

INTO THE ARMS OF TRAFFICKERS

Companion guide: Voices of the young people



Artwork by E, young champion at Shpresa Programme

Christine Beddoe

October 2021

Shpresa Programme
Inspiring hope & change

phf Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings and in housing decisions. It is within the spirit of the Convention that this document comes about.

In February 2021, in the midst of winter and during the pandemic lockdown, sixteen young Albanians in the UK generously shared their thoughts, fears and aspirations over the course of three focus groups held remotely via Zoom, the web-based conferencing platform. All had been children when first arriving in the UK and claiming asylum. Due to extensive delays in getting asylum interviews and decisions, several of the young people have now turned 18 years, with some in their early 20s still waiting for a final resolution to their immigration claim. The group included both male and female participants. A significant number of these young people had already experienced trafficking and exploitation or knew young people who had been exploited within the UK. Their comments reproduced here, anonymously but with their permission are powerful and upsetting. But they need to be heard at the highest levels. It is a clarion call for change, not least because of the devastating impact on children and young people's mental health.

This companion guide forms an essential part of the research undertaken for the report "Into the Arms of Traffickers." The research was undertaken to examine whether Home Office delays in reaching trafficking and asylum decisions increase the risk of modern slavery to young Albanians already in the UK. If so, what are the specific areas of risk and harm, and how could they be mitigated, if at all? The pandemic has unquestionably led to further delays in processing Home Office trafficking and asylum claims. But the experience of many vulnerable young people is that the past year or more of waiting added a new layer of distress at a time when they were already at a low ebb due to long delays from before the pandemic. Their views below capture what impact this has had on their physical and mental health, their relationships, their sense of self-worth, and their trust in the system. These are all vulnerabilities that traffickers will seize upon.

Christine Beddoe, October 2021

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DELAYS – MENTAL HEALTH

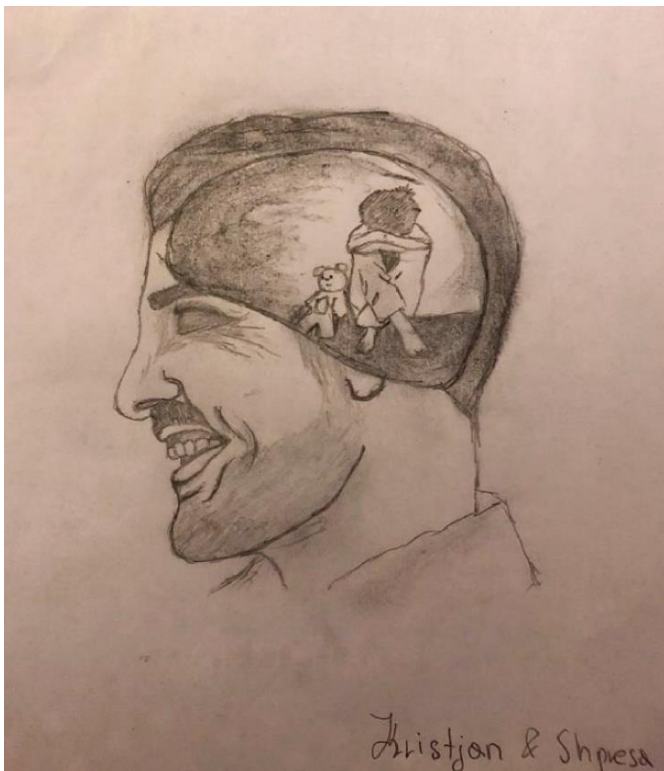
“Every day my mind is only thinking what will happen to my life, I can’t go back to my country because my life was in danger, that put me in depression. Now I can’t do anything. If I had a decision 3 years ago, I would have been at university by now.”

“I got a final decision a year ago, I have been waiting 5 years, my mental health [broke] down – so, I’m OK on paper but I’m still trying to recover from it. I was so stressed before – now just trying to recover. I go to counselling twice a week.”

“You want to be productive, you want to build a life.”

“I been here almost 5 years. The delays – you are put in a box, you can’t go forward, you just wait for a brown envelope to be positive or not. You can’t build anything, can’t build a career. Staying 4 years in ESOL because you can’t do anything. It puts you in a state of depression but even if you get a decision you have to recover after – you want to dream.”

“You see all the people around you doing things. I’ve been diagnosed [with] anxiety and depression. Sometimes you’re so fed up you don’t want all this responsibly on our shoulders. When I came here, we were just kids and we just want to feel like every other kid. We don’t want to be judged by the way we look, emotionally, physically, psychologically. It’s affected how I look, I’ve changed a lot.”



“My case was delayed [a long time] – then I had a refusal in July last year. I had hope but now am broken in pieces to go through it all again. All these things have an impact on my mental health.”

“I have had 5 years in talking therapies. I don’t want to make extra work for NHS – I want to work and contribute my taxes. Someone asks you ‘What are you doing?’ and you are forced to say you have no right to work... I am angry with people, but I manage it with tablets, I have had 5 years taking pills.”

