

# **‘Seeking safety’ - The mental health of care leavers refused asylum and living in East Kent, UK.**

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children come to the UK to escape war or persecution in their home countries. They enter the UK Care system but many find that they have limited rights to remain in the UK when they reach adulthood.

Mind funded developments in East Kent to carry out research with young people in East Kent who had arrived in the UK as children. Our aim was to learn about their perspectives with a view to making recommendations for how services could be improved. We interviewed eight young people and all but one of them had been refused refugee status and, as a result, were threatened with destitution, detention and deportation. They describe moving from feeling part of British society, cared for and legally resident, to marginalisation and disempowerment as migrants facing immigration control, detention and deportation. The eight male participants in this study originally came from Eritrea, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka and have lived in the UK between three and eight years.

The interviews reveal their perspectives on their experience in the UK and identify specific threats to their mental health and wellbeing.

## **These threats are:**

- Being an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child and accordingly having suffered the loss of family and home at an early age
- An often-dangerous journey and traumatic experiences in country of birth.
- Living within the Care and asylum systems in the UK
- Age assessment and asylum seeking processes, especially Immigration appeals, that young people have found confusing and punitive
- Rejection of asylum cases and adult immigration controls which include reporting, detention, destitution and the threat of deportation.

## **Mental health and wellbeing**

- The young people describe their poor mental health and wellbeing detailing how they live with anxiety, loss, sleeplessness and uncertainty about the future.
- They describe feeling unsupported and a lack of on-going treatment and care



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East Kent



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in Bexley

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## **Recommendations**

We identified a number of gaps in service provision and found that neither therapy to address past problems nor support to develop resilience and to plan their futures has been available to them. We found:

- A lack of preventative and holistic work
- A need for increased psychosocial support (including legal support) and specialist therapeutic interventions
- A need to explore partnership with local and national bodies with a view to creating a post based on a ‘social prescribing’ model specifically to work with young people as they reach adulthood and beyond.

To accompany this exhibition, a video has been made by an independent filmmaker with the young people supported by Kent Refugee Action Network’s Refugee Youth Project. Along with selections from the interview transcripts and young people’s artwork, this video will be used as part of this exhibition.

Throughout this Project we have begun with the testimony of the young people to foreground their experience and opinions. The interviews were clearly difficult for most of the young people but they were motivated by a desire to improve services and the experiences of new arrivals:

*“I don’t mind where we start so long as my interview makes some difference – makes things better for young people helps others bring some change ...”*



# In country of origin

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“When they asked these questions I was scared maybe they are going to put me in prison – I used to watch movies – so when this happened my mind goes to the movies. Then they beat me and slapped me ... my Mum brought a Minister – our local minister and they said you can’t keep him because he’s under 18 – I’d been there 2 days – so next day they got me out. But the Police refused to let my dad and cousin out.”

“My Mum send me to my father’s best friend, she says go with him ... my Mum scared – they killed my father they should kill you – I don’t know what happened to my family until now. I don’t know what happened. So bad, I was crying suffering.”

“In Afghanistan we are targeted by other majorities, we have been targeted for centuries before the British came to Afghanistan before that we were being persecuted we were just the same as Africans in America or like the British brought here. Our lands were taken, 60% killed the 20 % escaped and the rest were chased to the mountains. Their lands were all taken we have suffered for centuries – especially the Hazara people.”

“After the airport I was so scared because I know it’s a false passport – maybe they’ll put me in prison and it will get worse – Dad said don’t worry – its hell now – because of this government we have to leave. First of all he said for me to go to India alone – he would bring the rest of the family – I stayed there for a year”



# The Journey

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"I don't know that time which country – I never go – sometime 2 or 3 I go outside my village with my father – I don't know the countries just go with people they are like selling you – go with that person ... sometimes there's no water no breakfast – nothing sometime you go by walk, go by camp its so difficulty you don't know where you are."

"Most difficult we came I think from Greek to Italy we are like in a small ship about 11 or 12 hours it was so raining so bad night. I was thinking – we are about 24 people yeah – we are thinking this is our last night. We are definitely dead. It was so difficult – just pray to God a lot of people but God helped us."

