

The Mayor's Migrant & Refugee Advisory Panel (MRAP)

14.00 -16.00

30 April 2020

Microsoft Teams Meeting

Attendance

Hannah Boylan, GLA (Chair)
Mark Winterburn, GLA
Rupinder Parhar, GLA
Ramiye Thavabalasingam, GLA
Kat Radlett, GLA
Silvia Perin, GLA
George Hanoun, GLA
Lidia Estevezpicon, GLA
Maya Walker, GLA
Rita Dayoub, Doctors of the World
Lisa Doyle, Refugee Council
Michael Boyle, ELATT
Barbara Drodowicz, East European Resource Centre
Kahiye Alim, Council of Somali Organisations
Amanuel Woldesus, Consonant
Eleanor Brown, CARAS
Leticia Ishibashi, Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX)
Maria Iglesias, Praxis
Fizza Qureshi, Migrants' Rights Network
Gisella Valle, Latin American Women's Resource Centre
Gracie Bradley, Liberty
James Banks, London Funders
Lydia Martin, New Europeans
Mihai Calin Bica, Roma Support Group
Mulat Haregot, Evelyn Oldfield Unit
Anna Yassin, Glass Door
Zrinka Bralo, Migrants Organise
Sugirthakala Gobiratnam, Middlesex Tamil Academy

1 Welcome

1.1 Hannah commended the work the sector is doing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and recognised the difficult times we are currently working through both professionally and personally.

1.2 The minutes of the previous meeting were **agreed**.

1.3 Hannah welcomed Lidia Estevezpicon, who will be leading rough sleeping work for non-UK nationals and jointly reporting to the Migration team at the GLA.

2 Covid-19: Lessons learned for future resilience

2.1 Barbara opened the discussion on lessons learned from the Covid-19 outbreak and the changing needs of service users.

- There is currently a backlog of immigration cases, including for children in care, and many complex cases require face to face communication. The Home Office is also only running a limited service for the EU Settlement Scheme Resolution Centre. There has also been a significant impact on administrative issues, such as getting passports printed by consulate services.
- East European Resource Centre there has been an increase in demand for money, welfare and debt advice and this has led to a backlog in referrals, as there is now a need support people who would not have needed these services prior to Covid-19
- Universal Credit allowance has been increased until November, but it is unclear if the allowance will then decrease at that point.
- There may also be an increase in cases relating to exploitation of furloughed workers, difficulties in find employment and discrimination based on ethnicity or immigration status, and digital skills development.
- Increased need for mental health support under the current social distancing measures, and the need to support victims of domestic abuse.
- Children, particularly those in low income families, may become an emerging group who will need support in light of any educational delay.

2.2 Hannah thanks Barbara for sharing this, and highlighted that this information on the changing needs of service users is also being captured in a number of GLA surveys occurring on a weekly basis.

2.3 Leticia provided an update from FLEX about their recent publications on labour exploitation. One publication examined the current effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers, including:

- how people are not aware of the available schemes, have no savings and have to rely on benefits that they don't know how to access or might not be entitled to;
- how those working in delivery are either being pressured to work really long hours,
- how people who have lost their jobs are at high risk of moving to other exploitative sectors such as agriculture.

2.4 Members raised the following points:

- There is a need to support domestic workers, many of whom live with their employers, some not being paid.
- There is a clear digital divide among ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students, particularly in relation to English and IT skills, as digitally excluded students are unable to continue with distance learning.
- There are concerns around data protection in relation to Covid-19. There is no clarity on data sharing in terms of families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) being able to access free school meals. There are also concerns about the centralised data store for the contact tracing app being developed by NHSX.
- While there have been some positive changes from the Home Office in terms of processes for asylum support, it is unclear if these changes will suddenly revert back and lead to a cliff edge, e.g. when the suspension on evictions is lifted.
- Given the suspension of the resettlement of new arrivals, there are concerns around retaining staff and expertise through the furlough scheme when it is unclear when the next new arrivals will arrive.
- There are concerns about domestic abuse cases, particularly for migrant women, who may be struggling to access local authorities and statutory services. There have also been

cases of agencies and services forgoing their equalities duties such as providing translation services.

Action: Leticia to share FLEX report "Opportunity Knocks: improving responses to labour exploitation with secure reporting".