“If you meet someone on the road and they say asylum seeker, they treat you different in a bad way. It’s not a nice thing – it’s really bad.”

“Making friends, somewhere to hang – gives hope, helps with depression and mental health.”

“All of us been more than 4 years in UK. No chance to do anything for our future, that’s how depression has started.”

“Years go by, they are dead years, it affects you mentally and physically – you can’t eat what you need. I wouldn’t wish [this] on the worst people.”

“When I came here, I was 17. Now I am a grown man with facial hair – but I haven’t developed as everyone else has.”

“It affects us. We all have medical reports. Here we are, 5 people who all have anxiety and depression pills.”

“3 years ago I got refused and had to go underground – worst experience of my life to go through, you can’t go to hospital, mentally it’s so stressful. As soon as I could, I applied for a fresh claim. I thought I could hurt myself really bad. I got medication, tried to do therapy. Still recovering from it.”

“Specially in pandemic surrounded by 4 wall room, thinking stuff: what will happen, what will decision be? So, so depressing.”

“We are twice as scared as other people.”

“I am in the UK for 1 year and 5 months and still waiting for substantive interview. You are just waiting all the time, waiting for interview. I’m going to college and doing level 1. I am concerned about what happens next and whether I can do the course I want. Not having a decision distresses me – I think about it all the time. You ask yourself ‘What are you are going to do in 5 years?’ – I want to go to uni but life is on hold all the time.”

“I’ve got limited leave twice, now the 3rd time, waiting 9 months.”

“I’m in the process of appeal: three times refusal, twice certified. Been here 2.5 years. I waited for a year to get first decision. It’s moving quicker than before because it is not Home Office (it’s in the court).”

“[It] impacts mental health so much – we can’t even explain it. You wake up in the morning and have nothing to look forward to – especially in lockdown. It’s impacted [me] so much, I have no motivation, nothing to look forward to – whole life on hold, no results. So difficult and stressed situation. If someone doesn’t experience it, they don’t understand. It’s so hard for us to explain that literally we are in our room 24/7, some don’t have internet or phone, we just wait for

someone to tell you that you have an interview or to wait for an answer, and then maybe you can dream again to go to uni and start working.”

“Waiting, it’s worse when we see there is no progression. When we see progression: ok we can see. When you see nothing, everything struggling there is nothing, no hope. I’ve been thinking many times to apply for scholarship, but chances are so low – what am I going to do? Can’t work, can’t study. I want to go to uni. It gets my mind off [things] when I study. Even if I had connection, it gets boring, effects mental health. Not being productive effects mental health. I’m really scared of that.”

“I have been here since 2019, a year and a half ago. When I came here I was in danger in Albania and I still haven’t had a substantive interview or telling me anything. Shpresa helped me with my solicitor. I haven’t heard from Home Office. It’s quite stressful, anxious – it stops us to do anything in our lives to take out the danger in life. It’s difficult not knowing about our cases. Sometimes I can’t go to sleep, just thinking what will I do. I can’t do anything – no right to work. Everything has been so, so difficult – still haven’t got anything from them [the Home Office].”

“As young people [the delay] affects us in so many ways, a negative impact on our lives, on how we integrate and mentally – I remember crying and being so stressed and not understanding anything. The Home Office have their strict deadline when they require things from us but they delay most of the procedures and don’t come on time for hearings or interviews. It makes our lives so stressful.”

“I waited 2 years for an interview.”

“I have been waiting for a year and even on weekends I keep looking at my email, I know solicitors don’t work on weekends, but I keep looking at emails (checking).”

“I used to live with a foster carer then I live alone because I’m 18, then lockdown with one room, one window. No decision, no family, no right to work. Some times I was thinking I could end my life, thinking, thinking what am I doing in this position but how can [it be] better. I was waiting for the Home Office to make a decision, then I went for interview and they cancelled. Then I had to wait another 6-7 months for another interview. I was thinking ‘Why did they cancel?’ – I didn’t know the rules. Really stressful for our mental health, making you feel bad – not knowing.”

“Keep hearing stories they send people back.”

“Stressful, no words to explain how it affects our mental health at our age.”

“We have other young people they have committed suicide because of the stress, some people have suffered more than we know, and they just give up.”

IMPACT ON EDUCATION

“At this stage we have dreams of going to uni, but [the waiting] makes you pessimistic. You go to college, work hard and do well, but don’t have opportunity to get to uni because of legal status. It stops you from going forward, stops your intelligence. Maybe we can be of help to society, but because of legal status we can’t do anything. They keep your life on hold for 5-6 years. Then you are all grown up and there is no time to go to uni, because we have to earn money to survive so we can only get a random job. Maybe you were intelligent once, but you only get a random job because you have no qualifications. At this stage we can’t even work, we can’t work to support our own mental health.”

