

Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol

Bristol City of Sanctuary
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5 June 2020

Dear Marvin Rees,

Impact of COVID-19 on people seeking sanctuary in Bristol

It is starkly evident that the pandemic is affecting communities unequally according to familiar indicators of disadvantage, including ethnicity, age, gender, poverty, mental and physical health and ability. The webinar held on 29th May on Tackling Endemic discrimination laid this out clearly in relation to BAME communities and articulated a powerful determination in the city to seize the opportunity to make long lasting change locally, nationally and internationally in key areas or national life.

Within this bigger picture, issues affecting asylum seekers and residents without recourse to public funds (NRPF) have also been cruelly exposed. Bristol City of Sanctuary and the refugee voluntary and community sector (RCVS) have been working, together with City Council departments, to mitigate these. Certain temporary measures have been put in place during the crisis that have alleviated some of the discrimination asylum seeker and refugees face, and we can't afford to allow the Government to revert to 'business as usual' after the restrictions are lifted, and we urgently need your support with this.

Over the past decade, Bristol City Council has given substantial support to the refugees and asylum seekers. The Council pledged to become a City of Sanctuary in 2011, agreed a motion to alleviate and condemn the policy of destitution amongst asylum seekers in 2015 and introduced an asylum seeker and refugee strategy 2019. There is goodwill and a working relationship developed over many years between the RVCS and the Council. However, the Council has continued to be constrained by government policy from making interventions that would make material improvement to the lives of asylum seekers. We respectfully suggest that there is now a unique opportunity to make real change in this area.

Problems experienced by these communities which have been highlighted during COVID-19 lockdown stem directly from the Government's intention to create a Hostile Environment, in policies developed both before and since that intention was made explicit. Consequences of national policy impact not only the individuals concerned but also public health and public behaviour locally, in a way that is directly counter to the welcoming vision held by the city.

This crisis has shown that some things can, and should be done differently. It is essential that the Council now stands with the Refugee Sector to build on what we have learned works and therefore we are now asking you to take the next step in making Bristol a true City of Sanctuary. We ask you to express publicly and clearly to the Government that the situation as it is for asylum seekers and those with NRPF is simply not tolerable in a fair and just society.

We summarise here the main issues identified in Bristol that illustrate this hostile approach, some of which have been altered temporarily –improvements we MUST not now lose. They must be addressed urgently if we are to move towards the welcoming, compassionate, and respectful response to those in crisis, including refugees and NRPF, to which we are committed as a City of Sanctuary.

1. Replace reporting to UKVI at Patchway Police Station with a digitally recorded system or a landline phone.

The requirement for people with insecure immigration status to report regularly to immigration officials out in Patchway has been highly stressful for those concerned. The requirement has been suspended during lockdown. Other arrangements for reporting can and should be made in the long term, in this digital age.

2. Accept evidence for fresh asylum claims by post or email

It has been an absolute requirement for all refused asylum seekers who wish to tender evidence for a fresh claim (as is their right) to travel to Liverpool to present documents in person. This is costly and stressful. That it is also unnecessary has now made clear. During lockdown, fresh claims are being accepted by post or email.

3. Arrange evictions from asylum support accommodation to coincide with alternative provision of shelter.

The practice of evicting people seeking asylum from their temporary Home Office accommodation within one month, once an asylum claim has been decided, means that everyone, whether refused or granted refugee status, almost inevitably experiences a period of homelessness. This is not in the interests of the city as a whole. (It is currently suspended to the relief of those affected) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/home-office-to-hold-on-evicting-asylum-seekers-from-state-accommodation>

4. Reduce the immigration detention estate on a long term basis to current (lockdown) levels, and hold no detainee for more than 28 days.

The notorious immigration detention estate in the country is at its lowest for many years during the COVID-19 crisis, with some 2000 releases, leaving about 700 detained. This decision begs a fundamental question about the need for a system which costs almost £100 per day per person. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>

5. Ensure IT access across the NASS estate

During lockdown, we all rely on digital communication, for work and to be in touch with friends and family. Absence of Wifi across the NASS estate, combined with extremely low income, and lack of smart phones, has made life especially difficult for the asylum seeking population. Confined to their accommodation and cut off from community, and friends, often with heightened concern for family in countries of origin, has had a negative impact on people's mental health during lockdown which we believe to be disproportionate. School age children have been further disadvantaged in not being able to access and carry out their school work.

