



## The Clinical Context and Model at Baobab

*The purpose of this document is to explain the clinical context and model of Baobab's work. This is a clinical document but it is relevant to all roles at Baobab (clinical, operational and casework).*

Baobab works with young asylum seekers and refugees the majority of whom arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors. All have experienced violence, loss and unplanned change in their home countries and increasing numbers have also experienced domestic violence within their families. Most have experienced a difficult journey to the UK during which some have experienced further abuse from local police, military officials, and local citizens, or from the people traffickers who have been paid by family members to keep young people safe. As a result of such experiences, all the young people Baobab supports experience mental health difficulties.

Additionally, all the young people in Baobab's community experience significant difficulties in the UK in accessing high quality care, destitution support, housing, education, adequate health care and asylum. Moreover, many of our young community members' mental health and development is further negatively impacted by the UK asylum process. This is as a result of both the long waiting time for Home Office responses and the bureaucratic and insensitive Home Office interviews which are often conducted in a manner where it is difficult for the young person to think clearly. This can lead to young people being refused after their substantive interview. Subsequently young people wait, often for years, in a state of profound uncertainty about their future, young people cannot manage or bear this level of uncertainty without significant costs to their mental health and their development.

Most unaccompanied young asylum seekers suffer specific and particular vulnerabilities including the cluster of symptoms referred to as complex post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a consequence of the interaction of the impacts of their several overwhelming experiences, in their home countries, on their journeys into exile and in exile in the UK. Most also have significant strengths and resiliencies as well as the capacity to develop new resiliencies. Our aim as an organisation is to help them to acknowledge and to begin to work through their vulnerabilities and to enable them to access old resiliencies that have been suppressed by their traumatic experiences.

Baobab supports our community members to develop new resiliencies and strengths through individual psychotherapeutic, developmental and ego supportive psychotherapeutic work. New resiliencies are also gained through participating as fully as they are able in the life of our transitional, non-residential therapeutic community and in parallel or sequentially with life in the community beyond. It is part of our philosophy that key aspects of resilience develop via five key factors: Belonging, Reflection, Agency, Creativity and Community Membership. Our community aims to provide a variety of contexts where these aspects of resilience may develop and flourish.

The young people referred to our centre diverge in age between early adolescence and the mid to late twenties and they have access to our services for as long as they and our clinical team feel is necessary. Most leave to develop independent lives, accessing higher education and work, also building new families, building networks of friends, finding partners and having children. Our community is diverse and composed of young people currently from twenty- nine different countries. Our community is also highly diverse in terms of class and racial background some having participated in primary and secondary education and some having had no education due to war in their home countries or due to deprivation and poverty. We think that education is an essential resource and support the education endeavours of our community members. We have volunteers who teach basic English and Maths.

Our central aim as an organisation is to offer opportunities for both rehabilitation and justice and we do this in five key ways: 1) Practical case work support; 2) Individual psychotherapy, and developmental help; 3) Participation in group psychotherapy and a variety of group based arts, sports and educational activities; 4) Offering support through the prolonged and bureaucratic asylum system; 5) Encouraging all young people to take part in the life of the Baobab Community, sharing and taking



responsibilities and attending our regular community meetings and events. After experiences of sequential traumatisation, young people's development is often stuck at the level of development at which they were functioning when a series of traumatic and overwhelming events took place in their lives. Our aim is that slowly our young community members move from our transitional community to taking part in the life of the community beyond where they can contribute to community life, work and learn and make new and significant relationships and feel free to be themselves.

## **Introduction To Our Models Of Work**

It is our experience, re-enforced by several years of monitoring and evaluation by independent researchers, that our community members need multidisciplinary holistic and integrated support alongside intensive therapeutic support. Specifically, the therapeutic input and consequent progressive development that comes from thinking very carefully, about each community member's individual experiences and needs and then working to meet their needs through prioritising space for reflection and discussion about each member of our community.

