

Route  to your
Rights



Project
Findings Report
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Executive Summary

The Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to implement the Route to Your Rights (RTYR) project, a qualitative research and advocacy project, which was conducted from August 2017 until March 2018. The project explored issues that push migrants into a more vulnerable state, like labour exploitation and homelessness during settlement in the UK, and in particular, how access to certain services and opportunities impact on their ability to build a flourishing life here. It also aimed to pull out regional variations of migrants' experiences across London, Manchester and Coventry, in addition to the impact of housing, employment and immigration issues on mental and physical health, and the gendered experience of migration.

Through interviews and workshops with migrants and migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCO's), we have identified that immigration issues, access to adequate housing, employment and legal advice are inextricably linked and are key determinants of a person's vulnerability to poor outcomes on early settlement in the UK. Amidst 'hostile environment' policies plus funding cuts to legal aid and MRCO's, there is inadequate access to legal advice, adequate housing and employment.

The majority of migrants who participated in the project were or had been through periods of homelessness and destitution, and had been vulnerable to exploitation in housing and employment. These vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by an inability to regularise immigration status, which is bound by delayed immigration decisions, poor Home Office administration, and limited access to adequate legal information and support.

Lack of familiarity with the UK employment, housing and health system; high concentration of precarious employment contracts; poor housing and working conditions; structural barriers, such as restrictions on access to benefits and welfare support; language and cultural barriers; and limited capacity of support services are also key contributing factors to preventing a more positive settlement experience.

These factors have a long-term impact on migrants' pre-existing or newly developed mental and physical health conditions. This research highlighted that in addition to deteriorating mental health, migrants experienced detrimental physical health outcomes as a result of an inability to regularise their immigration status, poor housing conditions, and the nature of employment. Asthma was common amongst migrants living in damp and mouldy conditions, as well as amongst those exposed to chemicals in the workplace. Stress associated with regularising immigration status was also perceived to have an impact on diabetes.

Regionally, migrants living in Coventry struggle to find adequate support due to oversubscribed services that have largely been affected by funding cuts. Migrants relocating to London and Manchester for better support networks and employment opportunities are met with high rents, difficulty finding employment, and barriers to accessing council housing, which has led to homelessness and destitution.

Key Recommendations

- ◆ Apply a tailored and holistic approach to service delivery that acknowledges the diverse needs of migrants and multiple issues they may be experiencing.
- ◆ Collaboration approaches are needed between MRCO's and mainstream service providers, including the legal and housing sectors, in order to share information and best practice ideas
- ◆ Build the capacity of migrants to lead on addressing issues that affect them
- ◆ Build an evidence base of the detrimental impact the 'hostile environment' policies have on migrant lives for collective policy and campaigns



Introduction

The Route to Your Rights (RTYR) project is a qualitative research and advocacy project, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation conducted from August 2017 till March 2018. The project explores issues that push migrants into a more vulnerable state, such as labour exploitation and homelessness, during settlement in the UK, and in particular, how access to certain services and opportunities impact on the ability to build a flourishing life here. The overall aim of the project was to analyse the testimonies of individual migrants and migrant support workers to develop ways for the third sector to better support migrants through their early settlement in the UK.

Phase One of the project ran from August 2016 – January 2017 and was concerned with testing hypotheses that the Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) had developed through previous work, specifically in relation to the goods and services that are most likely to affect migrants' outcomes in their first few years in the UK. During this phase, we identified access to adequate housing, employment, and immigration advice as the key determinants of a person's vulnerability to poor outcomes on early settlement in the UK.

Phase Two of the project ran from February – December 2017 and further explored the factors highlighted by Phase One of the research: access to adequate housing, access to adequate employment, and access to immigration legal advice. It also aimed to pull out regional variations of migrants' experiences across London, Manchester and Coventry, in addition to the impact of housing, employment and immigration issues on mental and physical health, and the gendered experience of migration.

This report sets out the findings of Phase Two of the project and is informed by Phase One.

Methodology

Phase Two of the project consisted of workshops and individual interviews to further explore migrants' experiences in relation to housing, employment, and access to immigration legal advice.

Three workshops were held in London, Coventry and Manchester with 18 migrant support workers. We interviewed 20 migrants across the three cities (40% male and 60% female), both in person and over the phone. Participation for interviews was open to migrants who had been living in the UK for three years and had arrived on any immigration route apart from the Tier 1 visa. Whilst phase one of the project spoke primarily to people who had been in the UK for at least 6 months, phase two of the project was interested in understanding migrant experiences a few years after settlement.

Interviewees were of varied nationalities and statuses, including refugees, asylum seekers, EEA nationals, and a number of people with indefinite leave to remain or without regular status. The majority of interviewees were aged between 25-55 years old (20% 25-35 years, 30% 35-45 years, and 25% 45-55 years) and had been living in the UK for between 3 years to 17 years.

Eight migrant support workers were interviewed separately in addition to the three workshops. Their roles included: advice worker, migrant organiser, policy and communications, immigration solicitor, and community engagement worker.

Key Findings

Immigration Matters

Immigration issues, access to adequate housing, employment and legal advice are inextricably linked and are key determinants of a person's vulnerability to poor outcomes on early settlement in the UK. Inability to regularise immigration status subjects individuals to 'hostile environment' policies¹, which restricts access to basic services and criminalises those without regular status. Collaboration between the Home Office and those in the public and private sector, as well as members of the public, makes it extremely difficult for people to live in the UK without the right to work, rent, access healthcare, open a bank account or send children to school without the fear of information being shared.² The 'hostile environment' creates an environment of fear, both of and amongst migrants, feeding into racism and xenophobia, and forcing migrants underground into destitution. Reports from migrant support workers suggested that parents were not sending their children to school for fear of removal and fear of information being passed onto the Home Office.

Home Office administration was described as poor, and decision-making delays left some people without proof of ID, impacting on access to employment and accommodation. A common example of poor administration was individuals receiving a letter from the Home Office on the same day that it required a response. In another case, an individual was unable to report to the Home Office because they had lost their reporting letter due to accommodation relocation and a new one had not been reissued for some time.

"If you can't sort out immigration, you really can't sort anything out. If you haven't got your immigration status, you can't work lawfully, you can't claim public funds, you can't access housing, you can't even privately rent so you're vulnerable for the most basic needs."

IMMIGRATION SOLICITOR, LONDON


1. Impact on health

"Now I've been here for 17 years. Much of my adult life has been in this country, and I haven't actually achieved – I haven't actually moved on or developed as an individual."

IRREGULAR MIGRANT, COVENTRY

Migrants we spoke to had spent a period of more than 10 years trying to regularise their status, including having exhausted all appeals on their asylum application. They were or had been through periods of homelessness and destitution, vulnerable to exploitation in housing and employment and presented with pre-existing or newly developed mental and physical health conditions as a result of the lengthy process to regularise their status. Mental health conditions that had developed during the immigration process had long-term impacts on migrants even after regularising their status. The lengthier the waiting period to regularise status, the more time migrants without the right to work are kept out of employment, making it difficult to sustain themselves financially and to re-enter the labour market once status has been regularised.

