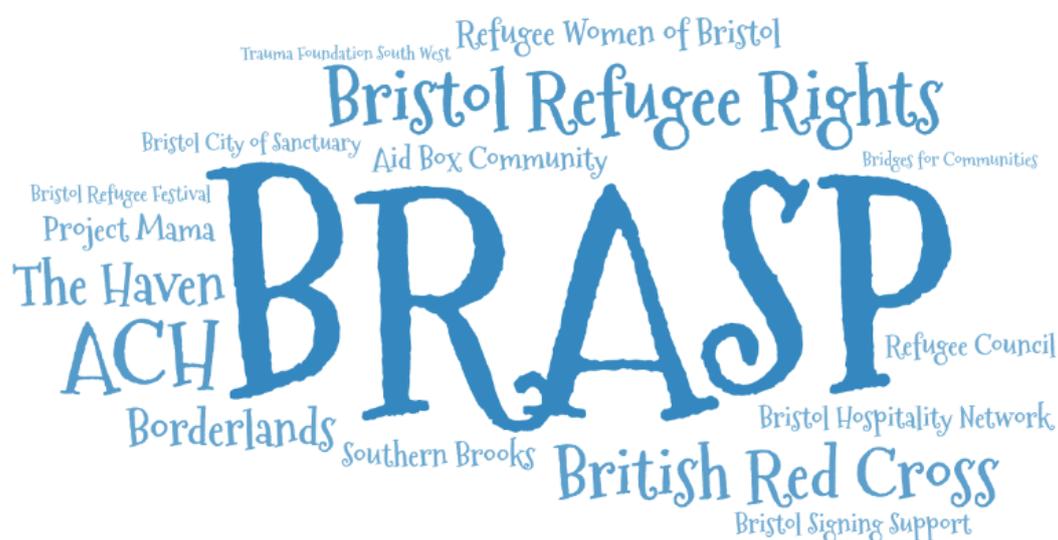


# Lessons Learnt:

## Bristol Refugee and Asylum Seeker Partnership COVID-19 Response

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**With Thanks To:**

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## Lessons Learnt: BRASP COVID-19 Response

### Executive Summary: Achievements and Plans for the Future

#### **Achievements:**

This report presents the achievements of organisations in Bristol which make up the refugee and asylum seeker sector, collectively known as BRASP (Bristol Refugee and Asylum Seeker Partnership) during the initial 9 months of the Covid-19 pandemic:

- #1. **Organisations and individuals showed great resilience** as all rapidly changed what they were doing/how they were doing it to ensure needs were being met.
- #2. **More people accessed more support** (money, food, accommodation, welfare support) as a result of inter-organisational referrals and division of labour.
- #3. **Clarity on each organisations roles and responsibilities increased efficiency and effectiveness;** individual organisations served more users as an increased number of inter-organisational referrals (both between BRASP organisations and with organisations outside of BRASP) were made.
- #4. The rapid switch to virtual engagement coupled with collaborative projects aimed at tackling digital inclusion meant **the sector was able to quickly maintain support remotely/virtually and reach new and different service users.**
- #5. Cross-city relationships with statutory authorities generally improved. **Bristol City Council improved their understanding of the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and provided additional support** to individuals as a result of joint assessment of needs by BRASP organisations (Everyone In Programme).

#### **What we will do in the future**

- #1. Service user voice and need will be at the heart of planning for post-COVID19 services.
- #2. Services will be designed with flexibility and enabling access in mind.
- #3. Services will be designed to improve service user pathways.
- #4. We will be clear about who is doing what and where the gaps are.
- #5. We will communicate and be generous with each other.
- #6. We will develop a shared understanding of shared organisational values and strategic approaches.
- #7. We will strengthen our relationships with statutory bodies.
- #8. We will build on relationships outside of the sector.
- #9. We will be clear about the division of labour and leadership.
- #10. We will learn from other organisations and regions.
- #11. We will explore broader engagement and collaboration across the South West.

#### **What we ask for the future**

We ask statutory organisations, partners from the VCSE to support us to achieve our aims. We ask statutory organisations to work with us to ensure the voice of asylum seekers and refugees is strengthened and heard by decision makers. We ask those outside of BRASP to work with us to be more effective and increase our impact. We ask you to be generous with your time, your knowledge and your communication as we have pledged to be with each other.

## 1. Introduction: Context, Purpose of Study and Methodology

Bristol's refugee support services are made up of 16+ organisations, from grassroots volunteer led, to a branch office of the international Red Cross and almost everything in between. For asylum seekers and refugees this represents opportunity, choice, a safe haven and a whole family of support. However, navigating the journey between these services is not always straightforward and during COVID19, risked becoming a barrier. For services, finding out who was most in need, making sure everyone was getting support, and sharing safety information became an essential part of their COVID19 response.

