

Wisdom from a Journey to a Good Life

Capturing the voices of people seeking sanctuary in the UK



Introduction

In this Wisdoms exercise, led by **Caritas Westminster**, representatives from local charities and organisations went out across London and Hertfordshire, to engage in deep listening with people on the streets, in day centres, in foodbanks, at coffee shops, and in families' homes. This listening exercise was open to anyone who had migrated to the UK seeking sanctuary. The diversity in avenues for identifying participants reflects the complexity of the systems faced by those seeking sanctuary.

This included: newly arrived residents of an asylum hotel, families who have emigrated through the Community Sponsorship Scheme, and those who have come through the Homes for Ukraine programme. Participants included those who have received refugee status, those who are waiting for a decision, and others who were without documentation, with many individuals not having recourse to public funds. Individuals migrated from many countries, including Iraq, Iran, El Salvador, Ukraine, Punjab, Eritrea, Vietnam and Syria, while other participants came from the Roma community.

These conversations took place between May and August 2023. In total, we spoke to 57 people, asking the question:

When you think of a good life, what does that mean to you?

For those we spoke to, a good life means having the freedom to make choices and have control over their lives, where they can feel safe and secure. It is a life where people are treated humanely and with compassion and understanding by those they rely on, including friends, family members, their community, and services.

The people we spoke with wanted to feel able to become a part of their local communities, to feel that they had a purpose, and, for many, that included ensuring they were contributing positively towards the world around them. However, where people did not have residency status and/or could not meet their basic needs, this could overwhelm the ability to focus on anything beyond survival, including their need to find a space to sleep, access enough food to eat, and/or work towards getting legal residency.

We heard that a good life is one without worry, where people can feel confident that they will have a place to sleep away from violence and war, where they have enough food to eat and that their family and friends have the same. This included knowing that close family still in their home country were safe. For some, a good life included being reunited with children, parents, and other people they were close to.

The Wisdoms Exercise

Developed by Mayday Trust, the Wisdoms is a research-informed listening exercise. The power of the Wisdoms is that there is a collective and inclusive voice, one which is listened to respectfully, without causing power imbalance. The findings are raw and honest, prompting critical reflection for organisations and local areas, but easy to read and accessible to everyone. Wisdoms aim to create a different type of relationship between your organisation and the people you work with, putting people at the heart of the direction and strategy.

This Wisdoms exercise and report were commissioned by Caritas Westminster, and co-designed by Caritas Westminster, the Mayday Trust, and participating organisations. Those carrying out the Wisdoms attended a half-day training delivered by the Mayday Trust.

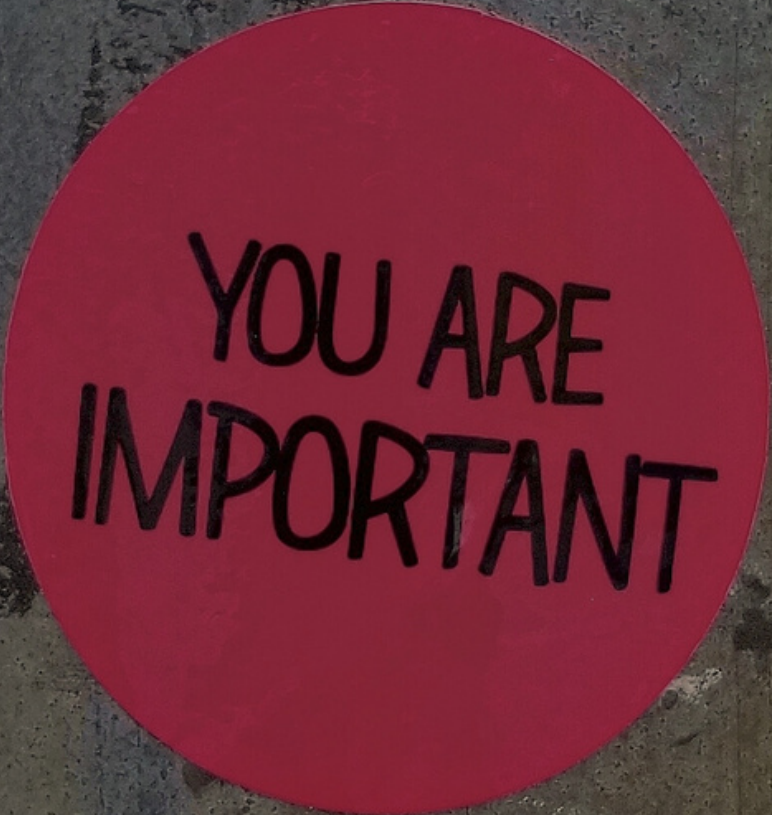
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this Wisdoms, especially the people who courageously shared their experiences, hopes and worries about living in the UK. The opportunity to capture these voices would not have been possible without the hard work and leadership of Caritas Westminster, as well as the many staff members and volunteers who went out into the communities to engage in this exercise, including: Hitchin Pantry, the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Passage, Hope for Southall Street Homeless, Camden Welcomes, Sutton Deanery Refugee Community Sponsorship Group, the Roma Support Group, Companions of Malta and Homes for Ukraine. Many more people were vital to the carrying out of this listening exercise, including volunteers, project leaders, and interpreters. We are extremely grateful for the many people without whom this project could not have occurred, including **Reset**, who kindly provided a Lead Sponsor Growth Grant.



