

Migrant stories from Wales

December 2019

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"All migrants are entitled to equal protection of all their human rights. On this International Day, I urge leaders and people everywhere to bring the Global Compact to life, so that migration works for all."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres (Source: www.un.org/en/observances/migrants-day)

Our **current work on migration and inclusion** began in June 2018 and since then we have spoken to many people about their experiences of settling in Wales. To mark International Migrants Day, we're sharing some of their stories.

We have spoken to many types of migrants, including those who have come to Wales to work, those who have come to study, and those seeking sanctuary whether that be through seeking asylum or being part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS).

We have been particularly keen to speak to EU, EEA or Swiss citizens who may lose their legal right to live in the UK once it leaves the EU and free movement ends. To continue living here, they will have to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). We wanted to find out how they have felt about having to go through this process and what, if any, concerns they have about their future.

This selection of stories highlight the variety of reasons people come to Wales, the barriers they face, the attitudes of local communities, and the effect that the immigration system has on their lives. They also give the reasons why many are proud to call Wales 'home'.

Aisha's story

Aisha came to Wales from Holland six years ago when she was just 11 years old. In the first two years she was moving back and forth between the two countries. During that time she has lived in Newport, which she likes:

"It is quieter, everyone knows everyone and it is small compared to cities like London."

Aisha is of Somalian descent and lives near her family, some of which were born in Newport. At the start Aisha said it was hard to adapt to a different culture and environment:

"It was very different from what I grew up in. But I got used to it."

It helped having family close by who showed her around the area and taught her about the culture and what she had to do to fit in. When Aisha first arrived, she didn't speak any English and she found this difficult. However, through help she received at school and her own learning techniques, she was able to pick it up:

"I wasn't speaking English when I came here, when I went to school people were talking to me but I had no idea what they were saying. I would watch British programmes and try and read books. I had support with English from the EAL [English as an Additional Language], they would come into class with me and help me with my work, I would use Google Translate on the I pads and that is how I learned."



Aisha doesn't attend any community groups outside of her own community, and although she is aware of youth clubs in the Pil area she doesn't go to them. She hopes she will make new friends once she goes to university.

Although Aisha feels welcome in Newport, she feels upset by what is being written on social media:

"Everyone was really nice to me at school and would ask if I was okay but on social media you see people's comments and opinions and stuff."

Brexit and its impact

Aisha found out that she had to make an application for settlement status through her father, who was still waiting for his decision at the time of interview. There have been delays with the application process and Aisha claimed it was partly due to the advisor at Citizens' Advice Bureau not sending it off. Asked about having to do this, Aisha said:

"It feels kind of weird that we have had to do this, because we have already been living here for six years and all of a sudden we need settled status to stay here because of Brexit - which I didn't really agree with."

Aisha is particularly concerned that she has only been granted pre-settled status, which is down to complications with her application. This is a particular issue for Aisha because she is currently applying to university this year and her first choice Welsh university requires evidence of her status for the fee application to consider her application. Other Welsh universities did not require such an approach. She hopes that this doesn't have implications for her attending university.

What makes Wales my home?

When asked what makes Wales her home, Aisha said:

"The Somali community where I live, people who have the same culture. You would always have somebody who knows what you are going through."

Lena's story

Lena moved from Poland in 2005 and took up a job in a care home in Carmarthen. A qualified PE teacher, Lena was unable to find a job in Poland. She decided to attend an interview for a job in Carmarthen and was told by the employer that they were finding it difficult to find local people to fill the vacancies. She was nervous but decided to move to Carmarthenshire along with 14 other people to take up the job offer:

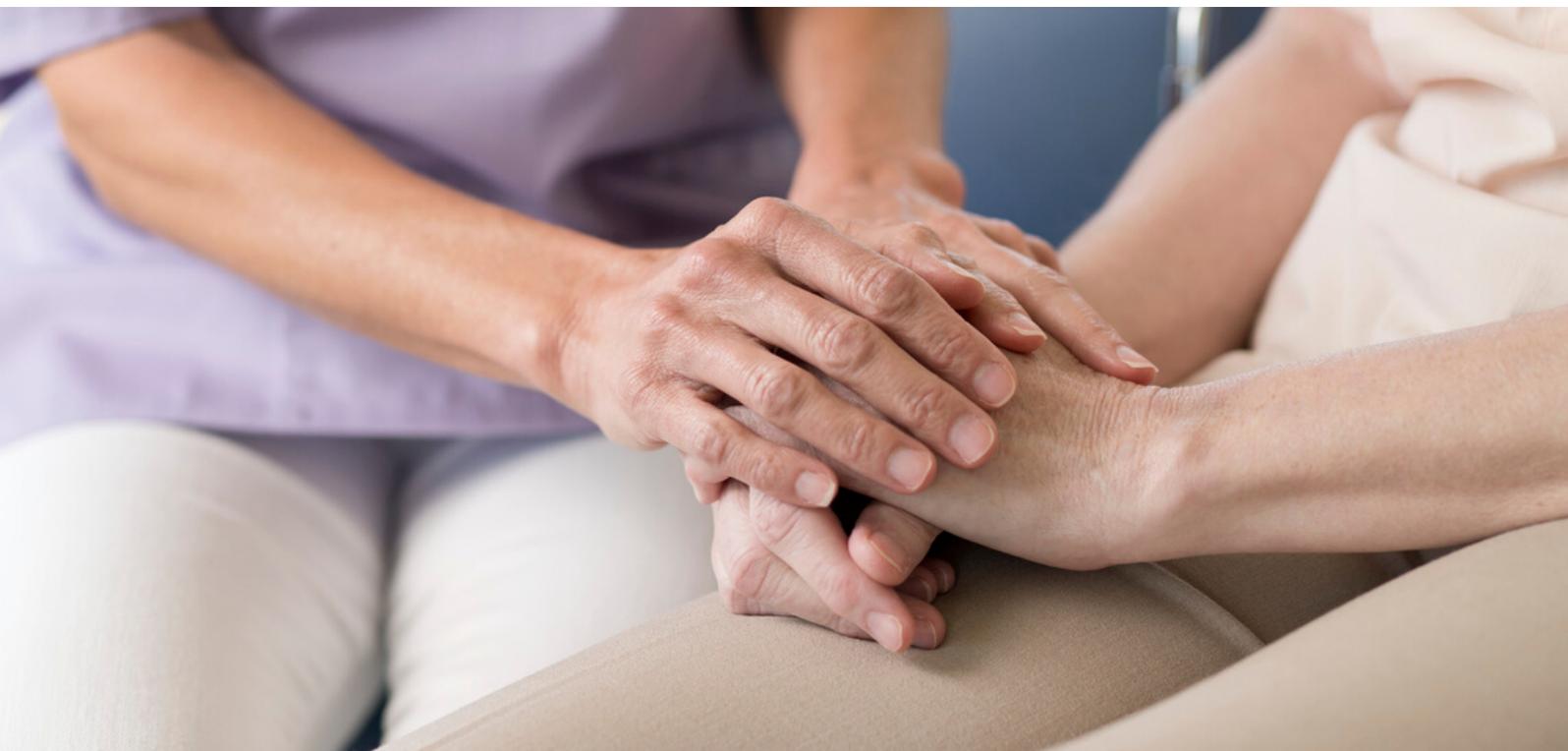
"It was very scary to be honest. I couldn't speak any English, I was shocked when she gave me the job ... I was working with vulnerable people. It wasn't easy coming to this country, they speak a different language, it was a different culture and I was missing family."

Lena said that although she missed her family, she had to think about her future and felt that she settled in quickly due to the good job and support from the manager to learn English. Even though Lena only intended on staying for one year, she had grown really fond of the job and decided to stay:

"I was taking patients to the doctors and I had to speak English. The job was a very nice job, it made me feel like doing something special, caring for other people."

At first, Lena was living in the countryside without a car, so feeling isolated she decided to move. She then met her husband and they have had two children. The family live in Carmarthen and really like it there, especially as there are more job opportunities.

Lena has been working as a health care support worker in the hospital for the past 10 months and has met many people through her job.



"I have met so many nice people; there are loads of Filipinos and loads of Welsh and English people, and I meet so many nice people in the church. We have started going out more often with the friends I have made at work."

Brexit and its impact

Lena said that when she first arrived in Carmarthen, she faced some hostility from locals and described one incident where a work colleague had said to her: 'you fxxxing Polish, coming here taking our jobs'.

She explained that sometimes the family of the people she cares for can be difficult to deal with:

"You are afraid to say something. Now I just laugh ... Family members are difficult to deal with because I am here to help your family."

Since Brexit she says that many more people ask her where she is from, and ask questions about her future:

"Lots of people say where are you from and I say Poland and they go quiet... their silence implies something. Some at the hospital has said 'ahh, another Polish'."

The family have all applied to the EU Settlement Scheme and have done all that has been asked of them. However, Lena does get stressed about her future, but she says her husband calms her down.

