



Community Rail Lancashire Refugee Railway Support Programme

CRL
Community Rail Lancashire



Community Rail
Accredited Partnership
2021-22

CRL Refugee Railway Support Programme

2019 - 2022

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Introduction

CONCEPTS & AIMS

Over the last few years there has been an increase in people coming to the UK from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan, fleeing war and oppressive regimes. Community Rail Lancashire (CRL) has developed the Refugee Railway Support Programme to help these families access rail travel confidently.

It is often difficult for people who have lived in the UK all their lives to travel by train if it isn't something they have done before. If English is not your first language and you have the added mental health issues of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of living in a war zone, one can only imagine the process of relocating to a country and having to start life all over again, trying to adapt to a new culture.

CRL's Refugee Railway Support Programme has meant that refugee families in Lancashire have been able to familiarise themselves with rail travel in the UK. This was achieved by taking the families through the process of planning a rail journey step by step, at a pace they can easily cope with and in a language they can speak and understand.

The idea was to deliver the useful information that they needed about rail travel through trips to local places of interest and employment to help promote integration, and eventually independent travel.

WHAT HAPPENED

CRL was contacted by Al Hayat Language Centre in Blackburn with a request to help some of their new students who had recently arrived into the UK as refugees from Afghanistan.

They were unable to access public transport with confidence due to language difficulties and poor mental health as a direct result of living in a war zone. They were unfamiliar with their surroundings but were keen to move around to access work and education.

CRL responded by meeting with the students and staff at Al Hayat's various centres in Lancashire. As there were over 20 families, CRL's Education Development Officer (EDO) met with them in small groups according to their location. Some families had been housed in Accrington and Rossendale whilst others were in Preston and Wigan. The main languages spoken by them were Pushto and Farsi and some Urdu. As Urdu was spoken by the EDO, this put the families at ease and enabled them to communicate more effectively.

After a few meetings to build a relationship of trust and to fully understand the needs of the families, CRL developed the Refugee Railway Support Programme. This programme included a step by step practical plan to help these families to access rail travel with confidence so that they could travel around East Lancashire and beyond to find employment, carry out daily activities such as shopping and going to school as well as travelling for leisure to improve their mental and physical health.



Outcomes

FIRST STEPS

The families experienced trips to Manchester, Todmorden and Nelson whilst being shown how to plan their journeys including buying tickets, finding the correct platform and reading timetables. They were introduced to the various uniformed staff at stations so that they knew who to ask for help.

This was done primarily in English in order to improve communication, but Urdu was used as and when needed.

For many of these families these trips were their very first rail experience as the railway in Afghanistan is extremely limited. Many commented on how it made them feel less anxious about planning a journey now that they knew who to ask for help. The anxiety of seeing someone in uniform had been alleviated to a great extent.

Some women had expressed how safe they felt as they were guided through the experience.

OPPORTUNITIES

It can often be forgotten that many people in these situations have come with transferable skills, and this was highlighted during a trip to Manchester when a member of the group expressed a keen interest in finding employment in the rail industry as he was a trained engineer in Afghanistan.

CRL is in the process of acquiring the relevant information to help make this a possibility.

News of the programme has spread and CRL has been asked to help deliver the Refugee Railway Support Programme in Bradford, Rochdale and Manchester.

“it made them feel less anxious about planning a journey.”

Issues Raised

THE COST
OF RAIL TRAVEL

TICKET VENDING
MACHINES &
PENALTY FARE
ROUTES

CARD
PAYMENTS

CAREERS

THE COST OF RAIL TRAVEL

The cost of rail travel is just too high for the average refugee family to access regularly. An individual person receives around £40 a week which is topped up if there are children.

On an income of around £200 or less a month and little opportunity for paid employment, it becomes a struggle to budget for travel as well as utility bills, food and clothing. When converted into the currency of their country of origin often the amount each family receives may seem a lot to them but the cost of living in the UK is significantly higher than in many of the countries they have arrived from and so budgeting can be extremely stressful.

Although there are a number of railcards that they could apply for it is difficult for many of them to understand which railcard could be the most beneficial for their situation. A Family and Friends card may be appropriate in some cases but at £30 a year it is still more than they could afford, bearing in mind their £40 a week income.



A possible solution to this problem could be to introduce a railcard specifically for people who arrive into the UK as asylum seekers or refugees, similar to some of the other railcards.

Government funding is allocated to organisations that help refugee families to integrate by providing ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) classes and support workers for help with everyday issues such as finding their way around their new environment, schools, doctors etc.

£40

Per week is the amount individuals receive from the government.

60%*

*Rail cards can save up to 60% on rail tickets.

These organisations may be able to use some of the allocated funding to subsidise a railcard that is specific to refugees and their families and help them to apply for the railcard. Evidence can be provided as to their status in the UK and if the railcard was to give them 50% or more off their rail travel they would use trains as their main means of getting around their new home towns for work and leisure.

For some people this could be the opportunity they need to find employment and gain a sense of independence and dignity to support their families.

TVMS AND PENALTY FARE ROUTES

Although TVMs are designed to make buying tickets more convenient, to someone who does not understand written or spoken English they can be a reason to avoid travelling on a train. The only languages available on the TVMs are some European languages so anyone from Afghanistan, Syria or Eritrea will struggle with the script if they are not proficient in English. For this reason, promise to pay tickets are confusing.

Understanding which routes are subject to Penalty Fares can be confusing for most people but this is beyond comprehension for some refugees. Some countries that these families have come from do not have an established and working railway, such as Afghanistan.



