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BIRCH is a great organisation, matching people together to share the simple yet essential things in life - basic human contact, dignity and respect.

- Volunteer with the Family Befriending Project

Front cover image: 'Home', by Jane Tharkoordin. See page 10 for details
Looking back over the past year, although the intense media focus on the so-called refugee crisis has subsided, refugees, asylum and immigration have continued to be a major political focus both in the UK and across Europe. While numbers of refugees crossing the Mediterranean by boat has declined - by a third in 2018 – the journey has become more deadly, with 1 in 18 of those attempting to cross during 2018 not surviving the voyage. Closer to home, there were lurid headlines in the tabloid press over the Christmas period about the small but increasing numbers of people attempting to cross the English Channel by boat in order to claim asylum.

In the UK we have also continued to see the fallout from the Windrush scandal and the government’s ‘Hostile Environment’ policy, with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community referring the Home Office to the Equality and Human Rights Commission; and the ‘right to rent’ provisions of the Immigration Act 2014 which prevented refused asylum seekers from renting property declared discriminatory by the High Court.

Delays and mistakes in Home Office decision making have continued to have an impact, particularly for those in BIRCH’s hosting scheme. This is starkly illustrated by the recent Home Office decision to scrap the target of processing 98% of asylum claims within 6 months, and the allegations from Home Office whistle-blowers of a ‘toxic’ atmosphere of ‘chaos and incompetence’ leading to unlawful detentions in immigration removal centres, and personal performance targets for caseworkers which encourage rejections of applications.

These national policies and practices have devastating consequences for people’s lives, both here in Birmingham and across the UK, leading to homelessness and destitution. Unfortunately, despite these policy decisions being made at a national level, the burden of picking up the pieces often falls on small local community organisations like BIRCH, and others in the NACCOM network.
When faced with these problems, it is sometimes difficult be optimistic, especially when the inadequacies with the UK asylum system are so long standing and seemingly intractable. However, I want to offer three reasons for hope: First, there is evidence that public opinion on immigration is changing – a poll by YouGov this year found that public support for immigration was higher in the UK than other European countries, and both the outcry over the death of Alan Kurdi, and the Windrush scandal show that public opinion can change rapidly when confronted with the consequences of restrictive immigration and asylum policies.

Second, over the past year there have been a number of successes by charities and other campaigning groups in challenging some of the most damaging aspects of the hostile environment for migrants, from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants’ challenging ‘the right to rent’ at the High Court mentioned above, to the work by Liberty to ensure that undocumented migrants can report a crime or seek medical treatment without fearing that their information will be shared with immigration enforcement.

Third, reading through this report, I am struck by the huge impact that small scale voluntary action can make in building community and solidarity, and in creating networks which challenge the prevailing hostility to newcomers to our city. The work of our volunteers in providing opportunities for places to stay; social activities; food; children’s play; and more is so vital in providing a safety net of support where the state has failed or turned its back.

So as you read through this report, I hope you are encouraged by the work that is being done, and can get a flavour of the friendships and opportunities that happen when Brummies from around the world live, eat and socialise together. Therefore, on behalf of the steering group, I would like to thank all who have played their part in Birch over the past year - our volunteers, staff, guests, partner organisations and funders who make this work possible, and who play such a big part in making Birmingham a home.

- Andy Jolly, Trustee

[4] Rogers de Waal, J. (2019). There is no mass public revolt against globalisation. [online] Yougov.co.uk. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2019/05/03/there-no-mass-public-revolt-against-globalisation
2018-19 IN NUMBERS

2186 nights accommodation provided to people experiencing destitution

1356 visits by families to Meet and Greet sessions

82 volunteers generously gave their time

16 young people matched with families

14 individuals accommodated through the Hosting Network
THE BIRCH TEAM

Staff

David Hirst
Refugee and Migrant Support Practitioner
(0.5 FTE)

Helen Hibberd
Refugee and Migrant Support Practitioner
(0.2 FTE)