## **Community Members**

The young people in our community have all experienced violence to their bodies usually from adults. This violence might have taken place in their communities perpetrated by citizens or government officials, or from members of their communities in conflict over resources, beliefs, values or power, or in prisons at the hands of government forces or in situations dominated by members of insurgent groups or people traffickers. They have all experienced child and adolescent specific human rights abuses. Many have also observed their parents being brutalised, humiliated, violated, arrested, tortured and murdered. As a consequence our young community members are often mistrustful of others, both peers and adults, and take a long time to begin to be able to share their experiences with others even when they know that others have had similar experiences. Their experiences of human rights abuses are linked with terror, guilt, shame, rage, anxieties and depression. We often engage in philosophical discussions in our staff group and with the young people in different contexts of our work, about the links between privacy, secrecy, honesty, and openness and how much another human needs to know about you. Barriers to sharing personal history and experiences are linked to certain traditional cultural styles, where parents do not discuss feelings and experiences with their children and further actively discourage their children from talking about feelings as well as to the shame and guilt, fear and confusion always connected to sequential physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

## **Clinical Models**

We work with several different clinical models including thinking about individual child, adolescent and young adult centred psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic work; thinking about therapeutic group work; thinking about arts based (art, drama, music and storytelling) verbal and non-verbal work. It is essential, at Baobab for all staff to be able to think about the vicissitudes of child and adolescent development and about the detail of the contexts from which young people have travelled to the UK and their experiences in the UK. Many young people are functioning developmentally, in many areas of their development, at several years below their chronological age. In this context we have found ways of working rooted in the ideas of child and adolescent psychotherapy and developmental help to be especially fitting. This includes working indirectly and in displacement and spending time finding a language for feelings alongside memories and experiences that may seem for some while to be unthinkable and unspeakable. **It can take a very long time to build a therapeutic alliance with young people whose trust has been broken and who have experienced significant human rights abuses.**

## **Multi-disciplinary working**

At Baobab all young people are allocated an individual clinician who becomes their key worker and



advocate. We expect a lot from our key workers however team working, within Baobab and beyond, is central to our work. The key worker's role is to identify work that needs to be done for the community member in question, not to carry out all this work alone. Alongside individual psychotherapy young people at Baobab are encouraged to join a small group. We run both psychotherapy groups and activity based groups and often make use of outings to build group connections, relationships and identities. We have found that a mixed model of group work is most effective that is one that combines and integrates psychoanalytic, activity based and psycho-social perspectives. Initially classical verbal interpretations can be experienced as intrusive, clarifications and explorations and interpretations in displacement are often acceptable and not rejected. Young people attending our centre will have had unthinkable and unspeakable experiences and non-verbal work through art and music is very helpful for our population.

As well as clinical support we provide practical and casework support. We support young people through the long and bureaucratic asylum system, often preparing detailed specialist clinical reports that meet the requirements of the courts to support asylum claims. Our casework team, support our community members to access Local Authority Care, adequate housing, benefits, education and a GP. We work closely with specialist asylum solicitors and Barristers and we also work increasingly with Community Care, Housing and Public law specialists.

### **Community**

Alongside the therapeutic support of seeing an individual psychotherapist or being a member of a group at Baobab the different individual relationships with the other adults in our community (clinicians, caseworkers and admin team) are therapeutic in nature. These relationships are part of our community support which has different degrees of formality with monthly Community meetings on one side and chats about football over cups of tea in our reception on the other. The community meeting enables young people who have been forced to leave their home community to develop the capacity to trust, listen and explore ideas and disagreements in a safe context.

### **The External Context**

Many young people have little understanding of the detail of the political and social context of their home countries that led to their having to leave their home country and seek asylum in the UK, as well as the complexities of the UK social and asylum systems. The onus is on our staff to try to make sense of these different contexts first for ourselves and later for all our young people. This is not simply social support, but to offer key aspects of substitute parenting, sensitive to individual developmental needs. Individual plans are made as we aim to give all young people the experience of being treated as individuals and with respect and involvement from all our staff. Understanding and information sharing needs to take place at the rate of understanding of each individual.

### **Working at Baobab**

At Baobab the staff roles are demanding. Individuals are expected to sometimes be advocates and sometimes to take on the role of substitute carers being involved with individual young people and sharing this role with others. The priority at Baobab is that for all decisions, at every level, the needs of our community members are central. We aim to recruit staff who are kind and generous, creative and flexible, resourceful and rigorous. We value our staff and volunteer team enormously and support them with clinical and managerial supervision. We also believe that despite the challenges of working in this context being a part of Baobab's community is immensely rewarding work where you will meet some incredibly resilient, funny and thoughtful young people.

**Sheila Melzak 2023**