

# Refugee Education UK Strategy 2024-2027

Full version

# A note from REUK's Chief Executive



At Refugee Education UK, we have had the privilege of working alongside refugee and asylum-seeking young people for more than a decade, supporting them to access and thrive in education in the UK. Through our direct education support programmes for young people, our training programmes for educators and other practitioners, and our research and policy work, we are reminded, day-in day-out, that education is critical to the building of more hopeful futures.

Over the last few months we've spent time as a community of young refugees and staff team, analysing the challenges, data and potential solutions to enabling refugee children and young people to access and thrive in education - as

well as being honest about our organisational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.


This strategy is the result of that work - our current best thinking about how we, as an organisation, can work towards a world where all refugee young people are able to access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future.

Over the next three years, we'll be structuring our work around three key organisational objectives - doing all we can so that, as a result of our efforts:

- **Young refugees will be better able to access education, from primary school to university**
- **Young refugees will achieve better academic and psychosocial outcomes**
- **Education systems will be environments where young refugees are welcomed and enabled to thrive**

Thanks for being on the journey with us!

Catherine



**“Education is the key  
that opens the door to a  
more hopeful future”**

# Who we are

# We are Refugee Education UK

**We are working towards a world where all refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future.**

REUK started out around a kitchen table in Harlesden. A small group of volunteers from a local church. A small group of young refugees from across London with no funding, no office, but lots of ideas.

REUK has grown from a small volunteer-led local project into a national organisation supporting several thousand refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people across the UK.

## Why we exist

In conflict, schools are destroyed, occupied by armed groups and used to shelter displaced people. Where learning continues, students and teachers can be targets of violence. For many, continuing to learn is just not possible.

When children and families are forced to flee their homes, they miss out on more education as they make dangerous journeys trying to find a place of safety.

**For young refugees arriving in the UK, education is a priority; it's how lives begin to be rebuilt, and hope for the future is rekindled. But getting back into and progressing in education is fraught with challenge.**

**We want things to be different.**

For many years, the young people we work with have told us that education is one of the few forward looking things in their lives.

**We believe that when we invest in education, it sends a clear and powerful message of hope: that there is a future, and it's a future worth investing in and preparing for.**

# Our 3 objectives

As a result of our work:

**Young refugees will be better able to access education, from primary school to university**

**Young refugees will achieve better academic and psychosocial outcomes**

**Education systems will be environments where young refugees are welcomed and enabled to thrive**

# The values we work from

All our work is guided by three core values

## Valuing the individual

- We believe that each person is precious and should be treated with kindness and dignity.
- We honour and respect everyone we work with – young people, colleagues and other professionals.
- We do our best to listen deeply as we work, valuing everyone's story and experience.
- We practice self-care within our team – doing our best to work from a place of rest and peace.

## A foundation of hope

- We have a deeply held belief in hope – in good times and in bad, and invest in education as a practical demonstration of our belief in the potential for hopeful futures.

- We respect and support the hopes that the young people we work with have for their lives. We believe in the importance of bearing witness to challenges and pain, even, and especially, when there are no answers.
- We also share and celebrate joy, even in the small things.

### Changing the landscape

- Our work is rooted with individual young people and groups of young people, but we also know structural change is needed.
- Together with the young people we work with and have worked with, we conduct research, make policy recommendations, and train others – in the hope that one day our work will no longer be needed.

REUK was founded by a group of volunteers from a small church in Harlesden, London, motivated by a conviction that one of the practical outworkings of the Christian faith is to provide care, support and welcome to the displaced. We carry out our work in the context of this Christian history and ethos.

REUK is a community of young people, volunteers and staff members of all faiths and none, learning from each other and journeying together as we pursue quality education for all young refugees.

We respect faith, culture, and the role of these in our own lives and in the lives of the young people we work with. We support all young refugees and asylum seekers whatever their faith, religion or beliefs.