“For all of my past experience I can’t keep myself busy, because that’s what can help your mental health, to keep busy. You just wait for the £30 a week, you’re not allowed to work and pay taxes.”

“Even if we have potential to do work, be smart and learn, we don’t have the right to move forward and get the degree we want - If we get status at 22-23 you just think what you could you have done before [if we had been given a decision earlier].”

“While I’m in college, because of trauma - while the teacher is explaining – I can’t concentrate on the teacher. It’s really hard, you can’t learn as much as you want – when we have this situation of waiting in the background it’s horrible.”

“I’m still waiting – I’m really worried about not being able to access student finance to go to uni. I’ve been here 7 years. I did school Year 7- 11 here, now 6th form.”

“Can’t go to university. Even if I get it [status] I still have to wait a couple of years. [So much] anxiety, stress.”

“I’m in education level 3 diploma, if I can’t get student finance, I can’t get to university.”

“I’m doing level 1 course, no idea if I can get finance to go further. Course needs to be funded and it stresses me because I don’t know – big mental health.”

“When we open our eyes in the morning, don’t feel motivated. We have no rights, can’t socialise – just lie with the hope for a decision – just thinking - we get £5.80 a day.”

“It’s been really long, really stressful. I didn’t understand the reason behind the long, long wait... Having to wait a long time makes us pause our life, we have no right to work or to continue to higher education – we can only do entry level and basic education which we are grateful of, but after waiting for so long and so many years it is important to us to actually hear back from Home Office - hoping for the best and trying our best to prove we are in danger. We need support from this country – but they put our life on pause, we have no rights, we can’t do anything.”

“If Home Office haven’t made a decision, you only have the right to entry level [education] – no right to do apprenticeship. Not given opportunity to do things, you have no rights if you are still waiting, but they are not letting you follow your dreams.”

“It’s difficult with immigration, it’s impacting performance in college – we are only entitled to do entry levels, it doesn’t give us a chance to progress to higher education to internship or apprenticeships.”

“...[At college] you see other people going up and up – you can’t do it, you feel different – you are just an asylum seeker and they will judge you. [When they say] ‘Go back to your country’ [...] in your mind and heart you feel bad. Other children have their family come to college but you don’t have anyone.”

“Not having same rights as other people made me feel like I had less self-esteem, not have the same rights to progress – it impacted my mental health. I couldn’t focus on studies and what I wanted to do, because I had to focus on Home Office. [It’s] good that we met Shpresa – having the support, all we need sometimes is someone to listen to us and our problems.”



RIGHT TO WORK

“If you had right to work, you can be active - while you are waiting for decision. Now you wait 2 or 4 years, what are you going to do? You can’t dream, you can’t go to uni, you can’t do apprentice work but you’re waiting for 5 years for a decision living with £30 a week. When we had a trip with class I couldn’t go because I had to do other things with my money.”

“The right to work would change our lives, we could finance ourselves. We don’t need to take money from the government, we would have motivation to get out of bed. We would have hope instead of feeling hopeless and not worthy. We don’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. All these delays and struggles impact on our mental health.”

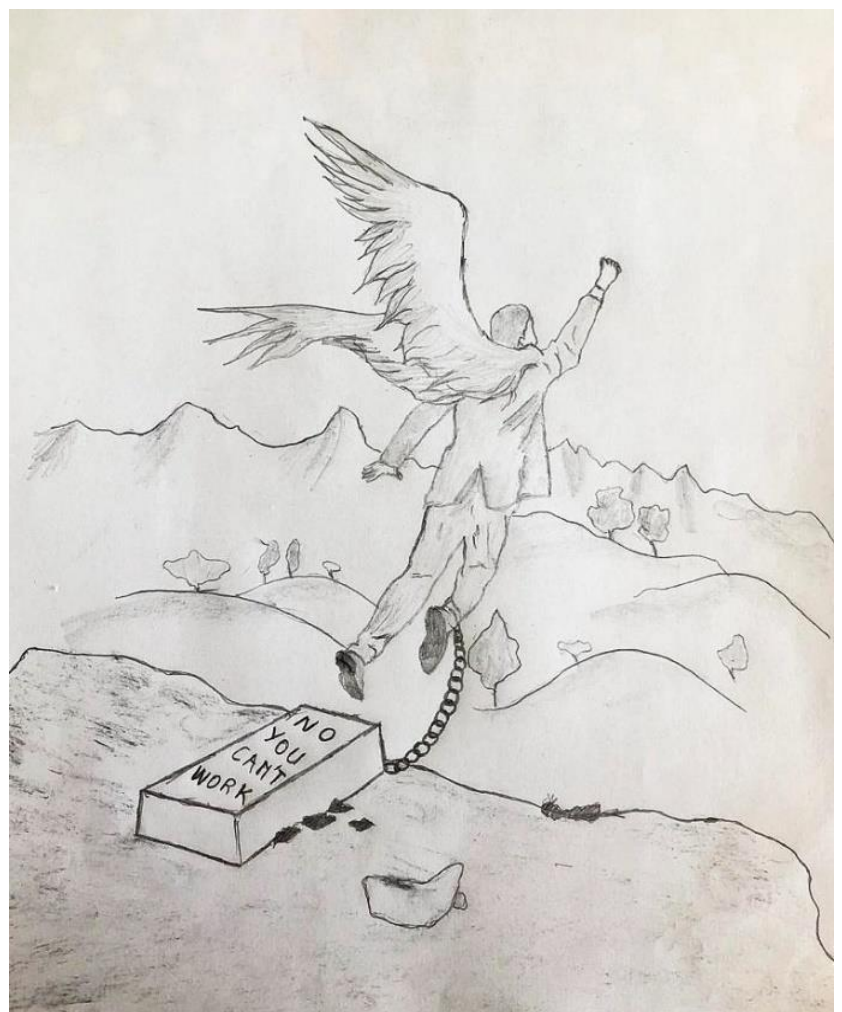
“If you’re working you can think you are doing something, can’t wait for the government for your £35 – [it’s] difficult, better if we have right to work.”

