INSIGHT 01

THE PULL TOWARDS SUFFERING

What draws people towards crisis, and why those motivations require our awareness and attention

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REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE
LEARNING HUB

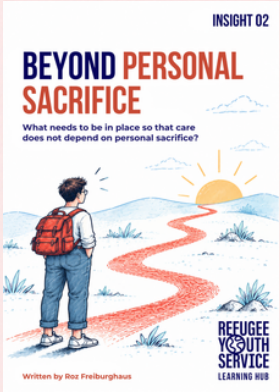
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RYS Insights draw on ten years of frontline work alongside children and young people on the move.

They include contributions from former staff, volunteers and leaders, presented through case studies, first-person accounts, questions for discussion and practical prompts.

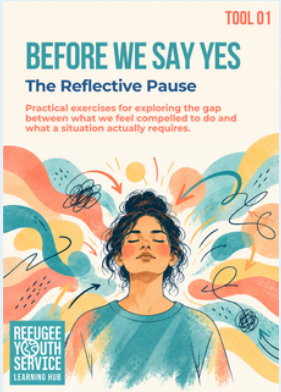
They can be read alone or discussed with a team. They are intended to support reflection and discussion, rather than provide fixed answers or concrete solutions.

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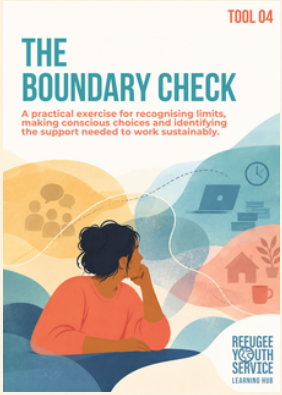
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IN THIS INSIGHT

Every year, thousands of people choose to move towards situations that many others instinctively avoid. They step closer to distress and uncertainty, offering their time, attention and care. This Insight asks what draws people there, what happens when those motivations go unnoticed, and how reflection can help us understand both the work in front of us and what the work is stirring in us.



The first encounter with crisis



The strange clarity of urgent need



The mixture of motivations people bring



Why doing 'something' can feel so compelling



Why reflection helps care stay safe and useful

A FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH CRISIS

I first arrived in Calais in mid-November 2015. It was cold, wet and grey. I had come with a friend to volunteer in the informal camp settlement known as “The Jungle”, where thousands of people were living in squalid conditions. Our plan was to stay for six weeks and be home for Christmas.

We drove off the ferry with the nervous anticipation you feel when you have committed to something you cannot yet fully picture. The first thing I noticed was how fortified the port was. Fifteen-foot fences topped with barbed wire ran alongside the road into town, stretching further than seemed necessary. For a moment it looked almost theatrical, a performance of security.

Then, minutes later, the camp came into view below and to our left, and the fences stopped looking excessive.

Tents and makeshift shelters covered in blue tarpaulin stretched across the land. Most people living there were hoping to reach the UK, often by stowing away on the back of a lorry headed for one of the many daily ferry crossings. Between them and that possibility stood the border: fences, police, the port, and the English Channel itself.



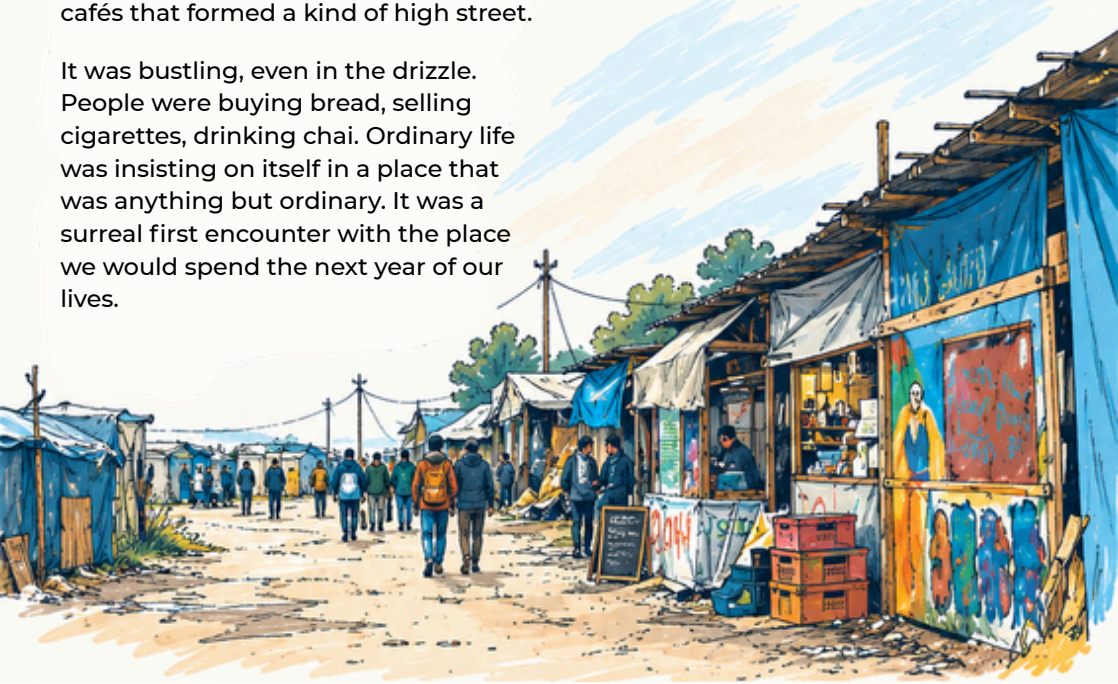
What was unfolding in Calais was not a distant crisis. It was twenty miles from Britain, beside one of the busiest transport routes in Europe. And it was heavily reported on in the media.

