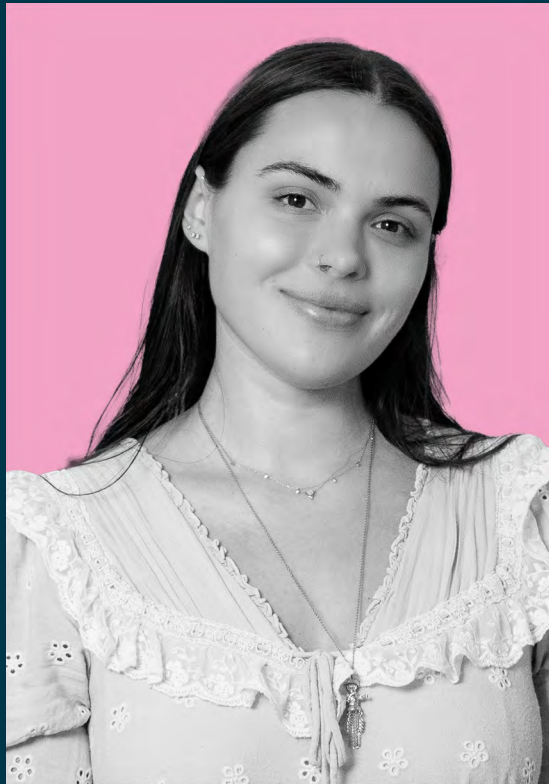
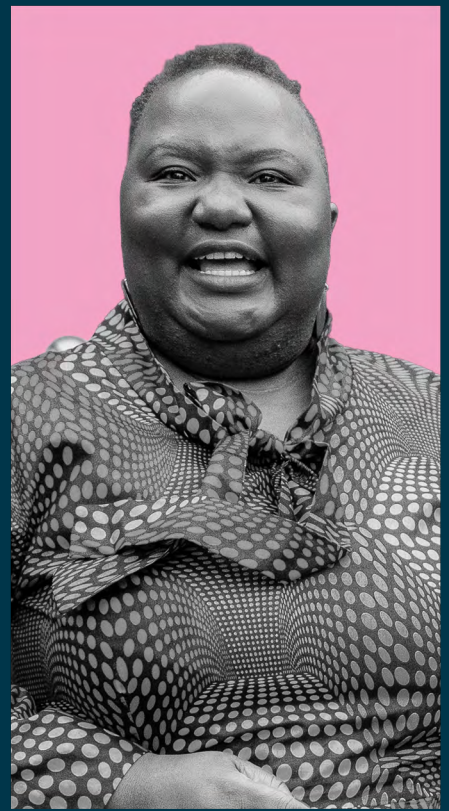




Letters From a Place



Notes from refugee
entrepreneurs to those
coming after

Letters

Anil Qasemi

Yeukai Taruvinga

Usman Khalid

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Foreword

Michelle Ovens CBE

CEO and Founder, Small Business Britain

There are some journeys that most of us will never have to make. To leave behind your home, your community, your work and the familiarity of everyday life, and to arrive in a new country where so much must be learned again, requires a kind of courage that can be difficult to comprehend from the outside. For refugees arriving in the UK, that experience will be different for every individual, but there is one thing that is too easily overlooked: while someone may have been forced to leave almost everything behind, they have not left behind who they are.

People arrive in the UK with skills, knowledge, experience, ideas and ambition. They have been teachers and engineers, designers and chefs, makers, professionals, shopkeepers and business owners. They bring languages, cultures, connections and different ways of seeing the world. They also bring the resilience that comes from having navigated circumstances few of us would choose to face. All of this has value, and all of it has the potential to contribute enormously to the country in which they are now building a new life.

This book is about that potential. It is a collection of letters from refugee entrepreneurs who have already begun building businesses in the UK, written to those who may be arriving now or wondering whether entrepreneurship could be part of their own future. They do not suggest that the road will always be straightforward. Many of the people writing these letters have encountered barriers around language, finance, immigration status, regulation and networks, alongside the much more ordinary difficulties that confront anyone trying to turn an idea into a viable business. What makes their advice so valuable is that it comes not from theory, but from having lived through those challenges themselves.

There is something particularly powerful about one entrepreneur reaching back to another and saying: I recognise where you are, because I have been there too. When you are starting again, it can be hard to imagine where the road might lead, and sometimes the most valuable thing another person can offer is proof that a road exists at all. The founders in these pages offer that proof, alongside the practical lessons, mistakes, encouragement and wisdom they have gathered along the way.