Recommendations

for those working to support people seeking sanctuary in the UK



YOU ARE
IMPORTANT

Whatever our role – official, volunteer, or neighbour, being kind and showing compassion can have an enormous positive impact. Many participants shared positive and negative experiences of trying to access needed support. Feeling that people were understanding and empathetic could be hugely important in mental well-being and feeling that they are working toward that good life we all want. This is a vital reminder to all of us across the public sector (the NHS, schools, homelessness and immigration services, etc.) who encounter people who have come to the UK in search of a good life. Many described feeling stuck in a dehumanising system. It is important to remember our own humanity and recognise that of those we seek to support. In addition, we have highlighted six key areas of recommendation that can be applied by people looking to offer support:

1. A good life is about more than just meeting your basic needs.

Creating opportunities to have purpose and to identify and achieve future ambitions was fundamental to so many respondents' ideas about a good life, as was having community and being with friends and family. It is important for those working alongside people who have moved here from another country, particularly those without the legal right to work, to help foster opportunities to thrive. This likely means working closely with people to really understand their dreams and ambitions.

2. But, until people's basic needs are met, they may struggle to connect with their broader goals and ambitions.

However, the need to move beyond people's basic needs comes with the caveat that, when these are not being met, the idea of leading a good life, of having hopes and ambitions, can feel far away. Identifying people's basic needs and where there are gaps in their access to food, safe accommodation, security, healthcare, etc., can be a fundamental first step, but, on its own, these aspects are not enough to achieve a good life.

3. Mental health and support to recover from past trauma are vital for those who have come through tough times.

Throughout conversations, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of respondents had struggled with mental ill health during their arduous journeys to make a home for themselves in the UK. However, with the significant lack of freely available mental health care in the UK, an issue made even more difficult for those without or with limited recourse to public funds, getting support can be incredibly challenging. Any steps to empower individuals to take the steps they need to access much-needed support may be particularly impactful.

4. Help to foster opportunities to develop and support local communities that emphasise choice and control.

For people who may have been forcibly displaced or have chosen to leave their home country for a range of reasons, being able to contribute positively to their local community can be a crucial component in achieving a good life. Where it is not possible for people to obtain paid employment, social and voluntary opportunities that are likely to enable the development of positive, supportive relationships may be crucial. Where social relationships came up in discussions, they often developed informally. Giving people the space and power to develop these types of opportunities, with maximum choice and control, may be particularly beneficial.

5. Work to empower people who may experience little choice and control in their lives.

The inability to make decisions about your life and future can be incredibly disempowering. Opportunities for people to take back power in their lives may be hugely important in people's ability to achieve a good life. This could range from simple day-to-day decisions, such as what food they are eating, to supporting people to have the financial freedom to pursue hobbies, travel, see friends, and more. Ultimately, listening to people and hearing how they may feel trapped by systems and national borders may help to identify ways to better empower them.

6. Continue speaking with people who have moved to the UK from other countries, particularly those facing challenges in securing residency.

This Wisdoms exercise demonstrated just how difficult it can be for those who are dealing with incredible adversity to identify their hopes and dreams. As one respondent explained, this can mean that ambitions and conceptions of a good life can shift and grow over time. It is vital that any services, organisations, or government agencies working to improve the lives of these individuals continue to create opportunities for people to speak about their experiences, hopes, and ambitions.