Which means that the idea of travelling by train is already very new and different, add to this the TVMs and Penalty Fares and it can be enough to dissuade someone from attempting to plan a journey by train.



If someone who has been granted refugee status or is seeking asylum has some kind of evidence for this, it would be better for them to be able to buy their ticket on the train from a revenue officer where there is no ticket office at a station.

CARD PAYMENTS

The Asylum Support Enablement Card (ASPEN) was rolled-out nationally in May 2017. It has replaced previous methods used to make cash payments to refugees. It is a green Visa pre-paid card onto which subsistence support is automatically allocated. People in receipt of asylum support can use the ASPEN card in any retail outlets in the UK as long as they accept Visa card payments. It is not contactless and cannot be used to make online purchases. This means that it cannot be used to buy a ticket online before travelling on the train. In some cases it cannot be used on public transport.

As TVMs only accept card payment, this can be an issue as the ASPEN card has sometimes not been accepted or there are insufficient funds on the card. Due to a lack of understanding of the currency many of the people who arrive here as refugees struggle to understand how much money they have on the card. The only way to know how much is on the card is to call a helpline number. This restricts the payment options for people and dissuades them from using this form of transport. There have been quite a few incidents where people have been fined for not having a ticket because they cannot use the TVMs and there isn't a ticket office or no one has approached them on the train for a ticket. They then don't know what to do with the fine demands and in reality will never be able to pay the fines due to insufficient funds.

Allowing people to pay for their journey on the train in cash could help to alleviate some of these issues.



CAREERS

At CRL we are proud to be able to promote rail travel and careers in the rail industry. We often promote apprenticeships when engaging with schools and colleges.

We can help to guide people interested in the numerous career opportunities within the railway family by directing people to the websites of the Train Operating Companies and Network Rail. This is all useful to those who are familiar with the application systems for jobs and apprenticeships in the UK.

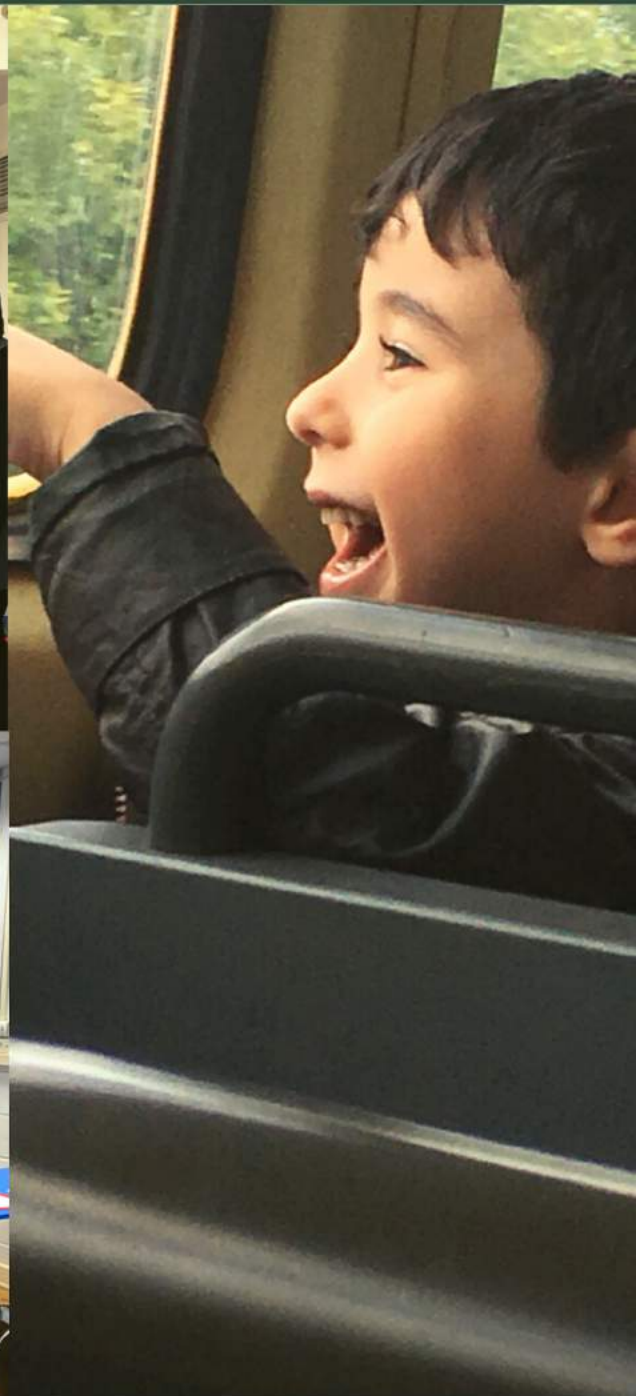
For those who have come from other countries in difficult circumstances it can feel like a mine field. Many people are keen to find work and come with excellent qualifications and skills but hit a wall when it comes to actually accessing employment. As an example; during one of the train trips CRL's Shahiesta Raja met a civil engineer from Eritrea who is looking for work.

Shahiesta suggested looking into engineering opportunities in the rail industry. He was grateful for the information but needs some guidance as to what is required by TOCs or Network rail etc. He needs to understand the process of application.

As a member of the Education Team, it would be useful to gain some training from the various components of the rail industry as to their procedures when applying for various jobs and training opportunities. This can then be conveyed in the best way possible to the people interested as part of the Refugee Railway Support Programme by CRL.



Some Pictures



We thank everybody
involved in this project.

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