

REALITIES WE SHARE

BREAKING THE CHAINS EVALUATION REPORT 2023/24

Conducted by the Research Champions of the *Breaking the Chains* Project in conjunction with Dr Rachel Alsop, Project Evaluator

September 2024

 Paul Hamlyn Foundation

 COMMUNITY FUND

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INTRODUCTION

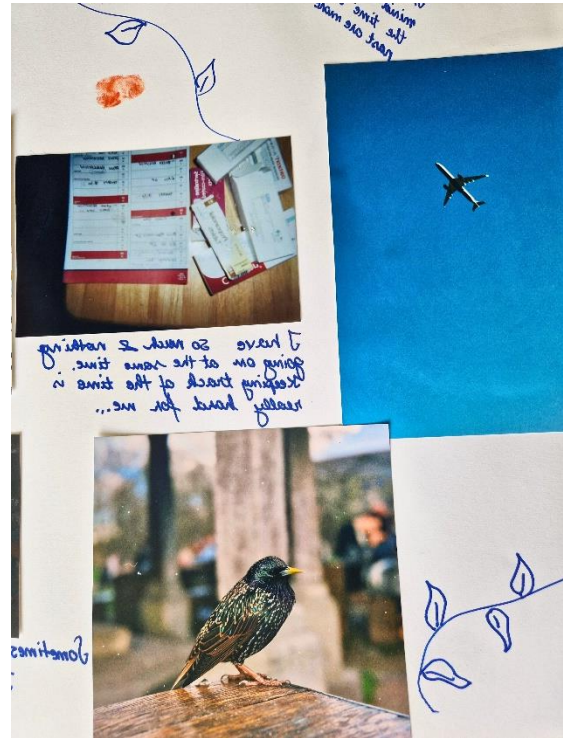
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INTRODUCTION

Breaking the Chains is a partnership project, starting in 2019, led by the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit (MiCLU) at Islington Law Centre and Shpresa Programme, a registered charity and refugee community group run by and for the Albanian speaking community in London.

The aim of the project is to improve the legal and social outcomes for Albanian speaking young people in the UK asylum system. It has at its core a child/youth-centred focus, with an ethos of centering the lived experiences of the young people, their voices and perspectives, in the development and delivery of the project. In line with the project's commitment to its child/young person focus, the 2023/24 evaluation of the project has been led by a group of young people, all service users within the project who have been trained as Immigration and Research Champions. The Research Champions in their evaluation of the project were supported by the project evaluator (Dr Rachel Alsop) and the *Breaking the Chains* team.

This written report, compiled by the project evaluator, highlights the research undertaken by the Research Champions, and foregrounds the voices, perspectives and experiences of the young people at the heart of the *Breaking the Chains* project.



THE EVALUATION

This is the fourth cycle of project evaluation. Previous evaluations of the project have highlighted as successes:

- The high quality of legal representation offered by MiCLU
- The vital work that the project does not only in individual casework but also in wider strategic work, advocating for sector-wide change in the ways in which young Albanians are treated in the asylum system
- The training of young people in immigration and asylum matters, so they have a greater understanding of the asylum system and their rights. The development of peer to peer support via the training of Immigration Champions has been important not just in supporting the young people, but also in the wider advocacy work
- The Child/Youth Focus of the Project, and the ways it works *with* the young people in the delivery and development of its work, always foregrounding young people's lived experiences
- Effective Partnership Working between MiCLU and Shpresa within the *Breaking the Chains* project, as well as effective partnership work with other agencies such as lawyers, migrant and refugee groups, social workers, foster carers.

As indicated in the 2021 Evaluation, even during the exceptional circumstances of the Covid period there were huge successes “[...] with the *Breaking the Chains* legal team providing critical legal work, policy advocacy and immigration training in conjunction with the Shpresa team, and supported by lawyers at Garden Court and a wider network of volunteers and associated organisations, always working collaboratively with the young people, Indeed, they are a shining example of good practice in terms of their child/youth centered ethos.”

Immigration Champions are young people already engaged with Shpresa Programme who receive training in immigration matters from the *Breaking the Chains* team and then become involved in peer-to-peer training; deliver training to lawyers, social workers, teachers and other professionals; develop training materials accessible to other young people; participate in conferences and information events to advocate for their community; and work with the *Breaking the Chains* staff to develop and deliver the project. This is a rolling programme, with a new cohort of Immigration Champions trained each year.

Research Champions are Immigration Champions who also become involved in the research aspects of the programme, undertaking further training in research methods. They participate in the evaluation project and the development of the research capacity of *Breaking the Chains*, also working with academics from outside the project.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE EVALUATIONS

Young people have been involved in all evaluations thus far. In the 2020 and 2021 evaluations, focus group discussions with the Immigration and Research Champions were a central part of the evaluation. In 2021, Research Champions also interviewed three members of the *Breaking the Chains* team as part of the evaluation process. For both the 2022 and 2023/24 evaluations the Research Champions led on the interviewing of persons from agencies and services with direct engagement with the project. From the inception of the project and throughout, the young people have been central to co-organising and participating in dissemination, training and launch events (see [2020 and 2021 Evaluation Reports](#)).

In the 2022 evaluation process a group of 12 Research Champions conducted interviews with:

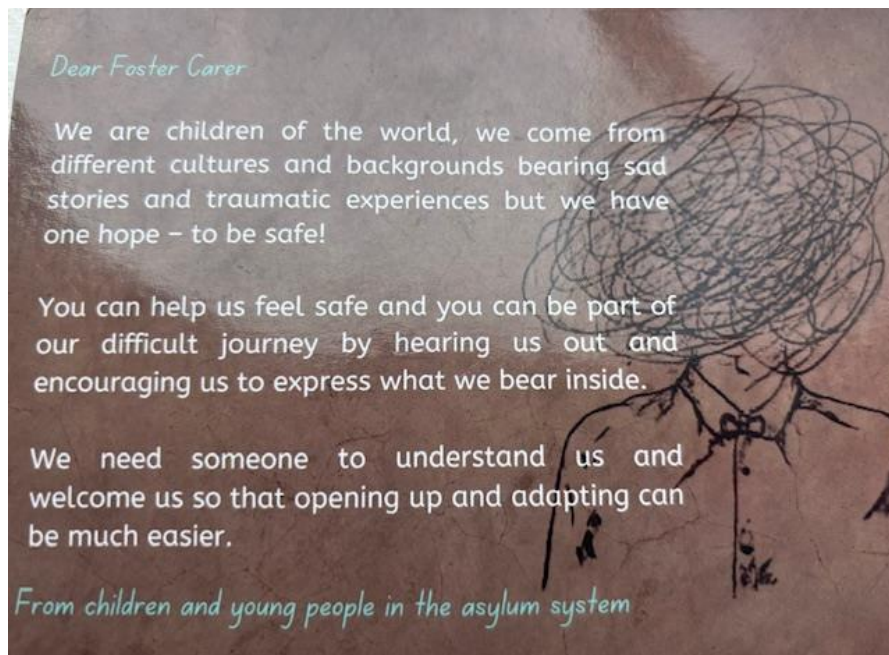
- 2 Foster Carers
- 1 Funder
- 1 Social Worker
- 1 representative from a Migrant and Refugee NGO
- 2 Immigration Barristers
- 1 Legal Analyst

Supported by the project evaluator, and the *Breaking the Chains* team, the young people led on selecting the groups of people they wished to interview, developing the interview questions, and conducting the interviews. The independent evaluator made contact with the interviewees and set up the interviews (which took place either in person or over Zoom). The young people interviewed in small teams, usually of 2-3 young people, accompanied at all interviews by either the project evaluator and/or a member of the *Breaking the Chains* team (who both provided additional support prior to the interview

and in the post-interview debrief). In addition to the planning of data collection, the young people took part in meetings with the project evaluator and *Breaking the Chains* team, after the completion of the interviews, to discuss key findings and plan dissemination.

The key deliverables from the 2022 evaluation were:

- Young people leading a launch event at the University of York on 20th June 2022 as part of the city's Refugee Week events, which, drawing on the interview material, highlighted the impact of the *Breaking the Chains* project. As part of the event, the young people presented a series of role play scenarios that illustrated the difficulties young Albanians asylum seekers face in their encounters with the Home Office, at school and college, and with foster carers. This event was attended by around 50 people including participants working with young people in the asylum system.
- A postcard for foster carers (and related professionals) giving advice on how to support young Albanian asylum seekers who might come into their care that was written and designed by the Research Champions:





Throughout the project, the participation of the young people has been foregrounded in the planning and delivery of its work, including its evaluation. **The extent to which the young people have been involved specifically in the evaluation of the project has increased from year to year.** For the 2023/4 evaluation (as is discussed in further detail below) the young people have been at the fore of all aspects of planning and delivering the evaluation. The capacity of the project to engage the young people in the review of the project, and to ensure that the lived experiences of the young people are 'front and centre' of its work is a distinctive and commendable dimension of the project. It stands as an **exemplar of good practice in child/youth engagement**, both generally but also particularly within work with young asylum seekers and refugees, and can be used as a successful model of practice from which others can learn.

THE 2023/24 EVALUATION

A group of 11 Research Champions were involved in the evaluation of the project. The key objectives of the evaluation were to:

1. Gain an understanding of the impact of the *Breaking the Chains* project on the young people's lives, what works well and how things could be improved.
2. Capture and promote a wider understanding of how being in the asylum system shaped the everyday lives of Albanian speaking young people in the UK asylum system.
3. Think through ways in which the young people's voices could be amplified within wider society, to promote within society a greater knowledge and understanding of their experiences as young Albanians in the asylum system and the barriers and challenges they face, with the view to engendering positive change.

The young people participated in the following activities as part of the evaluation:

1. A focus group with Immigration Champions to discuss their experiences of the growing hostilities against Albanian migrants. The focus group took place in April 2023, involved 10 young people (6 male and 4 female), and was led by the independent evaluator and a member of the *Breaking the Chains* project
2. Planning and leading 11 Peer to Peer interviews (in person or online) All were recorded and later transcribed by the project evaluator. All interviews took place in March/April 2024.
3. Participating in Photography Project to capture on an everyday level what it is like to be a young Albanian seeking asylum in the UK
4. Planning and undertaking interviews with three politicians (March to May 2024). At each interview the young people were accompanied by either the project evaluator, a member of the *Breaking the Chains* team, or both. All interviews were recorded and later

transcribed by the evaluator. The three politicians consented to being named in the report.

In addition to the above research, the project evaluator conducted four one-to-one interviews with core staff from the *Breaking the Chains* project (December 2023 to September 2024).

The Research Champions met regularly with *Breaking the Chains* staff and the project evaluator from 2023 through to September 2024 to discuss the planning, execution and dissemination of the evaluation.

SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND LEGAL BACKDROP TO THE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the project undertaken by the young people was carried out against the backdrop of increased governmental and media hostility against refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, with both government and media singling out the Albanian community for particular vitriol¹. MiCLU noted in December 2023:

Racist rhetoric following a temporary spike in the numbers of Albanians arriving by boat in 2022 has translated into measures increasingly scapegoating Albanians or disproportionately affecting Albanian asylum seekers that impact their ability to secure protection: the issue of new, contradictory government guidance and information notes, an agreement with the Albanian state, and changes to the Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance – all of which combine with and exacerbate already diminished access to legal representation. These measures look set to culminate in the implementation of S59 of the Illegal Migration Act which will have the effect of all Albanian claims being inadmissible and Albanians potentially being refouled to face persecution without ever having their claim heard.²

One of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's five pledges made at the start of January 2023 had been to "pass new laws to stop small boats, making sure that if you come to this country illegally, you are swiftly detained and swiftly removed."³ The government repeatedly used the term 'illegal immigration' to define migration via irregular routes, and arriving without prior permission. As there are very few safe and legal routes through which

¹ <https://www.lawcentres.org.uk/news/immigration-scapegoats-albanian-asylum-seekers-and-the-law-centre>

² <https://miclu.org/blog/risks-to-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-albanian-asylum-seekers#:~:text=Racist%20rhetoric%20following%20a%20temporary,of%20new%2C%20contradictory%20government%20guidance>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-outlines-his-five-key-priorities-for-2023>

people can claim asylum in the UK (and none for Albanians),⁴ the majority of asylum seekers were therefore deemed 'illegal'. The UNHCR states that 90 per cent of refugees in the world would not be able to claim asylum in the UK, as there are no safe and legal travel routes to the UK for them. In effect in terms of providing sanctuary for those seeking asylum the UK was 'pulling up its drawbridges' and contrary to its international obligations⁵. As one of the original drafters and signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the UK has pledged, for example, to uphold the core principle of 'non-refoulement' that means that people cannot be returned to a country where they would be subject to persecution.

The Conservative government pursued a range of legal changes to limit the possibilities of claiming asylum in the UK. The Illegal Immigration Act (IMA) received Royal Assent in July 2023.⁶ The Act stated that anyone who arrived by irregular means, for example by a small boat, would have their asylum claim deemed inadmissible, which means they couldn't have their asylum case considered. Furthermore, Section 59 of the IMA stated that asylum claims from so-called 'safe countries' - the 27 EU member states plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland *and Albania* - were also declared inadmissible. Under the Act anyone arriving by irregular means and/or from a country deemed 'safe' could be returned either to the home country (if listed as a safe country) or to a safe third country. Alongside this, the Conservative government signed a treaty with the Rwanda government to allow people seeking asylum in the UK to be transferred to Rwanda to have their claims processed there, if they did not come from a country that had been designated 'safe' such as Albania. In 2022 the UK government came to an agreement with the Albania government "to increase returns of Albanians, including those identified as

⁴ <https://freemovement.org.uk/what-safe-and-legal-routes-are-available-for-refugees-to-come-to-the-united-kingdom/>

⁵ <https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/immigration-blog-illegal-migration-act-an-asylum-apocalypse>

⁶ For more information see <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/what-is-the-illegal-migration-act/>

victims of modern slavery within the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in a bid to deny asylum for Albanians in the UK including those who were victims of trafficking and persecution.”⁷ The overall mood of legislation was that asylum seekers were not welcome, and that the government would make it as difficult as possible for most people seeking asylum.

In November 2023 the Supreme Court found Rwanda *not* to be a safe country and the Rwanda scheme to be unlawful, finding that asylum seekers being sent to Rwanda had risk of ‘refoulement’ (ie being returned) to their country of origin. In response, and despite parliamentary challenges from within House of Lords, the government under the leadership of PM Rishi Sunak passed the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration Act) in April 2024 which stated that “Every decision-maker must conclusively treat the Republic of Rwanda as a safe country.” Courts would not be allowed to consider any challenge to a removal of an asylum seeker based on the grounds that Rwanda is not safe. Furthermore, the Act stated that any other international or national law which applied in the UK (Refugee Convention, ECHR) could not be used to argue that Rwanda is unsafe.

Within the government’s crackdown on asylum seekers, PM Rishi Sunak singled out Albanians in his [speech on 13 December 2022](#) to say that all Albanians nationals arriving in the UK to seek asylum would be returned. Albania was, he claimed, a safe and prosperous country. The anti-Albanian stance which cast Albanians as economic and/or criminal migrants seeking to dupe the UK asylum system was repeated across government. Robert Jenrick, then Immigration Minister, stated that Albanians are “abusing” the Modern Slavery Act in order to frustrate attempts by the Government to deport them. Suella Braverman, then Home Secretary stated: “Today, the largest group of small boats migrants are from Albania – a safe country. Many of them claim to be

⁷ <https://www.asylos.eu/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=7c677570-ca08-4b31-bc48-752e4526bb7b>

trafficked as modern slaves. That's despite them having paid thousands of pounds to come here, or having willingly taken a dangerous journey across the Channel."⁸

The anti-Albanian rhetoric was further reproduced across mainstream media. The Sun and the Mirror, for example, "used narratives that portrayed Albanian forced migrants as a threat to Britain by using frames to 'Securitize' and 'Criminalise' them. In doing so they effectively described them as a threat to Britain's economy, social and political systems, presented against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic, a developing economic crisis, and a fractured National Health Service."⁹

The escalating language of hostility against migrants, and asylum seekers in particular, by government politicians and the media fueled a wider climate of anti-migrant hostility. Analysis by the anti-far right group Hope not Hate of 660,000 messages sent on the messaging app Telegram between January 2021 and March 2023 noted that 'spikes' in anti-migrant messaging from far-right groups accompanied increasingly hostile anti-migrant rhetoric from the government.¹⁰ The Home Secretary Suella Braverman's comments on in the House of Commons in March 2023 defining Albanians migrants as Albanian criminals¹¹ met with widespread critique from many quarters, including the Albanian community, and migrant, refugee and human rights groups.¹²

The Tory government's anti-migration 'Stop the Boats' campaign was, partly, in response to growing numbers of migrants making the perilous crossing across the English Channel in small boats. In 2022 45,755 people crossed the Channel in small boats, the highest

⁸ https://miclu.org/blog/fact-check-albanian-boat-arrivals#_ftn4

⁹ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/10/10/how-british-tabloids-framing-of-albanian-migrants-fuels-anti-immigrant-sentiments/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/21/uk-governments-anti-migrant-rhetoric-is-feeding-the-far-right-claims-campaign-group>

¹¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/edi-rama-suella-braverman-channel-home-secretary-prime-minister-b2306551.html>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/05/young-albanian-men-viciously-exploited-after-arriving-in-uk>

number since numbers were first collected in 2018. In 2023, 29,437 people arrived in small boats, and by mid-September 2024 23,533 had crossed the Channel in small boats. Between 2018 and September 2024 nearly 200 migrants have died attempting to make this crossing, including children.¹³

In 2022 there was a spike in Albanians crossing the channel in small boats, 12,000 in total with the vast majority crossing between May and October that year, with numbers trailing off quickly afterwards. While many other nationalities sought to reach the UK by small boats, the government overwhelmingly focused on Albanian nationals, with PM Sunak claiming that a third of people coming over on small boats were Albanian¹⁴ and former Home Secretary Suella Braverman inflating the number even more, claiming erroneously: “Now what we are seeing is a majority of people coming here from Albania – some 80 per cent – of the people coming across on small boats are claiming to be victims of modern slavery.”¹⁵

The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford observed that while during May-October 2022 there was a short-term increase in Albanian arrivals and asylum claims from Albanians, Albanian arrivals dropped significantly from the last quarter of 2022. In 2022 around 16,000 Albanian citizens applied for asylum in the UK, making up 16% of all asylum applicants. Of the 12,000 Albanian nationals that arrived in 2022 by small boats, 12 per cent were referred to the National Referral Mechanism as victims of modern slavery. Of the near 8000 people overall, who were referred to the NRM in the first two quarters of 2022, over a quarter (26%) were Albanians.¹⁶ As MiCLU notes, “Albanians have for some time formed one of the largest groups trafficked into the UK.”¹⁷

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53699511#:~:text=That%20is%20more%20than%20in,the%20UK%20by%20this%20route>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-remarks-on-illegal-migration-7-december-2023>

¹⁵ https://miclu.org/blog/fact-check-albanian-boat-arrivals#_ftn4

¹⁶ <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/albanian-asylum-seekers-in-the-uk-and-eu-a-look-at-recent-data/>

¹⁷ <https://miclu.org/blog/fact-check-albanian-boat-arrivals>

Data on arrivals by small boats disputes the stance taken by PM Sunak and his ministers that the majority of people seeking to cross the channel via small boats were Albanian. Data also disputes the rhetoric that all Albanian arrivals in the UK are economic or criminal migrants. In the first six months of 2022, for example, more than half (56%) of all decisions on Albanian claims for asylum were given a grant of protection or a grant of other leave. In subsequent appeals, over half were successful. As MiCLU noted, “These figures indicate that the majority of those from Albania who claim asylum are genuinely in need of protection.”¹⁸

Substantial information, in addition to the lived experiences of trafficking amongst the young people in the *Breaking the Chains* project, attests to the widespread trafficking of Albanians, in Albania, while in transit from Albania, and in destination countries, including the UK. A 2024 report by Asylos on trafficking in Albania, drawing on a range of expert evidence, highlights the prevalence of trafficking within Albania. It notes, for example, the European Commission’s report on Albania of November 2023 which remarks that “Albania remains a country of origin, transit and destination of trafficking in human beings. Albanian women and children are subject to trafficking mostly for sexual exploitation to neighbouring countries and EU Member States, while the second and third purposes for trafficking are forced labour and criminal exploitation [...] Children placed in institutions and children from the Roma and Egyptian communities are particularly vulnerable to trafficking.”