Without a timeframe attached to immigration processing decisions, their uncertain future places migrants in an extended period of arrival. Studies have suggested that the immigration-waiting period can delay the attainment of adulthood and contributes to deterioration of mental health.³ This evidently has long-term impacts on finding employment once a migrant has regularised their status.



"I was cleaning. I like cleaning because of the stress. I like to do something to push my stress, so I cleaned that house everyday..."

REFUSED ASYLUM SEEKER, LONDON

"The stress of not knowing what their future holds...is another huge stress. So we see individuals and families who are coping with enormous levels of stress, mental health problems that are all related to their circumstances and their environment they are living in, as well as wider environment."

MRCO, MANCHESTER

Depression, anxiety and stress were recurrent issues raised time and again by irregular migrants and asylum seekers as a result of not being able to fully participate and contribute to society, in addition to uncertainty about receiving a decision from the Home Office, and past trauma. Migrants described a state of limbo, not being able to move forward or backwards. Some filled the time by volunteering or doing activities that helped to distract themselves from the stress, whilst others felt the mental stress was too much. In extreme situations, the stress associated with immigration was considered to have impacted on the development, or worsening, of diabetes.

2. Access to legal information and support

"In the end you don't get legal help. Last two applications, I did them by myself, and the painful part is the Home Office said, 'we could have given you papers based on this, but you didn't provide the legal argument', because I had no solicitor, so now I'm back to square one."

IRREGULAR MIGRANT, COVENTRY

Access to affordable and timely, good quality immigration advice and legal support is impacted by cuts to legal aid, and oversubscribed pro-bono solicitors. Changes to legal aid have impacted on the support migrant support workers can provide to clients, and pro-bono solicitors are often only willing to take on strong cases due to limited capacity.


Migrants described negative experiences of accessing legal advice and the quality of support. There were instances where irregular migrants were turned away from Citizens Advice Bureaus (CAB) because of their unsettled legal status. Those without legal aid or support described experiences of paying for immigration lawyers who charged extremely high rates, often with unsatisfactory outcomes, or in situations where they were originally told the immigration advice would be free. In some cases, they were asked to pay additional fees despite having already paid for an application that was rejected. Those unable to afford legal fees were required to self-represent in court, where they were less likely to receive a positive outcome. Migrant communities provide a strong network of support – in some instances, they have helped to raise money for immigration fees or provided witness support and evidence. Migrants linked access to adequate immigration advice and support with access to adequate employment, outlining that the right to work would help to finance and resolve immigration issues, in addition to alleviate the issue of homelessness and destitution, and more importantly mental health.

MRCO's experienced frequent problems dealing with solicitors, some of whom they described as unresponsive, uncommunicative, withholding documents, and retaining legal aid cases, making it difficult for clients to access alternative support.

"There's so many changes in the law all the time...it's challenging for anyone to keep up with it. Regulating and wrong advice...that's a danger, that people give advice when either they're not accredited to do so or the advice they give is wrong."

MRCO, MANCHESTER

The danger of incorrect advice is bound by the pace of change and complexity of immigration law and policy, in addition to organisations providing legal advice when they are not accredited. Practitioners found it difficult to navigate changing immigration law, particularly in relation to EEA nationals' eligibility for benefits, and migrants found it equally challenging. Solicitors believed that some services were not up to standard in providing legal support to migrants, providing advice that was either incorrect or that they were not accredited to deliver.



Limited access to affordable and reliable information about immigration tends to lead to reliance on information shared within migrant communities, which is at risk of being incorrect and could dramatically affect an individual's application:

“There’s misinformation because you get rumours in migrant communities. They’ll assume something and think that it’s right if somebody said something. For example, with family reunion, when someone has refugee status, they’re entitled to bring in their pre-flights’ spouse and children under 18, but often it will circulate in the community that you have to wait until you’ve got a place to live and you’ve got an income.”

IMMIGRATION SOLICITOR, LONDON

3. Healthcare

“...if they’re overstayers, they can’t get routine healthcare...GPs often don’t register them which is wrong...they can’t get hospital treatment unless it’s immediately necessary or emergency treatment. So you could have an ongoing condition, which could be serious...but you can’t get your routine care and the only time you can get care is when you’re about to kick the bucket and they have to give you emergency care.”

IMMIGRATION SOLICITOR, LONDON

Migrants’ access to healthcare and health outcomes was identified as an issue equally important as access to adequate employment and housing. Barriers to healthcare include difficulties registering with a GP, lack of understanding of how the NHS works and entitlements to access; fear of being reported to immigration authorities; and fear of healthcare charging policies.⁴

Barriers to registering for a GP included misunderstandings by health services of migrants’ entitlement to healthcare, refusal of the health service to process registration without proof of address, lack of access to information on how to register, and NHS healthcare charging policies. MRCO’s felt that many health services were unclear about healthcare charging policies and upfront payment. Exemptions from healthcare charges are reliant on patients having the correct paperwork on the day. In most cases, failure to provide correct paperwork could result in migrants being wrongly charged a debt to NHS, and potentially negatively impact on visa applications and immigration outcomes.

Housing

MRN spoke to migrants who had experience of living in asylum accommodation, private rentals, social housing, homeless shelters, or those 'sofa-surfing' (on the couches of family and friends). Most had experienced homelessness and destitution at some point during their time in the UK due to reasons relating to immigration and delays, restrictions or informal gatekeeping around access to welfare and benefits. Access to adequate housing was dependent on access to decent employment, regularised immigration status, and was affected by structural barriers associated with housing, such as right to rent checks. Overall, migrants demonstrated difficulties navigating the housing system and had limited knowledge about their rights and sources of support. It was important for almost all migrants to resolve accommodation before finding employment.

1. Homelessness and destitution

1.1 Immigration status

"...some of the issues they face stem from legislation and the fact that not only in the hostile environment, but successive governments have done their best to make it so that migrants they don't want in the UK end up homeless."

IMMIGRATION LAWYER, LONDON

Immigration status was identified as a key determinant of vulnerability to homelessness and destitution. The majority of migrants who were homeless and destitute were unable to regularise their status as a result of a refused asylum application, relationship breakdown or a failed visa renewal. This was often linked to poor representation by immigration lawyers. Delays in finding accommodation impacted on the ability to resolve immigration status and to engage with services.

"I was destitute for four good years, and I have been exploited in people's houses, looking after their children for free. The mother would leave the children with me, she would go out in the morning and come home at 5 o'clock and I would sit in that house, I have nowhere to go, I didn't know anybody, I couldn't speak English then..."