# What's going on around us?

## Global displacement and the UK policy environment

There are more people displaced globally than ever before. In the UK, at the end of June 2023, there were an estimated 241k refugees in the UK, with a further 175k asylum seekers awaiting a decision. Refugees from Ukraine account for almost half of the UK refugee population. Resettlement pathways are very limited and protect only a tiny minority:

- At the end of 2022, **108.4 million people** were forcibly displaced worldwide, of whom **43.3 million are children** below 18 years of age<sup>1</sup>
- At the end of 2022 there were an estimated **231,597 refugees<sup>2</sup> in the UK<sup>3</sup>**
- In the year ending June 2023, **asylum applications relating to 97,390 people were made** in the UK. In the year to June 2023, **70% of initial decisions made have been grants of protection** (a total of 20,888 people). At the end of June **175,457 people were still awaiting a decision**; of these, 80% (139,961 people) have been waiting for **more than 6 months, many for years.**
- In the year ending March 2023, **16,183 children claimed asylum** - of whom 10,533 were dependents and **5,650 were unaccompanied minors. Afghanistan remains the top country of origin for unaccompanied minors.**
- **Resettlement of Afghan refugees** since August 2021 to date: 20,411 people resettled in total, of which half were children (11,298 under ARAP, 9,113 under ACRS).<sup>4</sup>
- **Schemes for Ukrainians:** at August 2023, visas under the Ukraine Family Scheme and Ukraine Sponsorship scheme had been issued to a total of 238,800 people.

<sup>1</sup> All global stats from UNHCR 2023

<sup>2</sup> Or people with other forms of protection

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR 2023

<sup>4</sup> Home Office (2023). [Asylum and resettlement datasets, year ending March 2023](#). Analysis of 'asylum applications, decisions and resettlement', table Asy-D02. Age filter – under 18 – applied to totals in quarters 2022 Q2 - 2023 Q1. Data for resettlement schemes does not record dependant applicants.



- **Other resettlement schemes:** only 904 people were granted protection through other resettlement schemes (Community Sponsorship, Mandate, UKRS) in the year ending June 2023 - this is 44% fewer people than the previous year.<sup>5</sup>

### The asylum policy environment and media are increasingly hostile - but may not reflect public opinion:

- **The Illegal Migration Act 2023 and The Borders & Nationalities Act 2022** have made asylum policy **more restrictive and punitive than ever before**. Described by the United Nations as incompatible with international human rights law, they criminalise asylum seekers, create a two-tier system for new arrivals (with major changes including inadmissibility and non-entry) and promote a substantial increase in detention facilities and other punitive measures.
- **Commitments to 'safe and legal routes' have been made but remain unrealised** for all but Ukrainian nationals.
- However, **public attitudes have warmed**, with a growing share of the population seeing migrants as important for economic development and cultural enrichment. According to Ipsos 75% of people believe 'people should be able to take refuge in other countries, including in Britain, to escape from war or persecution,' while only 16% disagree.<sup>6</sup>
- Nonetheless, **those opposed are very hostile**, and a skeptical media fuels this: research found that **94% of news broadcasts about refugees were dedicated to 'hard news topics'** (terrorism, crime, economy).<sup>7</sup>

# Education for refugee children and young people

Refugee children and young people continue to face significant challenges to both accessing and thriving in education, at all levels, and there is no overarching policy framework dedicated to their integration into the UK education system:

- Globally, 51% of refugee children are out of school. In the UK, refugee and asylum

<sup>5</sup> Refugee Council asylum statistics

<sup>6</sup> Ipsos 2023

<sup>7</sup> Ipsos 2023 plus Financial Times analysis of Factiva

seeking children can **wait up to 9 months for a school place** on arrival in the country

- Asylum seeking children who enter the UK separated from their parents are on average **three years behind non-migrant children** at school by the time they take their GCSEs
- Significant parts of civil society focusing on education largely ignore that refugee children have the **worst education outcomes**
- Barriers to education cumulate as young people progress, becoming **increasingly complex at the FE and HE levels**
- There is **no overarching national policy framework** for integration of refugee learners into the UK education system, and funding available for English language learning (ESOL) has been cut by 60% in the last decade.