**BRASP:** Bristol Refugee and Asylum Seeker Partnership (BRASP) is an informal collaboration of 16 refugee and asylum seeker support services located in Bristol and the immediate surrounding area:

*ACH, Aid Box Community, Borderlands, Bridges for Communities, Bristol City of Sanctuary, Bristol Hospitality Network, Bristol Refugee Festival, Bristol Refugee Rights, British Red Cross, Bristol Signing Support, Project Mama, Refugee Council, Refugee Women of Bristol, Southern Brooks, The Haven, Trauma Foundation South West.*

Having worked together, mostly in informal ways, these organisations came together to form this Partnership in 2020. This was enabled by a project led by VOSCUR which began in 2019, before the pandemic.

**Context:** In late January and February of 2020, the first cases of a new Coronavirus, named COVID19, emerged in England. In early March 2020, the first death in England occurred, individuals and organisations started to become concerned about the implications of this new virus; people were told to keep their distance and wash their hands more. By 20 March, government restrictions on businesses and social contact started to be introduced, with a full lockdown announced on 23 March 2020. Messages emerged that older people and those of BAME background were at greater risk.

Bristol asylum seeker and refugee services, many of which were predominantly if not wholly delivered face to face pre-pandemic, were forced to reconsider what they were doing and how they were doing it. There was a renewed effort to work together in response to the crisis.

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this rapid evaluative exercise was to learn from the experience of the organisations which are part of BRASP on the benefits and challenges of collaboration during Lockdowns 1 (March-June 2020) and 2 (November-December 2020). The hope was that organisations would be better prepared for subsequent lockdowns and also for planning for services post-pandemic. BRASP organisations aim to use the findings of this exercise to explore how to improve service delivery and support through more and better collaboration between BRASP members and with others e.g. statutory organisations.

**Methodology:** The evaluation exercise was undertaken through semi-structured interviews with all BRASP partners. An additional list of organisations partners had worked with during COVID19 was identified and a number were selected for interview. The main focus of the semi-structured interviews was on what had been achieved through collaboration, the challenges and on how collaboration could be better in the future.

Partner organisations were asked to share their own monitoring data where it could demonstrate the impact of collaborative work. Because of the focus on how organisations worked together, service users were not involved at this stage, but this report includes a recommendation on how their voices should inform work of the partnership going forward.

## 1. Achievements

**#1. Organisations and individuals showed great resilience** as all rapidly changed what they were doing/how they were doing it to ensure needs were being met.

**#2. More people accessed more support** (money, food, accommodation, welfare support) as a result of inter-organisational referrals and division of labour. The following is a snapshot of what was achieved:

- **Money:**
  - £30,000 to 307 individuals and families (Emergency Winter Grant funding received through Bristol City Council) jointly identified as those most in financial need. Distributed by Bristol Refugee Rights (BRR), British Red Cross, Refugee Women of Bristol, Borderlands and Bristol Hospitality Network (BHN).
  - £52,320 to destitute asylum seekers and refugees in Bristol from British Red Cross Hardship Fund. Referrals by Borderlands, BHN and Bristol City Council (BCC).
  - £40,716 in essential items, supermarket vouchers and grants through Project Mama's Covid Response project.
- **Food:**
  - 225 individuals and families accessed food / financial support from Borderlands, using additional food provided by BRR and referrals from British Red Cross.
  - Aid Box Community Hub received 204 referrals for food from 20 different organisations and made 1360 deliveries to 255 households.
  - Other Bristol Food banks (Non-BRASP) provided food with no entry criteria and/or relaxed referral processes.
- **Accommodation:**
  - 27 people referred to BCC homelessness team and accommodated under the Localisation Act COVID19 provision.
  - BHN has been able to find eight more host households and host nine new asylum seekers (as at 16.12.2020).
- **Other destitution support:**
  - The Haven received £150 from British Red Cross to pay for prescriptions for people in Initial Accommodation until their HC2 forms were issued by the Home Office.
  - BRASP distributed 156 bath towels, 552 bottles of body wash, 264 bottles of Shampoo and over 2000 toothpaste tubes through British Red Cross donations.
  - Over 220 people received smart phone, chromebook, laptop or tablet and over £7000 was distributed in data top ups/packages.
- **New arrivals to the city:**
  - The number of people accommodated by the Home Office in the city grew by around 1/3 in the summer of 2020 with the opening of a temporary Initial Accommodation centre. Several of the organisations mobilised to provide support to those accommodated there including healthcare, clothing and masks, advice and information.

- **Wellbeing:**

- All organisations made wellbeing calls in some form – ranging from brief welfare checks to developing friendships and providing in depth support. Befriending created long lasting mutually supportive relationships within and outside of the community.
- All organisations offered activities to alleviate the anxiety and isolation associated with the pandemic and lockdowns e.g. outdoor meet ups, exercise classes on zoom, wellbeing calls, doorstep chats.

**#3. Clarity on each organisations roles and responsibilities increased efficiency and effectiveness;** individual organisations served more users as an increased number of inter-organisational referrals (both between BRASP organisations and with organisations outside of BRASP) were made.