"It was something I couldn't even think of ... leaving country, of people keep chasing me, something ... very, very bad ... if you ask me now I don't want any person any human being to go through the issues I went through ... I was totally lost ... when they arrange and pass to this person to flee the country I been told - he's a good person he won't give you back to the people who are looking for you, he will take you somewhere nice ... I have to trust him .. and then I was ended up in different, different countries I didn't know the language - sometimes in a lorry, in a small room, sometimes in the jungle, hunger no food no water .. a few times lost my clothes, ended up with the dirty clothes no shower ... I had a very, very bad time then ..."



# Arrival

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"I was 15 – I was in Dover – I arrived in UK 2007 no family only me, when I get to Dover I've been caught by the Police in a cell they ask we a couple of questions – and immigration come along they ask my age my name and then they send me to foster care family – It was very scary and threatening – I didn't have choice - to get to a safe country."

"The Police arrest us – they bring to a small, small room – I had never in my life been to a Police Station – I was shocking ... it was so difficult for me – they say ... I will be dead here – they say OK someone is coming talking to you bring they bring Interpreter talk to him .. after I don't know how many hours – no wash no nothing."

"I was 14 then when I came to England then – I got arrested and taken to the police station they have an Interpreter to ask me who am I? Why am I here? What's the reason I'm here and I explain to him this is my name and where am I? That's the reason I flee the country and they sent me to Dover to where the Home Office is .. I was there for some time and they transferred me to a Hotel. I was in a hotel for a few nights and some people they came and they interviewed me and one lady she felt so sorry for me – she said you are very little, we are going to transfer you to a family where you can stay with a family where you can go to school and as it was first time seeing someone being nice and talking to me in a good way and they transfer me to foster family ... and I start living ..."



# Working out the system

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“You skip half of your life and start from the very last thing ... we don't know about these things official things we don't know – how can you expect a person to respond to the things that ... difficult ... for me it was very doubly difficult – even though I knew the language it was a new thing and normal new things are scary especially when your life is hanging ... if you are not ready you are going to make a mess and it's going to go against you. But when I went at that time, I was ill I was mentally messed up basically ”

“To integrating in English society – it is difficult for a young person especially when he or she faces visa problem with the Home Office with a system doesn't know a thing about how it works ... and how shall he proceed. I relied on the solicitor that was given to me by the HO – a free solicitor - that was the only person that I relied on.”

“I had all my hope on him (Lawyer) as he was fighting for me with the system to have my asylum granted and he was obviously he wasn't working – I can say this now but back then I didn't know – he wasn't working as much he should have been he just brushed me off as I think he does for most cases.”

“So for a child it's very difficult to be able to fight for himself to get his paper, his visa and everything – a child needs more help – 15/16 year old needs some encouragement and a lot of help until the person has his visa to carry on with his life however he wants it to ...”



# Age assessment

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“They did give me status for 2.5 years because of my age. And I did have a problem with my age because of my age basically when I arrived here I was 13, but they couldn’t believe it. They said I was 16 then a couple of weeks later they said I was nearly 17. I bring them my information, my teskera – my ID from Afghanistan – I proved them I was 13 but they still didn’t believe so I went to Age Assessment. They accept me as 15 and after one week accept me as 14 so through this all – it was one of the most horrible thing for me.”

“What is your age? That didn’t go very well either ... she was confused she was more confused than I was – we got on with the interview first day, and then second day and then third day or something and after that she said came to me she said “Yeah, you know, I don’t think you are 15, I think you was more like 16 and a half and 17 and a half” she said – so I said OK - what else can I do – you people are the law, you are from the government ...”

“They would asses my age based on the times I had travelled and had been living he just calculate all these time – I didn’t remember the exact times or years so it wasn’t accurate and he just assessed my age as 17 that was a big mistake from him which cost me, you know, cost me dearly to be honest, cost me a lot – imagine if you are assessed 2 years older and you don’t not have the experience of 17 year- old you are only 15 in life you struggle with things.”

“I just met this guy a week, just a couple of day once or twice for a week – this guy is assessing my age - just said you are 17 I didn’t think it was serious about this but later on as I got the little card that said I was 17”



# Asylum rejected

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“When I was refused, ... I couldn’t think of anything - I was undone they will send me back I just didn’t know what to do or what to think of – you know when your mind freezes and you don’t know what to do, what to think – I was very, very upset at that time.”

“I had made friends, made a life and then I lost my case in 2011. I’d been given many opportunities and they took all of it back. They stopped financial support, I’d been given a house and they took the house away and I start facing the issues again. I ended up on the street ...”