MRCO, MANCHESTER


Individuals who have been refused asylum and exhausted all appeal rights are no longer eligible for asylum support accommodation under Section 95. They can make an application for Section 4 support if they are destitute and meet a set of criteria; however most refused asylum seekers we spoke to were not receiving support from the Home Office and were likely to be destitute and homeless as a result of government restrictions on work and housing.

'Hostile environment' policies which prevent irregular migrants from the right to work, rent or to access public funds subject migrants to harmful situations such as homelessness and exploitation. Many migrants we spoke to who were homeless had exhausted accommodation options with family and friends and were forced to sleep on the streets or to move from one charity to another. In many cases, women sleeping rough find themselves doing domestic work in exchange for accommodation where they are at increased vulnerability to sexual abuse and harassment. With few connections in the UK and fear of coming to attention to authorities, vulnerable migrant women in these situations are less likely to seek support.

1.2 Access to benefits and welfare support

"Even the few safety nets that exist for destitute migrants, whether it's Section 17 or support under the Care Act, local authorities often do their very best not to provide the support, or they provide support that's so inadequate, it's not meeting the needs of people who it's being provided to."

MRCO, LONDON



Migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) endure a heightened vulnerability to homelessness and destitution when they have been or are no longer self-sufficient, or if their immigration status has changed or has never been regularised.⁵ NRPF refers to those who are 'subject to immigration control' and have no entitlement to welfare benefits, public housing and local authority homelessness assistance. A person is 'subject to immigration control' if they have leave to enter or remain in the UK with the condition 'no recourse to public funds';⁶ leave to enter or remain in the UK that is subject to a maintenance undertaking;⁷ or no leave to enter or remain.^{8,9}

There are provisions where local authorities have a duty of care to provide people with NRPF with housing and/or financial support to prevent homelessness and destitution. For example, under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, families with children may be able to apply for assistance to meet basic living needs, or adults requiring care and support due to disability, illness or mental health condition can apply for Part 1 of the Care Act 2014.¹⁰

Support workers said that when migrants with NRPF were entitled to local authority support, such as under Section 17 of the Children's Act or Part 1 of the Care Act, informal gatekeeping practices or incorrect information about entitlements prolonged destitution by delaying people's access to support to which they were entitled.

"... you might have no recourse to public funds in which case you can't get social housing. Now then you might have to have Section 17 which is really terrible because local authority provide the housing – they provide the absolute minimum...most clients I come across who are on Section 17 live in atrocious housing accommodation and they get £30 a week – you can't support yourself or children on £30 a week. I found a lot of the women I work with who are Section 17 supported or who are not and are in destitution...they end up in prostitution."

IMMIGRATION LAWYER, LONDON

In cases where migrants were eligible for Section 17 support, migrant support workers believed that local authorities provided the bare minimum support, often with low quality accommodation. The living allowance was also perceived to be inadequate and put migrants, particularly women, into vulnerable situations.

"When women find themselves in a situation of crisis, that's when the massive problems begin, because they find they can't get access to a refuge because they have no recourse to public funds..."

MRCO, MANCHESTER

Migrant women on dependent visas who are victims of domestic violence also find themselves in situations where they are unable to access refuge spaces or support services due to the precarity of their immigration status or due to being misinformed or wrongly identified as NRPF by agencies. Safety4Sisters identified that services with limited time and resources were quick to assume a migrant woman had NRPF, signposting them onto other services and often failing to follow up to ensure they received appropriate support. Funding cuts have also led to reduced women's shelters and refuges, making it difficult for migrant women to find accommodation. Migrant women unable to access appropriate services often turned to their community, family and friends; however once these solutions broke down, they became vulnerable to further exploitation and homelessness.¹¹

1.3 28 days move-on period


"It's very less time and they don't know where they need to go. Whoever provides the [asylum] accommodation – those people need to tell them and give them that support. You know how you get sent the letter, warning of eviction...but they're not supporting [refugees] that they can do this in 28 days and if you make application for hostel, it takes longer [than 28 days]."

MRCO, MANCHESTER

"I got my status, I'm like a fish in the water – no one speak to me, no one tell me where I can go, I have to find everything by myself. I don't know if I've got the right to have housing. I don't know anything."

MIGRANT, LONDON

Upon acquiring refugee status, individuals have 28 days before the Home Office withdraws asylum support such as housing and basic living expenses. This 'move-on period' has been described as an insufficient amount of time



to find accommodation and employment, leaving refugees vulnerable to homelessness and destitution. During this period, claims for benefits can take longer than 28 days or refugees may not access support until halfway through their 28-day notice period; there are often delays in applications for National Insurance Numbers; unfamiliarity with navigating UK systems and lack of information; they will not have had access to employment and savings; and there is a lack of available social housing or shortage of affordable private rental accommodation.¹²

“My friend – she has got her status, but 8 months ago she lived in a hostel in Manchester. She’s still looking for house. Some people are single, some families with children, they’re living in hostel. The hostel will be in Manchester, but the school of the children will be in Oldham.”

MIGRANT, MANCHESTER

Long waiting periods or ineligibility for social housing meant that refugees moving out of asylum accommodation spent some time in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough. A woman who was granted refugee status in 2009 believed that the current support and information provided to refugees and asylum seekers within her community had declined and resources were increasingly lacking. She spoke of a family who had been living in a hostel for 8 months in Manchester whilst they waited for social housing and who were struggling to afford the commute to their children’s school in Oldham. Another migrant we spoke to said he lived in a hostel for 7 months before being transferred to a housing association.

Support workers said that local authorities engaged in gatekeeping, which prevented refugees from accessing council housing support where they were not able to prove or persuade the council that they were in priority need. Refugees who had moved from smaller to larger cities for better employment opportunities and social support networks also found they were ineligible to apply for council or housing association homes because they had not yet established a local connection to the area, a requirement for some local authorities.¹³

2. Housing Conditions

The majority of migrants we spoke to lived in poor quality homes that had issues of damp, condensation, mould, mice, exposed pipes, leaky roof or no heating. Those who lived in accommodation provided by the council or housing associations tended to live in better quality conditions than those living in private rental accommodation.

“...a big majority are sharing houses with other people and we also have cases of women who are sharing rooms with other families. So there are between 3 or 4 families sharing one room with the children...”

MRCO, LONDON

In London, a large number of migrants we spoke to lived in overcrowded housing, with one family to sometimes multiple families sharing a single room to reduce living costs. One migrant described having to sleep in the kitchen because there were 12 people living in a two-bedroom house.

2.1 Asylum Dispersal Accommodation

Asylum seekers eligible for Section 95 support will usually be placed in dispersed accommodation whilst their application is being processed.¹⁴ There were a number of concerns raised in relation to the housing conditions provided by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), including overcrowded accommodation, filthy conditions, and sharing with many people with severe mental health conditions. Migrant support workers said that the Home Office do not inspect housing conditions and accommodation providers, such as G4S, deny responsibility for decent conditions. Language barriers and cultural clashes were also viewed as difficult to navigate because individuals were sharing living space with people from many different cultures and life experiences.

