

Client: TACT
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CHILDREN IN CRISIS

Firms charging £10k a week to look after single child in c

Children in care in England almost 100,000 by 2025

The number of children needing foster care far outweighs the number of approved homes. But what can be done? *Woman's Own* investigates

Neglected kids are the unseen victims of virus

Every year, hundreds of new foster families are needed to give homes to the rising number of children in care. Just last year, the charity Barnardo's warned of a state of emergency in the fostering system, with England now facing a shortfall of 25,000 foster families over the next five years.

In England alone, according to official government statistics, there are 57,380 children living with foster families, with

many more new places needed every year. But there is also a growing number of unaccompanied refugee children needing foster care, with many arriving having fled war-torn countries.

Demand has never been higher for people to open their homes to a child in need. Here, one woman shares her own experience of doing just that.



The family have opened their home and hearts to Hayat and her baby

'It was a huge decision, but we knew we wanted to help'



Fiona, 53, lives with her husband Peter, 55, and daughter Sophia, eight.

It was just another normal evening in front of the TV in

2017 for me and my husband Peter, then 51, but the news that night was about to change our lives forever. As images of refugee children who'd fled war-torn Syria appeared on the screen, I became emotional.

Peter and I had married in 2011 and had a big blended family. We had a child of our own – Sophia, then four – and we both had kids from previous relationships. Peter had two grown-up sons, and I had a daughter, then 22, as well as three adult stepsons who I'd looked after since

they were young. The thought of any of our family being alone in the world like those poor children on the news was just unthinkable.

'Surely we can do something to help,' I said to Peter.

He worked as a family solicitor, and had a client who'd fled Nazi persecution during World War Two, escaping on the Kindertransport, so he'd heard first-hand about how seeking asylum had literally saved someone's life.

We both agreed that we had room in our lives – and in our home in south London – for a refugee child. Peter and I really wanted to help, and we hoped our decision would set a wonderful example to our daughter.

A Google search highlighted a charity called **TACT**, the UK's biggest fostering agency, finding homes for both British

children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors from overseas.

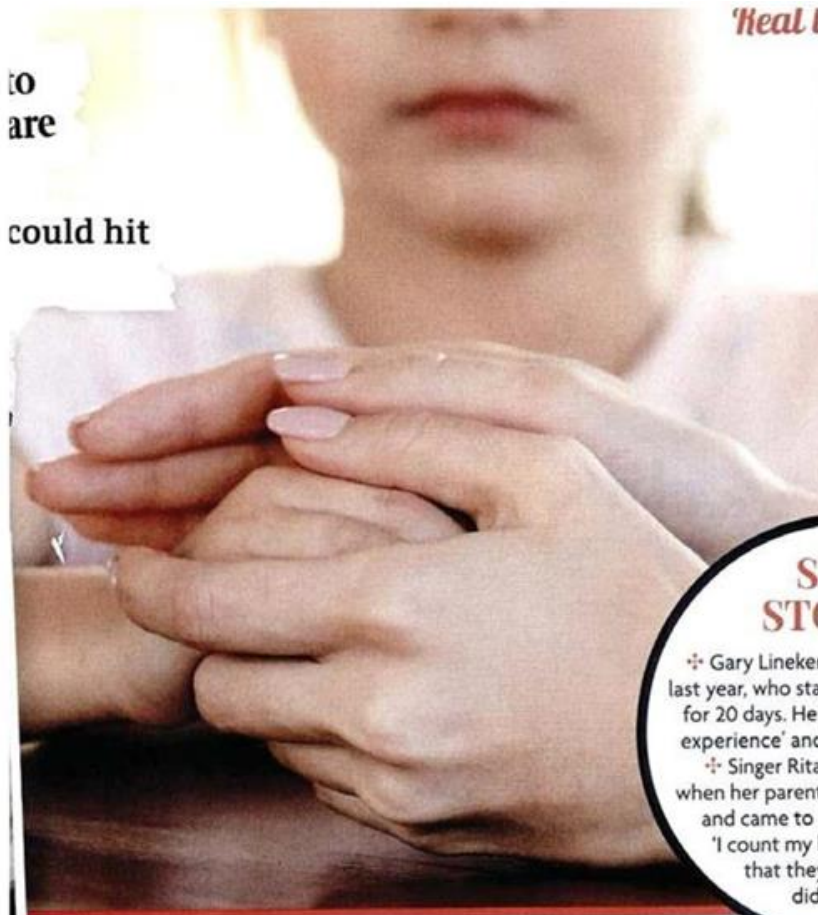
We contacted TACT and, within a couple of weeks, a social worker was sent to interview us. Then we started our training. Finally, in February 2018, we received the call to say a child was in need of a place to stay and was on her way to meet us.