Additionally, the Asylos report points to the experiences of the Albanian anti-trafficking network United Response Against Trafficking (URAT) which concludes that: “The trafficking of men and boys is very widespread, despite being less considered or discussed. The experiences of trafficked men and boys include various forms of trafficking. Men and boys are exploited for forced labour, sexual exploitation, the use

¹⁸ <https://miclu.org/blog/fact-check-albanian-boat-arrivals>

and involvement in low-level criminal activities (theft and distribution of narcotics), and for forced begging.”¹⁹

At governmental level in the UK, The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee report ‘Asylum and Migration: Albania’ published in June 2023 was somewhat contradictory in its analysis of risk of persecution for Albanians in their own country, claiming, on the one hand, that there was little evidence to suggest that substantial numbers of Albanians are at risk in their own country but, at the same time, recognising that some Albanians making claims will have been trafficked. It concludes that “Albania is a safe country and we have seen little evidence that its citizens should ordinarily require asylum” but “there are unquestionably cases of Albanian citizens being trafficked to the UK” albeit recognising that “appropriate safeguards must be in place before they are returned to Albania.”²⁰

Elsewhere concerns have been raised about the safety of returned asylum seekers noting little infrastructure in Albania to protect and safely reintegrate asylum seekers. As noted in the first evaluation report of the *Breaking the Chains* project, in 2019 the US Department’s *Country Report on Human Right Practices* in Albania noted that “[s]ignificant human rights issues included restrictions on free expression and the press, including the existence of criminal libel laws, and pervasive corruption in all branches of government and municipal institutions.”²¹ These concerns remain. MiCLU notes that “According to the most recent US State Department Trafficking in Person report on Albania (2021)[1]. Albania is a source, destination and transit point for human trafficking. Its government during 2020/2021 did not convict any traffickers, identified fewer victims than in

¹⁹ <https://www.asylos.eu/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=7c677570-ca08-4b31-bc48-752e4526bb7b>

²⁰ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40291/documents/204657/default/>

²¹ <https://miclu.org/assets/uploads/2020/09/Breaking-the-Chains-Evaluation-Report-September-2020-Final.pdf>

previous years, and reduced resources to NGO-run shelters for victims of trafficking, despite being a signatory to the European Convention against Trafficking.”²²

The UK government’s own “Country policy and information note on human trafficking, in Albania from July 2024”²³ (which is used by UK visa and immigration officials to make decisions on asylum) points to, in its evaluation of the risk of trafficking and re-trafficking, a range of evidence which includes that which affirms not only that the trafficking of people in and from Albania is a significant problem but also that there are insufficient preventive measures within Albania to protect victims of trafficking. For instance, the Country policy and information note (CPIN) cites the following pieces of evidence:

Albania is significantly affected by human trafficking... The country is recognised as a major source for human trafficking, with Albanians mostly trafficked to Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany and Switzerland, often through organized criminal networks.

There has been an increase in the number of Albanian children subjected to forced labour in Kosovo... and the UK.

Albanians are trafficked to Italy and Greece, but also other destinations including the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Germany and Switzerland. Albanian men, women, girls and boys are trafficked for labour or sexual exploitation, or both, in these, and other, destination countries [...]

Included within the evidence the CPIN also cites the EC’s Albania Report 2022 which states that “Albania continues to be a country of origin, transit and destination of

²² https://miclu.org/blog/fact-check-albanian-boat-arrivals#_ftn4

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/albania-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-human-trafficking-albania-february-2023-accessible#assessment>

trafficking in human beings” and UNICEF’s Evaluation report of November 2022, which raises “[A] notable trend recently identified is that men and boys are being trafficked to engage in illegal activities, such as drug harvesting and distribution, and street crimes. Traffickers often use debt bondage (i.e., the price of helping VoTs to illegally cross a border into EU countries) to trap men and boys into exploitative situations, particularly from a country such as Albania where young people, particularly young men, do not have many employment opportunities.”²⁴

In terms of protection for those with lived experiences of trafficking, the CPIN notes concerns by international agencies that there is a gap between the legislation in place and the implementation of legislation, and that “the lack of effectiveness in the implementation of anti-trafficking legislation has also been influenced by the fact that Albania still does not have a dedicated law for the fight against human trafficking and the legislation remains fragmented.”²⁵

Additionally, the ‘2024 US in Persons Report: Albania’ notes:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Albania, and traffickers exploit victims from Albania abroad. Traffickers exploit Albanian women and children in sex trafficking and forced labor in the country, especially during tourist season. Traffickers use false promises, such as marriage or employment offers, to exploit victims in sex trafficking. Traffickers commonly force children to beg or perform other types of compelled labor, such as selling small items, and also force children into criminality, including burglary and narcotics distribution. Traffickers exploit Albanian children, mainly from the Romani and Balkan-Egyptian communities, for seasonal work and forced begging. NGOs reported traffickers force

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/albania-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-human-trafficking-albania-february-2023-accessible#assessment>

²⁵ Ibid.

*children into selling narcotics mainly at schools. Traffickers exploit Albanian victims in sex trafficking across Europe, particularly in Belgium, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and France. Albanian migrants who seek employment in Western Europe are vulnerable to forced labor, including forced criminality, particularly in the UK. [Emphasis added]*²⁶

It is widely recognised that Albanian organised crime is embedded across Europe, including the UK, and encompasses a range of illegal activities including, but not limited to, the trafficking of people and of drugs.²⁷ Within the UK, Albanian organised crime is a key actor within the illegal cultivation of cannabis, for example, and is recognised for enacting extreme violence in the pursuit of its illegal activities.²⁸

Most of the young people in the *Breaking the Chains* project are victims of trafficking, and fleeing serious abuse, including torture. Members of the *Breaking the Chains* team also acknowledge the continuing risk of Albanian young people to grooming by the gangs *within* the UK, and how the effectiveness of grooming is aided by an asylum system which is plagued by delays, provides insufficient material support to asylum seekers, and leaves the young people seeking asylum living in poverty at the margins of society and vulnerable:

Grooming starts by giving them food and buying them lots of food, for them it's a treat to have a MacDonalds. They are being groomed because they do not have enough food. We [Albanian citizens] are raised in the culture that if someone helps you a bit then you are obliged to that person to pay back, to be grateful. Someone who helps them in the

²⁶ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/#:~:text=As%20reported%20over%20the%20past,country%2C%20especially%20during%20tourist%20season.>

²⁷²⁷ https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Threat_Assessment_of_Albanian_Organised.pdf

²⁸ https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Threat_Assessment_of_Albanian_Organised.pdf

darkest times, those people groom them for weeks, and then they say you can do me a favour, and then they find themselves in the place where they cannot leave. They get a lot of abuse and pressure by these people.

(Interview with member of the *Breaking the Chains* team, December 2023)

The 2021 ‘Into the Arms of Traffickers’ report by Christine Beddoe highlights the ways in which delays in the asylum system make the young people at further risk of being trafficked or re-trafficked. She concludes:

All evidence obtained for this report concludes that delays in trafficking and asylum decisions place young people at greater risk of trafficking within the UK, and specifically labour exploitation and criminal exploitation. Home Office delays are causing mental ill health, social isolation, poverty and distrust of authority. These are the same vulnerabilities that traffickers’ prey upon when grooming their victims.²⁹

As highlighted in previous evaluations of the *Breaking the Chains* project, young people from Albania have historically had a disproportionately lower chance of securing protection at first instance, and are more likely to have their cases certified (ie being deemed ‘without foundation’ and removing rights of appeal against refusal) than other young people in the asylum system. Despite such challenges, the evaluations have demonstrated that the project was able to secure successful legal outcomes for many of the young people.³⁰ The *Breaking the Chains* team shared how the legislative changes undertaken by the Conservative government to limit legal possibilities of claiming asylum, the general climate of hostility against asylum seekers and the specific targeting of Albanians (alongside the ongoing delays within a creaking and chaotic asylum system which is not fit for purpose) have produced unprecedented challenges for the team:

²⁹ <https://mclu.org/assets/uploads/2021/10/Into-the-Arms-of-Traffickers-Main-Report.pdf>
<https://mclu.org/assets/uploads/2020/09/Breaking-the-Chains-Evaluation-Report-September-2020-Final.pdf>

³⁰ [2020 and 2021 Evaluation Reports](#)

We had a model that was really working we were and are still seeing success on cases we haven't had a single case where we have reached the end of the line with no options. Every case bar one where the young person returned to Albania voluntarily³¹, the cases that have ended, have ended in success and if everything else wasn't going on we would be saying that we have proved that we can run these cases successfully: we have protected young people, we have a number of young people who are now living lives. We do go to [drops ins] and see young people who a few years ago were shadows but now are present, and come back for socialization, not for a life line [...]. But we are not where we should be because of the external environment, the impact of the external environment is just overwhelming, and we should be reflecting on our success and how we roll out - but we can't because of the external factors. It's awful, to succeed in your hypothesis on the one hand, and completely have it trashed on the other.

(Interview with Breaking the Chains staff member Dec 2023)

It was a bit like, we can't keep up with these changes and the impacts on our clients [...] You'd go back to the office, and everyone was like, 'What are we going to do? They're removing judicial review from certain aspects of the implementation of the IMA. What's going to be in our toolkit to stop unlawful action?' I think that was really frightening for the young people, because the press was full of coverage about people being flown to Rwanda. And there was a parallel narrative very hostile to Albanians. And within the legal community, there was a sense, can we hold this? [...] I feel like the combination of that kind of toxic narrative around asylum seekers in general and Albanians in particular, coupled with the increased use of hotels and then more recently with the alt-right [referring to far right violence against asylum seekers in summer 2024] - that whole explosion has meant that the external world has been internalized by a lot of the young people. If you have a cohort of young people who have experienced trauma, often from domestic violence, and then from traffickers and other non-state agents; if you've got

³¹ Since the interview a further two young people have left.

people who have that history of trauma and then they come somewhere where the intention is to find safety, and then there's extreme hostility and insecurity that is obviously such a toxic mix for people's mental health - I think there's no sense of a safe and functioning asylum system [...]. I don't feel like it functions. So, for clients it must be so incomprehensible, and that's really disempowering. But mostly it's terrifying. There's no safety anywhere for clients.

(Interview with Breaking the Chains staff member, September 2024)

The situation is much worse than when we started the project. We thought it was bad then, but was worse was to come.

(Interview with Breaking the Chains staff member, December 2023)

IN THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORDS

LIVING WITH INCREASED HOSTILITY AGAINST ALBANIANS

A group of ten young Albanian asylum seekers involved in the *Breaking the Chains* project met with the project evaluator and a member of the *Breaking the Chains* team in April 2023 to talk through how the increased hostilities against Albanians perpetuated by the then government and fanned by the media (both in traditional media, e.g. newspapers and on social media) were impacting their lives. The group included young people who had been in the UK (and in the asylum system) for some years as well as some who had arrived in the UK more recently. The young people explained how living within the hostile climate made them fearful, often ashamed of being Albanian (especially when with non-Albanians), reluctant to share that they were Albanian, and hesitant to speak in Albanian in public.

The following extracts from the focus group exemplify the feelings of anxiety that the hostile environment in which Albanians were now being targeted created within them:

- When you see the comments on social media, I don't know how people live with such a hate. You question yourself-, what have I done to deserve such a hate? Because normally, like everyone here said, you feel ashamed of being Albanian.

- Even if you are not a criminal you are treated like one.

- When they [general public] see all the stuff on TV about Albanians being criminals, they are going to assume you are criminals too.

- When it is the highest rank, when it is the Prime Minister who is talking bad things about Albanians, imagine what the other people are going to think?