In Manchester, a woman who had previously lived with her family in NASS accommodation felt unsafe to leave the house because groups of people regularly congregated outside with dogs, yelling racist comments and throwing rocks.

"...if they [migrant women] become an asylum seeker, they're thrown into the dispersal system and scattered into dispersal sites without any ability to hold on or to connect with organisations like us or Rape Crisis..."

MRCO, MANCHESTER

The dispersal system subjects asylum seekers to upheaval and disconnects them from existing communities and support networks, while accommodating them in areas where there may be little access to culturally familiar resources and communities.¹⁵ Women who are victims of domestic violence and in the asylum system are particularly vulnerable to the impact of dispersal accommodation because they lose connections with existing domestic violence support services they may have previously been in contact with. Social isolation and disconnect from family, friends and community was a key issue raised by individuals who had spent time in dispersal asylum support accommodation.

"I was sleeping in the living room. I've got like a big mattress and I have to wait until everyone go to sleep and then I can put down mattress and wake up early before everyone wake up."

REFUGEE, LONDON

If asylum seekers have family or friends they can stay with during their asylum process, they may be ineligible or choose not to apply for Section 95 accommodation support. Those we spoke to who had stayed with family members described conditions of overcrowded accommodation with little privacy, and often spoke of how they felt like a burden on their hosts. Those who had had their asylum claim refused found themselves moving between host families, shelters and street homelessness, sleeping rough for years – one woman had moved 8 times in two years.

"Some people say they do this so you are isolated...you don't have friends, and then you get frustrated and maybe you give up, or you die early, or you become mentally ill."

REFUSED ASYLUM SEEKER, COVENTRY

3. Structural barriers to housing

Several structural barriers to obtaining private rental accommodation were raised time and again by both migrants and MRCO's. These included difficulties getting together the money for agency fees and deposits as well as the appropriate documents for right to rent immigration checks; racial discrimination; and less inclination for landlords to rent out to those on social welfare benefits and those with children.

"It's going to be quite a lot more difficult to get a house...massive problems with overcrowding because there's going to be people who can't afford to get a house as the fees are going to be expensive...also the requirements of documents and paper they want to have..."

MRCO, MANCHESTER

Agency fees and deposits were the greatest barriers for migrants in obtaining permanent and adequate accommodation, leading to homelessness, sleeping on family and friend's couches, or delays in finding employment. Right to rent checks also posed a challenge for migrants because they were not always able to provide sufficient documents such as passports and visas, bank statements, and payslips. Increasing scrutiny of documentation was difficult for women who had arrived in the UK on dependent visas but had effectively become undocumented as a result of leaving their partner due to domestic violence. Many migrants we spoke to were either housed informally without tenancy contracts, paying rent in cash or were staying with friends because they were unable to submit adequate documents, effectively reducing their tenant rights, and increasing risks of overcrowded housing.

Some migrants felt that they had been denied accommodation on the basis of their skin colour or due to the landlord's prejudice against migrants. Migrants on temporary visas or those in the process of transferring their current visa to Leave to Remain also experienced difficulties with Right to Rent checks.

“...if you’re not paying your rent, no one can give you a house...you have to get the house, and then to process it takes 40 days to get housing benefits, so that time the landlord asks you to pay deposit.”
MIGRANT, MANCHESTER

Delays in housing benefit applications made it difficult for migrants who lacked savings to pay agency and deposit fees, particularly refugees leaving asylum accommodation. Housing benefit applications require an individual to have existing accommodation for which they pay rent. Some Housing Associations were known to have support workers who helped with Job Seekers’ Allowance and housing benefit application forms so that they could accept tenants before they received benefits.

Local authorities seemed to be disconnected from the realities of migrant and refugee needs and the barriers they experience in finding accommodation. Illiteracy made it impossible for one man to find social housing because local authorities only sent him housing information through text messages and the Internet, which he was unable to access.

Several migrants felt that it was more difficult to find private rental accommodation if they received benefits or if they had children.

4. Rent arrears

“...when you talk to people on the phone, they’re ok, but when they see you, you just know, you can feel it...maybe it’s because I’m African... they say, ‘now you can’t have the property.’ It’s one of those things you can just feel it where it’s ‘oh, it’s because I’m African or because I’m black.’”

IRREGULAR MIGRANT, COVENTRY

Almost all migrants who were interviewed had been or were in rent arrears due to low paid work, unguaranteed work associated with zero hour and agency contracts and immigration issues. One person had been waiting for 18 months for a decision from the Home Office to change from a Tier 1 visa to leave to Remain, during which time she was unable to work and had to pay rent with a credit card.

In cities such as London and Manchester, a large proportion of income went towards rent. Single mothers were disproportionately affected as they struggled to pay rent and provide for the family on one income. The proportion of total income spent on rent varied and affected individuals according to the number of dependants they had. For example, one adult with two children spent 30% of income on rent in London for one room, whilst a pregnant woman in London spent 60-70% of her income on rent. A family of four in Manchester spent 30% of their income on rent.

Those who had difficulties paying rent or bills borrowed money from friends, used their credit card or savings, or made negotiations with their landlord to the point of exhaustion. A few migrants we spoke to were in rent arrears of 3-5 months and had been given an eviction notice by their landlord at the time of interview.


Migrants were generally not sure of where to go for advice and support regarding their debt, or did not feel the advice they sought was adequate. However, it is important for migrants in debt to seek adequate advice as this can have significant impact on their immigration status and Home Office decisions.

5. Knowledge of housing rights

There’s often language barriers, they really don’t know anything. There’s an assumption amongst them...that they just can’t get public funds and that’s sometimes not true.”

IMMIGRATION LAWYER, LONDON

Migrants demonstrated limited knowledge about the housing system and tenant rights in addition to limited confidence in asserting their rights. In particular, migrants were unaware of their right to request repairs from their landlord or were worried about making a complaint for fear of eviction. In cases where migrants did make a



complaint, the landlord either refused to fix the problem or provided minimal and often insufficient repairs. Some migrants completed repairs at their own cost, or continued to live in inadequate conditions. Few knew of existing advice and support organisations. Although those living in social housing felt that their Housing Associations were responsive to repairs, some migrants living in council housing thought that repairs were responded to slowly, or not at all.

“They don’t know [what] they are responsible for; they think maybe it’s the same as the asylum system, where everything is taken care of by the landlord.”

MRCO, MANCHESTER

In other situations, there were common misunderstandings about tenant responsibilities and bills. For example, one individual living in a share house discovered that he was paying the council tax for the whole house, and it was only when he brought his tenancy agreement into a MRCO when he realised this was the case.

When migrants experienced housing issues or difficulties with paying rent, they approached Shelter, MRCO’s, friends, family and community networks and Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB); however, CAB often referred them onto other organisations. Support workers in Manchester said that there was a lot of homeless support available, but limited support specific to homeless refugees and migrants.

