Summary: Mental Health of Forced Migrants Recently Granted Leave to Remain in the United Kingdom

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Thousands of vulnerable and traumatised people who have fled war, torture, abuse and exploitation in their home country are granted refugee status in the UK each year. Gaining refugee status is hugely positive; it brings with it the safety and certainty after a long and perilous journey and an arduous and exhausting asylum process. However, the transition from asylum seeker to refugee is far from easy and can have significant implications for mental health.

When asylum seekers are granted refugee status (or other form of leave to remain in the UK), they are required to make the transition from the limited support for asylum seekers to mainstream support in a very short space of time. Although in the long term this means a greater level of support, there is little help available to ease the transition and, in the short term, many people find themselves at immediate risk of homelessness and destitution. New refugees, who often have poor physical and mental health, speak little or no English, and have no money or knowledge of the systems in the UK, have only 28 days to find somewhere to live and apply for Universal Credit; a process which takes at least 5 weeks.

Experts at the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) have supported many hundreds of new refugees through this transition and have seen first-hand how badly the stress of the rapid and unsupported transition can impact their health and wellbeing.

We have now conducted the first piece of research to investigate the impact of the transition period on new refugees’ mental health. The year-long study interviewed a group of new refugees at regular intervals during their transition from asylum seeker, assessing their mood, well-being and any significant challenges and changes that they had experienced.

The study highlighted many hardships during the transition period, particularly difficulties finding a safe place to live, applying for and being awarded the correct level of benefits, being confronted with barriers to accessing essential services and frequent experiences of discrimination. Results showed these stressful life events did have negative implications on mental health. Towards the end of the year, as personal circumstances began to stabilise, mental health began to improve.

We believe the participants in this study may have fared better than average during the transition period (their mental health may have been impacted less and recovered more quickly) because of the support they received from the team of experts at the Helen Bamber Foundation. The majority of new refugees in the UK do not receive this kind of support, and are therefore likely to experience a worsening of their mental health, and a longer recovery.

This research, along with our years of experience, show how beneficial and important it is to have dedicated support in the transition period from asylum seeker to refugee. HBF will now look to build on this research to increase understanding of the challenges of the transition period and the support required for new refugees to make the best possible start to their life in the UK.