary steps to improve their mental health. This has included attending specialist mental health support and services, at times accompanied by RYS team members. One psychological assessment

from a clinical psychologist, stated: "because J.P is still able to engage well with the support provided by the Refugee Youth Service and the Age Dispute Project at Refugee Council, these relationships prevent his symptoms of depression from increasing more rapidly."

This quote also highlights how RYS is working in partnership with other organisations to produce the best possible outcomes for age-disputed children. This has been essential for securing pro-bono lawyers to challenge age-assessments, which at times has only been successful through utilising the links and connections of other organisations working with age disputed children.

In light of the above, maintaining staff wellbeing is another core challenge and requires continuous effort, time and resources, and is a priority of RYS. The extra layers of support highlighted in the previous section have been implemented partly due to the aforementioned intensity of cases. Fortnightly reflective supervision provides a space for staff to discuss the challenges they are facing and reflect on their practice, with a psychotherapist. The main objective of this layer of support is to enable staff to develop their own coping strategies for the vicarious trauma they are liable to experience. The sessions provide a chance to remember the limitations of the work we are doing and that whilst we must do everything in our power to support unaccompanied children, our power is limited. In addition to this, weekly casework supervision with a third party provides additional guidance, as well as peace of mind to staff that they have done everything they could and should, to safeguard and support the children and young people.

Sadly even when everything that can and should be done has been done, we do not always secure positive outcomes. This is partly because, and as we have become acutely aware, the system is prejudiced against age-disputed children. In some cases the Local Authority has been by-passed completely, no Merton Compliant Age Assessment has been completed, and instead two border officials have determined in a matter of minutes that the young person is 'considerably above the age of eighteen'. In this instance an age is arbitrarily prescribed to the young person and they are sent to a Home Office hotel.

Where the Local Authority has completed a Merton Compliant Age Assessment, their reports frequently read more as character defamations than as attempts to objectively assess a person's age. Where an age of majority is prescribed, it is not uncommon for the young person to leave the assessment unaware that they have the right to appeal within 90 days. Thus 90 days pass and the possibility of challenging the outcome greatly diminishes. Below are real extracts from a small number of age-assessments:

“L.M refuses to make any positive eye contact and will, when being interviewed or spoken to by the Social Worker, look completely in the opposite direction, if questioned or spoken to on any subject. He has an air of arrogance and high entitlement.”

“During the assessment, R.T tried to portray himself as a child by smiling often, and at times when it was not necessary to do so”.

“When he is interacting with an adult, R.T will take a one-up position. He seeks his own company and will isolate himself in his room or go out alone in way of preference.

All of the above quotes also point, simply, to the individual being a teenager at one stage of development or another. But perhaps the most shocking assertion discovered by RYS in an age-assessment was that a chronic illness suffered by a young person could only be evidence of a previous sexual relationship, despite said illness being transmissible in a multitude of other ways, including perinatally. The age-assessment reads:

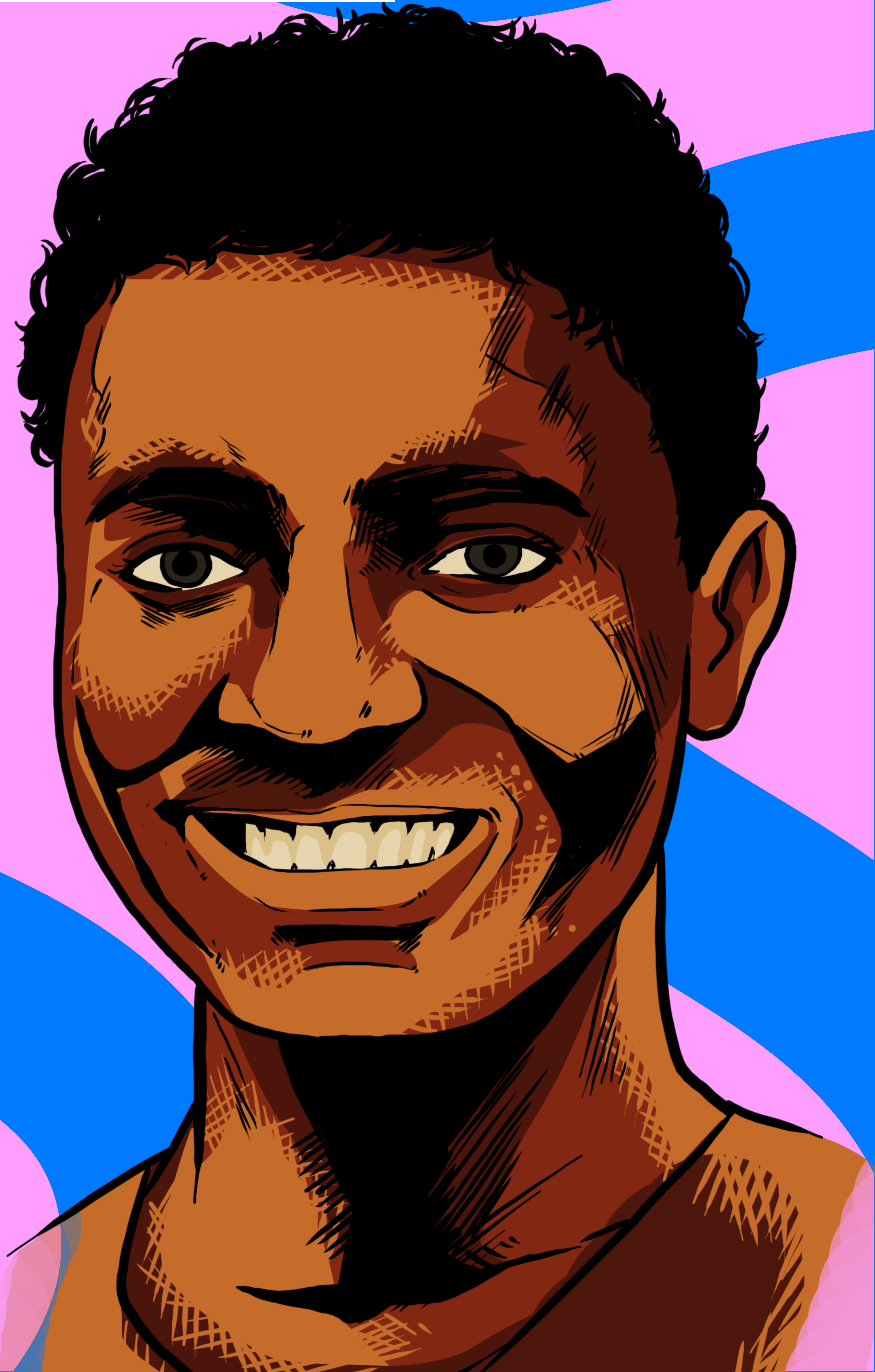
“If you left _____ in 2018 when you were 12 years old, you would have been too young to have engaged in a sexual relationship with the opposite sex as _____ is a country where Muslim values are preached and enforced. This means that you must have been an adult when you were in _____”.

This quote not only shows ignorance and a lack of education and information around certain chronic illnesses, but a willingness to determine absolute facts about a country that the assessors clearly have limited official information about. To make matters worse this is achieved through the use of stereotyping and homogenising cultures where Islam is the dominant faith. Age assessments often refer to the results of a ‘quick Google search’ that the assessors have undertaken to inform themselves around a particular topic. A quick Google search shows that 9% of the population of _____ does, in fact, not follow Islam.

JOURNEY WITH AN

UNACCOMPANIED

CHILD



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PROGRESS UPDATE

The Journey with an Unaccompanied Child (JUC) capacity-building training programme, an initiative aimed at equipping individuals and organisations to better support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, has marked significant progress over the past year.

The programme trained an additional 200 individuals across the UK. This brings the total number of trainees to over 500, collectively working directly with more than 1200 unaccompanied children. The programme's success can be attributed to its unique approach—immersing participants in the real-life journeys of four unaccompanied children, offering a comprehensive understanding unparalleled by any other training in the UK.

The quality of the training remains paramount, evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive feedback received. An astounding 97% of participants rated the training as either 'very good' or 'outstanding'. Such commendation not only reflects the programme's effectiveness but also underscores its significance in the realm of social work and child welfare.