Entrepreneurship can have a very particular significance for someone rebuilding their life. Starting a business can provide income and independence, but it can also restore something less easily measured: confidence, identity, purpose and a sense of control over the future. A first customer is not simply a transaction; it is someone placing value on what you can do. A growing business can become a place of employment for others, a connection into a community and, eventually, an asset that creates opportunity for a family and for generations to come.

The benefits travel in both directions. When refugee entrepreneurs succeed, the UK gains businesses, employers, taxpayers, innovators and community leaders. We gain new products, new ideas and international connections, and our towns, cities and high streets become richer for the cultures and experiences represented within them. Supporting refugee entrepreneurship is therefore not simply an act of welcome or compassion. It is an investment in people with enormous potential to contribute to our shared economic future.

Of course, we need to do much more to make that potential easier to realise. We need a system that allows refugees to begin building their economic lives sooner, access appropriate finance, navigate regulation and develop the networks and confidence that other entrepreneurs may take for granted. We also need to recognise refugee founders for what they are: not people to whom opportunity is being generously given, but entrepreneurs whose talent and ambition we should be doing everything possible to unlock.

That is why I find this collection so moving. Behind every letter is a person who once had to begin again and who has now chosen to turn around and extend a hand to the person following them. It is a reminder that communities are built in precisely this way: through people sharing knowledge, opening doors and making the journey a little easier for whoever comes next.

To those who have written these letters, thank you for sharing not only what you have learned, but something of yourselves. And to the person opening this book who may be at the very beginning of their own journey, I hope you find within these pages friendship, practical guidance and confidence in what might be possible. You have already travelled a long way to reach this point. Whatever has been left behind, your skills, ideas, experience and capacity to create a future have travelled with you.

There is a place for those ideas here, and there are people ready to help you build them. I hope that, one day, you too will find yourself looking back at how far you have come and reaching out to the next person beginning their journey. ■ ■

A portrait of Anil Qasemi, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is standing in front of a blue backdrop with the text 'The Centre for Resilience' and a pink tree logo. He is wearing a red lanyard with 'VISITOR' written on it and a name tag that says 'Anil Qasemi'.

Let your work
speak first, and let
it speak well of you

A letter from Anil

My business began in a theatre in London whilst I was watching my first ever theatre production in the UK. I noticed people wearing hats, and I got the idea to start my business. I love telling that story, because I think it really shows that your idea does not have to arrive in a big way. It can find you on an ordinary evening. What matters is what you do with it afterwards. I spent almost a year researching, gathering information and having conversations before I brought mine to life, building Hatopia alongside my day job. So, a big piece of advice is to take your idea seriously, even if nobody else does yet, because it may be the beginning of everything.

I came to the UK from Afghanistan just over four years ago after the Taliban took over. When I started Hatopia, my confidence was two out of ten. I am an optimistic person by nature, but registering a business and knowing where to begin was genuinely difficult, and though there was plenty of information out there, it often felt fragmented and difficult to navigate. If your confidence is at two right now, please know that mine was too, but do not let that hold you back. Confidence is not something you need before you begin. It is something the business gives back to you, little by little. Mine grew a few months after launch, when I took the first small loan, invested it in the business and saw customers respond. Today I'd say my confidence is eight or nine, and every point of it was earned by testing, learning, and trying again.

Get to know the finances of your business, and get to know them early. Build a simple system where you can see everything clearly and picture where you will be in six months or a year. Every lender you approach will ask for these numbers, and having them ready changes everything. When I first applied for a loan, not having them slowed us down. By my most recent application, I knew exactly what

would be asked, the loan was approved the same day, and the money was in our account the next morning. It took me three years to build that understanding. When I started Hatopia, some AI tools were only just beginning to emerge. Today, they're transforming the way entrepreneurs learn, plan and solve problems. Make the most of them and they'll help you get there much faster than I did.

Find a mentor if you can. Mine has walked alongside me for more than three years, and whenever I face an important decision, he's the first person I turn to. Some relationships are worth more than any funding.

And when you grow, be generous. After my business won an award, people from Afghan communities across the UK began reaching out to me, many of them newly arrived with ideas but no roadmap. I help wherever I can. Some wanted to start exactly the same business as mine, and I happily shared my suppliers with them. I often say that when we have the chance to give someone else a chance, we should take it. The market is big enough for all of us, and I remember too well what those early days felt like.

