



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

All Wales Black Asian Minority Ethnic Engagement Programme

28 April 2022

“Everyone has the right to Seek and Enjoy Asylum”

EYST:

Selima Bahadur (Chair/Host), Twahida Akbar (Co-host), Judy Li (Co-host/Tech)

Key Speakers/Panellists:

Sophie De Marco – Asylum Seeker and Refugee Advice Worker, EYST Sanctuary Team

Awder Ahmed – Project Officer - Share Tawe

Aliya Khalil – Sharing personal experiences, also Asylum Seeker and Refugee Advice Worker, EYST Sanctuary Team

Attendees:

Rahila Hamid (EYST associate), Pat Dunmore (Citizen’s Advice NPT), Madeleine Tyack (CAVC), Sian Evans (Newport City Council), Helen Gough (Scouts Cymru), Annie Evans, Kalpana Natarajan, Tammy Foley (EYST Wales), Catriona Learmont (TNL Community Fund), Helena Nadova (TGP Cymru), Flavia Espinova, Emmy Chater (Newport City Council), Ana Jones, Renata Treherne (CAVC), Clare Hollinshead (Tai Pawb), Sally Evans (Newport Live), Deborah Stauber (GT Wales), Fikayo Ilori (MAD Swansea), Eiman Nabag (EYST Wales), Joy Kinnear (NYAS), Rowan Davies (Prince’s Trust), Megan Cazeau (EYST Wales), Kalpana Tagore, Zoe Connolly (Barnardos), Joanne Maksymiuk-King (Race Council Cymru), Nicola Shone (Race Equality First), Abi Lasebikan (Senedd, Welsh Parliament), Pavlina Mondol (Newport City Council), Fran Thrower (NYAS), Joy Matibiri (The CAE), Ingrid Wilson (Ideas UK), Shazia Ali (BBC Wales), Mary Vincent, Magdalena Thomas (C3SC), Leila Usmani (Race Alliance Wales), Patricia Jones.



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Some cut out newspaper articles were put together on a PowerPoint slideshow and were presented for attendees to read and get a feel of what the topic is about, some of the slides also included personal accounts too.

EYST Introductions

SB introduced herself as Programme Manager for the Welsh Government funded All Wales Black Asian Minority Ethnic Engagement Programme.

TA introduces herself as Policy Officer on the programme.

JL introduces herself as the Marketing and Comms Officer on the programme – tech support, social media and comms at EYST.

Introductions from Key Speakers

SDM - I'm Sophie De Marco, Sanctuary Team Lead and I also support people seeking asylum and refugees in my front-line work. Firstly, I want to say how appalled I am hearing of the horrors in Ukraine. My heart reaches out to everyone, and I hope we can offer a safe place for people arriving in the United Kingdom. I am also really proud of my colleagues within EYST offering this hugely valuable support service and all those volunteering to help. Sanctuary systems provided by the UK Government - I'd like to shine a light on those communities that are already here and struggling. The current asylum process is hostile; they are penalised for years whilst waiting for a decision. Everyone deserves to be treated equally, regardless of where they've come from and how they've entered the UK.

AA - My name is Awder Ahmed and I am a Kurdish refugee from Iraq. I was a petroleum Engineer, worked in finance, administration of supply chain and then humanitarian sector in Iraq. In the UK, I have volunteered at the African Community Centre. I then received my leave to remain where I had the chance to work with them and now at EYST, where I am the Project Officer on the project 'Share Tawe'. Share Tawe is a project which was founded officially in 2010, launched by Swansea City of Sanctuary and Swansea Asylum seeker Support group. In December last year, it was handed to EYST. Share Tawe is a unique, person focused project where it provides accommodation to people who have become destitute; when their cases have been rejected by the Home Office. They are homeless and are out of any funds. What Share Tawe has achieved in the last 12 years, annually is they were able to provide bed nights to 2500 - 3500 homeless people. Fortunately, with these asylum seekers one in



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each four were able to get their papers and win their cases to securely live in the United Kingdom. We thank all the people who are supporting destitute asylum seekers. Thank you!