The programme's innovative approach did not go unnoticed. We are proud to announce that Roseanna, the visionary behind JUC and a former Frontline Fellow, was been shortlisted for the Frontline Innovation Award. This prestigious nomination acknowledged Roseanna's dedication and innovative contributions to social work, particularly in creating transformative change for vulnerable children and families.

RITE OF PASSAGE

After embarking a solitary journey no child would want to take – asylum-seeking children need your help.

SIGN UP FOR OUR LEARNING PROGRAMME TO OFFER THEM BETTER SUPPORT.



PROGRESS UPDATE

Recognising the value of lived experiences in enriching the training, we took a significant step in January by hiring a co-trainer with firsthand experience of arriving in the UK as an unaccompanied child. Massi Saffa, a talented actor, director, and facilitator, has joined the team and made a substantial impact. Massi's unique perspective not only enhances the training content but also creates a deeper connection with participants, fostering empathy and understanding.

To further amplify the programme's reach, we developed a promotional animated video that provides prospective trainees with a glimpse into the training experience. This was made possible by and with huge thanks to the team at *Inizio Engage*. The video serves as a powerful tool to attract and engage individuals and organisations committed to making a positive difference in the lives of unaccompanied children.

As we reflect on the achievements and milestones of the 'Journey with an Unaccompanied Child' training programme, we are filled with gratitude and optimism. With the unwavering support of our dedicated team, trainers, and partners, we remain steadfast in our mission to create a more compassionate and informed network of support for unaccompanied children in the UK. Together, we continue this vital journey, shaping a brighter and more inclusive future for all.



LIVING THE ENGLISH

LANGUAGE:

GREECE



BFSS



VELOS
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PROGRESS UPDATE

The Living the English Language programme launched December 1st 2022 with lessons offered five days a week. The project is delivered in a partnership between Refugee Youth Service and its sister organisation Velos Youth. The project has been made possible with funding from the British and Foreign School Society.

Three levels are supported each day: beginner, elementary and advanced. Private tutoring is also offered twice a week. An 80-hour fast track English course is delivered under the project, which if attended is followed by a certificate of attendance. So far, 40 young people have registered for attendance cards, in order to start working towards the 80-hours. Ten students have already completed them, eight are over half way, nine have only just begun whilst 14 have not completed the fast track course as they have moved on to other countries in Europe and/or have taken on jobs.

The English language is of vital significance for refugee and migrant young people in Greece. In a country where the tourism industry takes precedence, English is a gateway to improved communication and broader access to essential services. Proficiency in the language not only facilitates interaction with others, but also paves the way for diverse training and employment opportunities, primarily within the thriving tourism sector and beyond. While Greek remains the predominant language, English is widely spoken as a second language, making it a practical tool for everyday life. Mastering English not only enriches quality of life, but also promotes smoother integration into Greek society, unlocking a multitude of prospects that await them.

The educator's methodology, designed in line with the young people's educational backgrounds, needs and levels of English (students go through a screening test before being placed at the appropriate level), has been proven to be effective. The majority of students have been demonstrating improved levels of punctuality, accountability and self-worth, as well as full compliance with the classroom rules and measures employed for the best results. The 80-hour English course continues to motivate and generate a fast learning mindset. What is also observed is a sense of belonging within the classroom and team spirit among the classmates.

The educator when identifying the progress of a student, ie. from elementary C to elementary D suggests the student to move on to the next level/class availab-

PROGRESS UPDATE

-le so as to prepare for B1/B2 examination for an internationally recognised certificate. During this time, the technique of the examination is taught and practised and training takes place with regard to the four parts required.

Grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension texts, speaking, listening and writing skills. Four young people who initially registered in the educational programme at A2 level in December moved on to B1 level, went through the preparation mentioned above and sat for the BCCE Michigan University certificate on June 17th 2023. **All four were successful and in August received their certificate.**

In support of the learning objectives, the Living the English Language programme includes a monthly day-out for its students. These are an opportunity to practise in real life situations what has been learned in the classroom, and are also an inspiration to continue learning and secure smooth integration to their chosen career.