Your business should stand proudly on its quality. Your story belongs to you, to tell when you choose. Let your work speak first, and let it speak well of you.

Wishing you great success,

Anil Qasemi
Founder, Hatopia

A letter from Usman

I set up Haven in February 2019 and before that I was never a business person, just a nine to five guy, even back home in Pakistan. When I started, I was neither confident nor not confident; It was a bit of an experiment.

The idea came from two places. When I arrived in this country I fell in love with the coffee culture, the small artisan cafes, the care put into something so simple, and I could see there was still a gap in the market for proper speciality coffee done well.

Reason two came through an organisation called Counterpoint Arts, who I met once I had my refugee status. They ran a project training refugees in stand-up comedy, and I was part of their first group. That taught me art is a language everyone speaks, and it says things through humour that are harder to say directly. So, I built a social mission into Haven from the start, using art to challenge the false stories told about refugees, and training people as baristas so they have a real skill for the job market.



There was also a sharper, commercial reason, and I am not ashamed of it. There are a lot of cafes. I asked how to stand apart, and realised no one was running one built by refugees, for refugees, without cutting a single corner on the coffee or the feel of the place. I have used my own story to promote the business, and I will not pretend otherwise, but it was never empty marketing.

Here is some advice I'd give to you.

Sort out your financial plan before anything else, before you choose a name or design a logo. Work out how you will raise money to start, and then how you will fund the growth stage after that, because that is where most people get stuck. I do not agree with starting as small as possible and staying there. The people supporting you often do not have the resources to help you grow past that stage, and that becomes its own trap.

Organisations built to support refugees have been genuinely good to me, and I am not criticising them. But they are stretched thin themselves. They can offer training and a loan of a few hundred or a thousand pounds. They cannot offer the capital or connections that turn a small cafe into a sustainable business. So, look beyond the refugee sector as well as within it.

Your story, and your business, is what you make of it

Also, ask people supporting you to be honest rather than only encouraging. There is a bit of habit in British culture of telling people they are amazing without telling them what is actually working and what is not. I used to take that kind of praise at face value, and then wonder why it was not actually turning into any money. You cannot tell a twenty five year old refugee with no bank balance that they will be a billionaire in five years. Hope is brilliant, but hope can be delusional. Realistic, direct feedback will serve you far better than constant encouragement.

Running a business is a very lonely place, especially in the early years, especially when you are managing it largely alone in a system that is not familiar to you, especially as a refugee. A little personal support alongside the professional support, someone asking how you actually are, whether you are coping, whether you are eating properly, makes a real difference. So, when people offer to help, accept it.

Finally, do not underestimate what you and other refugee entrepreneurs bring despite the alternative narrative that can sometimes feel so loud. I run comedy workshops with asylum seekers and refugees partly because they find humour in different things, shaped by different lives, and that contrast is the whole point. I know people building food businesses rooted in dishes from Uzbekistan, Yemen, Syria, each one teaching others as they go. None of these ideas are unique on their own. Coffee already exists, catering already exists, but what is different is what you attach to it and how you make it your own.

Wishing you every success with your business.

Usman Khalid
Founder, Haven Coffee

Whatever your lion is, bring it with you

A letter from Yeukai

■ Whilst I want this letter to inspire hope, I want to start by writing to you about fear, because nobody warned me about it, and I really wish they had.

I arrived in the UK from Zimbabwe in 2001, when I was nineteen years old. I spent nine years in the asylum system, unable to work, unable to study, facing rejection after rejection. Those years leave something in you and long after they ended, I was still asking, am I allowed to do this? I was afraid to knock on doors, afraid of applications, at times afraid even to post a letter, because every envelope I had ever opened seemed to contain a refusal. When I started out, I drowned in a lot of fear.

I am telling you this because you may recognise it, and I want you to know that it did not stop me, and it does not have to stop you. I didn't start my business with a plan, it just began with a need. During those difficult years, I received support from community projects, and I could see the difference it

made to my life. I knew other young people, girls like me, who could benefit in the same way, and there was nothing for our community where I lived. So, I started a small self-help group to offer support. I had no idea it would become anything. This year, that little group, now Active Horizons, celebrates twenty years, with a team of eight and thousands of young people supported.