The following pages capture the 57 conversations that took place, which we have divided into six key themes.

What does a good life mean to you?

Having a sense of choice and control

“A good life means
you have many
choices.”



One of the main themes that emerged in conversations was the vital importance of participants being able to have choice and control over their lives. This could include specific elements – being able to get a job, being able to choose what you eat, and/or being able to work or study. A few mentioned how their inability to have any choice in what they ate was a source of frustration and contributed to poor mental health. One person described missing being able to grow their own vegetables, as well as the smell and taste of foods from home.

“I came here for a better life. I escaped from religious persecution. But I am not allowed to work.”

“To leave your country and go to a completely new place, [you have to be] a strong person. It’s a strong person who leaves their home. They are very ambitious people, but don’t have opportunity. Don’t have choices. At least if I had education I would be learning for the future.”

Some described a more general inability to make day-to-day choices, particularly those lacking legal residency status. For them, a good life was one where they had freedom and could make decisions about their life. Comments routinely described freedom of choice as a prerequisite to a good, happy life.

“I want to be free.”

“I wish I could have more freedom and happiness in my life.”

This feeling could be exacerbated by the reality that some wished they could be back in their home country, particularly if they still had family there.

“I can't go home but if I stay here, I am illegal ... I need help to carry on with life.”

Having the ability to work and/or receive benefits was key to having financial freedom and choice. With the majority of participants still unable to work, despite many having been in the country for years, the ability to achieve their ambitions and make decisions about their future could be greatly limited. One person described having been in the country for twenty years without the ability to work, repeatedly asking for permission to work from immigration services, explaining, *“If I get status I would be happy”*. Others expressed similar sentiments.

“I asked my solicitor to give me permission to work ... They don’t listen ... This government doesn't listen. I am not a criminal. I want food, children, and clothes. What do I do?”

“If I had papers, a good job, more money, it would give me more choices of what I can do.”

Some described feeling stuck in *“the system”*, being repeatedly told to wait and, for some, after more than one or two decades, feeling increasingly frustrated and trapped.

“We need someone to advise us how we get into the system. The process of waiting, waiting, waiting is affecting my mental health. It is a big strain. When I say I need to speak to someone, I really need to. It is for my mental health ... The process of waiting is too much. We need to be properly included in the system. After 3 years we still have to wait more. Sometimes it makes us stress and overthink.”

What does a good
life mean to you?
Being treated with
humanity,
understanding, and
compassion



“Where is the humanity and
compassion?”

Where people interacted with systems (health, education, immigration, etc.), the way they were treated was often described as a barrier (or, sometimes, an enabler) to having a good life. Several people talked about the impact of being treated with kindness. Where this was not happening, people could feel stuck and disheartened.

In a paired interview with two women, both spoke about their children struggling to adapt to UK schools. They described how their kids were not receiving enough (or any) appropriate support from the school. One stated that she had been given her kids' school books and told to teach them herself. She explained that the teachers did not properly understand the extreme stress and trauma kids like hers have experienced coming from a country at war, stating:

“The teachers need to be more understanding.”

Another woman described the lack of humanity she had felt in dealing with immigration services. Her applications for residency had been rejected and she was threatened with deportation while going through chemotherapy. She was told they would reject future applications, even if her cancer came back. She was left wondering why she was not being treated with kindness and empathy.

“I have been in immigration for 16 years and with the Home Office for 12 years. I have been so sick due to the stress. It affected everything. I had breast cancer. We all know everything is related to stress. They tried to deport me whilst I was going through cancer treatment, chemotherapy. I had no money, no way of getting medication that I needed. They were sending me to commit suicide. It was a death sentence.”

Conversely, others described the incredibly powerful impact on their quality of life of being treated with humanity and compassion.

“In England they saved my life with the kindness they gave me. I want to return the patience and compassion. They were patient with me and I want to be patient with them ... They saw something in me.”



What does a good life mean to you?

Being a part of the local community

“We are all human. We can’t be living isolated away from community.”

It is clear that a good life was, for these respondents, something that did not exist in isolation from the wider world. One of the most commonly mentioned themes was the importance of being a part of the local community and the need to have people you can rely on. Many also emphasised their own desire to give back.

