INSIGHT 04

BEYOND THE SERVICE

What changes when services are provided within a community space?

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REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE
LEARNING HUB

PART OF THE LEARNING HUB



RYS Insights draw on ten years of frontline work alongside people on the move. They include contributions from former staff, volunteers and leaders, presented through case studies, first-person accounts, questions for discussion and practice 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.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

This Insight can be read alongside the following RYS Learning Hub resources:



PRACTICE GUIDE 01

THE RYS PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

How we approached frontline practice.



PRACTICE GUIDE 02

CREATING SAFE SPACES

How environment can support safety and belonging.



PRACTICE GUIDE 05

ACCOMPANIMENT OVER RESCUE

Thinking differently about our role alongside young people.

IN THIS INSIGHT

01

A DIFFERENT MODEL OF SUPPORT

Why we wanted services and community to exist in the same space.



02

THE SPACE AROUND THE SERVICE

How environment and power shape people's experience.



03

RELATIONSHIPS AS PART OF THE WORK

Why connection doesn't always begin in an appointment.



04

FROM SERVICE TO COMMUNITY

What becomes possible when people connect with one another.



05

BEYOND WHAT WE PROVIDE

Recognising friendship, community and belonging too.



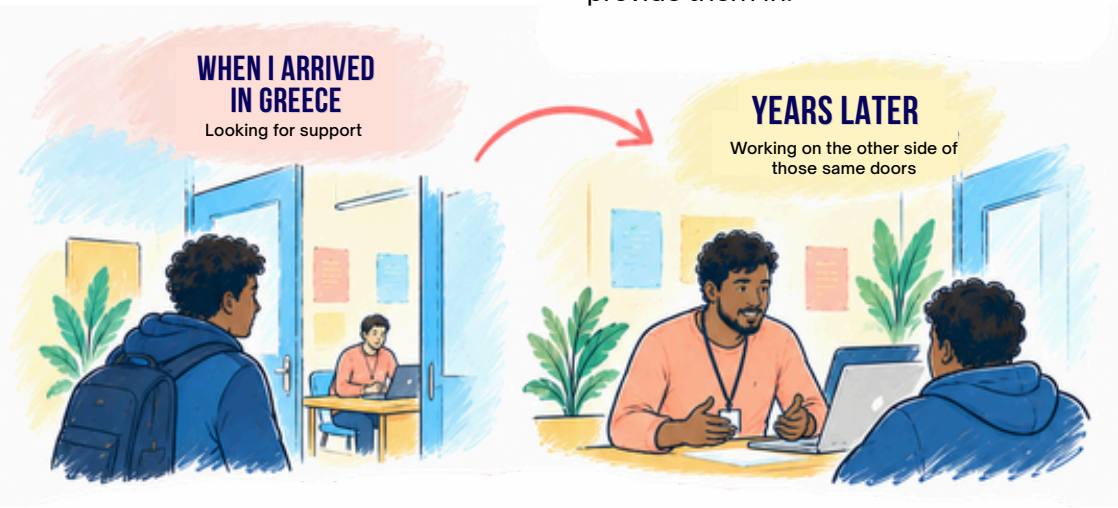
TRUST MAKES BETTER SUPPORT POSSIBLE

When I arrived in Greece as a young refugee, I believed what I needed most was information. I needed to know where I could sleep, how the asylum system worked, where I could find food and how to go about rebuilding my life. Like many young people arriving in Europe, I walked through the doors of different organisations hoping that this next appointment would somehow change everything.

Years later, I found myself standing on the other side of those same doors. I became a youth worker, and later had the privilege of leading *Velos Youth*, an organisation set up by Refugee Youth Service to support young refugees and migrants in Athens. At the core was a social service and a case management system designed to help young people rebuild their lives.

Experiencing both sides of that journey taught me something I never expected. The services offered are important. Legal advice, housing and employability support all have an important place. But how those services are experienced matters too. If someone doesn't trust the person offering support, even excellent advice or practical help may struggle to have the impact it should.