**#4.** The rapid switch to virtual engagement coupled with collaborative projects aimed at tackling digital inclusion meant **the sector was able to quickly maintain support remotely/virtually and reach new and different service users.** The flexibility of remote/virtual services appealed to some service users more than face to face had pre-COVID19. For some organisations, the efficiencies of telephone support meant more people could be supported.

**#5.** Cross-city relationships with statutory authorities generally improved. **Bristol City Council improved their understanding of the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and provided additional support** to individuals as a result of joint assessment of needs by BRASP organisations (Everyone In Programme).

## 2. Reflections and Challenges

**#1. The switch to virtual engagement was challenging for some service users** (young people were identified as a particular group who struggled with virtual engagement). **The depth of support provided was often limited by the means;** it became harder for some service users to disclose and harder for staff and volunteers to identify if someone was struggling. The perception of service providers was that there was a sense of less autonomy and choice for service users in how and when to engage.

**#2. The sector is heavily reliant on volunteers and it was challenging to maintain connections and relationships.** Engaging asylum seeker and refugee volunteers was particularly challenging for some. Additional training and support was needed.

**#3. Some emergent needs were both more pronounced and harder to meet** e.g. isolation, mental health. The inter-connected nature of some needs e.g. mental health combined with illiteracy was notes particularly challenging. Domestic violence also emerged as an unmet need with women's services seeing an increase in the number of women seeking support.

**#4. Emergency Funding provided opportunities for organisations to build new and deeper relationships with funders.** There was an increased sense of partnership with funders as

organisations and funders all worked towards a common aim. However, organisations may struggle in the longer term to sustain additional activities and the level of funds needed to deliver them.

**#5. Additional benefits came from working with others outside of the sector** including refugee community groups and the City Council; increased needs in relation to Mental Health, Domestic Violence and hate crime meant new partners were involved. More could be achieved if BRASP organisations put more time into building relationships and putting trust in organisations outside of the sector. But a lack of awareness of the challenges and a lack of language support in some statutory bodies/other organisations currently undermines their capacity to work with asylum seekers and refugees.

**#6.** Although all organisations made significant efforts to tackle mental health and isolation, **service users regularly asked for drop-ins to reopen.** It was hard to recreate the community, fun and peer support provided for and enabled through drop-ins. Befriending, aimed at creating long lasting relationships in the community went some way to tackle this.

### 3. What we will do in the future

#### Relationships with service users:

**#1. Service user voice and need will be at the heart of organisations planning for post-COVID19 services.**

**#2. Services will be designed with flexibility and enabling access in mind.**

**#3. Improving service user pathways through and between services** will be further understood and explored.

#### Relationships within the Sector:

**#4. Both service providers and service users will know who is doing what and where the gaps are.**

**#5. We will prioritise communication and being generous with each other, as both are key to ongoing collaboration.**

**#6. We will develop a shared understanding of individual and shared organisations values and strategic approaches.**

#### Relationships with Others:

**#7. We will strengthen the relationship between asylum seeker and refugee (ASR) organisations and statutory bodies** to ensure that ASR community and service users are recognised and visible in city wide assessments of needs in context of COVID19 response:

- We will continue to engage in work by Bristol City Council on those with No Recourse to Public Funds.

- We will hold the city council to account as City of Sanctuary.
- We will continue to support Bristol City Council on their journey to increased understanding of and response to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers as a marginalised group in the city.
- We will ensure asylum seeker and refugee needs are considered as part of city-wide decision making.

**#8.** The sector will continue to **build on relationships outside of the sector** developed and progressed during the pandemic to ensure the needs of asylum seekers and refugees (ASR) are visible and met:

- Where appropriate, joint lobbying/ fundraising and working strategically with other non-ASR partners across the city.
- We will invite VOSCUR / other city leads who can be conduits of our issues, needs and cause, to engage with Bristol Refugee Forum.
- We will lobby for other organisations to increase use of translation and interpreters.
- We will improve connections between statutory and statutory, and statutory and voluntary sector partners as a way of creating clearer pathways for collaboration and referral.

**#9.** We will be **clear about the division of labour and or leadership in relation to engagement outside of the sector** including with statutory bodies and decision makers

- We will explore the use of sector leadership as a way of addressing challenges around engagement outside of the sector.
- Divisions of labour and leadership will be clearly communicated outside of the sector.

### Sharing lessons:

**#10.** We will learn from response by other organisations:

- Both within and outside of BRASP;
- Sharing approaches with other parts of the country.

**#11.** We will explore broader engagement across the South West:

- Supporting new organisations in newer South West dispersal areas.
- South Gloucestershire organisations want to be better informed and connected to Bristol asylum seeker and refugee organisation partners; consider whether BRASP should be named differently so as not to have such a Bristol focus.

## 4. What we ask for the future

We ask statutory organisations, partners from the VCSE to support us to achieve our aims. We ask statutory organisations to work with us to ensure the voice of asylum seekers and refugees is strengthened and heard by decision makers. We ask those outside of BRASP to work with us to be more effective and increase our impact. We ask you to be generous with your time, your knowledge and your communication as we have pledged to be with each other.