“By having the right to work you’re helping the country, contributing and paying your taxes. Some of us are very talented but we don’t have the opportunity.”

“The way to show gratitude is to work and pay taxes and do everything legally.”

“I strongly agree that right to work will bring [young people] to the right path [to avoid exploitation].”

“Being able to work, it benefits not just us but everyone in the country, we can pay taxes. It’s a win-win, especially for our mental health.”



EXPLOITATION

“Biggest danger for Albania community people is drug dealers and traffickers. [For] young Albanians who go underground and don’t have [the] right to work, they go to work on building sites, they [their boss] pay only for meals. ...they might end up in jail.”

“What’s the danger of going underground? Depression, being afraid from police, afraid to go on the job, being afraid to get a job but they won’t give you the money you deserve, they take advantage of you – you can’t do anything if they don’t pay you. Mental health effects people. In my experience I tried to hurt myself super badly. Anything can happen.”



“Within Albania community, it happens in other communities – in my experience [working conditions] have been great in Albanian community, they understand me better they have been in my situation – they make you work super hard, but the others [Pakistani] make you stay late, working 12 hours or longer to get £5 or £10 or just a meal.”

“When people are in difficult situations, they will do anything – they try to look for a job. When you tell people you have no right to work, they take advantage of you. You might get paid £5 or £10 day a day or a meal, it’s like slavery.”

“I know some people that are underground and too afraid to deal with Home Office because of their mental health, because they have had such bad experience, they can’t take it – if I have to deal with Home Office I don’t know what to do.”

“People just don’t know how it works. They think that the solicitor has all the power, but we know now we are boss of solicitors.”

“My experience is homeless for 3 years, I tried to get a job but they ask about visa – you tell them you are not allowed to work, it’s really tough. I’ve been in street asking for money when I was in really difficult situation.”

“Not having the right to work - and so little money it can make you go like that.”

“People take advantage of you, they see you don’t have any hope – I have something in mind – has happened to some people I know.”

“First thing is we don’t have the right to work, it makes you a target for people exploiting you – people are tempted to – my brother did, he got caught – went to work in restaurant – [he] had no document, they called immigration, he got detained. Thank God he did because he could have been exploited in modern slavery – it exists in 21st century.”

“The delay on Albanian case[s] making young people choose bad destinations, end up selling drugs and doing illegal [things] – go to college and see friends with better shoes – they get bullied, and it leads to young people trying to get money.”

“People treat you that way – you have no right to work and modern slavery is a thing, believe it or not.”

“Really hard to explain to people, so hard to share sensitive information. Really hard to explain the struggles with delays – especially delays - a lot of people end up doing crime because they can’t work. It builds frustration when you can’t share. They find other ways of gain[ing] status.”

“I had 5 years waiting for a decision- the hardest thing is trying to stay out of trouble – we go school then college only 3 days a week – can’t just stay at home – just 4 walls and a bed, makes you feel depressed. While I’m out I meet people, easy to hang out with wrong people, you don’t care anymore, you end up fighting, police see you and do stop and search, then you have trouble with police. Even if you don’t want to, there are different people outside waiting, you can’t work, you have no money, they know your situation and they offer you. All I get is £45 a week, it’s not enough. If I go to college I want to look like everyone else.”