That belief shaped not only the services we provided at Velos Youth, but the kind of place we wanted to provide them in.



WHO IS THE SPACE FOR?

In my new role I would visit other organisations to learn about their work and services, and see how we might partner together.

What I noticed was that there were often dedicated professionals doing important work, but much of the support offered happened through a familiar model: someone needed something, they visited a service, waited to see a professional, received support and left.

There was nothing inherently wrong with this. But it was different from the kind of space we were creating at Velos. It made me wonder what changes when services are provided within a place that people can also spend time in, build relationships and experience as a community.



Imagine arriving in a new country after months, or even years, of uncertainty. You visit an organisation for support. The waiting room is quiet. Staff move between offices. Your name is called and you sit across a desk from someone you have never met.

To the professional, this is normal and familiar. But to the person in need of help it may be entirely new. And within minutes, they may be expected to explain some of the most difficult experiences of their life.

When we think about whether a service is 'good', we should consider not only what is provided or the outcomes achieved, but how it feels to receive it.



WHEN HELP FEELS STRANGE

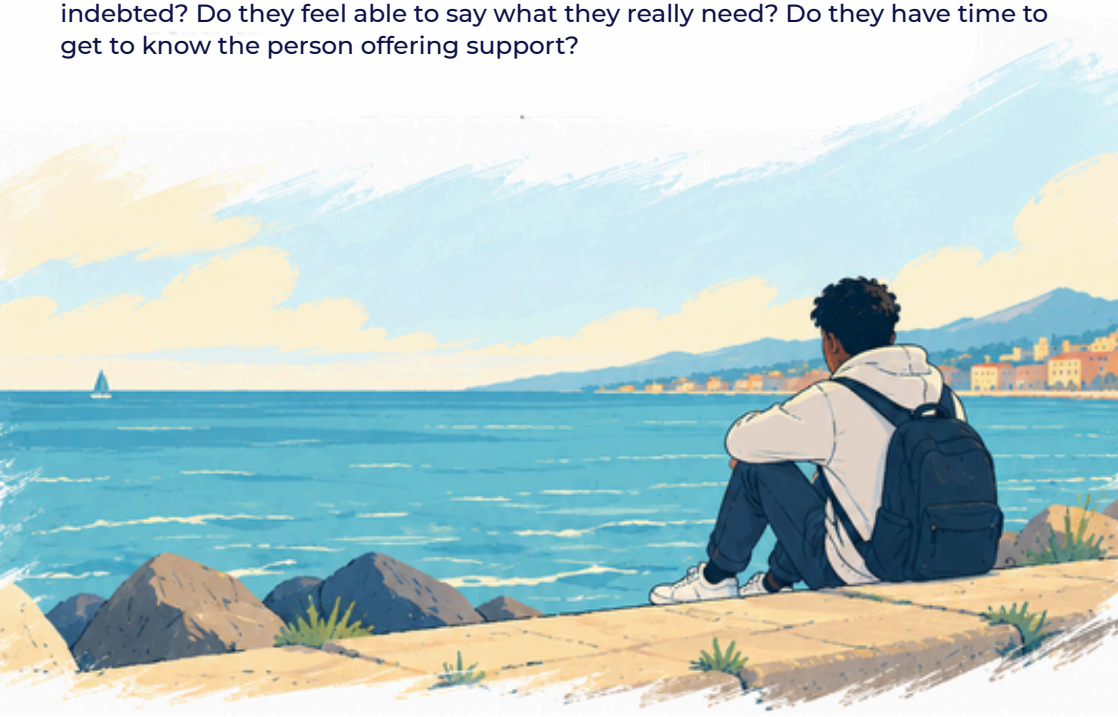
And there is another part of receiving support that I think we rarely acknowledge.

Many people, myself included, spend everything they have simply to survive and reach Europe. Along the way, they may have paid smugglers, transport providers, landlords and others who held power over them.