SB - Amazing work that the project does, I cannot explain how hard they all work, such a great need for it and a continuous need too. Thank you.

AK - My name is Aliya and I worked at EYST since 2012. I am a refugee & asylum seeker Advice Worker and I work alongside Sophie. I support people who have arrived at Swansea seeking asylum and through their asylum journey. We also help them after they have been granted status with many issues to help them settle in Swansea. I arrived at Swansea 14 years ago where I sought asylum in the UK in 2008. I waited approximately 3.5 years to get my decision and in 2012 I was granted my status. I was volunteering with different organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees, so I was really lucky to get this job with EYST and have been able to help asylum seekers and refugees. Thank you.

Question and Answer Session

Question for SDM: From your experience of working with refugees, have you seen a difference in treatment for the different groups, and if so, can you share what differences you have witnessed?

SDM: There's a big difference in how people access the asylum process. The system currently in place is if you have come into the UK and seek asylum yourself, there's a very 'guilty until proven innocent' system, which contrasts with the warm reception we give to other selected countries. The treatment and service provisions are completely different, people must go through a really long gruelling asylum process and prove that they are innocent essentially. Whereas if you come in through some sort of scheme, everything is provided for you and you can come into the UK as a refugee, so it's a completely different process and we see a lot of difference in the general public opinion which is fed by social media and tabloids which can favour the weak and it's then our duty to do some myth busting and try to stop it. For example, Aliya and I have had many people that we are supporting from the same countries that haven't come in through any schemes and they must go through the whole asylum process where somebody else they might know who



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managed to come in through the scheme has been able to get these things. It is just really hard when we're trying to encourage people who are going through terrible times and a lot of trauma that there is some sort of light at the end of the tunnel, and they worked so hard for something and then on the opposite end of the scale there are amazing schemes, but should be for everybody.

An attendee comments - I still feel there is a lot of stigma attached for those who have taken asylum trying to access health and social care, including housing services. The pandemic has been an eye opener for us all, especially people from diverse backgrounds, but asylum seekers especially, due to language and culture difficulties, but also being told that they don't belong here. So, I know EYST are doing a lot of good work across Wales, but I feel Gwent is a place with people from different backgrounds who have taken asylum, so we do need more organisations taking responsibility to help those vulnerable. There may be other people here helping asylum seekers, but it's just having a list of those networks and engage if they need any support. Another area is children, for instance, if a child is taken away by social services into care, the family don't understand the procedure of child protection etc. They need more help settling in for the children in school and for their well-being a mental health.

SB – Can everyone here put in the chat whether you help asylum seekers, how you help people and what support you or your organisation do to support and we will share this amongst the group or if you know of anyone who can support refugees and asylum seekers.

Question for AA: If you have seen a difference like Sophie has mentioned, or if a refugee that you have supported has been treated differently, have you/they felt comfortable in challenging this? Can you share the background and what you had to do?

AA - Asylum seekers and refugees go through a pathway or a certain process, so for example, Ukrainians have their own path, the Syrian or Afghan refugees have their own path etc. We can always get support and advice from other organisations. For example, we were dispersed to Swansea, and we found support from Swansea Community organisations, some of these were SCVS, African Community Centre (ACC), Welsh Refugee Council (WRC), because



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

Wales is working to become a nation of sanctuary, they are providing support besides what the 'system' or 'scheme' is providing, and they can help individuals as well. My advice is through these organisations people can get more support and advice. If we feel comfortable, they will raise any issues especially with housing; many asylum seekers housing issues tends to be the number one issue and it's really important we help them with this issue and that we don't leave them alone during this situation. I wish to see at every platform work to try and tackle this issue and try to solve the problem behind this issue as well as the other issues that they might be facing.

Question for AK: What impact does the difference in treatment have on the refugees as individuals, or for the families, who are new to Wales? So when the different groups are being treated differently as we've discussed, how does it affect the families or the individuals?