The monthly visits began in December 2022 and so far have included:

- Monocle bookshop, meeting and discussion with published poet/owner of the bookshop, poetry/creativity workshop.
- National Theatre of Greece, Charlie Chaplin's City Lights theatre production.
- Bowling day, Metropolitan Bowling centre; enforcing team spirit and collaboration.
- National Gallery of Greece, guided tour by art historian, discussions with young people on the artworks, art quiz follow-up lesson in class.
- Athens Ethnographic Film Festival, visit at the Faro Creative Learning centre, short films and history of documentary workshop.
- Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre, guided tour at the National Library of Greece, the National Opera and the Stavros Niarchos Park, visit at temporary in-situ art exhibitions.
- Gidakos Boxing Club Centre, motivational speech and training session by Russian immigrant athlete and two-time champion for Greece
- Harlem Renaissance Seminar by art historian, and guest director of Anasa African Greek Cultural Centre, aiming to familiarise cultures
- Eugenides Foundation Athens Planetarium, The History of Planet Earth show.

CASE STUDY

Nicol, originally from Cameroon, arrived at Velos Youth in September 2022 seeking assistance with various matters, including housing, employment, and legal support. Nicol also expressed her interest in attending the classes.

Following an initial assessment test, Nicol's English proficiency was determined to be at a B1 level, with areas such as writing, grammar, and vocabulary requiring improvement due to French being her native language. Once she began participating in lessons, although initially reserved, Nicol consistently displayed rapid progress.

In October 2022, the Velos Youth Livelihoods Officer (LO) assisted Nicol in developing her curriculum vitae (CV), learning how to search for jobs online, preparing for future job interviews, and becoming familiar with labor rights and the Greek labor market. Nicol also attended seminars organized by Generation 2.0 on babysitting and received training from the Odyssey NGO on hard skills. A month later, she secured a farming job without a contract, which she decided to accept for a limited period to cover her daily living expenses and gain work experience. Consequently, her education was temporarily put on hold.

Upon her return in late December, Nicol was informed about the opportunity to study for the BCCE Michigan University's official and internationally recognised language certificate, via the Living the English Language programme. She eagerly joined the programme and over the next six months, admirably managed to balance work (now employed in Athens) and education, sitting for the B1 examination on June 17th, 2023.

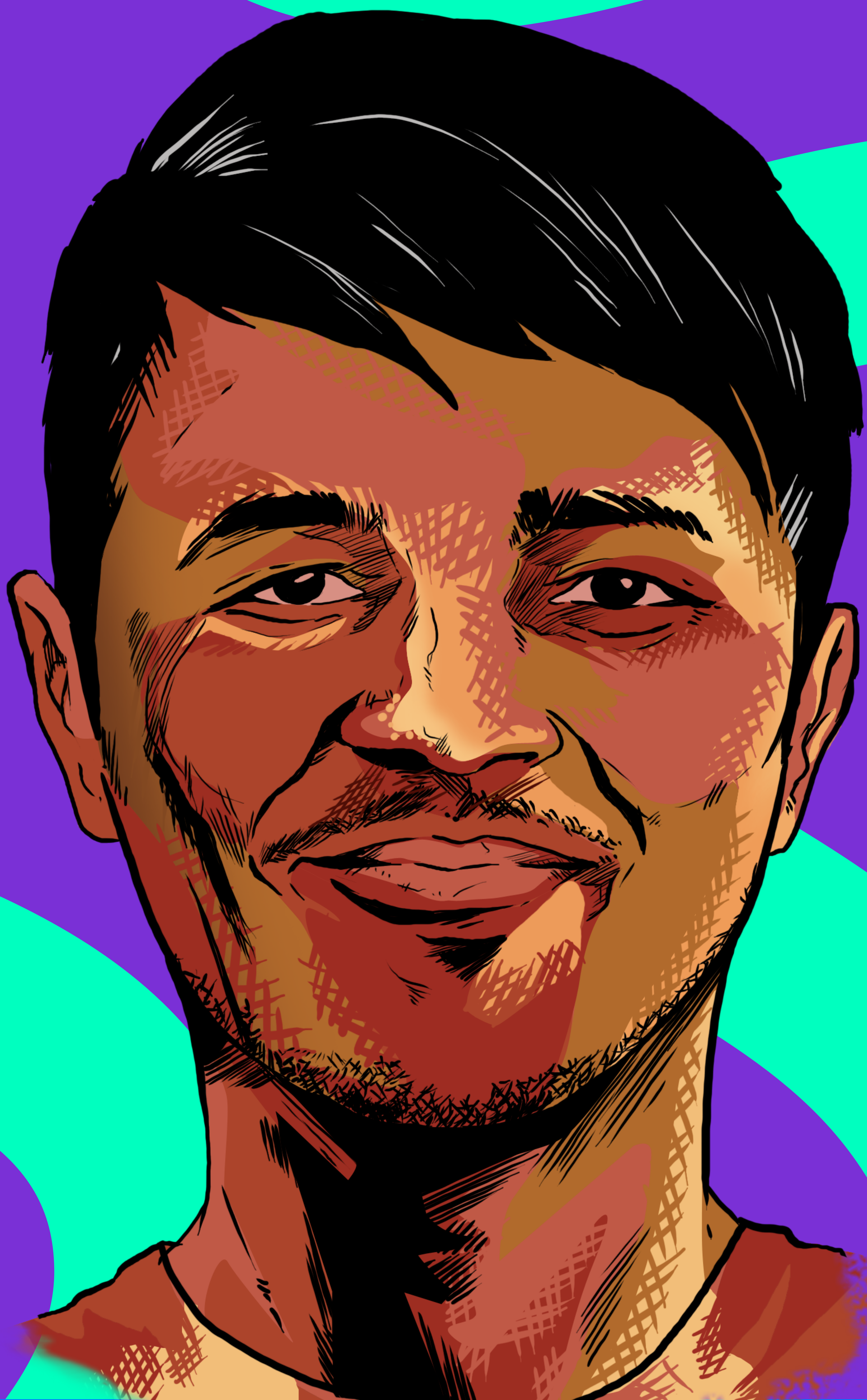
Nicol's next step even before receiving the exam results, was to immediately begin preparation for the ECCE B2 Michigan University (U.S.A) certificate scheduled for January 9th, 2023.

