

This is what makes Great Britain Great'

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DRESSED in his neat winter jacket and perfectly white shirt and cuff links, Fuad Mahamed is a long way from the Somalia he abandoned on his desperate dash to the UK at the age of 16.

Now, more than a decade since his arrival Fuad proudly runs an organisation helping refugees and asylum-seekers just like his former self settle in Bristol with a new life.

Sadly, his story of escape from one of the most brutal conflicts of the time to the safety of the UK and Bristol is a familiar one.

But through Ashley Community Housing, which now stands on the brink of a national award, he says there is a safety net for those who have entered the city with virtually nothing – often escaping unspeakable horrors in their own countries.

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Funded by the council, it takes care of housing, mental health trauma and employment – [easing the transition for refugees to a settled life unthinkable at home](#).

"When I came to England I had almost zero English. I couldn't speak much at all," the 32-year-old says.

"But a lot of people who come here now have also been through terrible trauma. They have escaped from war, left their family and are often on their own with no English in an alien place."

After Fuad and his family were housed in London in 1998, he set to work learning the language and ended up in university in Bath studying electrical engineering before moving to Bristol – joining an already growing Somali community.

There are between 10,000 and 15,000 Somalis alone now in the city, he says. But Bristol has growing immigrant populations from all around the world from Eastern Europe to the Horn of Africa.

Refugees in the UK are given accommodation by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). But once asylum has been granted they have just 28 days to find their feet and a place to stay.

Ashley Community Housing aims to get people housed, signed up to English courses and on the road to employment.

It helps with confusing paperwork and bureaucracy and also with training and tips with how to get into full time work or education.

Fuad says: "When you first come you can't do much. It is difficult. You come to a new country and you can't work or go to school you feel the whole world is against you.

"People find it difficult with zero English to learn and to understand the culture and to integrate properly.

"But once people are established their isolation reduces and that is an important thing for the whole of Bristol."

Fuad is full of positivity about his work. But he also sees a battle to dispel myths which dominate many people's views of asylum-seekers and immigration.

"People usually only see the negative side of things – the crime and the illegal part. What we see here is people who really want to get on with their lives again."

He adds: "It is the generosity of this country which gives people the chance to settle here and move on. I don't think this would happen anywhere else in the world. It is what makes Great Britain Great Britain."

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