Hayat was 15 and had endured an arduous journey from Ethiopia through Sudan, Libya, Italy and France, finally arriving in the UK several weeks later.

She'd fled Ethiopia after her elder brother had been put in prison because of his political views. If she'd stayed, she'd likely have suffered the same fate.

She looked so small and fragile, surrounded by two social workers and an interpreter. So I gently guided her to her new bedroom, and tried to make her as comfortable as possible. Hayat

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'Real life behind the headlines

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How can you help?

If you're not able to foster, here are some other ways in which you can help homeless children.

- ✦ Donate online: TACT is the UK's largest dedicated fostering charity. You can donate by visiting justgiving.com/tactcare/donate
- ✦ Take part in a fundraising event: walk, swim, cycle or run to show solidarity with child refugees who've made often perilous journeys in order to reach safety.
- ✦ Be creative: sell unwanted clothes on eBay and

donate any money raised to charity.

- ✦ Short-term fosterers are also needed.

Placements can last from just a few days to a few weeks – or even, as in Hayat's case, a few years.

STAR STORIES

✦ Gary Lineker welcomed a refugee last year, who stayed in the family home for 20 days. He called it a 'wonderful experience' and says he'll do it again.

✦ Singer Rita Ora was a year old when her parents fled Kosovo with her and came to London as refugees.

'I count my blessings every day that they did what they did,' she said.

knew very little English so, at first, I communicated with her by pointing and using body language.

It was snowing, so I lent Hayat a coat and we went for a walk to the local park. The next day, I took her to an area of London that had some Ethiopian shops so she could see some familiar foods and speak her native language.

Hayat only had a few clothes that had been given to her on arrival in the UK – absolutely nothing from her previous life – so we went shopping together and bought her some new tops and skirts.

She settled in quickly, but still found some things very strange – like why people walked around with dogs on leads, and how we used a dishwasher and washing machine.

Amazingly, it was Sophia who turned out to be the key to helping Hayat feel

really at home. Language is no barrier to kids, and the two of them soon became firm friends, spending hours interacting and playing together.

Gradually, I picked up some words in Hayat's native language, Amharic – and, with the help of Google Translate, she picked up English quickly.

'LANGUAGE IS NO BARRIER'

It took some time, but Hayat slowly started to open up to us, telling me about her family. Her dad had died when she was little, and the area where she'd lived with her mum and two brothers had been demolished. Hayat was missing them all terribly, but it would be extremely difficult to track them down now.

In June 2018, Hayat started college, studying English as a Foreign Language, and soon made a great group of friends.

She became more confident, finding her way around on public transport, and building her life. It was shortly after

lockdown in March 2020 that Hayat discovered she was pregnant, and her baby boy was born in the October. Watching her being a caring mum made us so proud.

Hayat, now 19, has just received her residence permit, meaning she can soon move on to the next chapter of her life. She's planning on getting a place of her own, and we'll give her all the help she needs.

She's amazing in the kitchen and loves cooking, so I'm sure she'll make a great chef one day.

We also hope to foster again. There are so many refugee children out there who need someone to support them into adulthood. Opening our hearts to just one of them has been truly wonderful.

✦ To find out more about fostering with TACT, go to: tactcare.org.uk/foster-with-us or call TACT on 0330 123 2250