Trustees

Andy Jolly
Chris Benfield
Almamy Taal

Steering Group

Mandy Ross
Sarah Taal
Jo Bagby*
Katherine Green
Esther Bakari
Jill Morgan

Volunteers

A Cullen & L Holness
A Morgan Family
A Tancula & J Hui
Al-Shemmeri family
Amadu Fula Barrie
Anusha Udmula
Arjun Rey
Bailey family
Bell family
Busiswe Diawini
Charity Soneye
Clare Short
Dileepa Abeyesakara
E Alos Melchor
E Phillips, E Kingdon, P Stokes
Edward Kathomasi
Espoir Njie
Esther Bakari
Genny Tunbridge
Green family
Harriet Luscombe
Hartland family
Hassan Adam
Hilary and James Parle
Ibrahim Rostam
Immaculate Nabakooza
J Bagby
J Booker
J Howl
J Hubble
J Thakoordin & P Campbell
Juliet Amne- Odozaku
Lizzy Bell
Maggie Le Mare and family
Margaret Murray
Margaret Okole
Margaret Zacheus
Mary Bamikku
Mary Conaghan
Meskrem Abraham
Michelle Bruwer
Morgan family
Rachel Boyd
Rashid Adam
Sara Packer
Sarah Taal
Simon Whitehouse
Sue Bell
*Elizabeth Adesuwa Omoros
*Felicia Mercy Egere
*Francis Simons
*Gimbi Cham
*Kaya Bienzle
*Laura Walters
*Nasratullah Popalzai

*left during 2018-19
Here at BIRCH we offer support and friendship to people seeking sanctuary who are at the periphery of society. We focus on three main groups: those with no recourse to public funds who are experiencing destitution, young people who arrived in the country as unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and finally newly arrived asylum seeking families living in temporary accommodation.

**VISION**

Birmingham is a welcoming city where residents stand in solidarity with people seeking sanctuary, increasing resilience and well-being.

**MISSION**

BIRCH Network improves the lives of vulnerable refugees and migrants by relieving destitution and improving wellbeing through increased resilience.

**AIMS**

To provide accommodation, practical and emotional support to vulnerable asylum seekers, including those who are destitute, through the creation of a network of community hosts and befrienders.

To contribute to community cohesion by providing opportunities for asylum seekers to form friendships with other West Midlands residents.
Our journey began in 2011 when we were established by a group of local people working in refugee charities who were concerned about the lack of accommodation options for people who became destitute in their journey through the asylum process. The Hosting Network began providing accommodation in volunteers’ homes in April 2011, and hasn’t stopped since. BIRCH launched the Family Befriending Project in 2013 in response to a need expressed by a 17 year old young person from Afghanistan who had arrived in the UK without his family, three years earlier. He was wrongly assessed to be over 18 and had been living in shared accommodation with adults. Finding it difficult to navigate the adult world alone and struggling with poor mental wellbeing he had said, “if only I had an English family to take care of me.” The Family Befriending Project was started later that year, matching young people who had come to the UK by themselves with local families willing to offer support on a regular basis. The Meet and Greet Project began in 2015 after a local charity running a playgroup at a large hostel for newly arrived asylum seeking families ended due to funding constraints. The play group had been a lifeline for families at a very stressful time in their journey, when children were unable to attend school and parents were trying to acclimatise to life in the UK. Acknowledging this void, we decided to begin running a weekly play, meal and support session for these families in addition to other isolated asylum seeking, refugee and migrant families in Birmingham. The Meet and Greet sessions have expanded dramatically since then, now encompassing a resource bank, a wide variety of structured and free play activities, sports, hand and head massages, and workshops delivered by partners including Birmingham Mind and Birmingham Opera Company.

The common theme throughout our projects is of harnessing the energy and passion of volunteers to lead and support activities. With two part-time workers totalling 0.7 FTE to 82 volunteers we truly are led and driven by the volunteerism of Birmingham residents, with a significant number of volunteers having personal lived experience of the asylum process, including current and previous beneficiaries of BIRCH. We pride ourselves on being a community response to inequality, coming together as one to offer a warm welcome to all people seeking sanctuary in our city.
Our Hosting Network had twelve volunteer community hosts/families in 2018-19, nine of these families provided accommodation during the year to individuals who found themselves destitute with nowhere else to go.