6. Housing and health

“What I notice as well is you can have a client who comes to see you and then later on they become homeless and they come back and the change in the person is enormous. If people are really sleeping rough then they seem to age very very quickly; their mental and physical health goes very quickly.”

IMMIGRATION LAWYER, LONDON

Access to decent accommodation has a fundamental impact on mental and physical health and wellbeing. It is a gateway to accessing health services and other opportunities that improve health and wellbeing such as employment, inclusion in social networks and maintaining relationships.¹⁶ Poor housing or homelessness can lead to mental and physical health problems or exacerbate existing health conditions. Irregular migrants experiencing homelessness and destitution are, in most cases, dealing with issues of homelessness, in addition to uncertainty about their immigration status. Those we spoke to who were sleeping in night shelters or with host families presented with stress and anxiety about being deported, worry about where they would be sleeping next, loss of hope and powerless about their situation. MRCO’s similarly spoke about the impact of homelessness and rough sleeping on migrants’ mental and physical health deterioration.

“When you get your refugee status, you are a vulnerable person. You try to settle in...but then you discover you are not actually really moved on...they expect you to move on. How can you move on with your life if you end up in another shared accommodation? If you have mental health, it’s even worse for you...you don’t see the difference because you are back in the asylum system, sharing accommodation.”

MRCO, MANCHESTER

Those with refugee status felt that they had not properly ‘moved-on’ if they were living in shared accommodation because it triggered experiences of living in asylum accommodation, and exacerbated existing mental health conditions.

“I don’t even know we had damp in the house, but what I know is every week I had to ring the GP for my son’s cold. The cold kept coming and I noticed my asthma was getting worse...I realised we have the damp in the house so much...”

MIGRANT, LONDON

There were a few instances where migrants living in accommodation with damp, mould and condensation said that they had developed asthma or it had worsened as a result.



"...after about a month, I had to leave the property, because during that period, I always feel pain in my bones...There was no heating, you had to use electric to heat the place...and the place was just a dump."

MIGRANT, COVENTRY

One migrant spoke of the long-term impact a private rental with no heating has had on his physical health, in that his body is now more sensitive to the cold. He had to heat the flat by using electric heaters, which resulted in higher electricity bills.

The conditions in asylum support accommodation were described as inadequate for maintaining both physical and mental health: one man with diabetes said that he had shared a house with 10 people that only had two toilets and felt this was inadequate for his medical condition. In other cases, asylum seekers had shared accommodation with people who had significant mental health conditions and who were at risk of those conditions being exacerbated by their living environment.

Employment

Since 2002, the distribution of non-UK-born workers employed in low-waged occupations has increased, with the most common sectors being elementary process plant (industry cleaning, packers, fillers), process operatives (food, drink and tobacco, glass and ceramics, textiles, metal making), cleaning and housekeeping, elementary cleaning, food preparation and hospitality. A significant number of skilled recent migrants are concentrated in low-waged employment.¹⁷ 37% of non-UK nationals, compared to 15% of UK national workers, were employed in work they deemed to be overqualified for.¹⁸ EU2¹⁹ and EU8²⁰ nationals tend to work more hours (over 40 hours per week) than UK nationals and earn the lowest wage compared to the national average, which is reflective of their concentration in sectors that are deemed to be 'low-skilled'.

The majority of migrants who were interviewed in all three cities were overrepresented in low-waged jobs, primarily in cleaning, hospitality, retail, care work, warehouse picking and packing, and on zero-hour or agency contracts. Zero-hour contracts means that workers are tied to a sole employer who is under no obligation to provide set hours and there are no contracted minimum work hours. Agency work is similar except workers can work in various workplaces, and can choose to work or not work a shift when offered. There were an exceptional few who were permanent employees or, in one case, working irregular jobs to make ends meet.



1. Finding work

Language barriers, lack of familiarity with formal job application processes, including interview experience and a lack of references were common obstacles to finding work.

"When I applied for work for different organisation in Manchester, at the time I had to improve my English...because of my English, some places it was difficult to accept me...English barrier is a big issue...some people have good language skill but don't have experience, skills for going to interview."
MRCO, MANCHESTER

A lack of English literacy skills delays migrants' abilities to find suitable employment and increases vulnerability to exploitation within the workplace. Cutbacks on public ESOL provision has led to long waits before migrants can learn English. MRCO's in Coventry said that private ESOL providers were filling the void, but there is a tendency to exploit individuals willing to learn the language.

"So they think they just have to look for work, but you have to keep a record of it, so some people look for work, and then they don't bother [to record], so when they go back [to Job Centre], and say they've been looking for work, they have no evidence and their Job Seeker Allowance is suspended immediately. That is a major problem because if they are in an accommodation, their housing benefits is also affected by that."
MRCO, MANCHESTER

Job Centres were described as having limited understanding of the barriers experienced by migrants, such as language, navigating transport systems, computer literacy, and lack of familiarity with Job Centre processes. The emphasis on jobseekers to find work immediately pushes back other priorities such as building English language literacy, and encourages migrants into jobs they are overqualified for. In Manchester, service providers said that migrants were pressured to find work and told to do cleaning jobs rather than to attend English classes. The Job

Centre had also provided limited to no assistance in explaining how to complete the reporting requirements for Job Seekers allowance, which consequently impacted on benefits.

“You can’t get a professional job because one they say our qualifications from our country are not the same standards...I would attend interviews, but that was the end...do you just sit at home and wait for a professional job? No, that’s how everyone ends up in care work because care work they don’t look for qualifications.”

MIGRANT, COVENTRY

Finding work that matches migrants’ pre-entry qualifications and experiences takes time, and is particularly difficult for those with limited English literacy. Migrants we spoke to felt they were often overlooked by employers because their qualifications and work experience had been obtained overseas. Those who were able to spend a few years working in junior roles, volunteering or completing further education in the UK to improve prospects of finding employment that was not considered ‘low skilled’. Volunteering and further education is often not possible for everyone, especially people with dependents who require childcare, particularly single mothers, and those with limited savings. It was considered easier and more practical to find ‘low-skilled’ jobs such as cleaning, care work, picking and packing, rather than to spend a few years building on UK work experience, language, and skills for jobs that migrants were qualified for.

People with newly acquired refugee status experienced difficulties in finding work in the smaller cities where they had been accommodated during the asylum process because there were less work opportunities. They tended to move to larger cities such as Manchester or London, where they had friends or family connections and there were both better employment opportunities and suitable support networks.

Other barriers to finding employment included delays in obtaining a National Insurance Number, and employers having no understanding about refugees’ rights to work.

2. Working Conditions

“...sometimes you don’t get paid, sometimes you work for a week, and they say ‘oh, we didn’t manage to pay you, we’ll pay you next week’, and then next week comes and you don’t get paid. At one point, I think I went for a month, and the place just closed and there was nowhere to go. I couldn’t complain to anybody.”