"When I think about it, I have lived here 14 years, I have always worked, okay I had two maternities but I was straight back; they cannot expect me to sell my house."

She said that she does have friends that are worried they will get sent back to Poland.

What makes Wales my home?

Wales is Lena's home. Her and her husband both work in the public sector, have bought a home, and their children both go to the local school. In a recent conversation with her eldest child, Lena asked if he wanted to go to Poland but to live but he burst into tears and said that he didn't want to go there because his friends are here.

Kemi's story

Kemi is a 27-year-old asylum seeker who was dispersed to Swansea around 6 weeks before being interviewed. Kemi came to the UK from Nigeria with her father when she was very young and has lived in the UK for the past 15 years. Her father has since abandoned her and she has no other blood relatives in the UK. Kemi is currently applying for asylum which means that, even though she has been settled for many years, she still has to go through the asylum system and as a result has been dispersed and can no longer work.

Although Kemi has been living in the UK for many years, being dispersed means she has left many friends behind, and Swansea is not like her previous home:

“Swansea was really different from where I came from... I am not used to be somewhere so small and because of my situation I am not free to move around and do other things ... you can't do much other than volunteering and sometimes I find that really annoying... I just want to go to London to see my friends. I don't have friends here; I have tried to make friends but maybe I find it hard to communicate or approach people.”

Kemi has found it really difficult to adapt to her situation and suffers from isolation, loneliness and depression:



"Most days I lock myself in my room and I feel isolated; I cry myself to sleep. I am the only one here and I have nobody to talk to... It makes me feel really down and I get suicidal. I suffer from PTSD and depression... This week I have been really down... it is not like I am new to the system, it is not like I am new from another country. I am not used to be treated in this way."

Kemi has found it especially difficult not being able to work and has been looking for volunteering opportunities to keep her busy, but also gain some work experience. However, the opportunities are limited in number and scope:

"I heard about the BME project and took part in that ... that keeps me going but it is for one day a week and that is all I do... I want to aim higher and I want a proper job, nothing [volunteering] suits me."

Finding new friends outside the asylum and refugee community has been difficult. Kemi thinks there should be more opportunity to get involved with other activities so she can meet more people, but has found there are limited opportunities:

"I want to meet people other than asylum seekers; I don't want to be stuck in the asylum stigma as it reminds me of my situation and who I am and what I am. I want to learn new things and meet other people."

Kemi has even tried learning Welsh, but said that she didn't meet anyone through that who were not asylum seekers. She felt it would be better if there were more opportunities to mix socially:

"In Swansea I have only seen certain groups – they are not mixed groups of people... there could be a kid who comes from Africa and they are just put with African people and they don't know anything else. If you mix, you get to know people - then you start to feel like you belong."

What makes Wales my home?