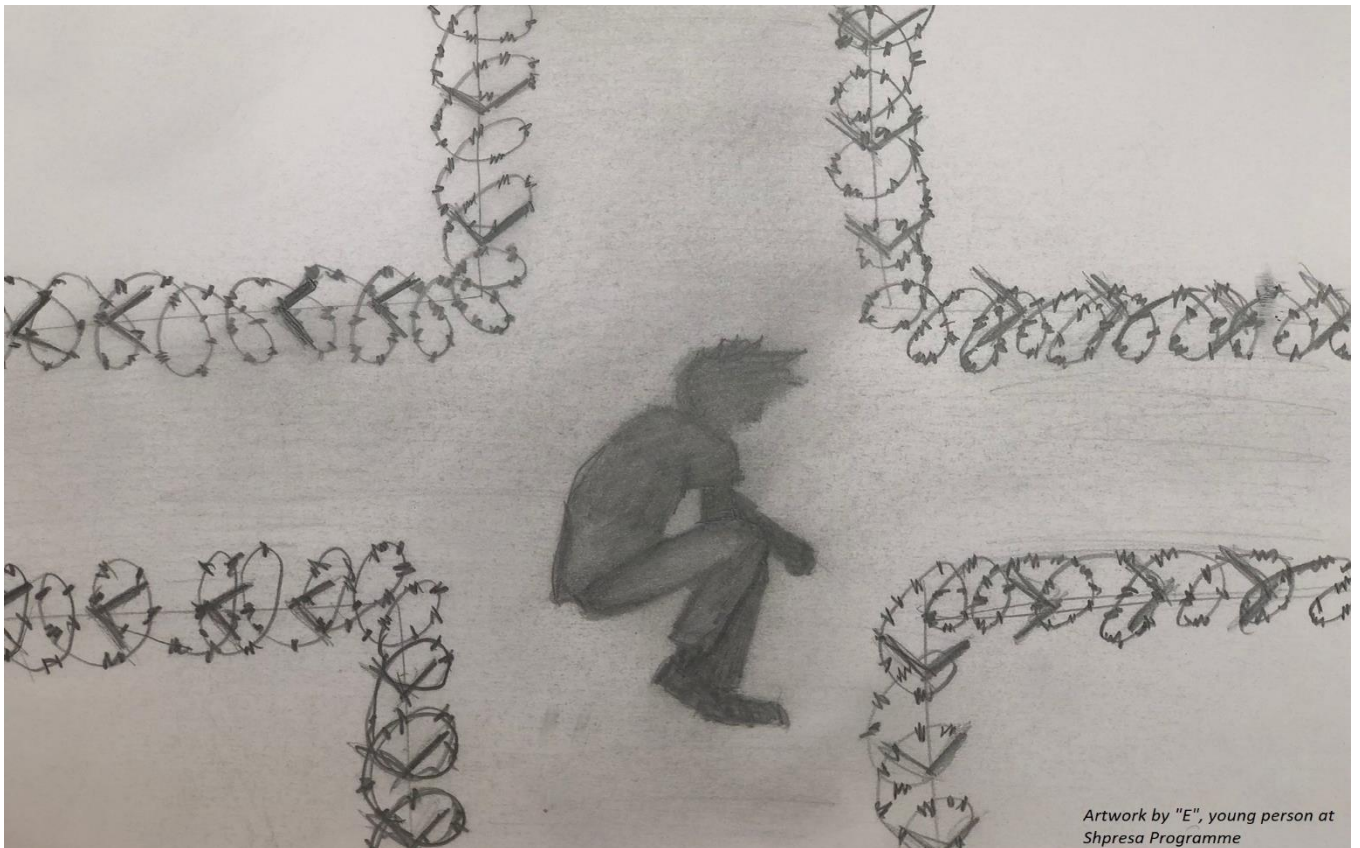
“Friends ended up in prison, I came here for a safer life. I’m not much of a school guy, I want to work – but have nothing to do, [there are] people offering jobs to sell drugs, they make it seem so easy. If police catch you end up in prison.”

“Because you don’t have any option that’s what seems right. I don’t have enough money – you think ok if I get caught, I go to prison, but at least that is better than being in Albania and risking my life.”

“With the [little] money we are receiving many people especially boys they are getting offered different jobs to do things to earn more money when their situation is difficult. They are getting offered to steal, to deal drugs and other things that will risk their lives.”

“When they have no other choice, they are desperate they run in to the first offer they get.”

“For boys if you see your friends going out and you have only £30, and they are involved in different things but if they had the right to work they would be able to contribute to this country.”



Artwork by "E", young person at Shpresa Programme

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PEOPLE

“I got invited to friend’s birthday – they all gave him gifts and I couldn’t [afford to]. It makes you feel really bad.”

“I’m a closed person – I don’t like speaking about my situation – it makes me keep a higher guard around me. If a friend sees me really stressed, I can’t speak to them, they won’t understand – their life is so normal and my life is so different – maybe I will be judged – another fear. For me it has been really difficult to reach out and speak.”

“I’m friendly but a closed person – I won’t share about myself, has affected my relationships with other people – I’ve just one friend and she knows, I feel sorry for her because she’s the one that gets all my emotions, she understands but it’s not good because has impacted our relationship.”

“You see a trend about Albanian people not sharing what they know. [In Albania] you don’t tell other people about mental health or what you’re going through, you just don’t share.”