Our hosts offer varying lengths of stays – some offer short term of up to two weeks, others offer accommodation for much longer periods. From April 2018 until end of March 2019 our hosts supported 12 destitute asylum seekers and two undocumented migrants (applying for visas). The total number of nights of accommodation provided in this year was 2186, with an average stay of 145 nights per beneficiary. This was much in line with the length of stay in the previous year (2017-18). The main reason for this is the length of time guests are having to wait for a solicitor and the length of time solicitors are taking to prepare and gather new evidence to appeal the original decision made by the Home Office. Our guests’ countries of origin were diverse and included Cameroon (x2), DR Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea (x3), Gambia, Iran (x2), Somalia and Tanzania. 12 guests were female and two were male. Outcomes for guests were varied: three guests moved to other voluntary sector provision; two guests moved on to Section 4 Home Office accommodation due to the progression of their Home Office applications; one guest claimed asylum and moved into Section 95 accommodation, another finally got her residency visa after a long wait; one guest received Leave to Remain; a long term guest is awaiting the outcome of a lengthy residence application after the Home

“Accommodation is not just giving you shelter. They give you kindness, they give you hope, they give you a new life.” – Guest from Iran.
Office admitted in writing that they had lost all her application paperwork. Two guests were taken into local authority accommodation (one being an unaccompanied care leaver). Four remaining guests had ongoing placements into the next period, and are preparing further representations.

13,054 nights of accommodation since 2011

Since we were established in April 2011 BIRCH hosts have now provided 13,054 nights of accommodation to people who would have been otherwise been made homeless and destitute. In 2018 BIRCH several BIRCH hosts and guests were interviewed for two different films highlighting the plight of destitute asylum seekers. These films were produced by NACCOM (No Accommodation Network) and LUSH.

WATCH:
http://player.lush.com - 'Seeking asylum from the spare room'
https://naccom.org.uk - 'Pathways out of destitution'

"I have been hosting for a year and I have had five ladies with me over that time from four different countries. Over the course of the first week someone stays with you the person literally transforms and you have somebody who is quite withdrawn then becomes smiling, happy even if you can't speak the same language and I never anticipated that when I first started hosting but it's such a wonderful thing and you can see how much a difference that makes." - Harriette (Host)

"I could be homeless if I don't find a family. There are many people living on the street. There are many people like this and I am not better than them." - Guest from Eritrea

"Other people were concerned about my safety and what if she doesn't leave. When you meet the person, it kind of changes things. We were both accepting of each other and obviously there are a lot of differences how we do things, how we live. It helped that we were so well matched and things have gone really smoothly. It enriched my outlook on life and the concerns that other people had hasn't materialized at all." - Michelle (Host)

"It feels like my home." - Guest from Ethiopia
Lazarus' story

"Hosting has changed everything for me"

"I was asked if I would like to stay with a British family. I didn’t know what to expect. I’ve got experience with other countries, other cultures but not with British. When I went to my host’s house on the first day, he came to pick me up and help me with my bag, but his wife was not well and was in hospital and so he said, ‘I want to go and visit my wife- make yourself at home’. Then he went. Immediately I think to myself, how is it possible that this person from another culture, another country, trusts me? It is difficult for me to trust my family- my close friends sometimes. Then I promise myself that because he trusts me, I will never lose their trust. They were kind to me and they give me happiness. Hosting has changed everything for me."
Our Family Befriending Project supports separated and former separated children aged 16-25 living in Birmingham and Coventry. Each young refugee, the majority of whom are care leavers, is matched with a trained volunteer family who meet with them regularly, usually sharing a meal in the family home on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

The project had 16 matches between young people and volunteer families between April 2018 and March 2019. Eight of these have continued into the next reporting period. Young people’s countries of origin included Ethiopia, Eritrean, Afghanistan, Guinea, Albania, Angola, Nigeria, Sudan and Kuwait. We supported 15 males and one female, broadly in line with the gender profile of unaccompanied minors nationally.

We have some glowing testimonials to the power of good this befriending scheme has brought not just our young people but also to the adults and families that befriend them. Many of the young refugees have talked about how the project has impacted on their social inclusion and integration, helping them gain an insight into ‘normal’ British life and opened their social spaces and experiences outside of their usual world. Some young refugees tend to stick to their own communities because of language barriers, fear of being excluded, feeling ‘different’ to other young people, and are extremely aware of their disadvantages, even with peers at college. It can take a long time to make friends outside of their usual social circles and befriending helps to do this. It cuts both ways for younger family members who are part of the befriending family. It can help them to understand the experiences young refugees face, and highlight the difficulties in their situation, but also help them to see that in many ways, they are very similar, facing the same anxieties, interests, hopes and fears. The project expands the befrienders’ experiences of different cultures and gives a broader insight into global issues.

When asked whether being part of the project has impacted on their life, young people said:

“Yes it has. It help me be part of a family, my befrienders are really nice to me and help however they can.”

“The best experience was when we went on a walk in the countryside it was fun and my first time to take part in such activities.”