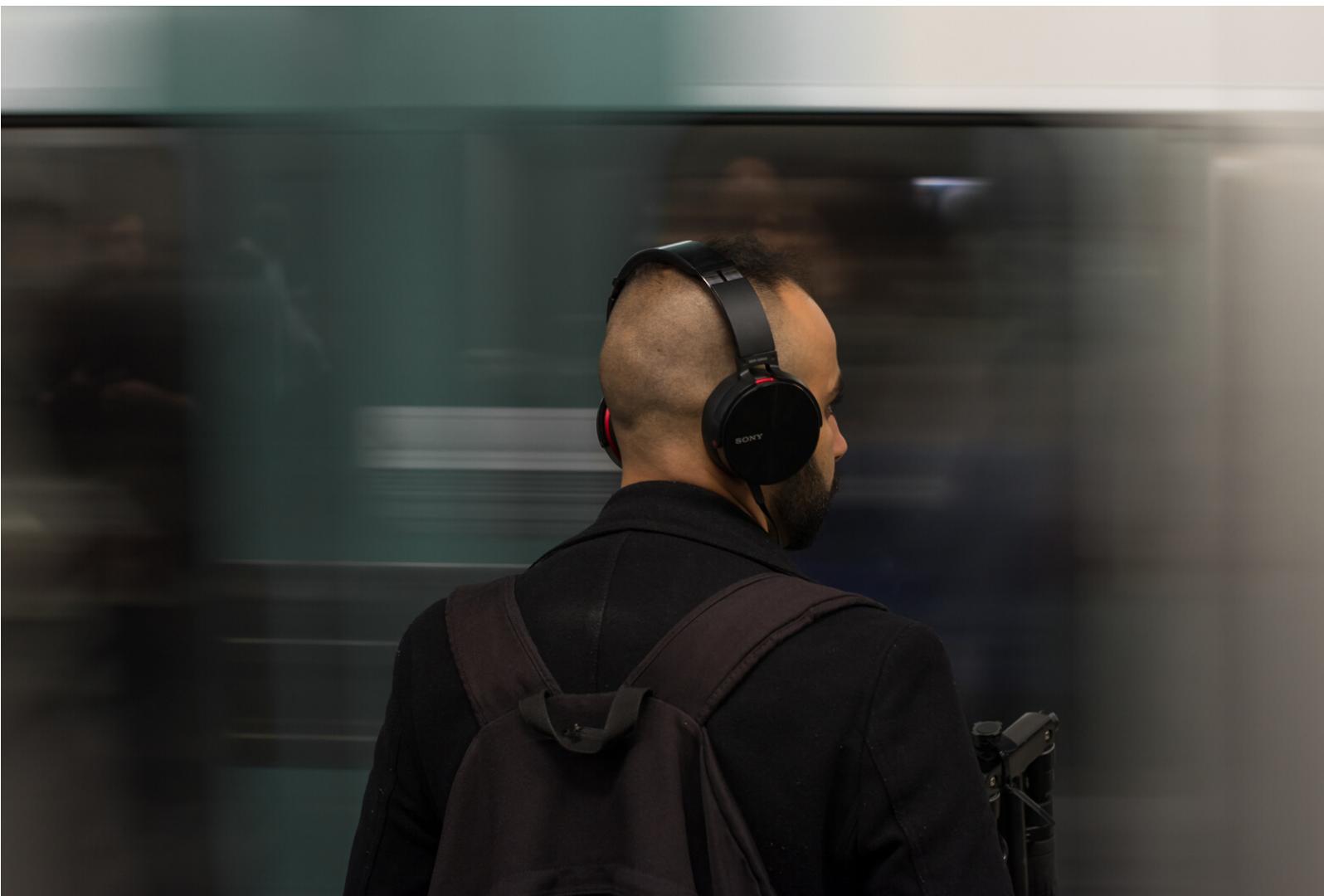
Kemi has only been here for a short time. She would like to stay in Swansea if she can get a 'proper' job here, because she feels it is safe compared to where she was previously living.

Tal's story

Tal and his family came to Wales via the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VRRS) three years ago. The VPRS was launched in January 2014 and was intended to provide sanctuary to several hundred vulnerable Syrians over 3 years. In 2015, in view of the worsening situation in Syria, the then prime minister announced an extension of the scheme, with the intention of resettling 20,000 refugees from the conflict by 2020. Every local authority in Wales has signed up to the scheme.

Tal lives with his wife, children and father-in-law. Since coming to Wales three years ago, Tal has attended ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes and now speaks fairly good English. He feels he would benefit from further ESOL classes but finds this is a struggle around school drop-off times. However, he feels this may improve when his child attends full-time school.

When he was in Syria, Tal was a chef. He now works in a local takeaway which he enjoys. He would like to develop his own business based on food that he used to cook – although he doesn't know if there would be much call for it in Wales.



Tal's wife has a disability and this has a significant effect on their daily lives and her ability to learn English. This is a worry for Tal as she cannot go out without him like she would have done in Syria. He feels she will be unable to navigate the local area, and she cannot take the children to school. He said that she is quite isolated and worried about the family she left in Syria.

He also worries about his father-in-law who is 60 years of age and has struggled to grasp English. This means he doesn't go out very often and just attends a drop-in session for refugees. Tal is concerned about his father-in-law's ability to go out into the community:

"He cannot go out because he doesn't speak English and his friends are in Jordan. He tried to speak English but he couldn't understand ... his hearing is bad... I am afraid if he goes out and makes a mistake ... it is different customs here."

What makes Wales my home?

Despite some of his concerns, Tal seems very happy in Wales, especially that his young daughter is settling in nursery, her teachers are nice and her English is very good. The customs and cultures in Wales are particularly good, especially in comparison to Syria and he likes the idea of Love Spoons.



Support our work

We're carrying out vital work to improve social integration in Welsh villages, towns and cities of people born outside the UK. As part of this, we're also exploring the possibility of a Welsh immigration policy. Find out more at:

bevanfoundation.org/current-projects/immigration-policy-social-cohesion/

If you've been touched by these stories, please support us by donating today at: bevanfoundation.org/support-us/individuals/

Thank you

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