3 Covid-19: London Community Response Fund

3.1 James Banks from London Funders provided an update on the London Community Response Fund. Based on a partnership of 48 funders, £16.5 million of funding is being granted to support the emergency response to Covid-19. The core principles of the fund are: being driven by intelligence on the needs of communities; making the funding process straightforward; making decisions quickly and effectively, with a week turnaround from receiving a decision to payment; and a strong commitment to equality and inclusion.

3.2 James outlined that there is a centralised website with all the information about the funding streams and one application form that connects applicants to the relevant funders. The first round of funding focused on food and essentials, while the current round, Wave 2 of the fund, focuses on crisis response grants of up to £10,000 and grants of up to £50,000 to support delivering service provision differently. For the larger grants, a much broader range of activities can be funded, such as staffing and counselling for staff, so that these aspects are in place ahead of the easing of the lockdown measures.

3.3 James highlighted that there is a specific strand of refugees and migrants, including on NRPF and ESOL, and other strands of the fund, such as children in care and rough sleepers, also reference these issues where relevant.

Action: Members send any additional questions about the fund to Mark to pass onto James, or contact the email address on the London Community Response Fund website if they have queries about a specific application.

4 Covid-19: Home Office Policy and Process Changes

4.1 Mark provided an update on policy and process changes in the Home Office, including

- immigration removal centres are now closed to visitors, with legal advisors only able to visit in exceptional circumstances;
- changes in conditions for NRPF are now made online;
- some categories of families with NRPF are now able to access free school meals;
- the EU Settlement Scheme Resolution Centre is now offering a limited service, which has reduced the ability for people to interact with the scheme;
- the refugee resettlement scheme has been paused;
- the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund will be funding up to 90% of the total project value. Applicants therefore only need to provide match funding of 10%;
- there have been changes to the asylum system, including suspending evictions from asylum accommodation for three months and providing financial support for those who have received a decision; and
- the reporting stage of the immigration bill has been paused.

4.2 Lisa highlighted that as changes are happening rapidly, Refugee Council are updating their website on a daily basis where significant changes relating to asylum and refugees have been made.

4.3 Mark updated on the recent meeting of the London Asylum Group. The Home Office is increasing its use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers, both new arrivals and those who need to self-isolate or be shielded. People may be housed in hotels for a significant period of time and it is critical that support is available to them.

4.4 Mark highlighted that access to Wi-Fi is a significant issue for people across asylum accommodation, as most accommodation does not include Wi-Fi, and low incomes make it difficult for people to pay for data. This presents a significant barrier to accessing support services, including mental health support.

4.5 Members raised the following points:

- Victims of trafficking who have become homeless are finding it difficult to access the system.
- There are concerns in some communities about the implications of sofa surfing for accessing services.

Action: Members to contact Mark with any questions about the London Asylum Group and about any gaps in policy updates from the Home Office.

5 Covid-19: Housing rough sleepers – GLA and local authorities' response

5.1 Lidia provided an update on the GLA's work housing rough sleepers in hotels in light of the Covid-19 outbreak. 1,100 people are being accommodated across 13 hotels. Hotels are divided into three categories: care sites for those who are symptomatic, protect sites for those who are particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus, and prevent sites for the remaining individuals.

5.2 Lidia clarified that rough sleepers will be accommodated in these hotels regardless of their immigration status

5.3 Lidia updated that the next steps will be looking at how to avoid people going back to the streets. For example, the GLA is looking to support people in hotels to get access to immigration advice to inform their options to move on or regularise their status. Praxis and other organisations are working on a project with one of the GLA hotel providers to give access to immigration advice. Members are invited to get involved if they have the capacity to provide immigration advice remotely.

5.4 Lidia highlighted that the GLA is looking to create a new group to look specifically at homeless migrants. Hannah noted that the details of this group will be discussed with lead members, particularly around how the group will be linked to MRAP. More details will be given to members in due course.

5.5 Rupinder highlighted the need for clarity on MHCLG's position on NRPF in relation to the housing of rough sleepers, as in March local authorities were told to bring everyone in, but they are now being told to follow the usual homelessness processes, which excludes those with NRPF.

5.6 Members raised the following points:

- There are concerns among organisations working with clients living in hotels but struggling to get the contact details of those running the hotels. Given that local authority-run and GLA-run hotels offer varying services (e.g. food provision), it would be useful to

know which hotels are being run by who in order to establish when emergency grants are appropriate. Lidia highlighted that there are privacy issues which need to be considered in relation to this, but it may be possible to look on a case by case basis.