I watched people who had done it before me. I had a mentor, a woman who had built her own project and told me, you can do this too, and who kept checking in on me. I went to every free training I could find, and slowly I realised something important. The people in those rooms were not out to catch me. They were like-minded people, and people who genuinely wanted to help someone like me. Once I understood that, I opened up, the networks grew, and one opportunity led to another. If fear tells you the world of business is against you, please test that belief. I did, and it was wrong.



And when the time comes, make it official. Formalising my group felt really frightening, but it made me serious and it told the world I was serious.

Today, twenty years in, I am learning to embrace what I have achieved instead of still fearing the next challenge. If I have come this far, it means I have overcome a lot, and so, already, have you. You crossed the world and began again. You are not a special category of entrepreneur who should be grateful for less. You are an entrepreneur, as capable as any other, and your contribution counts.

My boutique is called Shumba, which means lion. It is my totem, my identity. Whatever your lion is, bring it with you.

With hope,

Yeukai Taruvinga
Founder, Active Horizons and
Shumba Boutique



Take your greatest passion, and turn it into your business fuel

A letter from Maysa

Until 2021, having a business of my own wasn't an idea or even a dream. I have always loved and practiced belly dancing due to my cultural background, but it never happened to me that I could transform this passion into a 'business'. After all, a business is about financial gain, but our cultural dance is not!

The reasons for this were many: imposter syndrome, immigration status, too many big competitors, if I start giving classes, who's going to show up? If they show up, are they going to even like it? Will customers return again? Can my culture become a business? Do I have a USP? The list of doubts and excuses just kept getting longer and longer.

One birthday, my friends who had witnessed my passion for the dance gifted me a voucher for a belly dancing teacher's training in London. Here's my first piece of advice: surround yourself with those who lift you up and know you well! It was closer to the period before COVID. Meanwhile, on a weekday evening, a work friend and I went to a SOAS event. Once Arabic music is played, I can't help it. We danced the night away. Months passed by and we found ourselves hit with the worst pandemic. London, like many other parts of the world, went into lockdown. On a rather depressing 'Saturday-lockdowned' evening, I received a message from a Syrian girl who was at the SOAS event, asking me whether I'd give belly dance classes online. Fair to say that this was the spark that ignited this whole story. I started giving classes for free for my friends during the lockdown, and many joined from London, Kent, Canada, Australia, Washington DC and other locations. Here's my second and third pieces of advice: take the chance and start slowly, counting on your close circle.

The feedback I was getting from my friends was very positive, and this wasn't a surprise to me, given that I myself started professionally dancing during the time of the war in Syria and I witnessed myself how helpful it is in countering anxiety, trauma and uncertainty. This feedback encouraged me to take the business to another space and shape it once the lockdown was lifted and my legal status was secured. That was again possible when I took another chance after a group of Syrian friends of friends requested a private class for a hen do. That was my best opportunity to take the classes to a physical studio instead, and since then, for me, the rest is history. Here's my fourth piece of advice: know well where your audience and community are.

Belly dancing is particularly a spiky field to enter. There are many myths and stereotypes connected with colonialism, and these have strongly impacted how our own dance is even envisaged in our own societies. Plus, women who practice require a thick skin in the face of sexism and patriarchalism. That's why my last advice is to do the thing that you are most passionate about and transform it into your business, because no matter how difficult things can get, you will always find a way.

Wishing you luck and success,

Maysa Ismael

Founder, Shik Shak Shok School of Belly Dance

A letter from Waleed

In Yemen, I was a businessman. I imported goods, I travelled, and I built things. But then the war came, and after a journey of more than a year I found myself standing in a queue in the UK waiting for food and waiting to explain to the Home Office why I was here. It was a shock and I could not believe that this was my life now.

Here is the first thing I want you to know. You have to accept the shock, observe it, and then reset your mind. I said to myself, today you are not that businessman in Yemen. Today you are a refugee, and you have to deal with the situation in a positive way. Otherwise, the overthinking will take you somewhere dark, and it takes a long time to come back from there. Acceptance is not surrender. It is the beginning.

The second thing is this. You may well have arrived with zero money, but you did not arrive with zero. You have your mind, your experience and your history. I had no cash and no network, but I had the know-how, and I knew how to look at a market and see the gaps. Whatever you did before, whatever skills you carry, they came with you. Use them.