**There is global recognition of the critical importance of education for refugees, and increasing appetite from education institutions and local authorities to be part of the solution:**

- In recent years **international organisations** including UNHCR, the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies, Education Cannot Wait and the Global Platform for Education have **increased their focus on and investment in refugee education.**
- The **majority of global programming and investment remains at the primary level**, but global initiatives including UNHCR's 15by30 campaign (to see the proportion of refugees enrolled in university increase from 6% to 15% by 2030) are helping to **amplify the importance of post-primary education for refugees.**
- The **UK compulsory education sector** has benefitted from an increasing number of institutions becoming Schools of Sanctuary - though there is limited capacity to provide the support these schools need.
- The **UK Higher Education sector** has mobilised following the invasion of Ukraine and now has good national level sector coordination for refugee education at the tertiary level.
- **Local authorities** appear increasingly willing to engage in discussion (and subsequent action) about the most appropriate ways to support **newly arrived refugee and asylum seeking children** in their care who are **waiting for school places.**

# The UK charity sector

Charities within the UK migration sector are struggling; research, policy and advocacy work in particular is poorly resourced. There is a high dependency on trusts and foundations for income, and financial reserves are low:

- The majority of organisations in the sector are **small, grassroots charities**: There are 570+ charities with a combined annual income of £117m primarily working on refugee & migrant issues in the UK. Of these **only 2.3% have an annual income of over £1 million**. Over two thirds have an annual income of under £100k. **Only 9% of organisations have more than 20 staff**, whereas 18% have only 1-2 staff.
- **The majority (85%) provide direct service**, across multiple areas. Whilst 80% engage in some form of **influencing work**, it is very **poorly resourced**, with 47% having **less than one specified staff member**.
- There is **limited engagement with government**: a recent survey by Unbound Philanthropy found that parts of the sector refuse to engage in dialogue with the government and there is some hostility towards those that do.
- **Financial reserves are low**: 2/3 of UP surveyed organisations had less than 4 months and nearly half rely on trusts and foundations for at least 70% of their income.

## What are we saying?

Alongside this external context analysis, we have carried out workshops with REUK staff and young people to gather our collective views about our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as an organisation, as well as assessments from young refugees and frontline staff about the policy and practice changes that would make the biggest difference to their ability to both access and thrive in education.

### Our strengths

The way we value and care for young people and each other; the high level and quality of support and expertise we provide; the way we partner with others and our ability to be flexible and responsive.

### Our weakness

Not being well enough known by schools and young people; being understaffed and over-stretched; not being able to extend our work to older age groups; not doing enough

policy work and needing clearer internal processes and monitoring.

### Our opportunities

To do more policy and systems change work; to grow our training and networks; to create physical community hubs for young people, including in The Lighthouse; and to develop our work with and resources for schools.

### Our threats

The hostile policy environment and worsening mental health amongst young people; a lack of funding as we transition to a mid-sized organisation; failing to monitor our impact and staff burnout.

The recent policy frameworks and their implementation are likely to lead to worsening mental health outcomes amongst young sanctuary seekers, which will likely have a significant detrimental impact on their ability to thrive in education. **Our ethos of valuing the individual and working from a foundation of hope will be increasingly important in this context.**

The sector analysis shows that REUK is one of, if not the, leading organisation supporting education for refugee children and young people in the UK. We have valuable learning and data that can guide and influence policy at the national and international level, and **we should seek to be more active in work that brings about systemic change.**



# What we'll do

## Over the next three years:

- Recognising the vital role of our frontline services, **we will strengthen our direct education support work with refugee children and young people**
- Acknowledging that we could triple in size and still not meet all the frontline need we see, **we will grow our work aiming to change the landscape of education systems and policies**
- Following a period of rapid programmes growth without the accompanying investment in our systems, infrastructure and processes, **we will ensure the operational engine behind our work is appropriate for the size and scale of the programmes we operate**

Each year, we aim to work with at least:

- 4000 refugee children and young people
- 2500 educational professionals across at least 400 institutions