Today, Nicol takes great pride in her accomplishments. She has successfully passed the BCCE B1 exam and received her certificate, and is confident that she will pass her next examination in January. Nicol feels a strong sense of camaraderie with her peers and classmates, who have become her friends.

"I ALWAYS FEARED SCHOOL AND EXAMINATIONS BECAUSE IT WAS TOO STRICT. I'M GLAD I CAN NOW ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE".

ECPAT FRANCE

PROTECT PROJECT



**REFUGEE
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SERVICE**

INTRODUCTION

Refugee Youth Service (RYS) was founded in the Calais 'Jungle' in 2016 where it operated a safe space and wrap-around services for unaccompanied children on the move. Following the closure of the camp RYS established a mobile service, centred around a mobile safe space, between 2017 and 2021. In 2021 RYS secured a three-year grant to localise the work and subsequently granted it to ECPAT France. ECPAT's work is co-funded by Choose Love.

Today, ECPAT under its Protect II project, operates a mobile team of professionals dedicated to safeguarding the rights and well-being of unaccompanied children on the move in Calais and the surrounding areas. Via street work and outreach they not only inform children of their rights but also facilitate referrals to state child protective services. A total of 476 children have been supported by the project since September 2021.

Recognising the profound emotional and psychological toll on these children, ECPAT also organises psychosocial activities, offering them a brief respite amidst their challenging journeys. This comprehensive approach embodies ECPAT's commitment to ensuring that every child, irrespective of their circumstances, receives the care, protection, and support they rightfully deserve.

Drawing upon the experience and insights garnered by ECPAT, they have identified a prototypical operational system, to address the multifaceted needs of unaccompanied children in transit. This system is anchored on four foundational pillars:

1. Effective Coordination, which must be carried out by the state or local authority department
2. A 'going towards' approach, which requires the expertise of local teams to go out on the street and meet children wherever they are (in safe conditions only)
3. A place for children to rest and find their bearings; an opportunity represented by a day care centre
4. A state/local authority accommodation structure where they can be protected

OVERVIEW OF 2023

At the local level, ECPAT France grappled with numerous challenges throughout the year. The emergency shelter for unaccompanied children, located close to Calais, was consistently operated beyond its capacity, leaving many children without a refuge. This dire situation was further highlighted in an ECPAT press release, which garnered media attention through an article on the “InfoMigrant” platform. Despite efforts to seek judicial intervention, the organisation faced setbacks in the court, leading them to reconsider their litigation strategies. However, a beacon of hope emerged with FTDA's (the French state-mandated child protection actor) inauguration of a new shelter in December, designed specifically to cater to the needs of UAMs.