- When I go with my friends somewhere and people say, 'Where are you from?' I say 'From Albania,' they say, 'Oh Albanian mafia, Albanian criminals' and I feel so bad for that. They are not going to trust you.

- I feel sorry for the new arrivals. When I arrived here this stuff with Albanians wasn't going on. I experienced a lot of racism in school, but imagine how it is now for the new ones? With all this stuff going, it's just terrible.

- People don't have a lot of knowledge of Albanians. They see stuff on the news and think it's true.

One young woman who worked with young Albanian children shared how the children she worked with were absorbing and processing this hostility towards Albanians, often seeking to distance themselves in schools from their Albanian heritage:

Explaining to children that you are being scapegoated is very hard.

The young people felt that the Albanian community was being scapegoated by politicians because of failures elsewhere within the government:

When this country is breaking up so many categories, so the NHS, Transport for London [...] I read it also the Home Office for passports is now on a strike. They are making so many bad decisions, so the only way they can stop that, they can target a community, because they want their own people to forget about what is going on with their own country.

But the thing is there were a lot of other communities coming in at the same time, I think there were like 20 thousand more people and the only people that they target was just Albanians.

The young people felt frustrated about the misrepresentation of Albania in the media and by many politicians. They felt that information on trafficking within Albania, and on the threats from organised crime, were available if people looked, and they disputed the categorisation of Albania as a safe country. For them it was far from safe.

- Why don't they [the government] get a translator and open the news in Albania? We have everything on the news.

- I don't think the issue is how to find out the information. The issue is they do not want to.

- I watch the [Albanian] news every day and there is always a story of crime.

- It's not like they don't look at things, it's just that they don't care.

- Don't say safe when you have all those facts there!

Overall, the young people felt let down by the asylum system in the UK, unheard, unsafe, and discriminated against. These feelings were expressed throughout the period of the evaluation, not just in this focus group. Throughout the evaluation process the young people raised concerns about feelings of unsafety, including the insecurity they felt in hotel accommodation. Since the start of the *Breaking the Chains* project, more and more young people have been housed in hotels. The 2024 report 'Suffering and squalor: the impact on mental health of living in hotel asylum accommodation,' compiled by the Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid, notes that in "early 2020 there were around

2,800 people in initial accommodation at any one time, of which around 1,000 were in hotels. The average time people spent in initial accommodation before being rehoused in longer-term dispersal accommodation was 26 days.¹⁶ By the end of 2023, there were over 45,000 people in hotel accommodation.”³²

During interviews with Baroness Lister and Rachael Maskell MP (discussed below) there was opportunity for the young people to share their experiences of living in hotels, and raise awareness about the lack of safety they feel in hotel (as well as hostel) accommodation, feeling at risk not just from some other residents and external actors but also from staff. One of the Research Champions, herself a teenager and living with complex PTSD, shared:

The experience as a young woman when I first got here - I was underage, I was young, I lived in a hotel almost two years. There is little privacy, I have to share a room with [redacted], there are so many people there isn't food enough, we only get £8.60 a week for everything - for the bus for everything for a week. The staff isn't properly trained. Most of us living there are under therapy, taking medication. The way the staff treats us is inhuman, not understanding and uncaring.

It's truly unsafe and I think the staff is not professional. In my hotel, before two weeks, there were two men and they were fighting and the staff didn't do anything. The other day, one of the Albanian ladies was really sick and she has a young son, a one year old, and another who is six and in school, and she was sent to hospital and the staff came to my room knocking and said "I have two boys for you to look after." I think it's really unsafe.

³² https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Suffering%20and%20squalor_Final_June%202024.pdf

PEER TO PEER INTERVIEWS

In total 11 peer to peer interviews were conducted in March and April 2023. In each of the interviews one of the Research Champions interviewed another young person from Albania who was involved in the *Breaking the Chains* project. The interviews were conducted either face to face or online. Of the 11 interviewees, seven were male and four female.

The Research Champions, working with the project evaluator and the *Breaking the Chains* staff, decided as a group on the questions they wished to ask in the peer interviews. They sought consent from the interviewees to record the interviews and assured them of their anonymity in the dissemination process. In the spirit of conducting ethical research, the interviewers provided information on the reasons for the interview, checked consent to be recorded, and made sure that the interviewees were comfortable before starting the interview. They also reassured the interviewees that they did not need to respond to any questions they did not wish to answer.

The interviews explored:

- the impact of the *Breaking the Chains* project (and being part of Shpresa) on their life generally
- the specific impact of being involved in the *Breaking the Chains* project on their asylum claim
- what they had learned from being part of the project
- what events and activities they liked most
- what they felt could be improved
- how much (on a scale of 1-10) they felt, heard, safe and a sense of belonging within the project.

As the extracts from the interviews in the sections below show, across the board the young people felt that being part of Shpresa and involved in the *Breaking the Chains* project had had a positive impact on their lives and was 'life changing'. They all stated that they had gained knowledge of the asylum system through being involved and were able to share this knowledge with other young people. Because of the project they felt more supported in terms of the legal aspects of their asylum cases, and supported holistically as individuals. They felt their voices were heard, and the project had given them confidence and skills that were transferable to other areas of their lives. The project was an important safety net to them as they struggled with the traumas they had experienced and the institutional violences of the asylum system. It's clear from the interviews that for many young people, as survivors of serious violence, harms and abuse, the project had kept them afloat. The project and the wider community of Shpresa were key protective factors in keeping many alive and were providing support where statutory services were failing.

The following sections follow themes from the interviews and show in more detail, and in the young people's own words, how important the project is to them.

Impact of the Project on the Young People's Lives

It hasn't just impacted my life, it changed my life.

Shpresa has changed my life in good direction, which means that now I am safe, I am in a good place - I got my status, I have my own accommodation and getting all the support I need.

Coming to Shpresa - it has definitely changed my life for the better. It was a safe place for me that made me feel happier, loved and supported at all the times. I felt involved, and supported.

Coming to the Shpresa Programme and being part of it has made me stronger, wiser, able to understand and communicate better. I have learnt how to seek support, what support I need, how to contact my GP, how to contact my solicitor and I have made a lot of new friends.

I was skeptical [to begin with]. I didn't believe there was such an environment for Albanians, and to get free help. I thought it would be some type of scam. I was quite unbelievable having this help but when I saw it first hand I thought, this is good [...] When I got involved I saw how serious the work was and how committed the people working around it were, and I felt safe and I felt really happy to be there and to be surrounded by helpful and incredible people.

Yes I have quite changed from the beginning. I was skeptical I was really [withdrawn] into myself, introverted and now I am more extrovert and more talkative in the group and with the people. I was quite shy at the beginning and I felt like I was by myself and not involved a lot but now I feel like sometimes I am in the right place and I am quite comfortable with everyone around me,

My listening and speaking skills have improved a lot, made me more extroverted, being able to uphold an interview, or even interview people which I would never have done that before coming here. And sometimes I get stuck but I learn to pull myself out of that situation, being capable of that and learning from that.

Personally, when I discovered Shpresa, I was very timid and shy so it opened the door to many opportunities and possibilities and gave me lots of confidence and offered a home to me, a home away from home. It was a place I could find myself, speak my native language, eat Albanian food at that time I was completely alone, no family. It was the light at the end of tunnel

The only best example I can give is that I have managed to find a second family at Shpresa. That is a huge impact for me.

They are a great help for our community, and I hope they continue with the hard work because they are making a huge impact on everyone's lives at Shpresa. They have made a huge impact on a lot of people and in my opinion I hope they continue to do so. Because of this project lots of people now have a future - something to look forward to.

Gaining Knowledge within the Project

Within the project the young people gain training in immigration matters and their rights within the asylum system. Each year a group of young people take part in the Immigration Champions training programme which also aims to assist the peer-to-peer dissemination of knowledge and learning.

My life has changed a lot, every time I come here, I take information and learn to do my best [...] The information that I have learnt has helped me a lot in my case. Since starting on the project, I have learnt a lot of information, on how to do things with my solicitor, step by step, not all immediately. I understand the system better. [...] It helped a lot with my mental health, understanding my financial situation, it helped me a lot.

Yes I know the system better now, I know how it works, I know what is certified refusal, I know what is the barrister, what is the solicitor, I know how should be my attitude with my solicitor and what are my rights. [...] It makes a difference because you can become the solicitor of yourself, you understand your rights, what are the strong points, weak points in your case, so it is very helpful.

Having the information, makes the journey easier, less stressful. The Breaking the Chains project has taught me that negative decision is not the end and there are people who will walk miles with you and make the impossible possible, until you get the desired outcomes and you are in safe hands.

I hear about more rules, before I used to feel more scared, but now I feel we have the future in our hands. We are grateful to have a great team behind us, we learn loads of skills. Being good in conversation and communication, it impacts your confidence.

Now I know [from being part of the Project] I have to seek help, I have to ask for support, I have to go to the GP, have to my express my feelings, I have to go and check my health. So I know these things are needed and I have learned this just being part of the project.

I have gained knowledge of immigration, I have better communication skills.

I understand the system better now. The difference is before I didn't know anything about immigration cases and now, I know some.

When you arrive in the UK what sabotages a big part of the Albanian community is lack of information [...]. We often hear the expression, 'if I had known that I would have done this and that differently, or this or that would have decreased the wait time' [...]. In the beginning you do not know any of that.

[I have learnt] all sorts of skills. It really helps young people like us, drive us away from the stereotypes that society puts on us. Being asylum seekers, society really tells us how to fail, or how to survive. The project has equipped us with skills that push us forward to become something else [...] to give us the skills to say you can do it too, public speaking skills, creative skills, like design, like movie making, photography, advocacy, advice skills. I learnt a lot about democracy, diplomacy, research... analysing data and so on.

I was able to get a lot of information that I didn't know before I learnt a lot, helped me to deal with my case. They are still helping me to this day as I am still in the process. The information I received from Shpresa and MiCLU has been very helpful to me to this day and if I talk about the project it has helped me so much, helped me gain experience, knowledge, also kind of practice everything I have learned and be able to be involved with other young people, work with them, meet new people, do presentations and everything. It has helped me boost my confidence and like I remember when I was [first studying], I used to feel so shy I could never go in front of people and do a presentation - I used to feel so shy and anxious, I would tremble literally, and now in [my studies] ... I have so many presentations ... and I can see the difference from then to now and that's all because of Shpresa and the project. Honestly it has helped me in many ways and I am forever thankful for that.

I understand way better. At the beginning I had no knowledge. If it wasn't for Shpresa I wouldn't have known anything about asylum I literally had zero knowledge about it and everything I know now is because of Shpresa and the experience of going through it but I understand more, I am in the process of appealing and I understand what I need to do, what my next steps are, but also what I learnt from the Breaking the Chains project - it helped me with not only my case but with my studies.