“At the beginning we are not used to telling people – when you talk about it and tell people what you have been through.”

“It is so hard until the point you get up and tell someone. So many young people don’t want to say because they don’t want people to think bad about – we keep everything inside and then we get used to it.”



“Talking to people was hard for me but inside you feel better after telling them.”

“We are judged because we are Albanian.”

“When we compare ourselves to others we are like the lowest – in every way financially, psychological every way - we could even work for free for a little time volunteering but they won’t let us.”

HOME OFFICE INTERVIEWS

“When I went to interview, having a lawyer felt so weird. In Albania when you have a lawyer it means you committed a crime. When I went with lawyer I don’t know, I was 15, I haven’t committed a crime, having a lawyer so hard to explain.”

“I was around 12 years, I remember my foster care was there, but she didn’t know – I had no break, they asked complex questions – never felt so pressured since then.”

“The pressure of the way they ask you questions, the way they ask feels threatening and forces you to answer.”

“It’s like they think you have done something wrong, with my interview there was a lot of people there – especially back then I didn’t feel comfortable – the way they try to catch you on your words, it makes you think why can’t there be some reasonable doubt? Why can’t there be someone just believing in my case? No one has enjoyed their interview.”

“They ask same question, different ways. If I knew my rights at time of interview – would have made so much difference.”

“I came here when I was 17 after a traumatic journey. Not knowing anything, I was interviewed without interpreter, such a traumatic experience.”

“Most important is Home Office need to see our lives back in Albania so they can understand more, so they don’t just ignore it.”



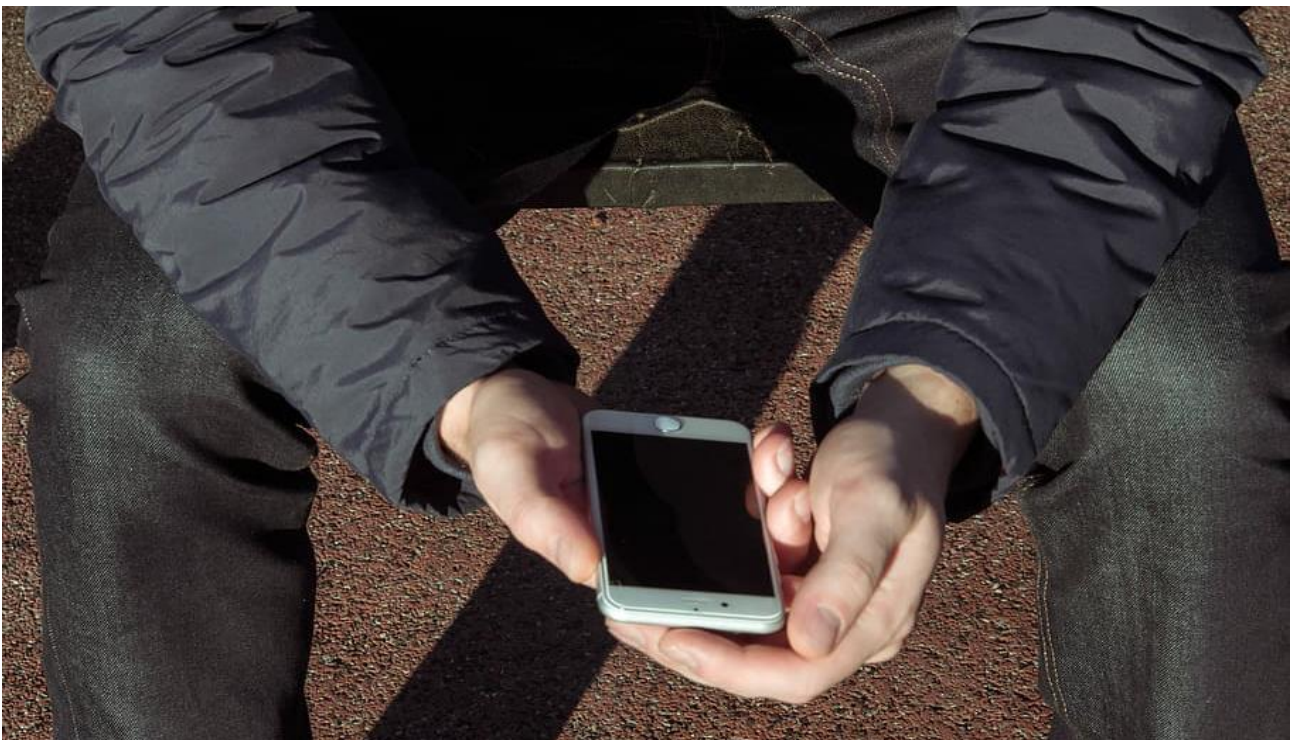
Artwork by E, young champion at Shipresa Programme

WHAT IS A REASONABLE TIME TO WAIT FOR A DECISION?