AK - As we've been working with different asylum seekers and refugees from different areas, we've seen this for our clients. One example is where Syrian people who have come under the resettlement scheme have been completely different to refugees who have arrived from Syria to the UK by themselves and claimed asylum. There is a big difference and it would be seen as double standards. Refugees who arrive on a scheme will have many rights, they don't suffer with housing issues while the person who arrives to the UK and claims asylum, and even after they have been granted their status, we see that housing is a huge issue as Awdwr explained too. The people who arrive on these schemes, they are eligible to have a furnished house while the person who claimed asylum here, even if they get a house, it is an empty house and they themselves have to get furniture for them and the family. Another example is (free) bus tickets; some refugees and asylum seekers can't get bus tickets so they feel very isolated while they're waiting for the asylum case to be dealt with by the Home Office while others on the schemes are treated different - they can get (free) bus passes very easily. For sure it impacts families lives as they don't receive equal treatment the families feel isolated and it has an impact on them because they are not all being treated fairly. We should treat asylum seekers and refugees the same and that's something that I feel very strongly about and something that we need to do.

Question for AK: How do people get chosen for the schemes?



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
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& Ieuenctid Cymru

AK - An example - our colleagues work for the Syrian scheme which has now changed to the 'Vulnerable People Resettlement Scheme'. The Home Office will choose to bring these people from refugee camps from different countries such as Syria, Afghanistan. So, any vulnerable people who have been living in refugee camps for years and it's the Home Office that decides to grant refugee status. As soon as they arrive in the country, they have the right to live and work in the UK whereas the people who have come into the UK and have to claim asylum in the UK, they will have to first enter the country and when they enter, they will then have to make a claim for asylum. They will have to go through a very long process and from my experience this is a very long and painful experience, they must wait, and they are left in limbo. Speaking from my personal experience I had to wait 3.5 years just for a decision. As an asylum seeker one cannot work, you are not allowed to do a higher education course, not allowed to drive, not allowed to have a bank account - it's like you have put your life on hold. The only thing you can do is volunteer with a charity organisation. The impact on people's mental health will affect all family members. People who arrive on the schemes, don't go through the painful process. The UNHCR go to the Refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq etc and the people that are registered - the Home Office accept these people on to the resettlement scheme. For example, Swansea council will take on a certain number of people and will support them. When they arrive, they are supported by the council, we have a team in Swansea at EYST that work with those people who arrive on the resettlement scheme and will support them across a range of issues such as housing, applying for benefits, employment support, school admissions amongst many other things. The support is there for five years until people become independent and can support themselves.

An attendee: About what people are saying about the different ways that people are treated, we had a good scheme in Carmarthenshire when the Syrians came over and we were working closely with education, housing, EYST; the support workers helped to welcome them, and they were given a wonderful start. Yesterday at our drop in we had our first Ukrainian lady and she seemed very isolated although she had a lovely family sponsoring her but she's not living in the town, she's living outside, she can't travel in, and she seemed very much on her own with it all. So yes, it is quite interesting, all the different groups. I know with the Ukrainians we've had no time for plan maybe that's one of the issues. It is a difference; different communities and the different ways people arrive.



