Covid-19 UK: Responding to the needs of asylum seekers in challenging and dangerous times

Over recent weeks and months the complexity of the Covid-19 crisis has become clear with wide-reaching and severe societal implications. Of particular concern, are the impacts on already marginalised groups, who invariably become more vulnerable in moments of emergency and crisis. Those who are seeking asylum are one such example. Asylum seekers often experience significant economic and social hardship and are considered one of the most marginalised populations in the UK. In the shadow of years of austerity and the 'hostile environment' immigration policy, asylum seekers in the UK are frequently dependent on grassroots volunteer groups, charities and religious centres for support, education and care. However, in the face of Covid-19 and social distancing guidelines, such services are having to adjust the services they offer, or in some cases to stop offering their services indefinitely. The Covid-19 crisis then, poses a serious threat to the wellbeing of asylum seekers and the work and support offered through asylum services.

A team of researchers at Newcastle University are part of a European project exploring the 'everyday experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in public space'. The UK work focuses on Newcastle-Gateshead and has involved speaking to asylum service providers and asylum seekers to get a better understanding of the current situation.

Increasing Isolation and Hardship
Like a number of cities in the UK, Newcastle-Gateshead has an infrastructure of volunteer and charity groups that provide asylum seekers with a range of important frontline services to meet their basic needs, such as English classes, welfare support, food banks, psychological therapy, housing advice and wellbeing activities (e.g. gardening, arts activities). The shutdown of much face-to-face provisions, alongside the general impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, is having new and concerning challenges for asylum seekers. A significant concern is the exacerbation of existing high levels of isolation among asylum seekers:

> 'The difficulty is that so many of our clients don't have smart phones or internet access at home, they would normally use the libraries and local projects to be able to access that…..people are having a really difficult time, they're struggling with isolation, that would be an issue anyway and they rely on social drop-ins and English classes and things as their network…then they've obviously got very limited resources and probably no internet access…so it's really not a good experience at all'. (Welfare Officer, Newcastle)

The closure of face-to-face provisions and social public spaces is shutting down the few possibilities for social interaction that many asylum seekers have. The physical spaces that are frequently relied on for engendering a semblance of community, support and kindness in their everyday lives have - for the time being - been lost. For many asylum seekers, this could contribute to a deterioration of mental health due to increasing isolation and lack of psychological or in-person support.

The shared accommodation status of asylum seekers, alongside low-quality housing with no tenants' rights, are also creating anxiety in light of social distancing guidelines and some

have reported concerns about the possible transmission of the virus in such living arrangements. Destitute asylum seekers whose cases have been rejected by the UK government and often no longer receive any financial support are particularly vulnerable. With the shutdown of face-to-face provisions, there are concerns that destitute asylum seekers may struggle to receive any basic needs support, potentially leading to severe hardship and homelessness.

To manage social isolation and social distancing, there is an expectation that people's lives and support networks can simply transition to online spaces and virtual platforms, such as Zoom and Skype, but this is often not straightforward for asylum seekers. Many have limited and intermittent WiFi access, relying on free WiFi provided in public buildings like libraries, and many do not own smart phones or personal computers. This is indicative of limited resources and income, but it is also indicative of the restrictive policies that the Home Office puts on asylum seekers:

> 'So asylum seekers are always told [by the Home Office] that you are not allowed to have internet connection in the house. In most cases, people are very, very scared…, so they don't have internet in the house. So they're like, stuck obviously now' (Volunteer and Asylum Seeker, Gateshead)

Therefore, inequality in personal 'digital infrastructure', alongside restrictive government guidelines, means that many asylum seekers are struggling to access the online spaces that have become especially important for connectivity and wellbeing in the current Covid-19 'lockdown'.