That proximity and visibility did something. It made the suffering harder to place safely elsewhere. It also made it easier to feel implicated. Once you had seen it, the question was no longer only what was happening. It became what, if anything, you were supposed to do next.

> *“...the question became what, if anything, you were supposed to do now that you had seen it.”*

Before going to the headquarters of the NGO we had come to volunteer with, we stopped at the camp. We walked in through the main entrance and emerged immediately onto two parallel rows of makeshift shops and cafés that formed a kind of high street.

It was bustling, even in the drizzle. People were buying bread, selling cigarettes, drinking chai. Ordinary life was insisting on itself in a place that was anything but ordinary. It was a surreal first encounter with the place we would spend the next year of our lives.



THE STRANGE CLARITY OF URGENT NEED



The NGO's headquarters was a warehouse located five kilometres from the camp, on the edge of an industrial estate. The building leaked badly, with buckets dotted around the floor to catch the rainwater. There was no proper power. Electricity came from generators, so everything felt provisional.

When we arrived, the place was in full motion. Lorries kept turning up with huge volumes of donations, creating more mess with every box that was unloaded. People in high-vis jackets moved with urgency, though not always with direction. The operation had grown quickly, faster than its own structure.

The activity seemed to generate itself. Donations arrived faster than anyone could make sense of them, and the pace of the operation made it harder to ask whether the goods matched the needs in the camp, or whether the effort required to handle them was helping or pulling attention away from more useful work.

That is one of the first things crisis can do: it creates obvious tasks while leaving little room for careful thinking. There are gaps everywhere and not enough people to fill them. People begin before they have had time to grasp the situation or what the best response might be.

In that atmosphere, doing something can feel more obvious than stopping to ask what is needed, or whether you are the right person to respond.

In ordinary life, the value of our work can be indirect, delayed or difficult to see. In Calais, the value was simple and clear. Someone was cold and needed a coat. Someone had arrived and needed a tent. A baby needed nappies or formula.

That kind of clarity can be grounding. For someone arriving with energy, compassion, and a desire to do something, crisis offers a role quickly. A person can arrive in the morning and feel useful by the afternoon. They can become part of something. They can feel that what they are doing has weight.

This is not a bad thing. It is part of being human. Many caring and humanitarian responses begin because people allow themselves to be moved. They notice suffering, step closer, and decide that distance is no longer acceptable.

Without that movement towards need, much good work would never begin. But crisis does not only reveal need. It also reveals something in the helper.



MORE THAN EMPATHY



I gradually began to sense that empathy was not the only force pulling people towards the suffering in front of us. Through the conversations I had and the stories I heard, I could see that people were not only giving themselves to the work. The work was also answering something in them. Looking back, I can see that it was answering something in me too.



This does not make the work selfish, or the care false. But it does mean that caring work can become personally compelling for reasons we may not yet fully understand.

When these remain unexamined, they can add force to the impulse to help. They can make action feel more urgent, more obvious and more morally necessary than it really is. A person who needs to feel useful may move towards a role they do not yet understand. A person who finds purpose in crisis may struggle to step back when they are out of their depth. A person who wants to belong may say yes before they have asked what the work actually requires.

This is where two forms of not-knowing meet: what we do not yet understand about the work, and what we do not yet understand about ourselves. When these gaps in understanding overlap, what the work offers us can start to shape our response. The desire to feel useful, purposeful or needed can obscure what we have yet to learn, making a role feel right because it answers something in us, not because we fully understand what it requires.

STEPPING INTO THE CHILDREN'S SPACE



It was at the warehouse that we first heard about Aske, a young Danish man running a small space for unaccompanied children in the camp. We were asked whether we might be able to help him.

The space was small and basic. Children came because the stove was lit, because there were games, football, and someone who remembered their name.

The word children landed hard, and I immediately felt out of my depth. But refusal felt difficult. Nothing technical was being asked of us. We were only being asked to help keep the door open.

Looking back, I can see that there was also something in the role that met a need in me. It gave shape to the discomfort of standing near suffering without knowing what to do. Of all the possible roles in the camp, helping with children who were there without family felt especially purposeful. It offered a way to become useful quickly, to move from witnessing the camp to having a reason to be there. So I said yes.