Then you must go outside. In Yemen we say you cannot learn to swim at home. You have to go to the sea. Sitting isolated because you are scared, you will never discover that things come together when you meet people. It was by going out, volunteering, asking questions, that I found the organisations who supported me, the mentors who believed in me, the events where I could sell my first jars of honey. The door will not open by itself. You have to knock on the door.

Start small and do not be ashamed of small. My business began with one gallon of honey from Yemen, four hundred pounds, and I could only pay half up front. I divided it into twenty little jars and designed the labels

myself. The logo was bad. It did not matter. I was in the market, learning, and everything I know now came from that.

But while you start small, think big. Do not plan for one year. Plan for ten, for fifteen. I am not building a stall, I am building a brand, and I want people one day to hear its name and think of the best honey in the UK. A long vision keeps you moving on the difficult days.

Most importantly, never lose sight of why you started. For me, YemenLand is more than a business. It is a way of sharing the beauty, heritage, and traditions of Yemen while creating opportunities for my family and contributing to my new home in the UK. Every order reminds me that entrepreneurship is not only about selling products, it is about building bridges between cultures and creating connections through trust and authenticity.

Finally, when someone helps you, help others. I was helped by beautiful people, and now I introduce new refugees to the same programmes that opened doors for me. This is the nature of the human. If you receive something good, you must make good for others.

You are not starting from nothing. You are starting from experience. Have the minimum confidence, and begin.

With full confidence in your abilities,

Waleed Zuoriki
Founder, Yemen Land

Acceptance is not surrender.
It is the beginning.





A letter from Mouna

I came to London from Syria in 2009 with a suitcase and a scholarship. I was here to study – a master's at SOAS – and I fully expected to go home afterwards. Then the war started, and home stopped being a place I could return to. Nobody hands you a leaflet for that. One day you are a postgraduate student with a return ticket, and the next you are something else, and the word people use for you is one you did not choose.

I want to tell you what I have learned since, because I think some of it might be useful whatever it is you are building.

Start with this: you are almost certainly underestimating yourself. You have already done harder things than starting a business. You have navigated systems designed to exhaust you, in a language that was not yours, with none of the safety nets other people take for granted. The skills that got you here are the actual skills of running a business; You are much stronger than you believe.

You have already done harder things than starting a business

But believing in yourself is not the same as believing every idea you have. Be ruthlessly honest about what is working and what is not. I have kept ideas alive for months past the point where the evidence was clear, because letting go felt like failing. It was not. Test things small, look at the numbers without flinching, and change your mind quickly. Resilience is not stubbornness. It is the ability to keep going after you have admitted something did not work. Learn the boring systems. VAT, payroll, contracts, licensing, insurance. I resented every hour of it. But you

have already learned a harder language than bureaucracy, in harder conditions, and this one at least comes with helplines.

And ask for help – properly, specifically, out loud. This was the hardest one for me. When you have arrived somewhere with nothing, asking can feel like confirming something you are trying very hard to disprove. It is not. There are more people willing to help than you think, and they are usually waiting to be asked. You are not alone in this, even when it feels entirely like you are. Ask for introductions rather than favours. An introduction costs the person nothing and gives you everything. Almost every good thing that has happened to me came through somebody saying my name in a room I was not in.

Finally: your story has real value, but hold it carefully. Tell your story on your own terms, when you choose to, and never let it become the whole of what you are selling. It will open doors. It will not hold them open and what brings people back is that the thing you make is genuinely good.

And remember, being stranded is not the same as being adrift. Build something that ties you to where you actually are. For a long time I thought of myself as someone waiting – waiting to go back, waiting for things to resolve. What changed was not my status. It was building something that tied me to where I actually was: a kitchen, a team of fifteen people, five of whom have gone on to run businesses of their own. My mother's recipes are cooked every day in East London by people who have never been to Syria. That is not a substitute for going home. It is its own thing, and it belongs to me, it's the new home that I've built.

Start. Start small, start badly, but start.

With love and hope,

Mouna Elkekhia

Founder, Mouna's Kitchen / Arnabeet

A letter from Tony

I got my first job in this country by making a latte. I had just received my refugee status after a year of waiting, and I walked into a coffee shop in Glasgow and asked the man behind the counter if I could steam my own milk. He heated it up, I poured it, and he asked me on the spot if I wanted a job.