However, people described a wide variety of barriers to community integration. The physical and social isolation of living in homelessness accommodation and relying on local foodbanks and charities, combined with language barriers, the inability to work or go to school, and a lack of legal residency could make this particularly difficult. One person described the isolation of not having legal residency:

“I had to be really low level [under the radar]. I couldn’t form close relationships as you didn’t want them to report you.”

Another described how not having residency status prevented her from being able to trust others:

“Without papers, being a woman is not very secure. There are lots of risks. People can take advantage very easily ... There is no chance that someone will help me. My experience is that, not having any money, if I ask for help, they take advantage, as they think that I can't call the police. So many times I forget and ask people for help, but people take advantage of me.”

Additional challenges could be faced by those with limited or no English, for whom the ability to make meaningful connections could be particularly difficult. One person described their joy in being able to connect with other people who spoke the same language:

“We have each other here, thanks God.”

What does a good life mean to you?

Being able to achieve ambitions and have purpose

“I like caring for people,
but can't even do care
work.”

A key component of being a part of the local community and having choice and control over their lives was, for many, the ability to seek fulfilling employment. This could include going to school and earning qualifications, with one person identifying the importance of passing knowledge on to the next generation. Many described how legal restrictions preventing them from working or going to school could significantly impact their mental health and make them feel as though their life was worthless.

“A job is so important ... people need work, because [otherwise] you feel useless and [that is] bad for our minds.”

“I am wasting my life ... There is no opportunity for education.”

“I want to have an English Certificate so that I can go to university ... In my home country, I have a degree. It will give me confidence. I can make my place in the community, make myself useful in the community.”

For many, the pinnacle of a good life was the ability to give back to others, either through voluntary or paid work. In describing what a good life looks like, one person explained that, for them, it is about *“being healthy and being able to contribute to society, uplifting others, especially vulnerable ones. Not just ‘me, me, me, ... leaving a legacy behind. Making humanity happy”*.

Many described specific goals related to helping others, sometimes building off their own challenges or professional/voluntary experiences in their country of birth.

“I just want to contribute, but they don't give me a chance to work or study. I feel useless. I'd like to provide food for asylum seekers, the homeless, and to help people.”

“I would like access to nursing, to work in cancer care. I was a patient at [a local hospital]. I could give people the benefit of my experience.”

Thinking about the hardships of others and being able to empathise through their own struggles meant that many felt that their own happiness was contingent on the happiness of others. One person described helping others as “*giving you satisfaction*” and how these selfless deeds “*comes back to you*”. Similarly, another respondent stated:

“When I am eating, sitting next to someone who is not eating, is hungry, doesn’t have a home, I can’t be happy. If someone is restricted from peace and joy and not able to fulfil their God-given gifts and talents, I can never be happy.”

Some described experiences of ill health as being central to their desire to help others, with experiences of long-term health conditions or being disabled being common.[1] For instance, one respondent explained their experience of having cancer led them wanting to care for others undergoing cancer treatment, explaining:

“It is my cross to bear. I take it in a positive way. This helps me to heal and to encourage others. I helped an Irish lady going through the same [health issues]. That lifted her. I went to her bedside, chatting to her and encouraging her. She didn’t want chemotherapy. But I kept going to her. She has fully recovered now.”

[1] The majority of respondents who indicated their disability status stated that they were disabled or were living with a long-term health condition (55%, 12 people).

What does a good life mean to you?

Being able to see family and friends

“A good life would be to
get back to my children
and live with them.”



One of the most prominent themes was the desire to reunite with family and, sometimes, close friends. One person stated that having a good life would mean returning to their home country where their children still were, describing their living far away in a country that did not feel as safe as “*really difficult*”. Many others discussed the distress of having family back in their home country.

“I hope to join my family ... By some miracle, we will be together.”

“My wish is to be united with my children.”

For many, being with their families once again was fundamental to having a good life, particularly for those who had children.

“A good life is all family and close friends with you and healthy, not about richness, expensive things. Family is the most important thing.”



What does a good life mean to you?

But, before any of this, basic needs
have to come first

“Security brings happiness.”

Throughout conversations, it was clear that, for many, the inability to meet their basic needs meant they could not think about or discuss hopes or aspirations for the future beyond obtaining housing, achieving/maintaining good health, and/or having sufficient food. Without recourse to public funds, many emphasised how not having 'papers' or the right to remain and work in the UK is the most important component of having a good life.

“When I became homeless, this is when I became unhappy.”