"I would say once I'm done with the interview as soon as possible would be a great decision, super great because it affects our mental health. I've had a negative decision, it feels bad, you think what will I do, if I go back to my country I will be in super danger."

"I would say the whole process max should be six months or shorter, they say in the big interview I would get a result in two to three weeks, but I waited five years. Every time I go to sleep you think they will come and take you without knowing, it's the fear."

"If they say three weeks, I want a decision in three weeks not five months or five years. It not good mentally, you can't do anything."



RESTRICTIONS ON NORMAL LIFE

“I have opened a bank account, but I have many friends who can’t.”

“I have five years in this country and still I don’t have a bank account.”

“You can’t get a driver’s licence. You are paralysed. Without money you can’t go out with friends, you step away from friends, everything comes to depression.”

“We only get £35-37 a week, you can barely afford to eat – without the right to work.”

“I have a lot of problems with the bank – if you don’t have passport or leave to remain – Metro [bank] is only one.”

“When I was living with my foster carer, I went to Metro bank three times and they asked me for passport [and they refused when I said I had no leave to remain].”

“I was also struggling to open a bank account - my college required a bank account to put the bursary through but I was not allowed to open an account. After a lot of struggles with social services the bank only allowed me to open a saving account but I wasn’t allowed to have a normal debit account.”

“My foster parent contacted the DVLA and they said no I can’t [get a driver’s licence] without right to remain. I contacted my solicitor and council and they said I can’t open a direct debit, can’t get a driver’s licence, and so many other things we can’t do. Someone offered me an apprenticeship and I wasn’t allowed to do it – can’t do anything apart from ESOL.”

“I learned it all [how to drive] but couldn’t get a provisional licence. I thought at least they would let me do the practical, but you are not even allowed to get even the provisional licence.

SHPRESA PROGRAMME

“Shpresa means hope – they are like a universal talking therapy. Before I had fear from my family because they can hurt you but with Shpresa at least I am stable now.”

“If it wasn’t for Shpresa I wouldn’t be here – I just don’t want to think of the worst. When I got refusal, solicitor was no good – Shpresa found me new solicitor – first lockdown I didn’t know anything, trying to do six days a week on Zoom to try to get ourselves motivated and go forward. Shpresa for me has been like a family. I owe them a lot, cannot express.”

“While I was underground I had to leave my house, I was homeless. Shpresa got in touch me, I begged for help and they found me a good lawyer – applied for fresh claim. Shpresa it’s like a family to us.”

“Without Shpresa I had difficulties communicating with lawyer - lawyers don’t explain. Shpresa helps. I joined from word of mouth. I learned a lot from Breaking the Chains project.”

“Shpresa offer us six days with Zoom meetings, so helpful now to keep us engaged and keep us out trouble – many young people can go down the wrong path.”

“If we get a negative decision, we wouldn’t know what to do and would be underground – illegal working, I know I’m not returning back to where I am from.”

“If it wasn’t for Shpresa I was going to be in big trouble to myself. Commit something I shouldn’t have, they have been there for me, whatever the time, middle of night, just to talk to us.”

“I can’t imagine what would happen to me without Shpresa – I’d be dead or in jail.”

“[Where would I be without Shpresa?] Back in my county dead, I had only 2 weeks to get JR [a judicial review].”



“When I came I was 16, I was in a coma, I stayed in street and someone stabbed me 4 times, Shpresa helped me.”

“I met Shpresa in Jan 2020 – I didn’t know anything about my rights, how I should be treated. We had zoom sessions about mental health - I got to know my rights, I am the boss of my lawyer, they help with us with lawyers, explaining out rights – they were supporting us. If I needed some motivation, needed help – always there – like a team at your back, they will help.”

“Me, since beginning I had no idea about the asylum process, I had no idea. Shpresa helped me a lot and still helping me. I went from having zero knowledge and now I know about treating my case, communicating with my lawyer – support with mental health so grateful. Through Shpresa I have the chance to get counselling which has helped me a lot through these months, during my screening interview in pandemic it wasn’t good because I had to do by myself – it’s good that we hear other people’s experience but I dread the next interview. It makes me so stressed and I don’t respond well to that treatment - what I have to go through and so difficult to speak to counsellor, I didn’t feel like I wanted to share, it’s becoming a bit easier but at same time you are re-living it, living same emotion and same pain, I am dreading but I am grateful that I know what to expect.”

“I’ve been with Shpresa couple of months but they are making representations that weren’t happening before and helping me finding scholarship – taking a whole load off my back.”

“I’ve known Shpresa since start of pandemic, I’m a new arrival four months – I had no friends, knew nothing – pandemic & everything became difficult. Shpresa helped find me good representation – got lawyer from MiCLU. With new lawyer I’m in safe hands.”