I suppose the point of this story is that your skills travelled here with you. After leaving Kenya I learned coffee in Dubai, and none of that disappeared when I became a refugee. Whatever you know how to do, whatever you carry from your culture, from your training, from your life before, it is still yours, this country has space for it.

I spent a year in a hotel in Glasgow waiting for my papers, in a new city where I knew literally nobody. Even then, I was building. I designed a logo on my phone, put it on a hoodie through a print on demand website, and wore it around town hoping another Kenyan would recognise it and say hello. It was not much of a business, but it was a beginning, and it taught me that you do not need an office or money to start thinking like a founder. You just need a phone and a reason.

My real business, Kwetu Coffee, began with a message to a stranger. I found someone online who had built something similar to my idea, and I went into his DMs. "Hi," I said, "my name is Anthony, I am a refugee in Glasgow, I have this skill, maybe we could talk." It took a long time, but he replied, and that one conversation connected me to the training, the community, and eventually the funding that built everything I have now. So please, send the message. Ask. The worst that happens is silence, and silence costs you nothing.

Be careful who you let discourage you. People whose job was to support businesses told me, more than once, that someone with my status could not get funding. By the second time they said it, I had already received three grants. If someone tells you a door is closed, I'd urge you to go and try the handle yourself.

And start small without shame. My first grant was five hundred pounds. I bought a small coffee machine, borrowed a space, and ran my first training. Because I delivered well, the second grant came, then the third. Funders trust what they can see.

"Kwetu" means our home. I chose that name because I was trying to make this country my home while helping others make it theirs. That is what I wish for you. Build something, tell your story, and leave the door open behind you.

Karibu,

Tony Kimani
Founder, Kwetu Coffee



Whatever you carry with you,
this country has space for it



Building together is stronger
than building alone

A letter from Anna

I came to the UK from Ukraine in 2022, just after the war broke out. My first venture here was small: I made and sold candles, with the proceeds going to support volunteers back home. It gave me my first taste of running something in the UK, even informally, while I was still finding my feet. It was only once I settled in Scotland and watched more and more Ukrainian women arrive that I understood what was really needed. I had spent years in Ukraine working inside a business services company, supporting entrepreneurs with their operations, so I knew what running a business actually required, even though I had never run one of my own. I decided we needed a space where we could talk seriously about business, not just about finding an English teacher or a gym. Our first events were small, in Edinburgh, then Glasgow, Stirling, Aberdeen. That space grew into what is now the biggest club for Ukrainian businesswomen in the UK, with branches in Scotland, London, Manchester, and Cambridge.

My biggest lesson, and the one that took me the longest to learn, is that you are not alone. In my first year I tried to be the strong woman who asked nobody for anything, and I just worked and worked. It was only when I opened up to the local community that I found real support: people, contacts, and ideas I could build with. There is no shame in asking for help, so please do not try to go it alone the way I did.

All of this happened alongside raising my own two young children. There is no such thing as a finished day when you are building a business and a family at the same time. I used to find it difficult to find a balance, but now I think it is simply what it looks like to build something you care about while you are also building a home.

It is also important to stay open, even when it is hard, and believe me, I know how hard it is. When you see every day what is happening to your home, when you call

your parents and friends and know they are in danger, when the weight of it never quite lifts, it is tempting to close yourself off. But openness is what lets you adapt to this country and start to feel something like happiness again. Kindness and curiosity will carry you further than being right about everything.

Now the practical lessons. Dreams are wonderful, but do your research before you open, not after. Understand your numbers early: your cash flow, your invoices, why the profit isn't there. I have watched businesses close because nobody wanted to look honestly at the spreadsheet but there is no excuse for that now. AI can help you build a financial plan, draft your marketing, even write your letters and improve your English while you are still learning.

And build on what you already know. I have seen a business owner who had a wonderful bakery from Kyiv open a wonderful bakery in London, because the owner knew their craft inside out. Your experience is your advantage, so make sure you lean into that.

Finally, surround yourself with people who, when everything feels like it's collapsing, will remind you it's only tiredness talking, and that tomorrow you carry on. Entrepreneurs are creative and emotional people, and we all need those voices around us.

We are about to celebrate our fourth anniversary as a club, and I still think of it the way I did at that very first small event in Edinburgh: proof that when incredible women who have faced real adversity find each other, they build something stronger than either of them could have built alone.