“3 times I was refused and every 2 weeks I had to go to Folkestone to sign – for maybe 2 years. They told me that they didn’t believe my story. I was fed up I didn’t know what they were going to do with me – even deport ... if they don’t deport me what am I going to do I had no paper what am I going to do? For 2 years I signed every week. I went by myself ... I used to see people there same like my experience they were from Eritrea, Afghanistan some still they do - 7 or 8 years later.”

“Going to Court is so difficult – they ask questions, questions, question for decision, decision – decision is coming ... refused. I have been six or seven times I think so or more than that ... something like this “...

“For us to be refused is traumatic - we have left a war-torn country and we have come to live freely that all – if we are able, to work we can look after ourselves we don’t need any help not government not any other people – so people are not allowed to and some people are allowed I had to go through a lot of struggles. I had to go to hearings and at that time I was a minor for them I was 20 – not 20 – 18 but I was actually 17 at the court hearing.”

“When I was refused (when was that? 2009/2010) I didn’t believe that but as time goes by ... I thought I couldn’t think of anything I was undone they will send me back I just didn’t know what to do or what to think of – you know when your mind freezes and you don’t know what to do, what to think – I was very, very upset at that time - I just laid low for some time - well actually I wanted to travel to different country but then I stayed somehow, here its not easy to live her illegally that’s the truth.”

“I was refused I submitted a fresh claim in 2011 and it was refused in 2013 but I wasn’t aware of that somehow they forget or I don’t know how it was sent to me but the Home Office. The next year when I was detained – I was signing every fortnight...”

# Homelessness

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“They did send a letter but I had no place, no place to live - it got to me when it had only one day left to appeal – I tried to appeal but didn’t succeed so everything stopped...”

“I moved, I jumped here jumped there go this person’s house, that person’s house - it was very difficult 99% of the people were in social service housing – you are not allowed to stay there over night 10:00 you have to fuck off but I was going there, anywhere I didn’t have anywhere else to go – I went into a mess – no place to stay, not allowed to work, not allowed to claim benefits you are not allowed to do anything but survive – do whatever to stay alive”

“I started working couple of times but no-one is going to hide you if you have no paper – the places that does are like slavery – at that time this rule came out they are going to fine (people who give) illegal migrants job fine them up to £10,000 nobody wants to hire anyone – no job, no money, no house, no papers I didn’t have anything – somehow I survived...”