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

An attendee: In addition to what Aliya has said people get assessed by UNCHR and IOM and if they meet certain criteria which are set by the Home Office then they will be granted refugee status and be referred to the home office who will then see where people can best be placed. It's not always local authorities, there are also community sponsorship schemes so various Communities can come together and say 'We as a community want to sponsor a number of individuals or families or one of the refugees who have been recognised by the home office as a refugee' whilst they were outside the country. There is a big difference in the support for those people. One of the parts of this hostile environment that the Home Office has created to make sure that we get as few asylum seekers as possible and that in itself I think, (is my personal view) is institutional racism to dissuade asylum seekers to come to the UK. This is a multi-layered and multi-faceted area. Unfortunately, we don't have enough time to discuss all the layers of this. Underneath all the schemes and different treatments, it really is the hostile environment or the arguably the institutional racist views and approach of the Home Office that creates these divisions. Even before the hostile environment started there was a gentleman who looked at the different categories of refugees and this happened in 2006 or 2008, if you Google 'status and category matter' Daniel Brown already identified 42 different categories of refugees and just means that with all the additional categories this means we have even more than the 42 already. What this does is create a lot of divisions amongst communities. As Aliya mentioned, we have the Syrians who came through the asylum process and then the Syrians who came as refugees. At times that would create friction between the two groups of refugees; that is extremely unfortunate and sad that government allow so much polarisation amongst all the various groups. It is understandable because the more you divide a group the less chance you have for them to unify, to stand up for their rights and challenge the government. This is my personal view. I will try and share the link, 'status and category matter'.

SDM - I agree with everything that the previous attendee has said, and I want to reiterate, there are people selected for the schemes and then there is everyone else and we find these schemes tend to arise when the British public, the peoples' feathers are ruffled and affects their life, everybody else has to go through the horrible system and it's unfair and double standards.



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

Question to SDM: We are a Nation of Sanctuary and due to have an Anti-racist Wales Action Plan that will give us an aim to be a non-racist nation by 2030. We need to be working now in whatever capacity we can to get to that anti-racist Wales by 2030 - we must call out organisations, others and racism for what it is, as stated in the action plan. What support would you or refugees need, to be able to call out racist treatment for what it is?

SDM - I think it's huge but as you said we need to be working on it now and tackling it and it certainly needs to happen and we must call out on organisations, but I do feel that it feeds back to what one of the previous attendees mentioned on how we as a country, the government treat people from different countries. It is so important that we do challenge these organisations, but we also need to look at what's happening at the higher strategic level. I do think that some people might not understand that they've experienced racism as it's all some people have ever known. For example, I saw my colleague being insulted the other day and I commented on it and asked him 'what are you going to do about it?' and he said 'nothing, as that happens all the time. What's the point and if I do this what will happen next?' I think that's really important, what happens when you do speak up? What are the consequences? Are you whistleblowing within your workspace or are you telling the police that someone called you something on the street or has this organisation not offered you a job when you think that's completely unfair? Training is needed to help people explain how they can safely do it and that they need to do it, but it is down to the personal circumstance and how they can safely do it but again it's very easy for me to say but we need to ask the people who have been through it, what they need.

Question to AA: In your supportive role what are the negative issues and experiences that you see refugees have to deal with? I know housing has been mentioned but is there anything else that may like to highlight or anything else you think maybe important?

AA - Housing which I consider number one but also loneliness. I feel that this is related to language barriers and the difference in cultures. They feel lonely as they have come from their own country to a completely new one. So, loneliness is also an issue. I would also to add food and money - I connect these up. Refugees are getting a basic type of benefit, so they must work to raise this level to help with their living needs. Racism - personally in 3 years I



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

have been on different types of training because we need it. In the beginning I wanted to understand how it is defined and how it is actually tackled here in this community. I then wanted to learn how to deal with it, what are the ways and whether it is ok to report and how to report it. Housing, loneliness, language barriers, integration, racism, food and money – these are some of the issues.

AK - I would like to add that refugees also suffer with unemployment. Even when refugees come to the UK, and they have very high qualifications it is still very difficult for them to get the qualification recognised by UK employers. Refugees are suffering underemployment. We need to help them improve their language and help them get their qualifications recognised as it's not an easy process and costs them a lot of money, so I feel this also is very important.

SB – Before my role at EYST, I was working on an employability programme with clients from a Minority Ethnic background. We would often have people who were really highly qualified abroad with jobs such as vets, university lecturers, etc, when asked what work they were looking for here, they would reply with things like kitchen assistant or lunchtime supervisor. Their experience and skills from abroad did not match what they were looking for in the UK and this was because they had difficulty getting their certificates. Some didn't even have their certificates due to fleeing in such a situation they were unable to grab the certificate at that time or certificates had been destroyed. Some were waiting for NARIC to translate them. What amazed me was the resilience and positive attitude they had, they didn't see it as a bad or negative thing, they were happy to search and find whatever jobs that were available.