Sharing Knowledge as an Immigration and Research Champion

Being part of the project not only helped me but helped me to help others as well, I feel it necessary that what I have learnt, I feel obligated to teach the others. I want to help like they helped me. If there is any way possible, I would tell every young Albanian person come and be part of Shpresa. They will learn a lot of new things.

I have recommended Shpresa to a lot of people. The first thing I say to them is that you know you are in the right place.

I am more informed about the immigration system, I feel like I have more knowledge and if anyone feels lost in their case, I am able to help them or I am able to point them to come to Shpresa. I can tell them where to seek information and can give them the information that I know as well.

Skills, the best skill that I have learnt, is that I know how I can help others, with asylum case, I know how to help them how I can be a better help to my friends or whoever needs it for any young person that comes to Shpresa.

Impact on Individual Asylum Cases

It has made a big change because in the beginning I was refused and certified but after judicial review and the help of [member of the Breaking the Chains team] and my solicitor now I got the status. From the certified case I now have 5 years leave to remain. It's completely 180 degree direction change.

In the moment when I came to Shpresa I had just registered as an asylum seeker, but being part of it gave me the chance, when I saw that my case was stuck. I had the chance to ask for help, to ask for support and after I was part of Breaking the Chains and I change my solicitor everything changed, my case was now in safe hands I was feeling calmer I was feeling safer feeling supported, I was feeling helped. I had hopes for the future.

My case before was stuck. I didn't have any news, I was not happy with communication from my solicitor. They weren't behaving properly with me. Changing the solicitor, and being part of Shpresa, gave me that chance and everything changed. The case was sped

up [and] I had my leave to remain for one year. The most important thing was the support and feeling hopeful.

I feel like things are moving, I have an amazing lawyer now, which is helpful. I have help from Shpresa, and [member of Breaking the Chains team] to listen to me. I feel that things are moving and having the help I needed. In this case if I receive a text and now I know that I'll be texted back in a couple of hours and not a couple of weeks which is such a big difference for me.

It has improved a lot with my immigration status, with my mental health, they helped me gain my status in less than a year which my other solicitor could not do in four [years]. It improved my mental health, I used to be very stressed out before coming to Shpresa.

[Being involved in the Breaking the Chains project] sped up the process a lot. I waited for 4 years with a different solicitor and at the end they said you have a 10 per cent chance to win in the case, and it got me even more stressed out but as soon as I joined the lawyers with Shpresa I got status within one year.

They [the Breaking the Chains lawyers] had a lot more knowledge and were dedicated to doing their jobs properly, unlike the other lawyers who just said we'll see what we can do and they don't do the work for it and base everything on luck, for example. [Member of Breaking the Chains team] was dedicated and even on Sundays sometimes she would fill up some papers. If I needed support any day she was there.

Impact on Mental Health

[It has had a] huge impact. I was an asylum seeker during the Covid pandemic, and I had a counsellor with Shpresa, the Breaking the Chains project was very helpful, they helped me to maintain my mental health in that time, so was very helpful.

Before being part of the project, I used to feel emotionally drained but as I became part of Shpresa and the project I just started to feel less worried, and having information regarding immigration system and being around a network of people who knew the law, yeah I did feel less worried and more supported.

This project has made me stronger. Now I have a purpose I have something to do I have where to go where I need help this has made me stronger and able to face all the problems, I have learned to deal with all the problems I have.

My mental health has been improved a bit because every time I get involved with the project, I feel that I am busy doing things.

I have made new friends. It's good.

Being surrounded by people who do so much even though they are in a bad situation themselves, they're struggling they help their community every day, and seeing them do that makes me inspired to do that myself. It inspires you as a person to work harder to help you and other people surrounding you. It helped me so much with my talking and my social skills which are really important. You meet new people every single week and that helps you open up and able to go and strike up a conversation.

It has changed a lot, before I was part of this project I was going crazy, I had no hopes about getting leave to remain, I had no idea what was going to happen, but joining this project they calmed me down, they reassured me that it was not the end you can always proceed no matter what answer they [Home Office] give - there is always another choice to take, there is always another thing to do, you can always follow it up. It was a great help to me to not give up and I kept going, I kept going until finally now I got the leave to remain so it did help me a lot for my mental health.

What I like about the Breaking the Chains project a lot and Shpresa in general it wasn't just a project, it was more than that. I remember for my mental health whenever we would feel stressed about our cases or we didn't know what was happening or we were still getting used to the process and I remember [names of Breaking the Chains team members] was trying to make us feel more comfortable, ok about it, trying to encourage us, motivate us, it was going to be fine, work on this stuff for now, everything is going to be ok, they were there for us at all times, so it wasn't something like a work list that you go there, you do it and you're done, no one contacts you or nothing, ... we got the support that we needed before, during and after which I think is very important. I think we became - we still are - a big family within the project and within Shpresa.

Cultivating Feelings of Safety and Trust

I think it has impacted so much, it has impacted the way I think, it has impacted the safety of me, and my week days and everything, I feel more secure. I am able to call someone if I am in danger and I feel my life has been impacted in a better way than it was before.

To get to know someone more personally it has to be one to one, to not get straight into the case and the immigration because no one feels safe to talk about that, we may get touched quite easily we are quite sensitive in that area and sometimes just having a normal conversation, would you like an orange? Do you like to play some ping pong with me? Even though they are adults, even just playing a silly game can make you feel more comfortable, and then sort your way into it, and then day by day the conversation gets deeper, till you get to the middle of it.

I would be left in the dark I would have no idea how things work, stuck somewhere, scared more paranoid, more anxious, the safety that we have now wouldn't be here, sometimes

I forget how hard it was before without the information and the safety, now that you are surrounded by it, it's uncomfortable to even think about it.

When asked to rate their feelings of safety from 1 to 10 all the interviewees expressed that they felt safe within the project, but this contrasted with how they felt generally in life. All the young people felt heard and a sense of belonging with the project.

I feel quite safe in Shpresa but I feel as a human being I cannot be safe anywhere.

Heard and understood? Yeah, I think I do because we do listen to everyone's opinions everyone's questions and take everyone into consideration. It does not matter how much knowledge they have, you always learn.

Giving Hope

Hope was a word and sentiment used across many of the interviews. Being part of the project gave the young people hope, that they could reach a successful outcome in their asylum claim and that they could be safe and be able to build a life going forwards.

They motivate me to fight for myself, they motivate me to see light at the end of the tunnel. Before I was lost and thinking it was not possible, I was hopeless. After I attended those sessions, I saw light at the end of the tunnel and I was successful.

I can say a total 100 percent there is a big difference between before and now. I didn't have hope, but now I have hope and I can see light and I'm really happy. My case before was refused, it's just changed, fresh claim and everything is different, I just have more hope.

What activities did the young people like most?

The *Breaking the Chains* staff team shared in interviews how maintaining hope when young people are in the asylum system so long and when the young people are living with significant trauma and facing so much hostility is difficult. One of the ways in which the project seeks to engender hope and engagement, feelings of safety and belonging, as well as providing legal support and sharing learning about the asylum system and the young people's rights, is through hosting regular activities for the young people. There are two in person drop-ins per week, where alongside training young people can play volleyball, make and meet friends, dance, eat Albanian food, take part in creative activities, and feel heard and valued. In addition, the project runs trips for the young people which are often a combination of learning (for example, Immigration Champions training) and having fun in a supported and caring atmosphere. The project also provides the Immigration and Research Champions with the opportunities to plan and participate in dissemination events, to engage in advocacy work, and to share their community's lived experiences and their learning with related agencies.

In the peer to peer interviews the young people were asked what activities they liked most:

The trips are my favourite.

Most information I received in person during the trainings but also we would do trips where we would have fun but, on the other hand, we would also get information, learn more about the law

Being part of Shpresa in general, is a sea of opportunities, you meet people, I have been to several universities doing presentations, I have been to the House of Lords, have been able to meet a lot of people and from all of them I have learn about education, employment, about immigration, and everything was worth it.

[My favourite things are] playing volleyball and going out on trips. Everything is well organized.

A week after I started at Shpresa we went on a trip to York which was wonderful before that I feel like I was locked in a dark box about immigration and I did know no nothing, just things people said around me that were all lies. We were deeply scared by all the things we heard about Albanians from the TV, and from the government and I thought all of them could be true, but when I went on the trip and talked to many professional people I knew then what truly is going on. I learnt so much from that trip. It was only a two day trip but [...] it was eye opening.

The project has lots of interactive and engaging elements that fit, there is something for everyone, there is sports, there is food, there are some artistic little projects that we do, drawing, photography, storytelling, presentations, videos, short movies, it's a lot of elements that keep us really, really engaged and even if, the situation is depressing if you are an asylum seeker, there is something for everyone, for people who want to share their opinions, for people who want to get creatively involved, who want to find their niche. For me it has helped me find what I like through the project I found that I really like research, and I might work in research in the future. At the same time it has created this idea that I really like working with people which I did not know before. Before I wanted to be an architect. Now I want to do politics ... it does shape you as a young adult.

Camping and we had our sessions for Breaking the Chains, like we also had fun at the same time so it was quite amazing really, again it was a new experience I had never been camping before so it was a fun way of learning and having fun at the same time, a great combination and also we also did many other projects within the Breaking the Chains project, where we had to do presentations or where we had to speak to professionals, to police, at the parliament. We had our online sessions, of course, that were weekly, so we

had all these activities of having fun and enjoying what we were doing but also getting knowledge and speaking up at the same time. I thought it was great. I want to say a little more about the online sessions, I remember we started doing the online sessions and even online we would play games to make it more fun, to make everyone want to engage, so yes the way that we got the knowledge and the information and the knowledge was a great way to deliver the project and everything.