Unfortunately, on-the-ground tensions at the informal living sites around Calais escalated at times, resulting in conflicts that led to injuries and, tragically, some fatalities. The region also faced severe weather, with storm Ciaran and subsequent floods posing additional threats. While authorities provided temporary respite through emergency shelters, capacity was not sufficient and many people on the move, including children, were left exposed to the elements.

Operationally, the landscape was reshaped by the opening of a new day centre for people on the move, operated by Médecins Sans Frontières. The centre is designated for unaccompanied children only on certain days of the week. This was a significantly positive development for UAM support in Calais, but also underscored the pressing need for a more coordinated response. Recognizing this, ECPAT emphasised the imperative of establishing a robust network that could holistically address the multifaceted challenges faced by UAMs and the organisations supporting them. ECPAT uses this new safe space to provide psychosocial activities for children on the move, allowing them to seek respite from their daily routines, build relationships with trusted adults, and build self-protective network with each other. Since the project began in September 2021, 51 activities of this nature have been delivered, attended 385 times.

At the national level, ECPAT France kept a vigilant eye on unfolding policy changes. A proposed immigration and asylum bill was under review, raising concerns about its potential implications for unaccompanied children. Alarmingly, several local jurisdictions began withdrawing support for UAMs, a trend that ECPAT closely monitored, wary of its broader implications.

In the realm of advocacy, ECPAT's engagements spanned a spectrum of political stakeholders. From dialogues with French MPs to interactions with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and esteemed figures like Lord Alf Dubs, ECPAT remained at the forefront of advocacy efforts. To date, ECPAT has meet with the local department responsible for child protection 13 times. ECPAT has also delivered 10 targeted advocacy actions including the press release regarding the reached capacity of child protection accommodation structures, and a public letter written by children themselves, regarding the living conditions at said structure.

Furthermore, ECPAT actively fostered collaborations, engaging with organizations across France and Belgium to exchange insights, best practices, and strategies. This collaborative ethos extended to capacity-building endeavours, workshops addressing the complexities of interactions with smugglers, and initiatives to bolster the expertise of the broader associative network. To date ECPAT has delivered 12 training, with 76 professionals trained.

In reflection, ECPAT France's journey to date has underscored the intricate challenges inherent in supporting UAMs on the move in northern France. Their unwavering commitment, coupled with their adaptive strategies, has positioned them as a pivotal actor in this humanitarian landscape, advocating for the rights, safety, and well-being of some of Europe's most vulnerable children.



CONCLUSION

It has been a meaningful and successful year at Refugee Youth Service, despite the worsening anti-refugee rhetoric and hostile environment for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. RYS has met and honoured each of its 2023 obligations, intentions and objectives, and looks optimistically towards 2024.

Despite undertaking and supporting work across Europe, RYS' identity is gradually transitioning to that of a British NGO. This is reflected in this annual report, which has offered a deep dive into RYS' flagship project *No Children in Hotels*. We have seen that the number of children erroneously classified as adults and isolated in Home Office hotels is alarming, and their living situations even worse than initially feared. However we have also seen that RYS' ability to bring hope and stability to their lives is profound, and confirms that the decision to focus time and resources on this particular issue was correct.

The project itself is unique and innovative, and is the first of its kind to go beyond county borders and connect the dots between age-disputed children, the communities they find themselves in, and the services they must access to improve their dire situations. The No Children in Hotels Project will therefore be the primary focus of RYS for 2024, as we attempt to raise and drive further resources towards the project and significantly increase the number of children we are able to support.

We are grateful to our supporters and partners, without which we would not be able to create this impact, and we look forward to deepening these relationships, as well as developing new ones, throughout 2024. Above all we continue to be inspired by and powered by the young people we exist to support. In truly dire circumstances they continue to show us that no challenge is insurmountable and there is no barrier that cannot be overcome!