SDM- I would like to add to whatever has been said, I agree that we are de-skilling people especially if you have been in the asylum process for years and years and who is to say that their mental health hasn't been impacted? They've lost their confidence and self-worth potentially, and yet they go for a job which isn't related to their skill set at all, they go for an accessible job or a job that they can go for as it's easier to get. Seeking asylum and then you get permission to work but as we know you can't really work in a general job, must have a high tier of qualification/employment but on top of this they are competing with people who already have a right to work in the UK and their skill set, experiences, and references. Also, the schemes that are there where



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

everything is set up for you when you come in and you can go straight into work, it really is a double standard.

An attendee: - Totally agree with Sophie, in my experience working with Mind Cymru, I come across some people who had taken asylum, they had come from universities, working, driving etc. They had a good life but unfortunately, they had to leave their country and by the time they have been given their status nobody will employ them.

Question to panellists: With what's been discussed in the forum already, the difference in treatment for different refugees from different places and the negative experiences, what can we do as individuals to help and better the situation - not only in a working capacity but as the general public?

SDM: - Social media and tabloids - lots of the general public base their thinking on social media and tabloids. When there are particular tabloids that one week criticise one nationality and then the next week encourage people to support another nationality, I feel it is our job to be able to do some myth busting and to share the hardships that people are going through, the people that are already in our country and the people that are arriving into our country seeking asylum in their own right and that it is not illegal. There is absolutely no difference in coming on the back of a boat or coming on a plane, it makes no difference whatsoever. We need to try and challenge these beliefs when we hear something negative on the street, it's our responsibility to say to people, it's not how this is, that everybody deserves to be treated fairly. There is no good or bad refugee.

AA – I agree with Sophie and from our side we have to show them that we are all equal and they all deserve the same opportunities and chances and support from us all.

AK - We need to put some pressure on the government or the decision makers to make the asylum process pleasant, not easier for people but to change it. So for example when they arrive in UK, when they claim asylum, say to them we will give you the right to work so they won't be losing their skills while they are awaiting their asylum decision. Allow them the right to study so that they don't put their life on hold. I feel this is fairer, even if they were to compare



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

themselves to the people arriving on the schemes. We need to make changes to the asylum process - this is very important.

SDM - I agree, decisions don't need to take so long. I know there's under staffing and there's a pandemic, so many different excuses and reasons, but cases don't have to go to appeal, they could be made by a decision maker who understands and has experience who can make that decision there and then. It shouldn't always have to go to a judge.

AK - I'm not talking about anything new, in some countries as soon as people arrive as asylum seekers they are given a national insurance number so that they can start work, rent a house, essentially they can support themselves and don't need to be supported by the Home Office whilst awaiting their decision, so we do need to do something about this, I feel very strongly about this.

An attendee: I agree with everything that has been said people are being treated very differently, however at the same time it's not always black and white as portrayed. People do come here as refugee status to one of the resettlement schemes and they come to a house that is furnished and have support for several years and they can work straight away. However, the reality is that the vast majority that I see through the schemes in Newport are significantly traumatised. This indicates that most asylum seekers will be significantly traumatised, but it isn't picked up quickly as there's less support available for asylum seekers. The vast majority can work straight away even if they are allowed to do so that's due to a variety of reasons; expectations, English language skills, lack of confidence, all sorts of issues around qualifications and getting them recognised in the UK. It doesn't necessarily mean that life is easier for refugees that come through the resettlement schemes. I agree that people should get equal treatment, but bit concerned that we are almost perpetuating polarisation that the home office tries to generate to the different treatment of all the different categories. Ultimately, they all people with their own stories, abilities and struggles but please don't perpetuate that. I first hand seen the struggles of the people who came here as refugees. I am a migrant myself and I know not a visible one but I needed between one and two years before I felt settled and that was with the help of family and friends here. Whereas most asylum seekers and refugees would not have family and friends here to support and if they do have family and friends, they may not be able to help as they may be in a similar position as



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

they are, so may not be able to give the advice to people who have been here all their lives. I needed that time to settle, and I didn't have any trauma that most asylum seekers experience and had that much support, how much more difficult and challenging it would be for people who have moved to the UK for different reasons.