With support,

Anna Andriievskaya

Founder, Ukrainian Business Women in Scotland Club



You aren't starting from zero

*A letter from
Dr Nooralhaq Nasimi
MBE*

Starting something of your own here is possible, and I know that because I did it. I grew up in a poor family in the north of Afghanistan. As a boy I sold cold water and fruit on the street, carrying the tray on my head and shouting through the heat. I never imagined that years later I would be the Founder of an organisation supporting thousands of people in the UK. If I could build something from that starting point, you can build something from yours.

When I arrived in the UK, I had lived through war and

years of study interrupted by conflict. I had a young family, and had almost nothing in the way of savings or connections. I started the organisation from scratch in southeast London, in a location that was not even the right one for our community at the time. Everything grew from there because I kept going even when the money ran out and the support was thin.

If you are just starting out, look for people and organisations who understand where you have come from. A community centre run by people who share your background, your

language, or your experience of displacement will help you far more than a generic service ever could. When you walk into a room and do not have to explain the basics of your history, you save time and energy that you can spend building your business instead.

Understand that integration takes longer than anyone tells you. It is not a matter of months. Be patient with yourself and do not measure your progress only against those who had an easier start.

Use every piece of practical support you can find. Learn

English as fast as you can, even if you have to do it while working. Write a proper CV. Ask for help with the paperwork and the systems that are unfamiliar to you, because the systems themselves are often the real barrier, not your ability or your ideas. When I set up our organisation, English classes and CV workshops sat alongside our business training, because you cannot separate one from the other.

Do not be afraid to ask for support from your own community as well as from outside it. Volunteers, family,

and people who came before you all have something to give. Some of the people I have supported over the years came with business experience from home in Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, or Sudan and that experience is priceless. Do not let anyone make you feel you are starting from zero when in fact you already carry knowledge and skill from your life before.

Finally, remember why you are doing this. It is not only for yourself. Every business a refugee builds in this country changes what is possible for the next person who arrives.

It changes how this country sees us. I did not set out only to help myself. I set out to build something that would still be standing for others long after me.

Wishing you every success,

Dr. Nooralhaq Nasimi MBE
HonDSS(RHUL)

Founder and CEO, Afghanistan & Central Asian Association (ACAA)



A letter from Lisa

I am incredibly proud of Cream Dream and what it has become, but I think it is also important to be honest, because I think honesty is often just as useful as inspiration.

I did not start my business out of a dream. When I arrived in the UK from Ukraine in 2022, I was 22 years old and I was angry because I did not want to be a refugee. I had just finished university, I was supposed to be starting my life, and then the war took it.

For a few months, I felt frozen. But when I understood I could not go home any time soon, I decided I would not waste any more of my life waiting and that is how Cream Dream began. Not out of fairies and dreams, but out of frustration that I turned into building and working. I never wanted to let the anger take over me, so I put it into the work.

So, my first advice is this. You do not have to feel inspired to start. If what you have is anger, use it because that is energy too. Making something with your own hands, something that is yours, is the best answer to everything that has been taken from you.

The second thing I will tell you is that it will be hard, and that is okay. When I opened, I honestly did not believe it would last. I had read that most small businesses close in their first year, and I thought mine might too. Three years later we are still here and growing, which taught me that you do not need to be certain to begin; you just need to begin in the first place. The confusing letters, the systems that sometimes feel they contradict themselves, the

Third, do not do it alone like I did. When I started, I did not know that specific support for refugee entrepreneurs existed, so I built everything myself, transformed an empty space into cafe in 30 days with the help of a few volunteers. I am incredibly proud of that, but it did not have to be that lonely. The organisations are out there, and they want to help you.

And a huge piece of advice is to learn English however you can. I arrived unable to speak it, but I saved up for an intensive course, and the rest I learned from customers, suppliers, and forty emails a day. It really does open every door, so fight for it.

Finally, be proud of what you bring. I came here with respect for this country, looking for the beautiful places where my culture and British culture can meet.

Today, Cream Dream employs people, and people travel from across Europe to visit us. We are not a burden.

You will work harder than you ever imagined. But you will make something that is yours, in a life that tried to take everything from you. And that is worth everything.

With love,

Lisa Tataryna
Founder, Cream Dream

Building your own business is the best answer to everything that has been taken from you

rules nobody explains, none of it means you are doing something wrong or that you are not capable. Just be prepared to ask questions, read everything link by link like I did, and find an accountant who will explain things, not just report them. I promise you that every problem has a way through.