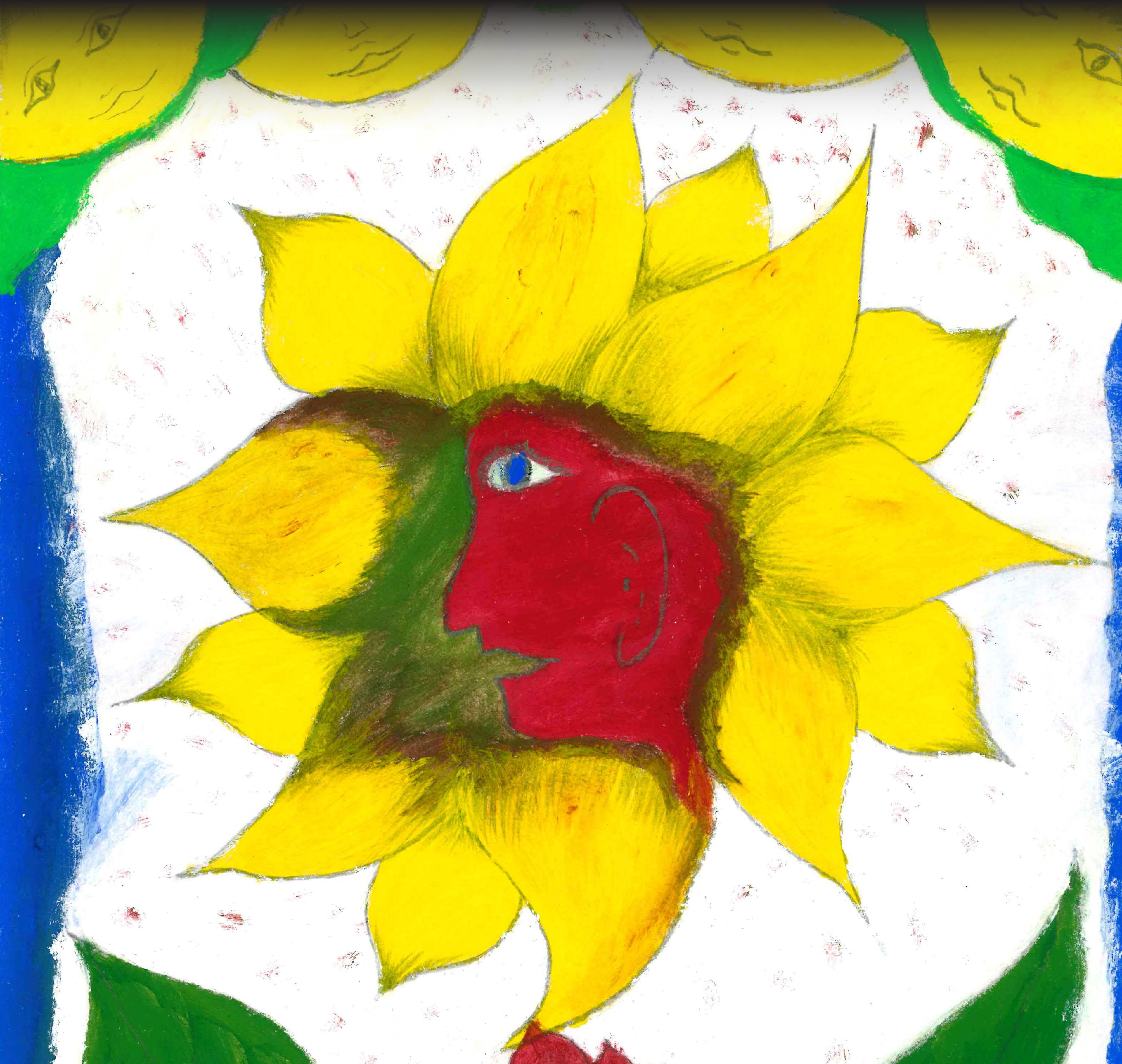
# Promoting resilience

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“When I was in prison and detention I never cry, I never be sad – the only reason is I don’t want to be mad – I said let’s be happy let’s be nice friends with the prisoners and in detention”.

“If I want to be happy I put some songs and I will dance – many asylum seekers are always sad and I can understand their feelings but if you stay like that you will become mad and then its very hard to come out – I don’t want to come into the mad.”

“If I get stressed maybe I.... call one of my mates ... I tell him about it I say I’m a bit stressed – he gives my advice. So long as you take it out you relax - if I just keep it, it gets more and more and you explode.”



# Mental health and wellbeing

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“We are away from our family, our parents, its difficult, sometimes you have very difficult times – depressing - you haven’t got people you trust to tell your feelings.”

“They moved me to Leicester – I was still in a mess – the problem when you get mentally unstable, once you trust someone and then you get to move you have to start with another person and tell them all the things again. I was starting everything from 2008 to 2012 telling this – I got fed up with it – I have to repeat more than 10 times before I get somewhere which is fine, if it does get somewhere but it never got anywhere... it wasn’t solving anything...”

“So difficult - my brain is not working properly ... if I go to College anywhere I’m not listening to teacher - just thinking about family ... I don’t know where are they – my Uncle he sent his cousin to our village he says they are not here I don’t know ... I try many different ways – the British Red Cross (Tracing Service) they say we don’t know but maybe they are in different country I don’t know exactly... I miss them ....”

“Came 2008, I was drinking and wandering around here and there, ... my Leave to Remain finished. Everything from the past kicked in I was wandering around having a screen in front of me most of the time rewinding playing the same thing most of the time - in front of me over and over again – that was the worst thing – playing things from the past from Afghanistan – the worst things you can imagine... I was seeing those things plus I wasn’t sleeping plus nightmares – the tension and trouble from the Home Office all of those added up and I couldn’t do anything. I thought I should give up – I’m going to give up – I should give up. Now I survived for about 2 years but after 2 years it got to a point I had to do something about it or finish it off – I started hurting myself, to cut myself, to overdose on illegal drugs – I cut myself in 2010 or 2011 ... while I was in other people’s houses.”

“Signing is another weapon that they use to make us suffer even more – their strategy is to make us suffer here long so that we voluntarily leave the country. If I am signing once a week – just knowing that I have to sign, its always in your head before you sleep when you sleep... you dream about being taken away and constantly think about this place where you have to go to report – that’s another psychological misery that they put on us ...”

“I’ve got to sign ... every minute every second for me like attacks I’m afraid I think Immigration are going to come to my house and take me so I’m feeling like scary – like they are going to send me over there.”