“I found it very good, she is very kind and very nice to me. Always asking me to go out and meet. Took me to countryside for walking and took me 2-3 times outside to other cities. She helped me lots, she showed me lots of ways. She talked with me lots and helped me with college.”

“Good just to meet one to one, being respectful to me and me to them.”

“It was good, I don’t have a mum and dad [in the UK], was good to make friends, to play games, cook together, take care about you.”

“…being part of a family, you talk about what’s happening about my case, giving me advice.”
Many of the young people involved in the project describe simply appreciating having a different environment to go to and to be around a different group of people. Living in hostels with such a range of different people and with many people coming and going can be very unsettling, and often, the young people we work with are moved around and have to get used to new areas of Birmingham. Having that one place that remains the same and is a safe and welcoming space seems really important to them.

When asked about their experiences of befriending through the project, volunteers said:

"Amazing. It has particularly impacted on my son as he was 14 at the beginning. It has fostered tolerance, patience and social/political awareness. He even did a presentation as part of his English GCSE exam to explain to classmates about the plight of refugees and, in his words, to "raise awareness". He is hoping to study politics at uni now too."

"It has been very positive. We have opened our home to young people who are similar ages to our daughter, the simple act of sharing time and food has given us great pleasure."

When asked if they would recommend the project to others, our volunteers said:

"Absolutely- the beauty is in its simplicity- offering a bit of family life to young people who do not have this and will probably never gain have the warmth and protection of their birth family around them."

"Most definitely and I have done! Two people I know have also befriended young people."

"The staff at BiRCH have been wonderful at maintaining regular contact with our service and the young people who access it. This contact is crucial in establishing a rapport with the young people and trust in the service, which has ensured that befriending relationships have started on a positive footing. This is such an incredible service and has such a powerful and positive impact on the young people who are matched with families. The service allows them to be part of a warm and caring relationship that is very different from the more formal relationships they have with other professionals in their lives - something much needed by children and young people who are separated from their own families."

Refugee and Migrant Services Manager, The Children’s Society
Nas' story

“When I was a boy in Afghanistan, I had four pigeons that I loved. They had babies and soon I had over 40 birds! My favourite bird, I loved very much. He would fly away but always came back after 24 hours. One day I found a pile of feathers— he had been killed and eaten by another animal. I cried for days. When I came to Birmingham, I started to feed the pigeons that sat on my balcony. Now every night they all settle down to sleep on my balcony. Although Brummie pigeons are not as beautiful as Afghan ones, I still care for them! I love volunteering at the BiRCH Meet and Greet, helping out with games and activities. Jane, my friend, designed the t-shirt to raise money for BiRCH. She was inspired by my story.”

Nas left Afghanistan aged 13 when his father was kidnapped by the Taliban and his brother and sister killed. He went to secondary school and college in Birmingham and has dreams of becoming a fire fighter. He lived with a foster family for four years until he was 18. Due to poor legal advice before he turned 18, Nas had to apply again for the right to stay in the UK. Despite the difficulties he was facing, Nas volunteered weekly at the Meet and Greet Project and was supported by Jane, his Family Befriending volunteer. Nas ran a campaign to petition the Home Secretary to allow him to stay, which was supported by over 11,000 people! In January 2019 Nas received the news he had been hoping for: he had been given five years leave to remain. Well done, Nas!
Our Meet and Greet Project runs a weekly session for vulnerable refugee and asylum seeking families with children. The majority of the families come from a local hostel for newly arrived asylum seekers. They are placed there for up to six weeks while longer term accommodation is found. Children are not able to attend school and there are minimal play facilities at the hostel. We also have isolated asylum seeking families attending and destitute migrant mothers of British children with no recourse to public funds.

In 2018-19 we held 45 sessions and there was a footfall of 655 adults and 701 children at the sessions. On average 15 children and 14 adults attended each week. Each session includes a hot meal, activities such as crafts, games and opportunities to practice speaking in English. The meals are cooked by a team of regular helpers who have undertaken basic food hygiene training. We have a worker who is employed for six hours per week to co-ordinate the volunteers and other aspects of the project. He is supported by a pool of around 20 volunteers some of whom have been involved with both BIRCH Hosting and Family Befriending Projects. A significant number of volunteers have been BIRCH guests or are currently hosted. We have had several volunteers who have come to us via Birmingham and Sandwell Women’s Aid as well as other voluntary agencies. Asylum seekers face barriers to volunteering because of language issues, difficulties with providing identification, lack of social networks to provide childcare and negative attitudes. Alongside other volunteers who are retired, working people and local university students, we endeavor to give our asylum seeking volunteers experience to be able to gain references if they eventually get leave to remain in the UK and seek employment. This past year we have had two of our asylum seeking volunteers get leave to remain, and one has now gone into employment.

