

NRPF Partnership Working in Bristol - Key Findings

Introduction and Context

1. In response to the COVID pandemic, the Government in Spring 2020 announced the 'Everyone In' policy, giving Local Authorities emergency powers and funding to house all rough sleepers in their area regardless of their immigration status. In Bristol this has resulted in Bristol City Council using hotel and other properties in the city to accommodate over 400 people who were previously rough sleeping, including more than 75 people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).
2. Recognising that this policy was unlikely to ever be made permanent, in Autumn 2020 two 'One City' partnership working groups were established – one focused on European Economic Area (EEA) nationals and one focussed on those seeking sanctuary in the UK. The idea behind these working groups was to bring together the expertise and resources of both the Council and the voluntary sector in order to identify pathways from the residents of the temporary hotel accommodation into more sustainable housing situations.
3. This report is an evaluation of these partnership working groups, conducted by David Barclay (Mayor's Adviser on Inclusion) and Olly Alcock (BCC Welfare Rights and Money Advice Manager). From interviews and focus groups with participants we have attempted to identify key learnings from how these groups have operated in order to guide future work on supporting people with NRPF in Bristol.
4. We are extremely grateful for all those who have given their time to participate in the working groups and in this evaluation research. For many of them their work often goes unrecognised and unrewarded, but their tireless efforts make an enormous difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in the city, and they are the reason that Bristol can proudly call itself a City of Sanctuary.

Reflections on Positive Aspects of Working Groups

5. Participants from both the Council and the voluntary sector were united in describing the overall experience of the working groups as an overwhelmingly positive one. Key elements that people picked out as particularly important were as follows:

A sense of shared responsibility

6. A number of working group members reflected on the palpable sense of shared commitment towards the hotel residents from across the Council and the voluntary sector, which enabled the group to build trust and work together towards positive outcomes. There was a particular sense that the Council had come a long way in the last decade in terms of proactively looking to support those seeking sanctuary who were facing homelessness. Of course this was partly driven by the context, with BCC housing people under 'Everyone In' that they might not do in 'normal' times, and therefore facing the undesirable prospect of having to evict people back on to the

streets if that policy ended without having identified pathways for residents. But it was also recognised that there was a level of personal commitment from Council officers to this work, including those in senior positions, which was highly appreciated by the voluntary sector. The level of buy-in from across the Council was also cited as a positive factor, with strong engagement not just from Housing Teams but also from Social Services and Communications.

7. This way of working unlocked positive outcomes for a number of individuals, including helping a significant number of EEA nationals into work, as well as helping Bristol Hospitality Network find new hosts for 9 asylum seekers in the hotels. It also helped solve some of the more complex barriers and problems faced by individuals e.g. disability challenges and more complex legal and benefits issues.

A focus on individuals, with space for discussion of policy

8. One factor highlighted by several participants was the way in which the working groups quickly focused in on particular individuals, and adopted a 'case management' approach to discussing how best to support those people to thrive and move on from the hotels. This focus on individuals and their circumstances ensured that the conversation went beyond generalities and into concrete actions and collaborative work. A particularly strong example was the MoveIN MoveON MoveUP programme for EEA nationals, which was able to stay with clients through their housing journeys, as they moved from, say, a hotel to The Wing and then on into private rented accommodation. It also created the opportunities for greater learning, as the particularities of individual cases highlighted some of the key challenges in the system which make supporting people with NRPF so difficult. However, it should also be noted that participants appreciated the fact that the working groups could also 'zoom out' from discussing individual cases and reflect on broader questions of policy and funding. This dual function was felt to be a strong asset of the working group approach.

Regular meeting builds trust and empathy

9. One common refrain from interviews and focus groups was the simple fact that meeting regularly (the working group met every fortnight) had been a positive experience. The convenience of meeting virtually had enabled broad participation, and the regularity of conversations was felt to have allowed a gradual build-up of trust and empathy between the Council and the voluntary sector. Several participants also commented on the level of openness and transparency from both sides as being key to the success of the working groups. Allowing others to gain a genuine window into the perspective, opportunities and barriers faced by various different services enabled more creative conversations about partnership, rather than an atmosphere of different organisations and sectors having to constantly or solely challenge and hold each other to account. This also allowed for the challenging of misconceptions (e.g. around the eligibility of EEA nationals for certain services). It was noted that this way of working between Councils and the voluntary sector was extremely rare, particularly on issues related to NRPF, and should be something that Bristol is proud of and seeks to preserve and build on.

Reflections on Challenging Aspects of Working Groups

10. Alongside many positive reflections, participants also highlighted some areas where the working groups had been challenging or where it could have been improved. These included:

Early challenges with the 'Everyone In' policy

11. Participants in the Sanctuary Working Group reflected that the process had started with a somewhat 'frosty atmosphere' due to some early challenges with supporting people to get into the hotels. From the voluntary sector perspective, this process had demonstrated many of the challenges that people with NRPF (particularly those seeking sanctuary) have traditionally faced when trying to engage with statutory homelessness services. One participant commented that the BCC Outreach system felt like it wasn't designed with sanctuary seekers in mind, and this created a number of practical challenges. One key example was around sofa surfing, which for asylum seekers can be a very complex and fraught issue due to the way it can interlink with individual's cases or those of their 'hosts'. Whilst this working group played an important role in helping to work through these challenges, there is a feeling that some of those systemic issues are likely to remain and therefore require further focus and dialogue between the Council and the voluntary sector.