But when care begins in response to obvious and urgent need, it can feel as though the rightness of the work protects everything around it. It becomes easy to move from "this needs doing" to "I must do it" without noticing the step in between.

WHY ‘YES’ SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SO OBVIOUS

We quickly learnt how little we properly understood the work. It was not simply a matter of being kind, present or enthusiastic.

It involved supporting children who had suffered great loss and trauma, learning to maintain boundaries in what was otherwise a boundaryless environment, and managing the risk that a child, understandably given their circumstances, might need more from us than we could give.

It involved children whose lives were shaped by systems we did not yet understand and by experiences we could not simply meet with goodwill.

> *The work was relational, technical and risky.*

We did not yet understand how much we did not know. That is what the pull towards suffering can hide.



MOVING TOO QUICKLY



The fact that a need is real does not automatically make us the right people to meet it. Sometimes a need is ours to respond to directly. Sometimes it is ours to notice, understand, escalate, accompany or make visible. Sometimes the most responsible first act is not to step in fully, but to ask who should be involved, what structures are missing, and what harm might follow from moving too quickly.

This became one of the central lessons RYS returned to over the years. Over time, we became more willing to recognise the limits of what we knew. And we accepted that to offer good care we needed people with different skills, backgrounds and forms of expertise.

This did not happen perfectly. There were mistakes and there were moments when we mistook closeness for understanding. But the culture of learning was what helped the work become safer.

RYS remained most useful when we kept asking not only how we could help, but whether we were the right people to do this, and what would make the care safer if we were.

> There were moments when we mistook closeness for understanding

WHAT SAFER CARE REQUIRED

- Safeguarding knowledge
- Social work experience
- Legal understanding
- Language skills
- Cultural knowledge
- Local relationships
- Reflective supervision
- Clearer structures

REFLECTION: CREATING A PAUSE



This is where reflection becomes indispensable: not as a retreat from responsibility, but as one of the ways we learn to carry responsibility more carefully.

Reflection creates a pause between being moved by need and assuming responsibility for it. In that pause, we can ask two kinds of question: what is this work asking of us, and what is this work stirring in us?



> In that pause, better questions become possible.

Why am I so drawn to this?
What is making this feel urgent?
What is actually needed here?
Am I/we equipped to respond?

MAKING REFLECTION PART OF THE WORK

A useful and honest reflective culture helps people slow down without disengaging. It allows care, urgency and commitment to remain present, while also asking two questions again and again: do we understand what this work requires, and do we understand what this work is stirring in us?

Our motivations are not always obvious, and they can change from one situation to another. Anger at injustice, guilt, fear of letting someone down, or experiences from our own lives can all shape how we respond. The aim is not to remove these feelings from our work, but to recognise when they may be influencing our judgement.

Reflection is not just an individual responsibility. It depends on the conditions around us, in our teams, organisations and the wider sector. Three guiding principles can help make reflection a normal part of the work, rather than something we turn to only when things go wrong.



Make motivations discussable

Create space to talk openly about what draws us to the work – whether a sense of justice, a wish to be useful, personal experiences or other needs. Understanding these reasons helps us practise more safely.



Make it safe to question decisions

Create a culture where people can express uncertainty, challenge assumptions and acknowledge the limits of their knowledge without feeling that they are failing or letting others down.



Make reflection collective and routine

Build reflection into induction, supervision and team discussions, rather than relying on individuals to recognise problems or raise concerns themselves.

WHAT WE CARRIED FORWARD

Looking back, it seems clear now that we were not the “right” people to start this work, or to build an organisation around it. We were willing, moved and available, but we did not yet understand enough about safeguarding, trauma, legal systems, boundaries, organisational responsibility or the emotional weight of the relationships we were entering. And for me personally, I can now see how stepping into the work was made easier by my own need to feel useful and have purpose.

But it would also be too simple to say that we should not have started it. Many responses to need begin before people are fully ready. In crisis, people often act from the edge of their understanding, because waiting for perfect knowledge can also become a way of looking away. The question is not whether people should ever respond when they are out of their depth. They will. Sometimes they must. The harder question is what happens next.

For RYS, the work only became safer because we kept learning together. We brought in people with different skills and experience. We built structures around care that had initially depended too much on willingness. We created spaces where decisions could be questioned, difficult feelings could be named, and the limits of what we knew could be taken seriously.

We learned to ask better questions about risk, boundaries, power, responsibility and the limits of what we could hold. We made mistakes, but we also tried to make the organisation more capable of noticing them. RYS lasted for ten years because it kept reflecting, testing, strengthening and changing itself.

The pull towards suffering can begin good work. But it cannot carry the work alone.



TAKE THIS FURTHER IN TOOL 01 | BEFORE WE SAY YES: THE REFLECTIVE PAUSE

The companion tool offers practical questions and exercises to help you explore your motivations, prepare for this work and support a reflective culture in your team or organisation.

THANK YOU FOR READING

Continue exploring

This resource forms part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together Insights, Practice Guides and Tools developed through ten years of work alongside displaced children and young people.



REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

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