“My daughter likes to play and enjoys coming.” - Eritrean mother

“I like knitting and the food is nice.” - Eritrean mother

“Very, very, very nice.” - Kurdish mother

“My mother makes things for me when she knits at the session.” - Kurdish girl aged 12

100% of families asked said that the service supported their needs

87% of families asked were ‘very happy’ with the service received
The sessions have been supported by The Children’s Society and this past year they have continued to help with some of the running costs (including hire of the venue). Two members of staff are provided by The Children’s Society to help supervise the session and run arts based activities.

We have a number of outside agencies that have continued to visit and support the session. We would particularly like to mention East Side Projects based in Digbeth, Birmingham who have provided a regular monthly arts session and have been involved in fundraising for the session for which we are very appreciative. In the summer months of 2018 East Side brought along a group of artists called “Mixed Rice” from Seoul, South Korea who engaged with our visitors and exhibited some of the children’s and adults’ art work in a public gallery in Birmingham. During the summer period we were honored to be visited by soprano singer Lizzy Cragg from the Birmingham Opera Company who conducted an excellent singing workshop with our visitors and volunteers. We have also been supported by workers from Birmingham MIND who have come in on occasion and delivered activities for adults and children. Our masseuse Jagir Karara continued to visit on an occasional basis giving free head, arm and shoulder treatment. We continue to be supported by students from the Social Work Experience Education and Training Project (SWEET) who help out during the session. This past year we have also had student placements from University College Birmingham and the University of Birmingham.

The Meet and Greet is supported by the wider community to assist with a variety of acts of kindness, for example donating unwanted pushchairs, nappies, sanitary items, toothpaste, toothbrushes, toiletries, toys, cuddly toys, children’s books and wool for our knitting and crochet group. At Christmas Dame Ellen Prinscent School donated presents for our visiting families.
PARTNERSHIPS

In developing and carrying out our activities we have worked with and been supported by a variety of individuals and organisations. These have included:

- The Children’s Society
- Birmingham MIND
- Birmingham Opera Company
- University College Birmingham
- East Side Projects
- The SWEET Project
- Who is Hussain? Birmingham
- Dame Ellen Prinscent School
- Mixed Rice – Seoul, South Korea
- Jagir Karara (masseuse)
- The Red Cross
- Hope Projects
- Baobab Women’s Project
- Women’s Aid

DONORS

Between April 2018- March 2019, grants were gratefully received from the following trusts and funds:

Guardian Charity Appeal (c/o NACCOM)
Harry Payne Trust
MSN Fund
Jill Franklin Trust
Wesleyan Birmingham and Black Country Communities Fund
W A Cadbury Trust

Huge thanks to our long term supporters who donate to us on a monthly basis which is extremely helpful in giving us a degree of stability: Nicholas Bell, Jonathan Collinson, the Willot family, Habib Refugee Support and Torus Management.

We are very grateful to the Latin Women’s Association, Birmingham Buddhists, St George’s Church, East Side Projects, Stuart and Jan Freed and several anonymous donors who have kindly donated towards our work in the past year.

A big thank you to Jane Thakoordin and Nas Popalzai for designing and selling t-shirts to raise funds for our projects.
## Financial Review

### April 2018- March 2019

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<th>£ Expenditure</th>
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### Expenditure

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<td>Meet &amp; Greet</td>
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<td><strong>Total staff costs</strong></td>
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<td>Wellbeing project activity costs from 2017-18</td>
<td>501</td>
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<td><strong>Total expenditure</strong></td>
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#### Net of income/expenditure

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<td>Funds brought forward from previous period</td>
<td>16,407.95</td>
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<td>Funds carried forward to next period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funds carried forward to next period</td>
<td>12,577</td>
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Thank you for reading this report.

If you would like to get in touch with us, please do so using the email addresses and phone numbers below.

If you would like to give a donation to help continue our work, please visit our website: www.birchnetwork.org/give

Birmingham Community Hosting Network
Charity registration 1151763

www.birchnetwork.org     David@birchnetwork.org     07708339362
BIRCH Network, The Moseley Exchange, 149-153 Alcester Road, Birmingham, B13 8JP