MIGRANT, COVENTRY

Many of the jobs that vulnerable migrants are concentrated in have little regulation and often are not unionised, particularly in smaller workplaces. Migrants spoke of a multitude of workplace issues in relation to pay and contracts such as unpaid overtime, unpaid training or holiday, different pay to what was stated on their contract, no formal contract, pay deductions from lunch breaks (see Coventry regional variations) or delayed pay. Many of these aforementioned workplace issues are experienced by employees more generally working in low waged work. Migrants are exposed to additional factors that increase their vulnerability to exploitation, such as language barriers, and immigration status. Additionally, the uncertainty of Brexit and its impact on permanent residency requirements for EU migrants has led to increased vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination within the workplace. Many EU migrants are fearful that their residency will be jeopardised if they lose their jobs, therefore giving employers additional means of control over them.

Migrants with no legal right to work in the UK are at increased risk of exploitation in the workplace and have few avenues to enforce their rights and access justice. The type of work they are involved in ranges from warehouse picking and packing to care work for people within their community in exchange for accommodation, as well as restaurant work.

“Because they’re not flexible, sometimes when they call these people, maybe ‘I’m in hospital, or my children are sick.’ When they say they can’t come that day, that is the end of their job.”

MRCO, LONDON



The nature of zero-hour and agency contracts contributes to the precariousness of particular work industries. Those on precarious contracts spoke of how they were expected to be flexible with shift work, despite this flexibility not being reciprocal. Shifts are not always guaranteed; therefore, individuals feel compelled to accept every shift for fear of losing future work. This is particularly difficult for women who are often the primary child carers and risk dismissal for pregnancy or taking time off work to care for a sick child. Additional issues associated with zero-hour and agency contracts were working multiple shifts at different locations, often without adequate breaks and at all hours of the week.

3. Workplace treatment and knowledge of rights

“The other day, I had a case of elder Latin American women who were working as a cleaner in an office and she received a letter from her supervisor saying if she doesn’t learn English, she will be fired, because it’s one of the requirements now that you need to have a certain level of English.”

MRCO, LONDON

The majority of those we spoke to who had experience of working in the UK reported discriminatory or unfair treatment by their employer and colleagues. Treatment included differential treatment to British employees such as being paid different wages for the same job, or being given less opportunities by the employer to work in roles with higher levels of responsibility and pay; bullying; being rudely spoken to; racism; denial of a job due to lack of a British passport; discrimination due to limited language skills and for not speaking English in the workplace. Some migrants reported they sensed an overall feeling of discrimination on the basis of their immigration status. There were reports that employers refrained from employing EU nationals because of the uncertainty of Brexit, or they capitalised on the fear that EU employees may have in relation to unemployment and requirements for obtaining permanent residency. Support workers stated that there had been cases of explicit discrimination where employers had said they did not want to employ Polish or Romanian workers because of the uncertainty of Brexit.

“...you could see like two different people – African and British – working for the same, but getting different pay.”

MRCO, COVENTRY

Health care workers spoke of situations where they discovered that they were paid lower wages than their White British colleagues for similar work, such as working evening shifts or weekends. Or in other cases, they believed to be paid a lower wage compared to the level of work they were doing.

“A lot of discrimination, because those sectors – cleaning and hospitality- requires a lot of movement and maybe you need to lift very heavy stuff. Some of them are very afraid of reporting the pregnancy because they are afraid of losing their jobs...A lot of them don’t know that they have a right to go to their appointment, have a right to a break, have a right to the risk assessment, so those are rights no one mentioned to them.”

MRCO, LONDON

Women in particular experienced additional levels of discrimination as a result of their gender. Sexual abuse and exploitation by employees and employers were raised as issues in the workplace, particularly in highly feminised roles such as the cleaning sector where male employees may feel emasculated by a job that is stereotypically considered a woman’s role. Service providers reported pregnancy discrimination and limited understanding of health and safety as an issue for migrant women working in ‘low-skilled’ jobs that may require heavy lifting and exposure to chemicals that pose a risk to pregnancy outcomes. Women in ‘low-skilled’ work are often not aware of their right to attend antenatal appointments and health and safety assessments and may delay informing their employer of their pregnancy for fear of losing their jobs. Migrant women’s vulnerability is compounded by language barriers, limited knowledge of rights and ability to enforce their rights, alongside community reactions of reports of sexual abuse, particularly if working with other members of the community.

“Quite very rare I see someone who’s got knowledge of what is their rights in the workplace because it’s also a barrier of English, lack of understanding but also they give them quite difficult contract where you don’t understand the language...”

MRCO, MANCHESTER

Migrants demonstrated limited knowledge of their rights in the workplace or of the avenues they could take to address experiences of discrimination and exploitation. Service providers stated that there are common misconceptions in the migrant community about rights and entitlements, and those who are more vulnerable tend to trust knowledge of community members who may not always have reliable and correct information.

Employment contracts were also raised as issues that impact on workplace treatment and ability to enforce work rights. In some cases, migrants working in zero-hour or agency type work were not issued a formal contract by their employer, and if they were, the terms and conditions were sometimes different to how they were treated, such as pay and holiday entitlements. In other situations, migrants did not understand the content of the contract due to limited English literacy or they were not sure what a contract should look like.

Exploitation by big chains was identified as a common occurrence by MRCO's who said employers were hiring people with no formal contracts but were unafraid of tribunal threats and costs.

Service providers have stated their clients being labelled as troublemakers when having asked for their employment contract. Having no contract, along with limited understanding of work rights, exposes migrants to increased vulnerability. Service providers gave examples of situations where migrants had been working well below the minimum wage on £3 or £4 an hour.



A few individuals with more secure immigration status raised issues with their employer about unfair wages or withheld pay. However, in most cases, migrants did not report discriminatory or unfair treatment because they had limited understanding of their rights, fear of losing their job, or as one service provider stated, some migrants are more willing to receive low pay in exchange for learning English.

When asked about unions, migrants either had no knowledge of what a union was or had limited understanding of how they could provide support in the workplace. Some migrants were afraid of being victimised and felt that they would be viewed as a troublemaker if they joined a union. Those who were part of the union felt that they had been well supported, but in other cases migrants were not able to receive support from their union due to the required waiting periods after joining. Additionally, when migrants had immigration issues that were linked with their employment, unions were not able to provide them with adequate support. Support workers spoke of migrant workers forming their own unions and collectively challenging issues at hand.

4. Employment and health

"The women who are working during night time, some of them are working alone in the office. They don't interact with other people; they don't even have the chance to practice their English skills because there is no one there. Because they work different times, it's hard to take English classes, and of course that makes you feel sad, depressed, alone and in the physical health, the lack of sleep, the physical activity you're carrying all the time – it affects you."