An attendee: We can help by taking part in these campaigns to lift the ban on asylum seekers not being able to work because in our experience in our association, the Latin American Association, people would like to work if they could and some of them could work quite quickly. When they acquire refugee status; some acquire it quickly, within 6-months some of them within a year or two years and others have been waiting 5 years and still haven't got it. The disparities are terrible. If we as an organisation support these campaigns, this is something that everybody could do. Another thing that I would like to suggest is that the people arriving from different places of Latin America who would like to be able to volunteer but it's hard to signpost them. I'm aware of organisations that allow asylum seekers to volunteer but would be nice if we could have a website where all organisations that are willing to take on asylum seekers as volunteers could appear so that we can sign post them and help them apply etc. If an organisation could put something together that would be helpful. Organisations like ours provide that family and friendship support and it's a mix of asylum seekers and refugees and residents from all over the world that are interested in our culture, heritage, and language so very important we do things that don't segregate asylum seekers and refugees. I understand that some of the meetings and organisations are geared up to support people, so we bring together all asylum seekers and refugees and they are all in the same boat but need to speak to people who aren't in the same situation so are able to integrate, better to feel included. We do all sorts of projects and activities that include residents who are here, so we don't label them, they are just 'Latin Americans' and it doesn't matter how they arrived here, and why they are here. We all dance together, participated in a well-being project and although they might be in a higher need of support than other people, in fact some local residents that are members of the association have needs as well and why should we discriminate against them? Just because they're not asylum seekers or refugees. we need to try and get them to meet local people to feel connected and integrated.

Forum close and final question



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

Question to all Panellists - Can you please share some of the positive ways that people who have supported who are refugees, have contributed to Wales?

AA - We have many examples that I can share from our clients that we supported before they were granted their refugee status. Many of them are now our colleagues; they work in EYST and makes me feel proud of them. Those people refuse to put their lives on hold and refuse to just sit at home waiting for the Home Office to just make a decision; they start volunteering at different organisations to support asylum seekers and refugees and they have the opportunity to be offered a paid job once they have been granted stay. They are contributing to the community and are helping other asylum seekers and refugees.

SDM - There's this established belief that UK just give and give and people take and take but that's not how it is at all. We need to recognise the amazing contributions made towards our communities, cities, and the places that we live, by people who are seeking sanctuary. I'm proud that within EYST we are very progressive when it comes to employing people when it comes to having amazing skill set and recognising people's skills. Yes, lived experience is an amazing additional skill to add to something but it's about recognising people skills they already have and all their worth.

AA - The first time I met Aliya was as a client and I wanted to register my daughter for school, and it was through Aliya. I appreciate all that she is doing for asylum seekers and refugees and all our EYST Family and all the other organisations that I mentioned previously. When my family and I arrived at Swansea, from the first month we started volunteering. I volunteered 3 days with the African Community Centre and my wife was volunteering one day a week with EYST and another day with the Welsh Refugee Council. Strangely one time I was discussing with a colleague that I was volunteering, and she replied to me 'Oh, so you are trying to give back?' and I felt that was nice, as though I was trying to show my appreciation because we understand that our lives has been saved and we are welcomed, so we have to give back in a way.

SB – The hard work that asylum seekers and refugees put in is inspiring for me as someone born and raised in this country. When I see how much effort is put



Ethnic Minorities
& Youth Support
Team Wales

Tim Cymorth
Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig
& Ieuenctid Cymru

in by people who are new to the country, it really is humbling and a source of motivation! Thank you!