



Asylum Seeker and Refugee Community Insights

June 2020

Julia is part of Healthwatch Doncaster's Health Ambassadors network. She represents the Asylum Seeker community in Doncaster which include people from a wide variety of countries and backgrounds.

Julia has shared her experiences in terms of what these seldom heard communities are currently going through and the support they have received during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Not all these issues seem at first glance to be connected to health but in terms of mental well-being and the connection of this to general health, they are all relevant.

What's working well?

From connecting with residents of the asylum seeker properties within Doncaster, it appears that none of these households have suffered with symptoms of coronavirus.

Doncaster Conversation Club (DCC) have been able to link with Doncaster Council and have delivered food parcels to different households on a rotation basis to ensure support is fair. We were also able to link in with Doncaster Council to make sure that, at the start of the lockdown, a small number of asylum seekers who were 'sofa surfing' were offered safer accommodation in hotels as indicated by the government.

Support has been given where needed to ensure children have been able to access school meal vouchers – the system for doing this can be difficult to navigate for anyone who is not IT confident and who does not have English as a first language.

The charity 'City of Sanctuary Sheffield' has been able to provide laptops to families of asylum seekers in Doncaster with school age children. Distribution of these has been facilitated by DCC. Asylum seekers are unable to afford laptops or the data to access the internet. Children from these families are already disadvantaged educationally – and without access to on line lessons are likely to fall even further behind their peers.

Skilled members of the asylum seeking and refugee community have been making face masks for members of DCC. We have distributed well over 300 of these for free to asylum seekers and volunteers.

GP appointments have been accessible over the phone with a telephone interpreter service as needed and organised by the GP practice.

We have linked with Mears over a number of issues in asylum properties – sometimes acting as an alert system to conflicts within houses.

We have lent tools (and sometimes provided labour) to asylum seekers who have wanted to make back yards more useful – either for sitting in the sun – or for growing vegetables.

What's not working?

Asylum seekers in general have struggled with the national guidelines in terms of what they can and cannot do during the pandemic. The rules have changed. Many people just accept information from friends or social media – they do not have reliable access to information about the UK situation with regard to coronavirus. Many appear unaware of the continuing need for social distancing – or even of the continued threat to health. Information was provided in specific languages at the start of the pandemic – but there have been no updates.

Living in shared accommodation during the lock down has caused conflict within households. Asylum seekers are assigned to a property – they do not choose their housemates. Conflicts have arisen. In several extreme cases, the housing provider has been able to move people between properties, but this is exceptional.

Asylum seekers live with stress all the time – with anxiety about families back at home and anxieties about their own futures. Coronavirus has added to this. Many people have felt very alone and frightened. Without DCC being open, we have been unable to help.

The Home Office have not been carrying out asylum interviews during the pandemic. The lack of decision making by the Home Office has been frustrating for many – and often inexplicable. Solicitors' offices are offering a limited service. Without a drop in at DCC, people are unable to get reassurance about this. We can respond to those who contact us by phone – but not everyone has the language skills to phone.

Accessing emergency dental services has been challenging, the first hurdle being able to navigate the automated system at the start of the 111 call. Interpreters are available – but there is a lot of downward pressure to limit the number of people who are offered appointments.

Many dental problems need semi-urgent advice. However, registering a new arrival with a regular dental practice is difficult. So if the pain is not of a severity to access an emergency appointment, there seems to be no lower level of access.

We have been told that only a small number of asylum seekers have been 'dispersed' to Doncaster during the lock down. However, we are aware that asylum seekers are still arriving even if the numbers are small. Of those we have been able to contact, GP registration has often been delayed. Many practices require online registration – which can be challenging for asylum seekers with limited English. People with limited English are also struggling to make an appointments.

Some asylum seekers are still being offered hospital appointments – but frequently these are now phone consultations. The hospital appointment letter advising on the telephone appointment, does not offer interpreters. When I have phoned to enquire about using an interpreter, some hospital departments do not appear to have the

facility to offer 3 way telephone calls with clinician, interpreter and patient. Video consultations are sometimes suggested. Very few asylum seekers have computers – and not all have a working smartphone – so video consultations are not always feasible.

DCC have struggled to get information about asylum seekers who are newly arrived in Doncaster. There are obviously Data Protection issues – but the upshot is that we often find out about problems by chance. These issues can include registering with a local GP, addressing dental problems, accessing free prescriptions, accessing clothing and finding a solicitor.

Recommendations

Some of these issues are not unique to asylum seekers but will affect the wider population including the wider BAME population. Some issues are national and not local.

- Wider use of telephone interpreter services by the hospital
- Ability to register with a dentist for 'low level' problems.
- Information for asylum seekers in their own language about current 'Covid rules'.
- DCC would like to find a way for an asylum seeker arriving in Doncaster for the first time, to be asked for consent to allow a volunteer at DCC to phone them to check if we can offer any help even though we are not able to offer a drop-in point yet.
- To alert GP practices to expect a small influx of new asylum seekers as the lock-down eases up. It is very likely that a number of these will arrive without photo ID. These people will still need to register with a GP – and are entitled to do so – but registration without 'full documentation' is not always accepted at the GP reception desk.
- To encourage the Home Office to listen to the need to move people between houses rather than risk a violent incident.
- It is understood by many charities that £35 - £37.75 per week (the amount of money offered by NASS (National Asylum Support Service) is not enough for people to live on.
- Now there is greater reliance on IT in all realms of life, reliable WiFi in all NASS accommodation is essential.