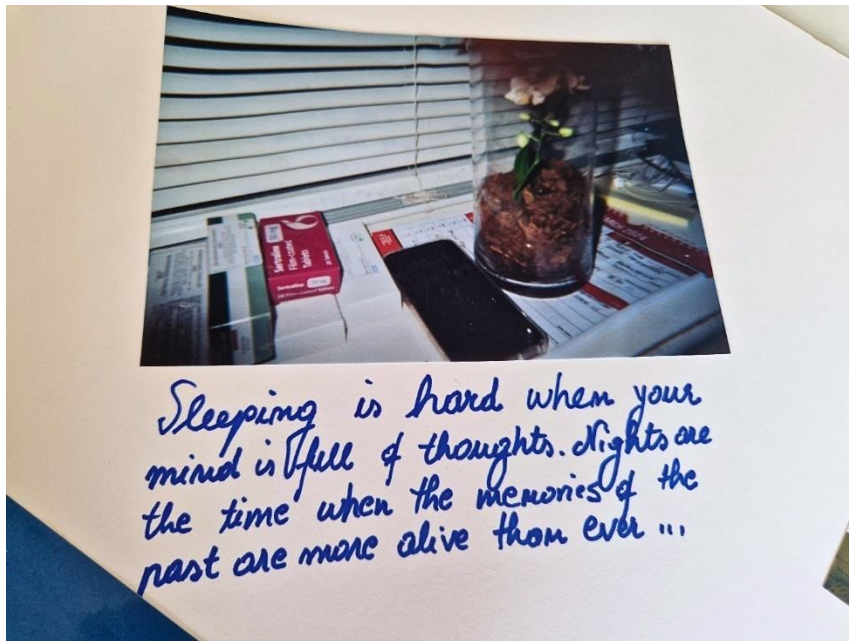
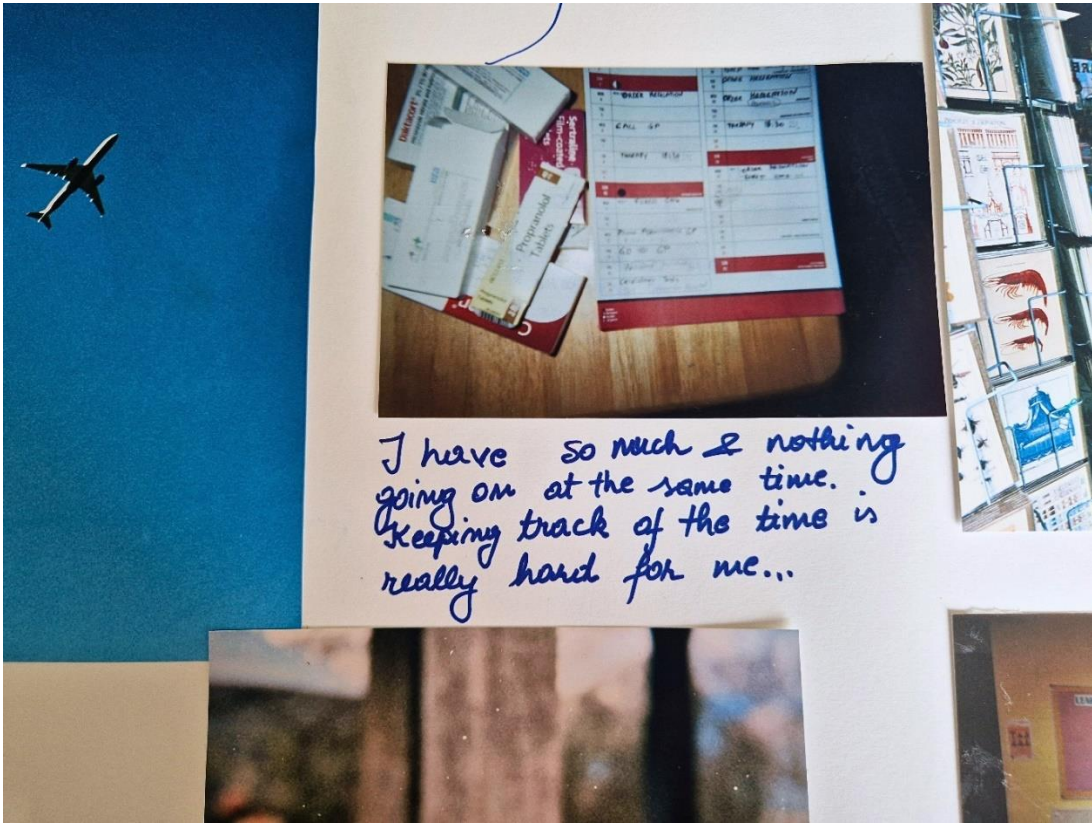
PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT: SNAPSHOTS OF REALITY

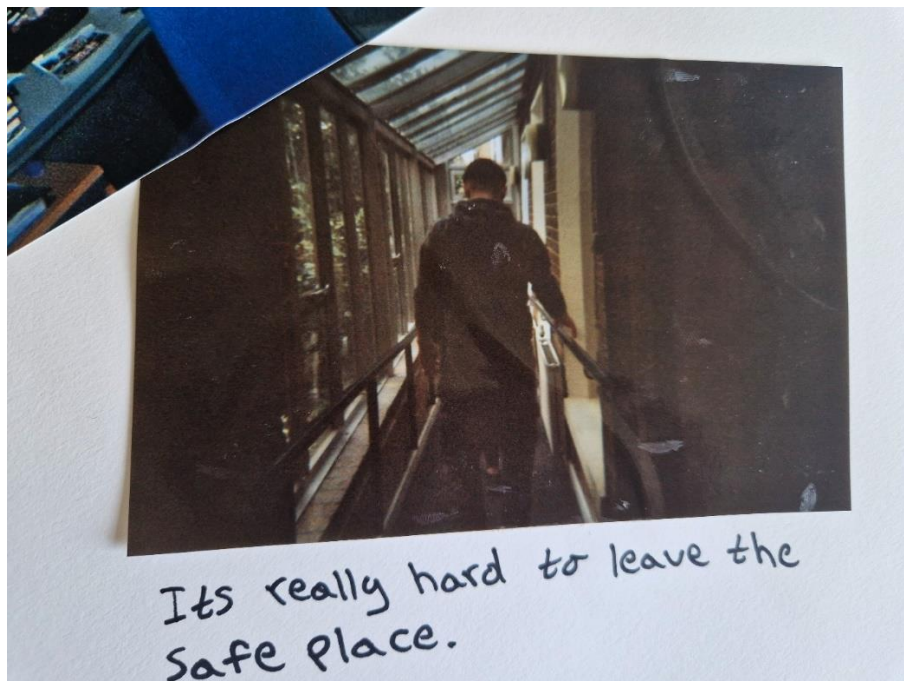
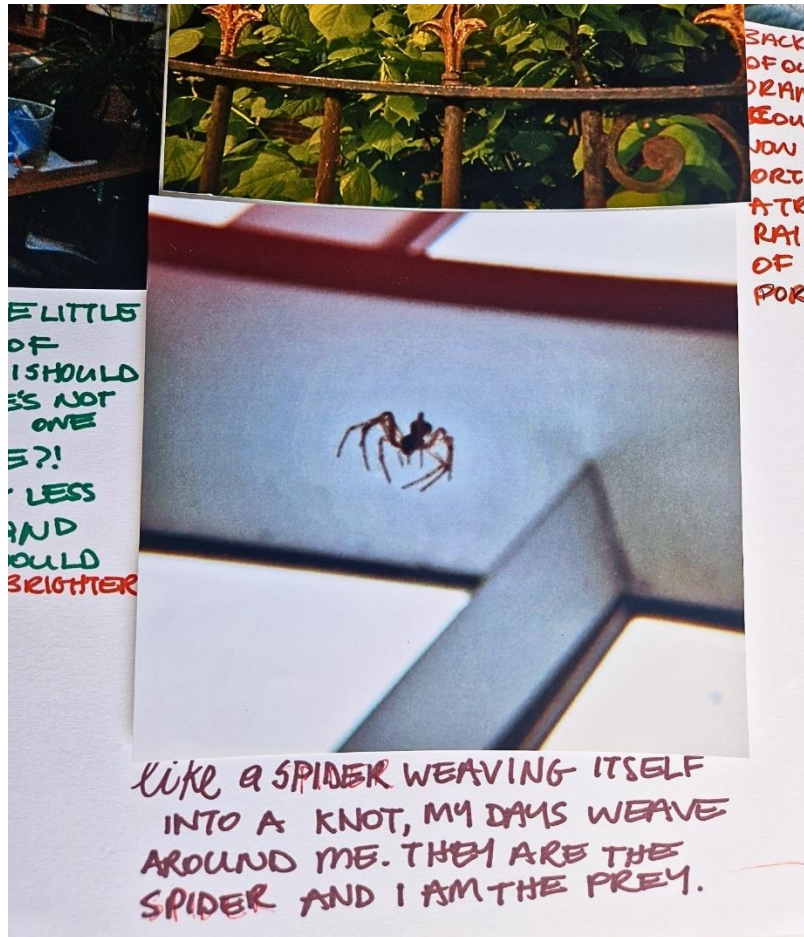
As part of the project evaluation the team of Research Champions were given 35mm film disposable cameras to capture instances from their everyday lives. The aim of the activity was for the young people to have the opportunity to use a different medium through which to share what it means and feels like to be a young person from Albania in the asylum system. Together the young people created collages from the photos, adding their own words, to provide a glimpse into their daily lives.

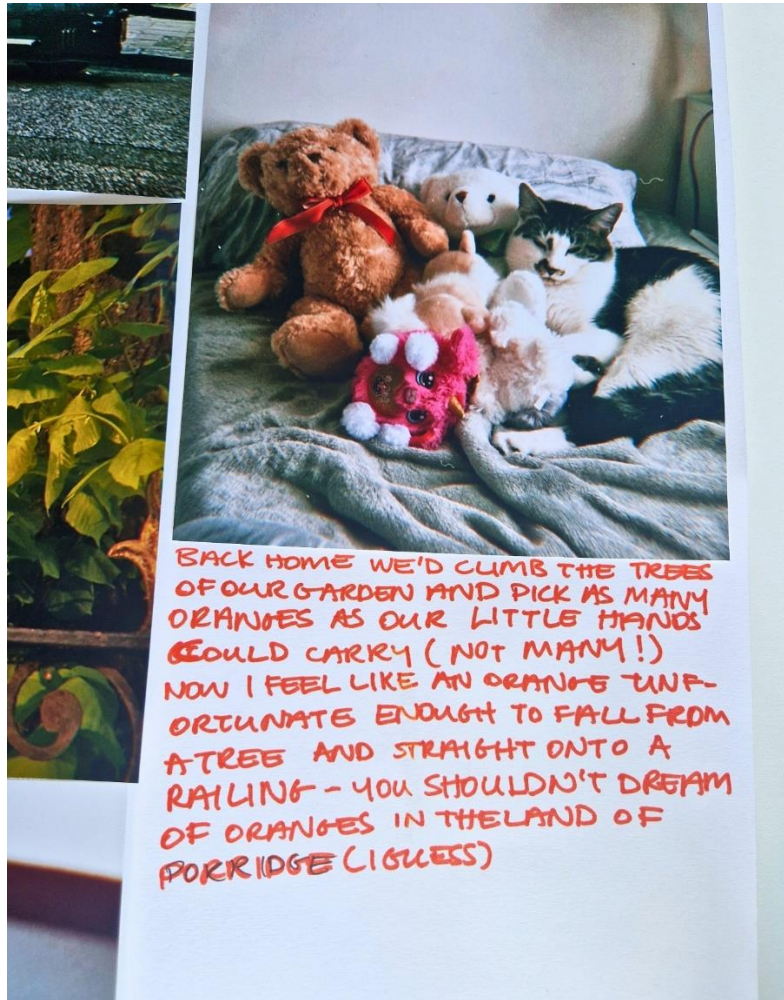
The images fall broadly into two areas:

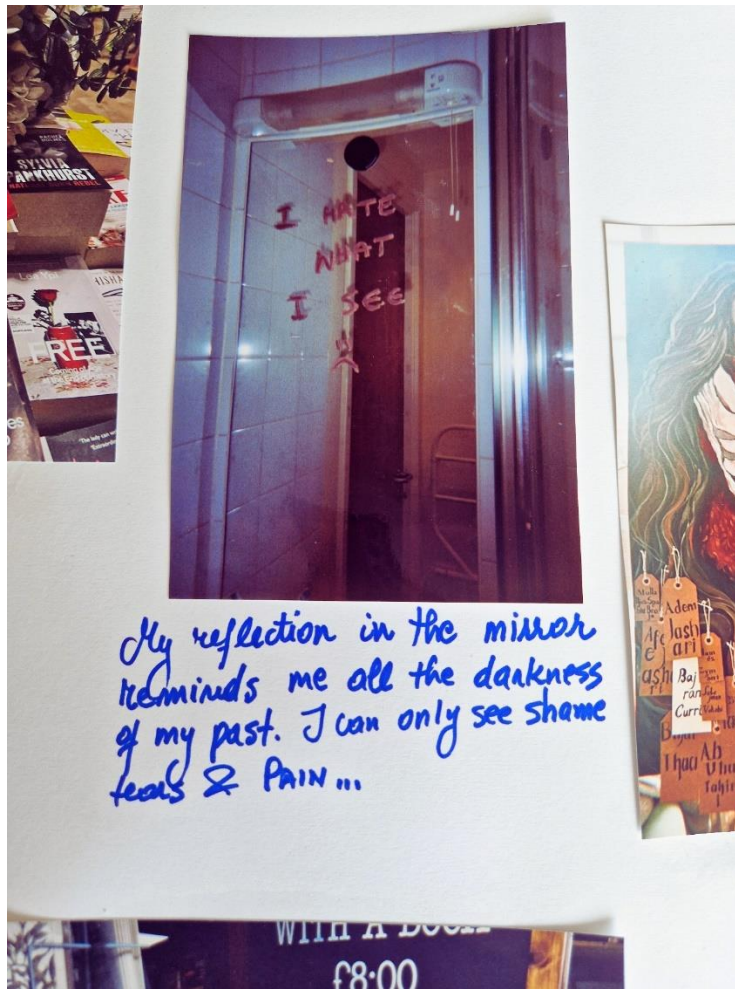
- Firstly, many of the images capture the struggles the young people live with on a daily basis – their isolation, trauma, anxiety and depression, the poor quality and insecure accommodation, the sleepless nights;
- Secondly, the young people show, both in the images and the words, what the *Breaking the Chains* project and the wider Shpresa community means to them, in terms of giving them a place of safety, warmth, protection and hope.

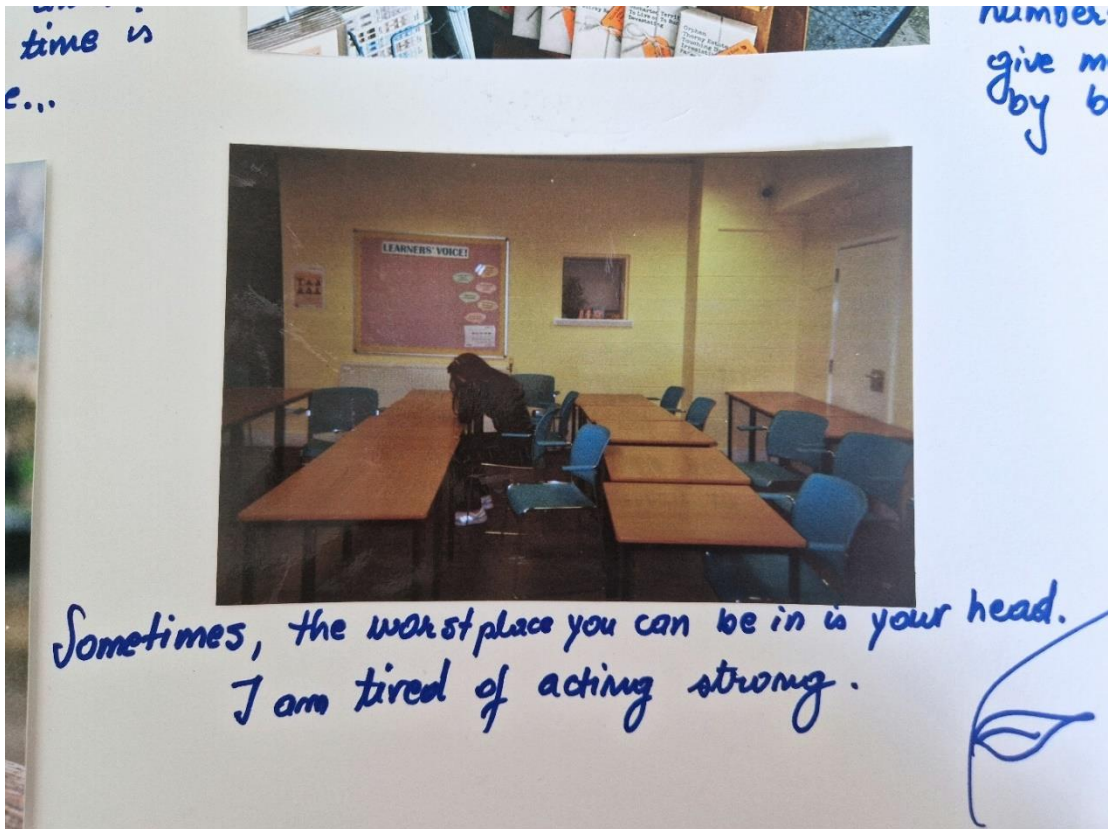
Below is a selection of the collages the young people put together. More can be found at <https://miclu.org/blog/snapshots-of-reality>













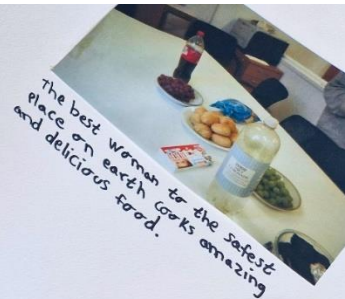
COLLECTING MEMORIES WITH POSITIVE PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY ARE THE ONLY REAL ONES I HAVE.



EVERYTIME WE MEET WE HAVE FOOD MADE WITH LOVE.



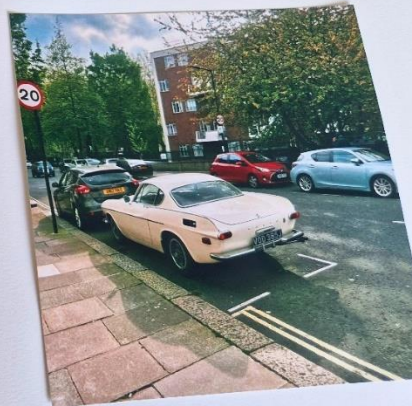
My friends are very tall. Im trying to look like them.



The best woman to the safest place on earth cooks amazing and delicious food.



The safest place on earth.



RESEARCH CHAMPIONS' INTERVIEWS WITH POLITICIANS

Research Champions involved in the evaluation of the project had, over the years of the project, expressed a desire to interview politicians. The young people were keen to know politicians' views on the asylum system, on the *Breaking the Chains* project, and to have a space to raise their concerns and share their experiences directly with those with political power.

In 2024 we were able to secure interviews with three politicians: Baroness Lister from the House of Lords; Rachael Maskell MP and Sir Stephen Timms MP (all Labour Party politicians).

In the planning of the interviews some of the young people expressed concerns about interviewing politicians, particularly if they were hostile to asylum seekers. At the 2023 Focus Group, for example, the young people shared:

- There is always the feeling you will be judged [...]. I'm not comfortable doing it.

- I'm a bit afraid of what they are going to say, what their views are.

- It's not as bad as you think because if they have accepted to be interviewed, someone who hates us I don't think would be interviewed.

It was therefore agreed that only politicians who had some knowledge of Shpresa and/or the *Breaking the Chains* project, who were known to be allies in some way with the community would be approached. Sir Stephen Timms, Member of Parliament for East Had had longstanding links with Shpresa Programme; Baroness Lister had attended a presentation given by the young people on the unfairness of the Illegal Immigration Bill

towards the Albanian Community at the House of Commons in May 2023.³³ Rachael Maskel, Member of Parliament for York Central, had attended the same meeting, and had links to members of the *Breaking the Chains* team through her support of refugee and migrant groups in her constituency.

The aim of the interviews was:

- to explore the politicians' views on the current asylum system,
- to discuss the particular experiences of Albanian young people in the asylum system,
- to hear the politicians' thoughts on the *Breaking the Chains* project, and
- to discuss with the politicians ways in which the young people could make their voices heard more in the political sphere.

The interviews all took place between March and May 2024, thus in the final months of the Conservative government and prior to the General Election in July 2024 that brought in a new Labour government. Either the project evaluator or a member of the *Breaking the Chains* team (or both in the case of the interview with Rachael Maskell MP) were present at the interview. Two of the interviews were in person and one via the Zoom online platform. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the independent evaluator. The young people interviewed in small teams (of between 3 and 5).

All three politicians identified huge problems with the asylum system, pinpointing in particular the inefficiencies of the system (which cause huge delays in asylum claims being processed and related trauma for those making claims), the lack of safe and legal routes to claim asylum, the ban on asylum seekers working, as well as the general inhumanity of the current asylum system:

³³ <https://shpresaprogramme.org/shpresa-programme-at-the-house-of-lords-the-unfairness-of-the-illegal-immigration-bill-towards-the-albanian-community/>

Well, I think there are lots of problems. I mean the fact that the system is so slow and bureaucratic is a serious problem. The fact that people have to wait so long to get an answer causes no end of problems. Very often I have noticed that when people are waiting for decisions they don't really have any idea of what's going on or even if they are in the system, and quite often people come and see me and ask for my help and write to the Home Office and at least - I mean - we get a reply from the Home Office but it may not tell them anything, but at least they can see from that reply that they are in the system. They have got a reference number for example, so the fact that it's a very cumbersome, slow and I think under-resourced process is I think a big part of the problem. [...] I think there are questions as well about whether people who have claimed asylum should be able to work and the circumstances under which they should be able to work that are really very difficult at the moment as well. But fundamental, I think, it is the slowness and the failure to adequately resource the work that needs to be done, I think [this] is the biggest problem at the moment.

(Sir Stephen Timms, March 2024)

Rachael Maskell MP spoke of the ways in which the asylum system compounded the traumas that asylum seekers are facing:

The system locks you in your trauma and in your past and that's got to change because you are part of informing our future. We need to take those barriers down.