Occasional logistical confusion

12. It was noted that it was sometimes unclear who 'owned' the meetings in terms of logistics and Zoom hosting, and that this had led to occasional confusion about when meetings were happening. It was also felt that the meetings could be clearer on when a 'casework' approach was going to be taken and when there would be a more general discussion on policy. The speed at which things moved also caused some challenges, for example leaving some individuals with extremely high workloads at different points, or creating confusion for clients who were having to engage with a large number of different professionals and services.

Some missing parties

13. Participants noted that the working groups could have been more successful if some other groups had been able to join in. Some reflected that having mental health experts in the group could have been beneficial. Others thought that the Council's Asylum Team should have been involved, and from the voluntary sector ACH and CAB were identified as key groups who hadn't yet participated.

Key Learning from Working Groups

14. Participants felt that the experience of being on the working groups had led to a number of areas of learning/insight. Some of the key ones mentioned were:
- 'A greater understanding of the resource and policy constraints of the Council with regards to providing accommodation for vulnerable people'
 - 'Sometimes accommodating people is the only way to have a good conversation with them about voluntary return'

- ‘Important to realise that there are only really a handful of people who reach “the end of the road” in the asylum system’
- ‘It isn’t always about money!’ – joint working can unlock good outcomes too
- ‘When the Council is willing to engage with the voluntary sector it makes our jobs more fulfilling because we feel like we’re getting somewhere for our clients’
- BCC needs to improve the clarity of its communications, particularly to individuals with English as a second language
- ‘It is possible to help people with NRPF get off the streets and into stable accommodation!’
- ‘This kind of partnership working is the only way to achieve some of the city’s big ambitions (e.g. around ending rough sleeping)’
- ‘Greater understanding of the difficulty of accessing Home Office accommodation’
- ‘We’ve learned a lot about where the benchmarks for different services are set.’

Upcoming Challenges on NRPF

15. Participants were asked to reflect on what they thought the likely upcoming challenges were for supporting people with NRPF in Bristol. Key themes included:

Ongoing challenge for those in the hotels

16. Whilst there was much satisfaction with the number of people who had been supported to move on from hotels, there were also concerns for those who remain. The possibility of evictions from the hotels raised the prospect that the voluntary sector and the Council might end up in a more ‘oppositional’ mode, for example if voluntary sector organisations are involved in supporting people to formally challenge Council decisions.

Brexit and the EU Settlement Scheme

17. Looking beyond the ‘Everyone In’ policy, there were widespread concerns about the many challenging aspects of the future landscape. There was a strong feeling that national government policy was unlikely to be a positive factor in supporting people with NRPF, and that the continued existence of the Hostile Environment was going to be a reality and a constraint that Bristol would need to struggle to deal with. Several people highlighted the EU Settlement Scheme deadline in June, and pointed out that those who fail to get status before then will be at an extremely high risk of destitution, whilst those who are granted pre-settled status will have NRPF. When combined with the economic consequences of COVID this was likely to increase the problem of rough sleeping homelessness in the city. There is also a risk that Brexit and attendant legislation will mean that people feel less inclined to engage with statutory services, stay under the radar and remain at risk of exploitation. This is particularly relevant to rough sleepers.

Lack of resource

18. It was recognised that tackling these challenges would be difficult due to the resource constraints faced by both Bristol City Council and the voluntary sector; and that there would need to be efforts made to bring new resource into the city as well as to be creative with what we have.

Suggestions for the future

Finally, participants were asked to make recommendations on how partnership working could be maintained and built on in regards to this topic. Headline recommendations included:

- **The continuation of the working groups.** All participants wanted to see the working groups continue in broadly its current form for the time being. There was a feeling that it might need to evolve as hotel accommodation ceases, but there was a desire to maintain a focus on particular individuals. This will require some negotiation and discussion between BCC and the voluntary sector to come up with a shared process for how to identify those individuals which can then be supported through partnership working.
- **Continued efforts to lobby Government to ameliorate the NRPF condition, to provide greater funding for Local Authorities to support those with NRPF and to create a more humane asylum and EU Settlement system.** It was particularly requested that BCC continues to engage with other LAs to make joint representations to Government.
- **The need to capture and share the human stories of what living with NRPF means, as well as the positive stories of lives transformed through partnership working.**
- **Continued efforts to share expertise and build dialogue.** There was a strong feeling that the work of exposing the Council and the voluntary sector to each other's worlds and work was not done. This included maintaining ongoing lines of referral for individuals. It was felt that there should be **particular efforts made to engage with organisations who are working with EEA nationals**, as this is an area where there has been less work in the past but where there is a growing need.
- **Focused efforts on supporting people with mental health needs.** There was a concern raised about the cohort people seeking sanctuary who are likely to 'fall between the cracks' in support as they are too traumatised to be hosted by Bristol Hospitality Network, but don't meet the current thresholds for community care. It was felt that places like Arnos Manor had been great for this group, as there was expert support which enabled people to stabilise their situations and make meaningful progress. Options to continue/expand this type of support and provision were felt to be at the top of people's 'wish lists'.
- **Renewed focus on access to legal support.** Accessing legal support has been key to finding positive pathways for people, but this provision is felt to be significantly

underfunded in Bristol. Bristol Refugee Rights used to provide a service which supported those seeking sanctuary to access legal advice which was funded by BCC, but this funding was discontinued. With the future of the Bristol Impact Fund unclear, it was felt that this needed to be a priority for future funding.

- **An opportunity to showcase partnership working in BCC-provided NRPF accommodation.** All Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide accommodation to some people with NRPF under Section 17 of the Children's Act. It was felt that Bristol City Council had an opportunity in the delivery of this housing to showcase what is possible through partnership with the voluntary sector, and that the model developed [in London by Praxis](#) provided a helpful blueprint for how to do this.