MRCO, LONDON

Both mental and physical health issues were linked with employment. Concentration in 'low-skilled' and physically demanding jobs such as cleaning or picking and packing presented migrants with risks to health and safety issues. A MRCO said that although most migrants they work with in the cleaning sector are provided with health and safety training at the beginning of employment, they are not able to fully understand procedures due to low levels of English literacy. Other MRCO's stated that employers had not explained health and safety procedures properly. Migrants without the legal right to work are at increased vulnerability to exploitation, where health and safety procedures often go unregulated. There were cases where employers were prepared to use translators for health and safety training but did not provide all languages.



Jobs that involve working alone, such as cleaning, can keep individuals isolated from society, especially if they are working multiple shifts, seven days a week. Additionally, migrants working in precarious jobs tend to put their health issues on the backburner: long and unsociable hours make it more difficult for migrants to access health services.

Asthma was a common physical health problem that impacted on people in the cleaning industry exposed to strong chemicals.

"I don't want to do cleaning job anymore because it really affected my asthma...I went into full time cleaning [at a leisure centre], so we normally use very strong chemicals...we use bleach chemicals, so that is really the one that trigger my asthma..."

MIGRANT, LONDON

Mental health was also identified as both a barrier to finding employment, particularly for those with post-traumatic stress disorder, and a consequence of not having a legal right to work. Additional factors affecting migrant women's mental health include experiences of gender-based violence and lower education and literacy levels.



Housing and Employment

“I’ve worked a lot with refugees who have been newly granted status, and there are a number of reasons they end up destitute...one of the reasons...is that negotiating the system, as far as finding employment is concerned, and getting a CV together and accessing the Job Centre, and even knowing where to look for employment...”

MRCO, LONDON

Employment and housing issues are inextricably linked. Many migrants we spoke to were keen to resolve their accommodation before searching for employment; however private rental accommodation generally requires proof of income, so they found themselves in a vicious cycle.

Work restrictions imposed on asylum seekers, and irregular migrants more generally, makes it extremely difficult to meet basic needs or to save and prepare for the possibility of being granted settlement.

Several people who had acquired refugee status were not able to immediately afford private rental fees, and therefore lived on their family or friends’ couches whilst looking for employment and saving for agency and deposit fees. Concentration in low paid work also gave little prospect for migrants to afford their own flat or better living conditions. An MRCO said that some of their service users rent rooms and therefore do not have their names on bills, which has made it difficult for them to register with a GP because they lack the proof of address.

“Getting paid less, like for example when you’re working for agencies, you’re waiting for them to call you if there is any work. So you’re available, but there is no work, so you can stay a week to weeks without maybe working...so you kind of fall back because you’re not eligible for help with the dole so you just end up in debt.”

MIGRANT, MANCHESTER

Almost all migrants who we spoke to were or had been in debt because they had experienced difficulties paying rent as a result of unguaranteed shift work or delays in housing benefit applications. Some individuals had faced eviction, or owed a few months’ rent due to housing benefit delays.

Additionally, cash-in-hand work can impact both on housing benefits and on obtaining accommodation, because payslips and bank statements are usually required when applying for housing. In Coventry, MRCO’s said that private landlords were not accepting potential tenants who worked cash-in-hand because they could not prove pay, even where the organisation could endorse the tenancy.

“I’ve got a new client at the moment who was sleeping on night buses and every now and then people would say, ‘you can sleep at my house’, and then she’d be used as a servant, or there’d be attempted rape.”

IMMIGRATION LAWYER, LONDON

Migrants subject to ‘hostile environment’ policies are vulnerable to exploitative situations. Women in particular tend to take up childcare or domestic tasks in exchange for accommodation that can verge on the exploitative. One support worker mentioned that even in well-intentioned hosting schemes for asylum seekers and refugees, there is an expectation on the part of the person, or the part of the host to do housework or to help around the house.



Key Regional variations

London

There are greater levels of support overall in London, particularly for irregular migrants, compared to smaller cities where support may be few or dispersed. It is common for newly granted refugees to relocate from smaller cities to London for better work opportunities and support; however high rents, difficulty finding employment, and limited knowledge of support networks can increase vulnerability to homelessness and destitution.

Due to limited capacity and funding cuts, immigration advisors in London admitted to gatekeeping their services to accept only clients who had strong cases. Legal advice services stated that limited funding prevented them from being able to provide childcare support to clients or to pay for travel and food for migrants unable to afford this. This was considered to be a barrier to providing adequate immigration support.

“...it is harder when you feel that in some cases people are entirely left out to the charity that is supporting them...a lot of the people we work with we know really have nowhere else to go...”

MRCO, LONDON

Service providers who work directly with vulnerable migrants spoke of being overworked, felt high levels of stress within the job, and found it difficult to manage professional boundaries outside of work when they knew migrants had no other source of support. They are working on incredibly tight funding with limited capacity.

Manchester

Similarly to London, Manchester also has a high level of migrant support. Many organisations in Manchester believed that they collaborated well together and were particularly effective in meeting migrants' needs through partnership working and referral. However, some felt there is more scope for networking to learn and share good practice.

Frontline providers said that non-refugee and migrant organisations working nationally are in competition with each other for funding.

It is common for migrants, particularly recently granted refugees to move to Manchester from cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool because support networks and job opportunities are limited. A new Amazon warehouse that opened in Manchester in late 2016 has reportedly created many permanent job opportunities for migrants. A major issue raised by organisations and migrants is the eligibility criteria for local authority accommodation, which requires a local connection to the area, making many new migrants to the city ineligible for council housing.

Coventry

Coventry has a high demand for housing due to the recent growth of the university and students paying a year's rent in advance. MRCO's stated that there is a local housing crisis and rent costs have been increasing across the city.

Compared to Manchester and London, the support migrants receive in Coventry seemed to be more significantly affected by cuts to legal aid, voluntary sector funding, and the challenges of working under hostile environment policies. This is due to the fact there are fewer MRCO's than there are in the larger cities.

“Most of the help I'm not eligible for, so if I'm destitute, I don't have anywhere to sleep. I can't go to Salvation Army. I know the links that people can go for help according to their status, but because I don't qualify, I can't access that help.”

MIGRANT, COVENTRY

Oversubscribed services and uneven distributions of funding in the voluntary sector have had a significant impact on the quality and accessibility of services. An issue raised by frontline providers was that entire homeless contracts were



taken by larger national organisations, whilst specialised and smaller support services struggled to obtain funding. The majority of homeless contracts held by national organisations only provide housing to those on housing benefits, so those with NRPF or who are ineligible for housing benefit cannot access these services and therefore have very few places to seek support.