Then they arrive somewhere that offers help for free. That is a good thing. But it does not necessarily feel simple.

After years of learning that almost everything comes at a price, accepting support without giving anything back can leave someone feeling vulnerable, embarrassed or even ashamed.

As someone who experienced that journey myself, I understand those emotions. It taught me that receiving support is not always a neutral experience. How help is offered is important. Does someone feel judged or indebted? Do they feel able to say what they really need? Do they have time to get to know the person offering support?



WHEN RELATIONSHIPS BECOME PART OF THE WORK

With all of this in mind, at Velos Youth, we made a deliberate choice not to separate service delivery from community.

Young people could come for practical support, but those services existed within a space where people could also simply spend time. You did not need an appointment, a problem to solve or a reason to be there.

Someone could make a cup of tea, sit on the balcony, play cards, challenge someone to a game on the PlayStation. They could listen to music, talk about football, or simply do nothing at all. Our team was given time, and encouraged, to take part in this. To simply be around, be present, and see what might emerge.

Often, it was through these ordinary moments that relationships began. A conversation over tea or a game of cards could build the relationship that later made a more difficult conversation possible. Young people might disclose something they had not felt able to say in an appointment, or staff might begin to understand a need that had previously been hidden or misunderstood.

This required us to treat relationship-building as a legitimate use of staff time. If every interaction had needed to produce an appointment, referral or recorded outcome, much of what eventually became valuable at Velos would have had little opportunity to begin.

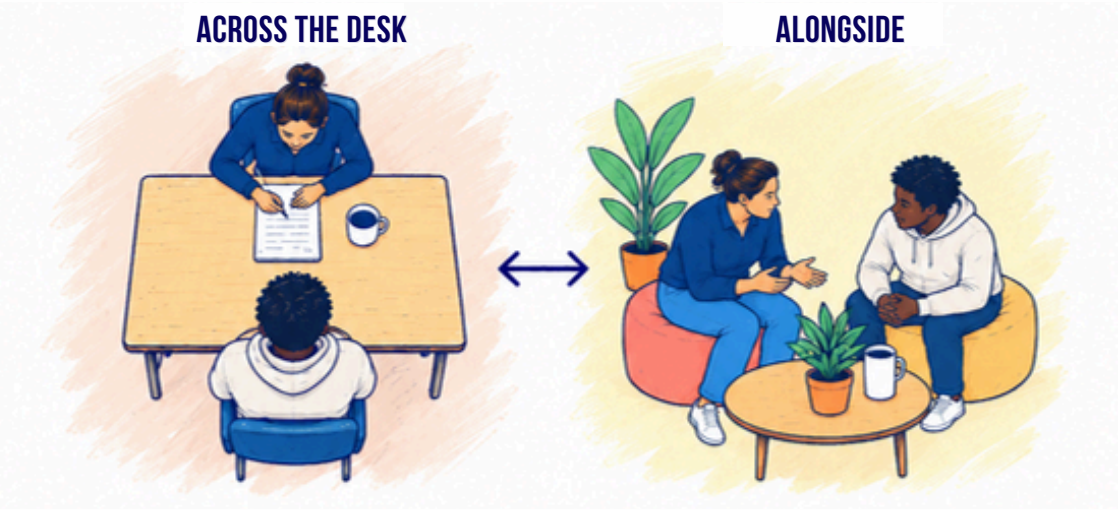
These moments were not distractions from the work. They were part of what made the work possible.



BEYOND THE DESK: HOW THE SPACE CHANGES THE RELATIONSHIP

Like in many organisations, some members of our team still naturally spent more time in their offices, waiting for young people to come to them. Their services were in high demand and there was often a waiting list, so it was easy for this to become the normal way of working. But we found that relationships did not always begin most naturally across a desk.

When a staff member leaves the office and sits beside someone, something changes. The conversation becomes less formal. The distance between professional and service user becomes smaller. There is more space for an ordinary conversation to begin.