APPENDIX ONE: OUTCOMES SCALES

The tables below offer guidelines on how a young person should be scored under each of the four outcome areas. The scorer is required to form an opinion in order to settle on the final score, as young people may appear to be between two progress levels. The tables are not exhaustive and not all of the items in each table/progress level need to have been complete/need to apply for the score to be chosen. Therefore, the team member is entitled to use other factors to determine the score, as long as these are justifiable and recorded in the Lamplight case management system.

Access to Rights	
Urgent intervention required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person has not had a Merton Compliant Age Assessment • The young person is not aware of their right to challenge their age assessment • The opportunity for Judicial Review (90 days) has passed • The young person has no lawyer for their age-dispute case
Taking initial steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Merton Compliant age assessment has been requested from the Local Authority • Young person is aware of their rights and wants to challenge age-assessment • All necessary/existing documentation has been requested by RYS • Age-dispute lawyers have been contacted for support
Action plan in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All necessary/existing documentation has been received by RYS • LA have agreed to undertake a Merton Compliant Age Assessment • A lawyer has been secured for an age-dispute case/claim (pre-action letter underway/sent or case going to court)
All possible steps taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age-dispute case completed, regardless of outcome, all options exhausted If negative outcome, young person informed and plan made for next steps
Case resolved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age-dispute case successful, young person moved in Local Authority care

Wellbeing, Reduced Loneliness & Isolation	
Urgent intervention required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person displaying signs of severe mental health problems • Evidence of recent self harm Young person has verbalised wish or intention to self-harm • Young person has verbalised wish or intention to die by suicide • Young person has no involvement with any services, charities, or parts of the community
Young person stabilising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgent interventions/steps taken, including referrals to MH support/GP • Young person engaging with necessary MH services (RYS and external services) • Young person has stated they have no plans to harm themselves • Young person has not mentioned self-harm or suicide for at least 2-weeks • Young person engaging with some services, charities, or parts of the community
Young person stable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person taking medication • Young person has not mentioned self-harm or suicide for at least 1 month • Young person consistently engaging with necessary MH services • Young person engaging with some services, charities, or parts of the community - constituting some form of support network outside of RYS
Feeling hopeful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person taking medication or no longer needs it • Young person reports feeling hopeful about the future • Young person consistently engaging with necessary MH services or no longer needs them • Young person consistently engaging with services, charities, or parts of the community and reports to have a good support network outside of RYS
No further support needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All of the above, plus RYS remote/mobile support no longer need as local support network functioning well • Young person is active in their community and makes productive use of free time

Wellbeing: Physical Health	
Urgent intervention required	Young person is complaining of health problems Young person does not know how to access healthcare Young person is not registered with GP
Immediate steps taken	Young person registered with GP Medical appointments made and kept

Longer-term action plan being devised	Relevant actors aware of ongoing health issues and collaborating to devise plan Young person willing to engage with ongoing healthcare
Long-term action-plan in place	All actors agreed to long-term action plan All actors coordinating long-term health care Young person willing and able to engage in healthcare plan
Long-term plan functioning consistently OR no outstanding health issues	Healthcare plan functioning well Young person consistently and fully engaged with healthcare plan OR all health issues resolves, no further healthcare needed

Access to Opportunity (Employment, Education & Training)	
Young person is 'stuck'	Young person unwilling or unable to engage with potential opportunities Young person will only engage with opportunities once recognised as a child Young person unaware of their rights even with ascribed age Young person only wishes to engage in opportunities in previous location but these are not viable
Young person is motivated to engage	Young person willing to engage with and discuss potential opportunities Young person may not have necessary documents/consent/permission to engage in opportunities
Young person is taking active steps	Barriers to accessing opportunities have been addressed (possibly by RYS) Young person is taking active steps to accessing opportunities Young person is researching opportunities Young person is completing applications
YP accessing opportunities with support	Young person accessing opportunities with support and encouragement Young person may not have 100% attendance Young person may still have a lot of free time that could be used more productively
YP accessing opportunities autonomously	Young person is accessing a range of opportunities Young person is productive with free time