Asylum seekers are entitled to £37.75 per week if they are supported under section 95 of the government's immigration and asylum policy. This amounts to little over £5 per day, per person, so even before the Covid-19 pandemic many asylum seekers that we spoke to were struggling to meet their essential needs. The current crisis then, is putting asylum seekers under even greater financial strain and hardship. An increased need for food shopping, potentially an increased need to buy medicines, local shops increasing food prices, increased costs for those who have children with them throughout the day, are all factors that are creating a dire financial situation. A volunteer for Peace of Mind, a support group for asylum seekers, told us that their weekly food parcel orders had increased from 60 to 120 during the first week of lockdown, and believes there is an urgent need for the government to increase the financial allowance given to asylum seekers:

> 'I think they should announce something for asylum seekers too, possibly maybe increasing the amount for at least the three, four months of emergency. The amount should be increased temporarily to make sure that families are not struggling, because they also have children'. (Volunteer, Peace of Mind)

This call to increase the financial support has been put forward in a letter to the government signed by around 60 organisations, including the Refugee Council and Amnesty International, and in a petition set up by Freedom from Torture. They are requesting an increase in asylum support by £20 a week for the next 12 months, in line with the recent increase in Universal Credit.

Adaptation and New Forms of Care

In the face of these incredibly difficult circumstances, how is the asylum services sector in Newcastle-Gateshead responding? Providing support has become extremely challenging, especially with the shutdown of the majority of face-to-face provision, but what is also evident is resilience and innovation, with many organisations adapting their services to continue providing support. As such, new forms of care and education have been mobilised.

In the first weeks of lockdown, a number of groups rapidly transitioned to online spaces to continue providing services and support. North East Solidarity and Teaching (N.E.S.T), a student run volunteer group at Newcastle University who work with hundreds of asylum seekers and refugees in the local area, drew on its active student volunteer base and implemented a response strategy called 'Operation Charlie. A first phase of this 'Operation' was to move their educational classes online:

> 'We have run 28 hours of Zoom classes over the past two weeks. With an additional 10 YouTube Live Streams/uploaded lessons. It took us a while to get ourselves and learners sorted with Zoom so from the 16th March to 6th April we ran 14 live streams per week. Each live stream represented each class that is normally available to learners. The point of the live streams was that learners can ask questions in live time to the person teaching'. (Volunteer, Newcastle)

With the awareness that many asylum seekers do not have sufficient access to WiFi and digital technology, campaigns have been initiated to try and source spare smart phones, tablets and dongles. As an alternative to WiFi, organisations have been utilising emergency relief funds to provide clients with internet data packages and phone credit.

Extensive welfare check-up schemes have been set up by various groups. N.E.S.T. has a 'Central Team' who through regular phone calls check in on the welfare of a large number of asylum seekers and relay Covid-19 updates and government messages in Arabic and English. Through using 3-way telephone interpreting services, Freedom from Torture have been in regular contact with all their clients and have independent client care and welfare plans updated and in place. Gateshead Carers have also started to utilise telephone interpretation services, which has been a key new service for monitoring the welfare of clients during social distancing.

Volunteer groups are also helping with the supply and delivery of food and essential items to those in need. Peace of Mind in Gateshead has been focusing its volunteering work on food poverty, delivering in excess of 100 food and essential items (e.g. toiletries, nappies) parcels every week since the lockdown began, and the Comfrey Project in Gateshead has been sending out care packs with food, toiletries and wellbeing kits (gardening, craft and learning materials).

These rapid and innovative responses from volunteer and charity groups offer some grounds for hope and illustrate the important infrastructures of care that exist in cities such as Newcastle-Gateshead. However, these acts of volunteering and charity are not enough alone. There is an urgent need for central government to show more compassion to the treatment of asylum seekers and to provide more centralised support.

This brief examination of the current situation for asylum seekers in Newcastle-Gateshead illustrates clearly that Covid-19 is exacerbating existing inequalities. The pandemic is shining a light on inequality, especially in terms of who can access and who deserves support and welfare, and this is having dire consequences for the most vulnerable in society. It illustrates why a move towards a politics and welfare system that prioritises social justice and equality is essential.

Robin Finlay, Matthew C Benwell and Peter Hopkins
@robinnfinlay, @mcbenwell, and @hopkinspeter1

Robin Finlay is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Matthew C Benwell is a Senior Lecturer and Peter Hopkins is Professor of Social Geography, all based in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, UK.