That does not mean abandoning professional boundaries or pretending that our roles are the same. It means recognising that where we position ourselves can shape the relationship we create.

Sometimes a desk and a private office are exactly what the situation requires. But at Velos we tried to remain conscious of what our position in the space was communicating.

FROM RELATIONSHIPS TO COMMUNITY



But the relationships around a service can do more than help that service work. At Velos, creating opportunities for young people to build relationships with one another was always an important part of what we were trying to do.

Many young people arrived alone, knowing nobody. From the beginning, we made a conscious effort to introduce people to one another. We encouraged them to share meals, play football, organise card games or simply sit together after a class or workshop.

These activities were not simply there to fill time. They reflected a deliberate choice not to separate our services from community life, but to allow the two to exist in the same place.

A young person arriving at Velos had opportunities to build relationships with both staff and peers. They could meet someone who had arrived a few months earlier. Someone who understood what it felt like to wait for documents, or had experienced homelessness. Someone who had already navigated a problem they were facing.

Sometimes the most useful person in the room was not the professional. It was another young person saying: **“I went through that too.”** Sometimes our best contribution was to create the conditions in which people could find support in one another.

WHY THE NUMBERS DON'T TELL THE WHOLE STORY

When speaking at conferences or meeting with donors, I was often asked about numbers. *How many young people found jobs? How many legal cases did we support? How many people found housing? How many attended activities?*

These are important questions. Organisations should be able to show what they do and whether it makes a difference. But over time, I became interested in what those numbers might leave out about a model like ours.

At Velos, some of the changes we valued most were much harder to record: Someone who usually sat alone began joining a group for lunch. Two young people exchanged numbers and started helping each other outside Velos. Someone began coming not only for support, but because their friends were there.

None of these would necessarily appear as a successful case outcome. But they told us something important was happening: the community around our services was creating value of its own. Young people were building friendships, confidence and support networks that did not depend entirely on our team.

Those things can be harder to count. But that does not make them less important.

WHAT WE CAN COUNT



- Jobs
- Legal cases
- Referrals
- Housing
- Appointments
- Attendance

WHAT WE DON'T ALWAYS COUNT



- Friendships formed
- People helping one another
- Choosing to spend time together
- Feeling part of a community
- Coming back without needing support
- Knowing someone will notice when you're not there

THE TWO SISTERS

I often think about two young sisters who arrived in Greece completely alone.

They were frightened and spoke neither English nor Greek. They needed practical help, and we supported them to find accommodation, obtain the right documentation and connect with specialist services.

Eventually, those immediate needs were met. They no longer needed the same level of practical or one-to-one support. But they remained part of Velos.

They had become part of a wider community of young people who looked after one another.



They celebrated birthdays together, shared meals, checked in on each other and supported each other through difficult moments.

Velos had become more than somewhere they visited for services. It was also somewhere they felt they belonged.

WHEN COMMUNITY BEGINS TO TAKE ROOT

People aren't only connected to the organisation. They're connected to one another.

THE GOODBYE

Eventually, the sisters were given the opportunity to continue their journey and move to Germany.

Before they left, we organised a small goodbye gathering. That afternoon, the centre was full. Some young people wrote cards. Others brought small gifts. Phone numbers were exchanged, hugs were shared and promises were made to meet again somewhere in Europe one day.

Standing in that room, I remember looking around and thinking about how differently things had begun. I thought about the time they had spent with us, the people they had come to know and the gradual changes I had witnessed. What had started with a simple introduction at the centre had grown into something much bigger, through ordinary afternoons spent talking, laughing and getting to know one another.

The sisters had first walked through our doors with almost nothing. Now they were leaving surrounded by friends. And those friendships belonged to them, not to Velos.

Phone numbers would travel with them. Friendships could continue across borders. People who had met at Velos could remain part of one another's lives long after they had stopped needing us.

For me, that was part of the value of what we had built.



A SERVICE CAN MEET AN IMMEDIATE NEED.