Obviously, things should be processed really quickly. There is no excuse - I mean this backlog is government-contrived. They can't blame Covid, it happened long before that because they decided to cut staffing and I believe then purposefully build up a backlog to then use that to weaponize it, and to use that as culture war in the country, really disgracefully. That is what I believe is behind it.

We need safe and legal routes, and if you cut off those routes, what option do you have but to be placed in the hands of gangmasters and traffickers?

We have a massive problem in this country in that we don't have enough young people. We need to really think this through in a really sensible way to ensure that as a country we are thinking through .. [Other countries'] economies are booming because they have supported asylum seekers, integrated them into communities and they have the labour that we are desperate for. If we are smart about this, let you finish education with us, help you into good quality jobs - that is going to help this country. I really do want to see a lot of change in the system. A mature country would do that, and not to mention that I think there is a massive breach of human rights in what's happening at the moment as well. We've got to do better.

Baroness Lister talked about the impact of hearing the young people from the *Breaking the Chains* project speaking at the event put on by the *Breaking the Chains* team at the House of Lords in May 2023 to challenge the designation of Albania as a safe country in the Illegal Immigration Bill that was going through parliament at that time. At the event, the young people shared testimonies of their own experiences, of the lack of safety they felt, the impact of living with hostilities, and the escalating language of hatred against Albanians. As a result, Baroness Lister tabled an amendment to the Immigration Bill, which sought “to remove Albania from the list of “safe states” with reference to which asylum and human rights claims will be deemed inadmissible.”³⁴ This was an example of how the advocacy work, which the young people in the *Breaking the Chains* project undertake, has political impact, using their voices to raise awareness of the issues facing young Albanians in the UK asylum system. In the interview with Baroness Lister, she reflected on the impact of this meeting:

³⁴ <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3429/stages/17659/amendments/10007527>

I think I have to admit that I probably didn't know that much about it [discrimination against Albanian asylum seekers] or understand it before I met with members of your community in the context of the Illegal Migration Bill, and I can remember there was a meeting we had in the House of Commons and I learned a lot about the racism that your community suffer at that meeting. And I was particularly struck by, and it was put very carefully by members of your community, the kind of language that is used about you, particularly in the media, and I do think language is very important. I mean, it's something I've argued about [...] the way politicians and the government talk about asylum seekers.

So, what is the reason for it? I mean, I think I think there is a kind of antipathy towards the 'other.' And because Albanians have been, in a sense, singled out as a kind of people who don't need to seek asylum in this country, therefore, the argument is that all Albanians are just here for no good reason. I don't know whether that's a cause or a product of the racism. It's probably kind of working both ways. And it's all got caught up in the wider issue of, people coming across on the boats, which has become a kind of symbol of so-called illegal migration. And as I pointed out recently in Parliament, in the House of Lords, I mean, they are only illegal because this country has made them illegal [...]. There is a legal right to claim asylum but that right has been taken away by the legislation that's going through.

The young people were keen to gain advice from the politicians on what they could do to raise greater awareness, to better advocate for changes in the asylum system, and to amplify their voices within the political arena. All three interviewees agreed that the advocacy work that they are currently doing is so important, and having impact, and that finding and working with politicians and journalists as well as academics was key to getting their stories heard.

It's so important for politicians to meet people with lived experiences because that's when our humanities engage, but also I am here to learn, more than share opinions. You have different experiences that you can share with me about how the system has engaged with you, where those barriers are, what you want to see change in the future. Meeting people with lived experience is invaluable for politicians.

(Rachael Maskell MP)

More of the same [...] Because it's very easy I think for people to think [Albanians] are not coming here anymore. We can forget about them [...] but you need to be reminding them that there are members of your community here who have good reason to seek asylum, to help combat the prejudice, the assumption that Albania is a safe country for everyone.

(Baroness Lister)

I think what you are doing is going to be a helpful first step, I think there are opportunities to talk to people like me. And some MPs who may be less sympathetic than me would probably be willing to meet and talk and discuss these things, and all those steps help to make sure that the voices that you represent are heard. I think there are opportunities in Newham, which has a very helpful local newspaper called Newham Voices, which is always interested in hearing from groups like this, so there are media opportunities for the voices to be heard, but it's may be the political ones that I am perhaps most familiar with, and I think doing things like this, is exactly the right approach.

(Sir Stephen Timms MP)

The young people are impressive speakers and advocates for their communities. It was clear across the interviews with politicians that the young people's testimonies and advocacy work had raised their awareness of the struggles they were facing, and is pivotal to the continued success of the project. As one of the *Breaking the Chains* team summarises:

Hearing from the young people changes minds much more effectively than hearing us wang on about the law. The human aspect and the understanding that those young people are real humans, like the young people in our families, is the key to making the progress that we have made or resisting the worse slippage that could have occurred. And their expertise in the issues that they speak to is unassailable in so many ways. They really are speaking truth to power and that comes from their own experiences and their support for each other and their view on the reality. Lawyers can tie everything up in knots linguistically but that young person' experience can cut right through it, and that's been essential.

(Interview with *Breaking the Chains* staff member, December 2023)

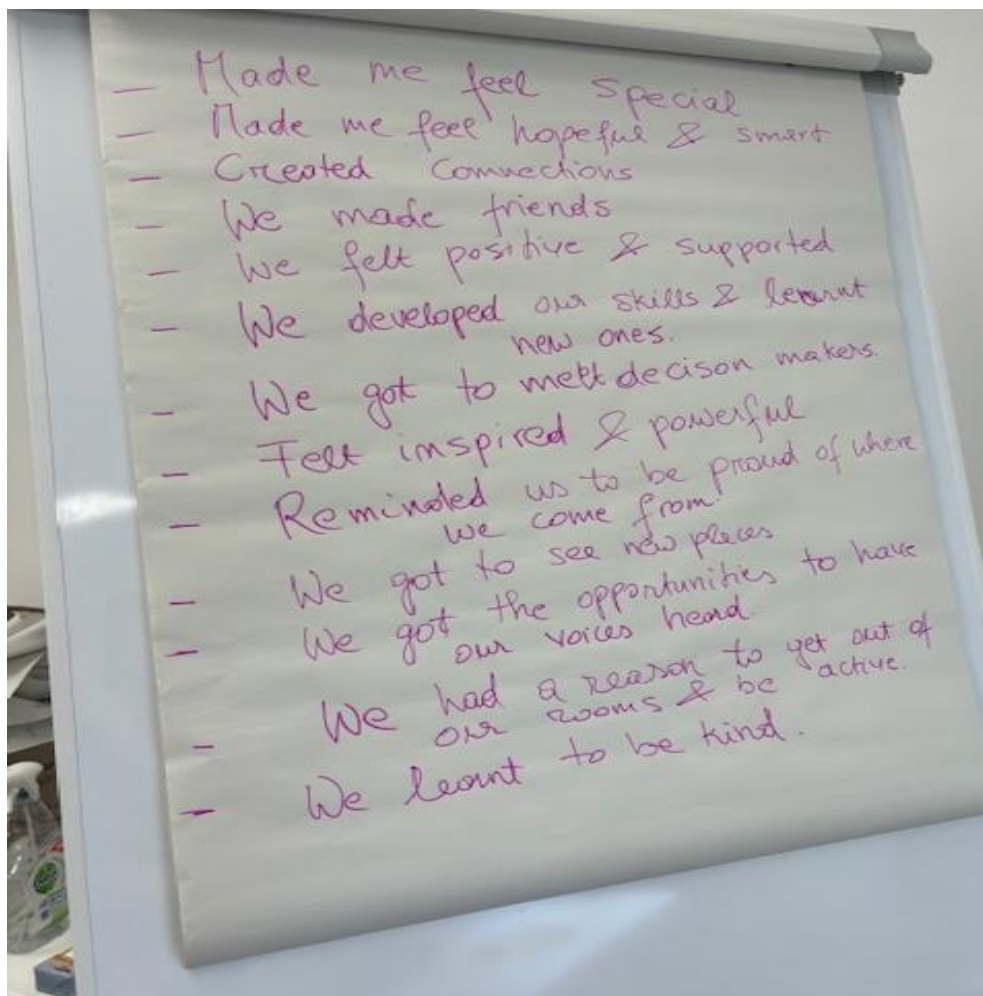
CONCLUSIONS

The *Breaking the Chains* project is succeeding in its objective to provide holistic legal and social support to the young people from Albania who are seeking asylum in the UK and are part of the project despite increasing external challenges. The evidence from the young people collected during the process of this evaluation points, on the one hand, to the immense difficulties they face seeking asylum, legally, socially and materially, and the profound and devastating effect it has on their mental health, their feelings of unsafety, isolation and vulnerability. On the other, it also points to the ways in which the young people, working together and with the *Breaking the Chains* team and the wider Shpresa community, are given the hope, support and skills, love and care to keep them afloat as they navigate multiple traumas. It is important to remember that **all** the young people involved in the project are fleeing serious harms and abuse. Given all that they face, the young people's ability to work as advocates for their community, and 'to speak truth to power', is beyond impressive. This is only possible because of the dedication of the *Breaking the Chains* team and the wider Shpresa community that seek to provide the wrap around care vital to sustaining the young people through their process of seeking asylum in the UK and to empower them to take part in civil society, and to have their voices heard by those making decisions about them.

This project remains lifesaving and life changing. In this recent period of increased hostility (legally politically and socially) against asylum seekers, with Albanians often specifically targeted, the project has been a lifeline to the young people, and steps in where statutory services fail. The interviews with the *Breaking the Chains* team spoke to the colossal mountain there was/is to climb in terms of gaining fair legal representation for the young people and supporting them through the process of seeking asylum. As one member of the *Breaking the Chains* team remarks: "This project should not exist in the

way it does, we are not social workers. If we do this with such little capacity, then they [the statutory services] can do more and do it more systematically.” This is still a small team working beyond capacity, and since the last evaluation in ever more challenging and hostile circumstances. Nonetheless the project demonstrates through its hard-won legal successes that the young people they support have viable, credible and meritorious asylum cases, and through its broader support and training that they have much to offer in wider society.

THE IMPACT OF THE *BREAKING THE CHAINS* PROJECT BEST SUMMED UP BY THE YOUNG PEOPLE THEMSELVES:



RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations focus on building further on the successes of the child/youth-centered focus of the project.

Going forward the Evaluation recommends that the *Breaking the Chains* project should:

1. Continue to include the Immigration and Research Champions in all aspects of project design, development and evaluation;
2. Support the young people to extend further their engagement in the evaluation of the project and their use of creative methods in data collection and the dissemination of findings (for example, using audio and video technologies);
3. Further support the Immigration and Research Champions to advocate for their community through engagement with academics, journalists, politicians and policy makers and representatives of other relevant organisations;
4. Increase the engagement of 'hard to reach' young people in the project; and
5. Seek opportunities to share learning and best practice from the project with other agencies and organisations working with children and young people.