“I met Shpresa in a bad moment, in June or July 2020, I got refused with certified, my last barrister said my case had no merit, unless you have the evidence – I was thinking of going underground but got connected to Shpresa and to MiCLU. They took my case on and proceed with JR but Home Office withdrew the last decision, and court gave me right of appeal. Really grateful to Shpresa for getting me out of a bad situation – I’ve had mental health sessions – made me a better person.”

“Shpresa inspired me to dream of becoming a human rights lawyer. I want to be like them.”

“Such inspiring people. The work they do is amazing – never complain, I feel proud to be part of this group with Shpresa. So grateful.”

“They work tirelessly.”

ASPIRATIONS

"I'm trying to do accounting and finance or engineering."

"I want to get a degree in computer science and work in IT."

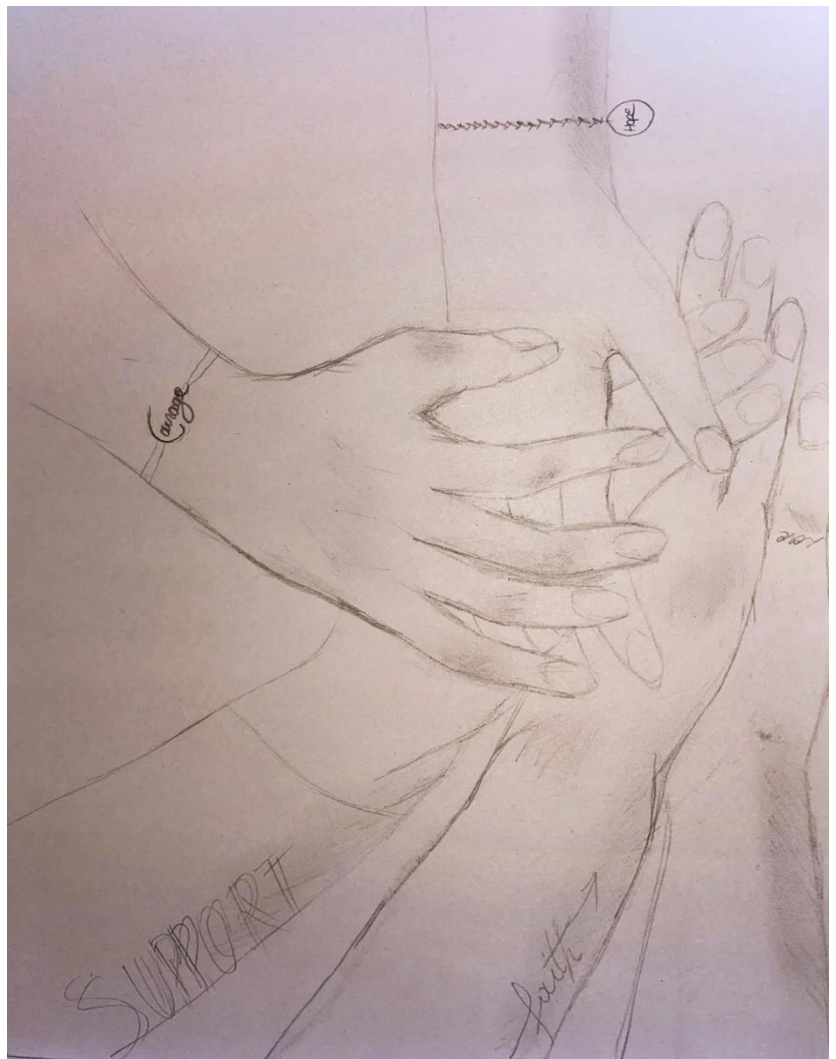
"I want to be a criminal lawyer because many Albanian young people end up in prison and they don't get enough support in criminal justice system."

"I want to get a degree in medicine, and become a doctor."

"My degree in psychology, but I'm a recent graduate. I hope I will be able to continue – I'm quite interested to be a psychologist and researcher, I'm interested in both, not sure."

"I'm hoping for bio medical science."

"Right now I'm not able to think about it. The future is full of surprises - good surprises, bad surprises."



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The opportunity to speak to the young people was generously facilitated by the organisation Shpresa Programme (Shpresa). Shpresa is a charity that promotes the participation and contribution of Albanian-speaking refugees and migrants in the UK. The young people who contributed to this report are part of the *Breaking the Chains* project¹, a vital resource for Albanian young people who are supported and trained to become Immigration Champions. Only by listening to the experiences of children and young people can we understand the profound impact of policy and practice affecting their lives. But listening is not enough, now we must act.

With special thanks to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and to Flutra Shega, Shpresa Programme, and especially to the brave young people who spoke out to make it better for others.

All artwork featured in this guide has been created by the young people at Shpresa Programme.

¹ *Breaking the Chains* is a partnership project developed by Shpresa Programme and MiCLU, the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit based at Islington Law Centre. *Breaking the Chains* is founded on the principle that children and young people need to be listened to – and this should inform every aspect of the policy and practice issues that affect their lives. <https://shpresaprogramme.org>