What grows around it can stay with someone long after that need has passed.

WHAT WE LEARNED

At Velos, we made a deliberate choice to provide services within a community space. We found that the environment around a service could shape how that support was experienced. It created opportunities for trust and relationships to develop between staff and young people.

But it also created opportunities for young people to build relationships with one another. Those connections could develop into friendships, peer support and a sense of belonging that did not depend entirely on Velos. These are some of the principles we tried to keep central to that approach.



1. BUILD TRUST BEFORE EXPECTING ENGAGEMENT

People may arrive asking for a service, but trust creates the conditions in which that service can actually work.



2. MAKE THE SPACE HUMAN

Conversation, tea, games and laughter aren't distractions from support. They can create the relationships that make support possible.



3. PAY ATTENTION TO POWER

Where people sit, who starts the conversation and who controls the space can all affect how safe a relationship feels.



4. CONNECT PEOPLE TO EACH OTHER

Create opportunities for people to meet and build peer relationships, while recognising that connection cannot be forced.



5. MAKE ROOM FOR BELONGING

Ask not only what someone receives from the organisation, but whether they are becoming connected to the people around them.



6. MAKE SPACE BEYOND THE SERVICE

Create opportunities for support networks that can continue independently of the organisation, even when formal support comes to an end.

QUESTIONS TO CARRY INTO PRACTICE: WHAT ARE WE BUILDING AROUND OUR SERVICE?

Not every organisation can create a community space like Velos, and not every service should. A legal clinic still needs private appointments. A busy advice service may not have somewhere people can spend an afternoon. But the underlying question still applies: does the way we organise our service create opportunities for trust, connection and agency, or unintentionally make them harder? Sometimes relatively small choices can change that.



THE SPACE

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE HERE?

1. Could a waiting area feel less like somewhere people are processed?
2. Could people sit beside rather than opposite staff where appropriate?
3. Is there somewhere someone can stay for a while before or after an appointment?
4. What does our physical space communicate about power and roles?



THE SERVICE

HOW DO WE ALLOW SUPPORT TO HAPPEN?

1. Could an interaction begin with conversation rather than assessment?
2. Do staff have permission to spend time that isn't tied directly to a task?
3. Does every interaction need an appointment or defined outcome?
4. What might become possible if there were more informal ways to engage?



CONNECTION

CAN PEOPLE FIND SUPPORT IN ONE ANOTHER?

1. Do people using our service have opportunities to meet?
2. Could shared activities or group spaces sit alongside one-to-one work?
3. Are appropriate forms of peer support encouraged?
4. Are we always the source of support, or can we sometimes help people find it in one another?



POWER

WHO IS THE SERVICE DESIGNED AROUND?

1. What choices does the person receiving support actually have?
2. Who determines where the conversation happens and what gets discussed?
3. Where could we give people greater agency?
4. Which of our routines exist because people need them, and which exist because they make the service easier to run?

BEYOND THE SERVICE: WHAT STAYS WHEN OUR ROLE ENDS?

Looking back at Velos, I don't only think about the support we provided. I think about what remained when that support was no longer needed.

A young person might eventually find somewhere to live. Their documents might arrive. They might find work. Our role in their life might become smaller, or end altogether.

These were important milestones, and we worked hard to help young people reach them. But alongside that practical support, something else was happening. People were meeting, spending time together and forming friendships. Often, these connections developed naturally, through ordinary moments that had little to do with the services we provided.

And while our role in someone's life might come to an end, those relationships didn't have to. Someone they first spoke to at Velos might still answer their phone years later. A friendship that began in our space could continue without us, becoming part of a young person's life in ways we might never see.

I think there is something important in that. Perhaps part of our role is not only to provide good support, but to create the conditions in which people can, from the start, build things that don't depend on us.



KEEP 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.





INSIGHTS

Stories, learning and reflection from our work.



PRACTICE GUIDES

Ideas and approaches drawn from frontline practice.



TOOLS

Practical resources to use alone or with your team.