Without the freedom to make choices about their life or meet their basic needs, it seemed that some were unable to discuss what a positive future would look like. This included the need to feel safe and secure, a common theme amongst participants. For some, simply being in the UK meant they felt safer.

“It is a free country. You can do what you like.”

“All is good.”

However, not all felt this way. Many found that the waiting and worrying about immigration-related decisions, combined with the desire and inability to work or have choice and freedom in their lives, contributed to distress.

“I need a legal status to live a full life.”

“This government doesn't listen. I am not a criminal. I want food, children and clothes. What do I do?”

Some felt unsafe due to their situation. One person described how his current accommodation seemed dangerous to him. As a result, he did not seek community and instead explained:

“I just need to look after myself.”

Others described not having somewhere to sleep as a reason for not feeling safe and a source of worry.

“I would like somewhere safe and secure to live.”

The worry about their home country and, potentially, those left behind was a significant barrier to being happy and feeling settled. For many, the worry about those left behind in their home countries seemed all-consuming. One person said that a good life would be:

“to have my mum, my sister and brother, cousin, and dog with me. To live. I worry about them all the time. [Our home country where they live] is not a good place to be.”

It is clear that, for many, these essential components of a good life, things like safety, security, and being free from worry, need to be addressed first.

“My happiness is lower because my city is bombed.”

“Money comes and goes but family is here all the time and that is why it is so important ... If your family is happy, than you are happy.”

A collection of colorful, hand-painted rocks and stones, some with the word 'HOPE' written on them, set against a background of sand. The rocks are painted in various colors including blue, yellow, red, green, and brown. One prominent blue rock has the word 'HOPE' written in black, block letters. Other rocks feature a purple flower, a rainbow, and the word 'SMILES'.

What does a good life mean to you?
Having something to feel hopeful about

“Without hope, you are just
breathing. You don’t live.”

Ultimately, many people clearly expressed that a good life is one with hope. This means having the freedom to make decisions about their lives, to be free from worry about their own safety and security and that of their friends and family. And, to feel that there was a path out of the difficult circumstances they were in.

“I think always positive. To live life. I'm never alone, because God is with me. There are struggles, but we have to be patient and hope that a good life would come.”

“Without hope, you don't have anything.”

Appendix

For this Wisdoms exercise, we spoke with 57 people during the summer months of 2023.

Each conversation was held with two staff members/volunteers, with one serving as the listener and the other as the note-taker. People were able to participate in pairs/groups of three, which some chose to do, though the majority were individual conversations.

Some conversations were held in the participant's native language, with listeners and note-takers or someone from the local community serving as translators. Where this has occurred, quotes and responses have been translated into English for this report.

An optional demographic form was completed by 22 participants (43%), who ranged in age from 24 to 58 years old. One participant was in the 18 to 27 age range, 4 were in the 28 to 37 age range, 7 were 38 to 47, 8 were 48 to 57, and one was 58 to 67, with an average age of 44.

Participants were roughly split between male and female, with 45% (10) identifying as women, 55% (12) as men, and none as non-binary. The majority (55%, 12 people) indicated that they were disabled or had a long-term health condition.

Of the 22 who completed the form, 15 indicated if they had a dependent. Just over half (53%, 8 people) said that they had no dependents, while 47% (7 people) said that they had children, with three stating they had one child and four that they had two.

What can you do?

In addition to sharing this Wisdoms and applying our six areas of recommendations, each one of us has the potential to have a positive impact. The act of kindness can be transformative for people seeking sanctuary, people working in services and for communities as a whole. Leading with kindness and empathy, rather than process, has the power to change an impossible situation into one that's met with empathy and honesty. In turn, together, we will create hope.

Are you in a position of power?

The 57 conversations we captured through this Wisdoms highlighted the impossible situations people are forced into and the increasing barriers they face due to not being able to work.

We recommend a review of the prohibition on people's rights to work when they are seeking sanctuary in the UK. People will then be able to contribute to their local communities and to the economy, as well as claim a sense of agency over their lives and their futures. It will create long-lasting positive change.

Want to find out more about the Wisdoms?

Whether you have contributed to this Wisdoms, you're interested in carrying out your own Wisdoms, or you have a few questions, we would love to hear from you. You can email development@maydaytrust.org.uk or visit www.maydaytrust.org.uk

Thank you to:





Mayday Trust is a charity and company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales.
Charity Registration Number: 1035524 Company Registration Number: 2911222