## As a result of our work:

- **Young refugees will be better able to access education, from primary school to university**
- **Young refugees will achieve better academic and psychosocial outcomes**
- **Education systems will be environments where young refugees are welcomed and enabled to thrive**

**We are working towards a world where all refugee children and young people are able to access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future.**

**We will make responsible and realistic plans, whilst remaining responsive to emerging and changing opportunities, circumstances and challenges.**



# How we'll do it

## Three pillars: Education Access, Education Thriving, Education Change

In order to achieve our ambition for the next three years, we will organise our work around three key pillars: **Education Access**, **Education Thriving** and **Education Change**.

### Pillar 1: Education Access

#### The problem

**More than half of the world's refugee children are out of school, and only 6% access university. In the UK, they face waits of up to 9 months for school places on arrival.**

**As they progress to further and higher education, eligibility, finance, language and academic barriers accumulate, leaving young refugees locked out of education and denied the chance to build a future.**

#### What we will do

This pillar will bring together all of our work getting refugee children and young people through the door of education in the UK, from primary school to university, and will incorporate:

- **Our national Access to Education Advice Line**
- **Our Access to Schools project**
- **Our Access to FE project**
- **Our Access to HE project, including the Displaced Scholars' Initiative**

#### Our impact

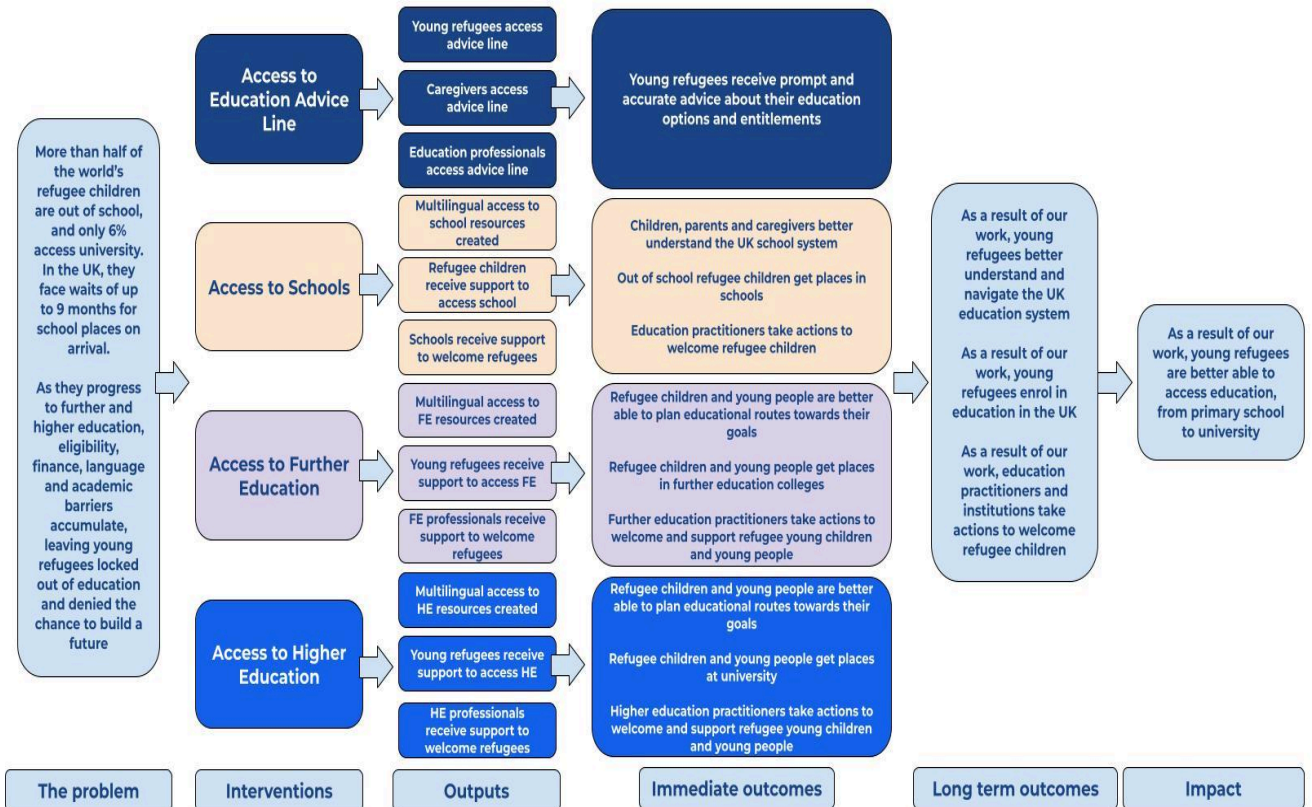
As a result of our work in pillar 1:

- **Young refugees will better understand and navigate the UK education system**

- Young refugees will enrol in education in the UK
- Education practitioners and institutions will take actions to welcome and support refugee children

In the long term, as a result of the work within this pillar, **young refugees will be better able to access education, from primary school to university**

## Education Access Theory of Change





## Pillar 2: Education Thriving

### The problem

**Getting into education is just the first step.**

**Once there, language barriers, gaps in previous learning and mental health challenges mean young refugees achieve poorer education outcomes - with unaccompanied children 3 years behind non-migrant children by the time they complete secondary school.**

### What we will do

This pillar will bring together all of our work supporting refugee children and young people to thrive academically and psychosocially once in education, and will incorporate:

- **Early Skills (Orientation Programme)**
- **Academic Learning (Educational Mentoring and Study Groups)**
- **Education Wellbeing (Social and Emotional Learning)**

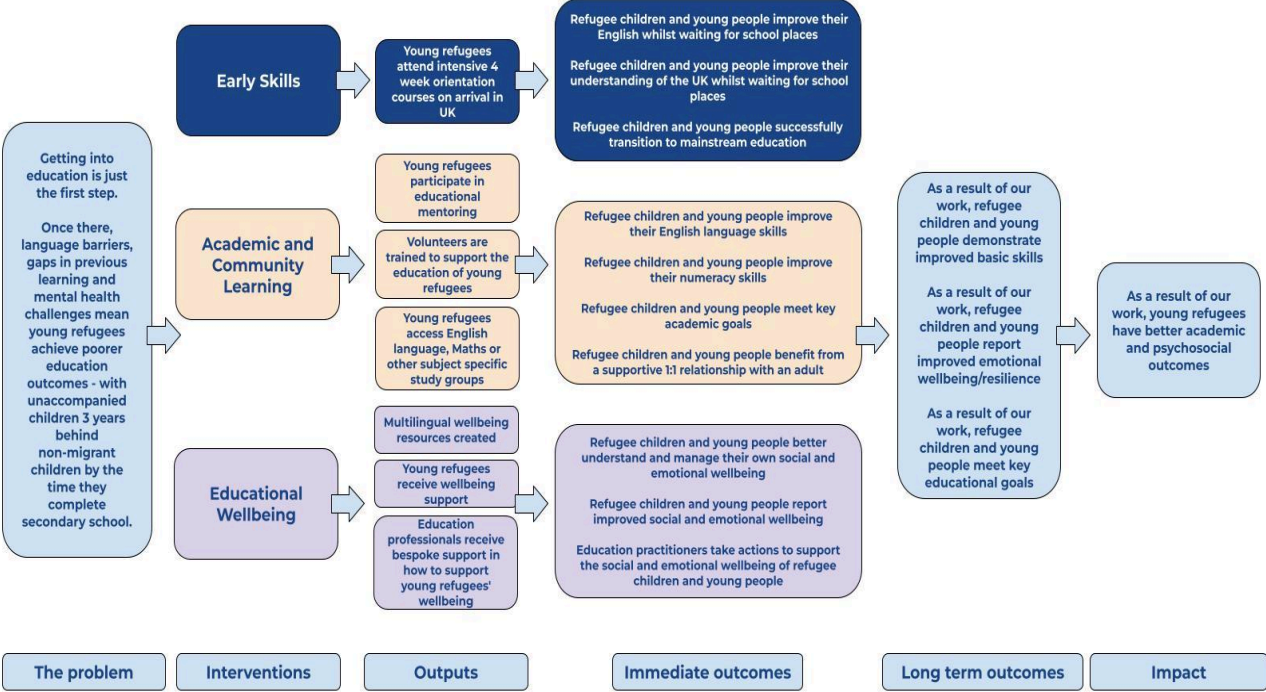
### Our impact

As a result of our work in pillar 2:

- **Refugee children and young people demonstrate improved basic skills**
- **Refugee children and young people report improved emotional wellbeing/resilience**
- **Refugee children and young people meet key educational goals**

In the long term, as a result of the work within this pillar, **young refugees will achieve better academic and psychosocial outcomes**

# Education Thriving Theory of Change



## Pillar 3: Education Change

### The problem

There is no overarching policy framework for the integration of refugee learners into the UK education system, and there are key evidence gaps in what works best in education for refugee children.

School leaders and teachers want to help, but lack the needed training and support. Good practice is often hidden and the expertise of young refugees is not considered in policy making.

### What we will do

This pillar will bring together all of our work influencing policies, structures and improving educational practice, and will incorporate:

- **Research, policy and advocacy**
- **Youth Advocacy and leadership**
- **Training and teacher networks**

Collaborating with and being shaped by the views and experiences of young refugees will be central to this pillar - **our work to change education systems will be done with, not for, those with lived experience of navigating access to and thriving in education as a refugee.**

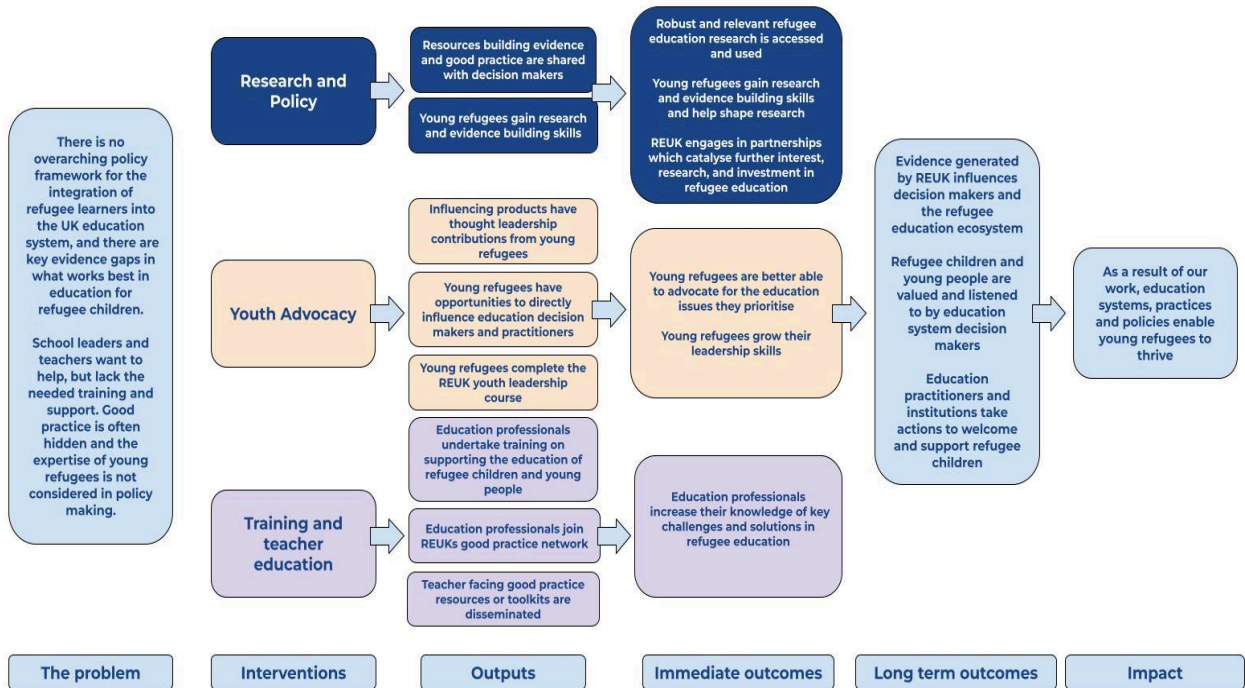
## Our impact

As a result of our work in pillar 3:

- Evidence generated by REUK influences decision makers and the refugee education ecosystem
- Refugee children and young people are valued and listened to by education system decision makers
- Education practitioners and institutions take actions to welcome and support refugee children

As a result of the work within this pillar, **education systems, practices and policies will enable young refugees to thrive**

## Education Change Theory of Change





# How we'll develop as an organisation

## Operations with heart

**Our direct work with young people and our systems change work are enabled and empowered by the core functions that support our work. Over the last couple of years we have experienced a period of rapid growth. We need to let the operational engine that powers our work catch up! We want our core functions to be a strong trellis that enables our direct work with young people, and our systems change work to grow healthily and strong.**

**To do this, over the next three years, from our foundational principle of 'Operations with Heart', we will:**

### Invest in systems and processes

- We will ensure we have appropriate financial and practical infrastructure to do our work safely and well - including the systems that allow us to monitor our impact, well manage the growing number of relationships we hold, and the IT resources appropriate to the size and scale of our work.

### Invest in people and culture

- We will continue to invest in our anti-racism, equality, diversity and inclusion work, doing more to centre the voices and experiences of those with lived experience of forced migration. We will continue to prioritise staff care, and will improve our internal staff development.

### Invest in fundraising and resources

- Our fundraising capacity needs to grow to support the size and scope of our programmes. We aim to diversify our income by building better and stronger relationships with individual supporters, corporates, generating earned income through training and consultancy work and by getting better at telling the stories that reveal the impact of our work.

## The Lighthouse

In March 2020 we purchased a derelict former high street bank in Harlesden, London. Four years later, after a long and challenging refurbishment journey, we have turned it into an education centre for young refugees and headquarters for our work. **We will ensure that the Lighthouse is a place of home, welcome, hope and opportunity for young refugees, that it supports our work, engages positively with our Harlesden community, and generates income through lettings and events to help cover its running costs.**

# A national strategy

Several components of our work have a national reach, and other components of our work have an explicit place based nature, or are by default geographically limited (to London, the West Midlands or Oxfordshire) due to the in-person nature of the work.

**Over the next three years, we aim to - gradually and in line with resources - solidify our national footprint. To do this, we will have a two phase strategy - to first strengthen and then to grow. We will:**

## Strengthen:

- Ensure our London-based work is fully benefiting from our new home, **The Lighthouse** - and that this national headquarters will operate in such a way that our work across the whole country is strengthened and equipped
- Aim to **strengthen the existing non-London hubs in the West Midlands and in Oxfordshire**, with a priority weighting towards the West Midlands where there is less provision from other organisations, and greater articulated need.
- When advertising roles within the team, the starting point will be that (unless the funding or specific work dictates otherwise) the **roles can be carried out from any of our three in-person offices - London, Birmingham or Oxford**, according to the candidate's preference. If the recruiting manager is of the view that the role needs to be restricted to a certain location, they must make a strong case for this and request SLT sign off.

## Grow:

- When we are next in a position to proactively open a new hub, it will be in a **significant northern England or non-England (e.g. Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) city**. We will only do this when we are in a position to fund two in-person roles.

- Other potential growth is likely to be subject to **Local Authorities commissioning orientation programmes** within their region. When we are approached by a local authority to undertake this work, we will explore the appropriateness of doing so on a case by case basis, and to enable us to be responsive this will not always be subject to the same geographical criteria as our own proactive opening of a broader new hub.

## Further reading and supporting documents

- [Full Organisation Theory of Change](#)
- [Full Organisation Logframe with KPIs and means of verification](#)
- [Full team and young person SWOT analysis](#)



Refugee Education UK