- Questions were raised as to whether there would be any data sharing between local authorities and the Home Office for those who have been accommodated in hotels, as there have been reports of local authority threats to do so. Rupinder confirmed that there is no data sharing in relation to those staying in GLA-run hotels, but the GLA cannot force local authorities to do this.
- There are concerns about those staying in hostels returning to sleeping rough due to a lack of communication in such accommodation. Lidia emphasised that in terms of hotels, at the start of the lockdown people were being accommodated in commercial hotels where they may not have received the information or support they needed, but that this should not be the case in GLA-run hotels, as leaflets are being given out and caseworkers continue to work digitally. There are also health teams on site for the most vulnerable.
- There are reports of Roma rough sleepers continuing to live on the streets because they find it difficult to accept being placed in hotels, given how the information is delivered and a lack of trust. Lidia noted that outreach teams manage the offer to rough sleepers and the GLA does not have control over this aspect. At the moment the demographic breakdown of those being housed in hotels is not available, but this is something the GLA is looking to work out.

Action: Mark to share Lidia's contact details with members.

Action: Members to contact Lidia if they have the capacity to provide immigration advice remotely or know any other organisations who may be interested in this work.

Action: Rupinder to share Mayoral letters to Government with members once published.

6 Windrush Lessons Learned Review

6.1 Rita noted that she will be leading this issue at the upcoming London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP) meeting, so if members have any questions or concerns for the Home Office representatives, they should contact her. Rita noted that the results from the Lessons Learned Review report are frustrating, and that Doctors of the World are particularly concerned about the hard of this extending the learnings to migrant communities more broadly.

6.2 Members raised the following points:

- There are concerns about the hostile environment policy lingering and how migrant communities fear the Home Office and other state institutions, and consequently avoid interacting with them. It is therefore important that existing Windrush cases need to be resolved and compensation is given to rebuild trust in these institutions.
- There is a danger that the issues around the hostile environment may hinder people's access to healthcare and other services in the context of Covid-19.

Action: Members to contact Rita with questions and concerns for the Home Office about the Windrush Lessons Learned Review.

Action: Rita to ask the Home Office representatives at LSMP about their plans to ensure people are able to access healthcare and other services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

7 Future Immigration System

- 7.1 Hannah noted that the second reading of the Immigration Bill did not happen, although it is unclear whether this is due to procedural issues as a result of Covid-19 or changes around the intention of the Bill post-Covid. Hannah highlighted the need to consider how the sector can be prepared for the end of freedom of movement and a change in immigration system.
- 7.2 Mihai highlighted that Roma Support Group have already begun to think about this change in terms of whether the UK will accept asylum applications from within the EU in future. This is particularly relevant for the Roma community who are facing significant discrimination in many European countries in light of the Covid-19 outbreak.
- 7.3 Amanuel highlighted the need to consider how smaller organisations can prepare for changes to the immigration system, as they are likely to get the majority of requests for support.

8 GLA Update

- 8.1 Mark summarised the GLA's advocacy work on the Covid-19 response, including mayoral interventions on social media and mayoral letters to the Home Secretary. Hannah highlighted that the latest letter references the confusion around automatic visa extensions for NHS staff and the need for this to be extended to other key workers.
- 8.2 Mark updated that the GLA is having ongoing conversations with civil servants at an officer level. Members are invited to get in touch with Mark if they are struggling to get traction or information on government issues, so that these can be raised with this new group.
- 8.3 Mark highlighted the GLA's ongoing #LondonTogether campaign, which focuses on mayoral messaging around staying at home, mental health, business support, and positive stories from communities. Members are invited to use the campaign if they are interested.
- 8.4 Mark also highlighted that the External Affairs team are looking to broaden the channels they use to communicate with Londoners, including through own language media such as radio stations and newspapers. Any suggestions for these platforms would be appreciated.

Action: Members to contact Mark if they are struggling to get traction or information on government issues.

Action: Members to share any own language media suggestions with Mark.

9 AOB

- 9.1 Mark noted a new stream of work at the GLA on loneliness and social isolation in light of Covid-19. This work is being led by Kat Radlett in the Social Integration team.

Action: Mark to share Kat's contact details with members if they are interested in this work and have any thoughts or resources to share.

10 Close