Migrants recognised that MRCO's have very little capacity, and it has diminished in the last few years, but they felt the support they received from organisations such as the Coventry Migrant Centre was very helpful. In contrast, migrants believed that agencies such as CAB and Job Centres provided inadequate support, with there only being one of each in the city. Migrants we spoke to would travel to Birmingham to access the CAB, which has also been reduced to one office. They spoke of their frustration with the lack of the support provided:

"If you come before 9, when you get there you find a queue, then you wait, wait, wait. The other day I was waiting for 4 hours but still I had not seen anybody. And then I was so hungry, I had to go back home."

ASYLUM SEEKER, COVENTRY

The CAB is so overstretched that people queue from early morning without guarantee of speaking to an advisor, some of whom said they were refused support due to their irregular immigration status.

Service providers discussed the deindustrialisation of the labour market in Coventry, which has led to increased agency and zero-hour work in call centres. There were reports of migrants travelling to work in warehouses outside of the city in Daventry where agencies charge workers to be transported by minibus to work. There are also cases of migrants without the right to work being recruited to clean university halls through agencies who provided inadequate breaks and deducted lunch breaks from wages. Additionally, there have been examples of agencies discriminating against people speaking Polish at work, even though they had been recruited in Polish.

Supporting themselves

Migrants are resourceful in finding their own networks of support within the current political climate and amidst cuts to legal aid and the voluntary sector. A lot of information, support and assistance is sought through word of mouth from the community, including churches and local community organisations. Due to language barriers and limited availability of multilingual information, many migrants rely on the advice and support from their peers.

“There are many law centres that don’t have community languages. If you want to refer or to send someone to a specific place and they don’t speak Spanish or Portuguese, that’s impossible, so I think language...I think we can work even closer together. Sometimes I have the feeling that we replicate a lot of work...[that the legal sector does]...or the other way around.”

MRCO, LONDON

MRCO’s shared best practice strategies for engaging with and providing support to particularly vulnerable migrants. These include: holding specialist legal outreach sessions; referrals between organisations, particularly specialised ethno-specific services with relevant expertise; and partnerships between the homeless and migrant sector. MRCO’s provide a high level of support to migrants and work well together within their networks to signpost migrants to appropriate services such as legal advice, homeless shelters and hostels. However, service providers felt there were often delays in referring migrants due to a lack of a central database. Organisations are currently involved in a number of online information and knowledge sharing groups. They spoke of the importance of following up with their service users after referral to ensure they received the support they needed, a procedure often lacking from more mainstream services.

“If you’re supporting somebody out of destitution, you have to do a lot of things at once, because you have to be addressing the housing at the same time you’re addressing the immigration...the longer someone is not housed...the less likely it is they are going to be able to resolve their immigration, because they won’t engage with services because their mental health will deteriorate, their physical health will deteriorate... they might end up getting sectioned or just disappearing.”

MRCO, LONDON

A key support strategy that organisations are currently doing well is applying a holistic approach to their services that acknowledges the connection between access to immigration advice, adequate accommodation, adequate employment, and access to healthcare. Some housing associations, for example, provide employment training to their tenants to increase their prospects of finding adequate employment or signpost migrants to relevant information.

In Manchester, an organisation said that they support refugees and migrants to save for a deposit to obtain accommodation through the Home Office support loan, whilst at the same time providing support with job applications:

“...when a refugee has got refugee status, the Home Office give them an application form so they can apply for a loan. The Home Office give them a loan of £500, so if they come early in here, we tell them this is not for furniture for your house because the local authority will help with furniture...so we want to use that money to apply for private accommodation...so I find 2 or 3 people and then we look for accommodation they can rent...each of them give £250 for deposit, and then they can move in.”

Ensuring migrants are well-informed of their rights and entitlements is essential for regularising immigration, reducing discrimination and exploitation and building capacity of individuals to assert their rights. Multilingual rights-based information in multiple formats, including workshops, leaflets and legal support; working with interpreters; and referrals to specialist migrant community organisations are equally important to ensuring migrants fully understand their rights and





can access the support they need. Providing outreach in areas where service users congregate was identified as an effective strategy for engaging with migrants who may otherwise not access or be aware of services.

MRCO's identified migrant-led campaigning and advocacy as important for finding sustainable solutions to addressing migrant vulnerability; however, many believed that not enough is invested into building migrants' capacity to lead on issues affecting them. Whilst investment is put into immigration advice, equipping migrants with the tools to understand and exert their rights as well as seek routes to address any rights violations was identified as equally important.



Recommendations

Apply a tailored and holistic approach to service delivery that acknowledges the diverse needs of migrants and multiple issues they may be experiencing.

Migrants are not a homogenous group. Each individual accessing a service will have a different migration experience and potentially have a set of overlapping needs. As illustrated in this report, immigration, housing and employment are inextricably linked; therefore services need to consider intersecting issues. Additionally, discrimination and inequality will not be experienced in the same way by all migrants. Gender, race, age, sexuality, class, geographical location, religious beliefs, ability and profession can change how migration and settlement is experienced.

A holistic and tailored approach, which provides support and information at various levels, namely social, legal, employment, physical and psychological, and language would be overall beneficial to the wellbeing of migrants and refugees.

Collaboration approaches are needed between MRCO's and mainstream service providers, including the legal and housing sectors, in order to share information and best practice ideas

Collaboration ensures that migrants are well linked with their local services, and draws on the expertise of organisations. To enable good partnerships, organisations require processes for sharing information, expertise, contact details and up-to-date information, particularly updates on changing immigration laws. A shared service database for the sector was identified as a useful resource for connecting services and quickly referring migrants to appropriate support. When signposting, it is important to keep in mind that many vulnerable migrants have been through multiple agencies and referrals to the point of referral fatigue.

Collaboration and partnership includes training or guidance for mainstream services, including health services, on the provision of culturally responsive and accessible services, with greater understanding of immigration and entitlements. Cross-sector training between the legal and migrant support sector was recommended by both sectors to learn about best practice and to bring MRCO's up to standard with regards to immigration policies that affect health care, employment and housing.

Building the capacity of migrants to lead on addressing issues that affect them

Migrants demonstrated limited knowledge about their rights at work and housing or the avenues for asserting their rights. Despite there being existing resources on employment and housing rights, including multilingual information, migrants were not accessing these. It was identified that increasing rights-based knowledge through a multilingual peer-to-peer approach would be effective and sustainable, and would ensure actions are representative of concerns affecting them.

There was a clear need demonstrated by the findings that migrants and refugees need better awareness of their employment and housing rights, so they have the ability and understanding of how to navigate out of precarious situations.

Building an evidence base of the detrimental impact the 'hostile environment' policies have on migrant lives for collective policy and campaigns

Alongside funding cuts to legal aid and the voluntary sector, 'hostile environment' policies and NRPF restricts access to basic services and increases migrant vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination. Campaigns should include ending right to work and NRPF restrictions; monitoring gatekeeping by local authorities and put a stop to tying services to immigration status. Work restrictions increase precarity and contribute to migrant homelessness and destitution. We would recommend a review of work restrictions.

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