6. Raise NASS support by £20 per week in line with the rise in Universal Credit

Subsistence support given by the Home Office to asylum seekers stands at only half the basic level of Universal Credit, i.e. at £37 per week. They are also prohibited from taking any work. The inadequate level of Universal Credit has been acknowledged by Government, and it has consequently been raised by £20 a week for 12 months. The rate for asylum seeker support must also be raised by a minimum of £20 per week. <https://act.refugee-action.org.uk/page/59805/-/1>

7. Lift the ban on working for asylum seekers

The Labour and Green groups in Bristol City Council have supported the national campaign to [Lift the Ban](#) on the right for asylum seekers to work. Many asylum seekers have the skills and the determination to be independent tax-paying members of society. Post-COVID it will make less sense than ever to continue to a policy of enforcing idleness on any sector of the population, and requiring its maintenance solely from the public purse. (The cost of supporting an individual was approximately £10,000 per person per year at 2015 figures¹)

8. Stop health care charges for asylum seekers

There is evidence that the current system of applying health care charges for asylum seekers deters people from accessing vital health services which creates risk to public health <https://act.patientsnotpassports.co.uk>

9. Ensure children of asylum seeking and NRPf families can obtain Free school meals

Funds have also been made available in order to provide free school meals to all children irrespective of their status as having no recourse to public funds

10. Provide shelter for Bristol's homeless and destitute, irrespective of immigration status

In March 2020, the Government provided funding to local authorities to house rough sleepers and homeless people irrespective of immigration status. Bristol has housed some 280 people of whom about one quarter had NRPf. The need for people to have somewhere safe to sleep was recognised in this emergency as a public health issue, and funds have been found in the short term. Rough sleeping does not cease to be a public health concern outside the pandemic, both for the well-being of those who are homeless themselves and the community within which they live.

¹ see [Freedom of information request](#)

Our request to you now is to

1. **Press the Government** to change policy in line with 1-6 above, and indicate support for these measures by public endorsement of relevant campaigns
2. **Press the Government** to Lift the Ban on working for asylum seekers, by endorsing the national campaign to Lift the Ban, and end the current system of healthcare charges for asylum seekers
3. **Adopt a commitment in principle** to continue the provision of free school meals to all entitled families in Bristol, including those who would be entitled but have no recourse to public funds.
4. **Adopt a commitment in principle** to continue to support Bristol's destitute and homeless people into accommodation locally, irrespective of their immigration status or local connection.

Commitment to find ways of housing refused asylum seekers and NRPF city dwellers could be pursued in **partnership between statutory and voluntary sector**. Expertise in understanding and responding to the local population of people who are seeking sanctuary lies largely in the VCS. In Bristol, existing collaboration between voluntary and statutory agencies can be strengthened in shared public commitment to prevent all homelessness, irrespective of immigration status.

A number of local authorities across the UK are actively supporting reform of the asylum system, and making commitments to prevent poverty and homelessness in the city, including amongst residents with NRPF. Such commitments recognise that access to adequate shelter and food for all is a fundamental principle for a progressive and humane society. They also recognise that the problem of destitution is not only one for the individual concerned, but one that has public health implications for the whole population in an area.

Attached is a motion that has recently been passed in Brighton Council

https://present.brighton-hove.gov.uk/documents/s152216/Homelessness%20NoM_April%20HCV4%20LATEST.pdf

[Southwark](#) publicises coordination with the voluntary sector in managing support for those with NRPF.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Signed

Caroline Beatty, Co-Chair, Bristol City of Sanctuary

Rev Richard McKay, Co-Chair Bristol City of Sanctuary,

Chair, Borderlands

Priest of St Nicholas of Tolentino



Bristol City of Sanctuary

Beth Wilson,

Director Bristol Refugee Rights

Sarah Webb,

Co-Chair, Bristol Hospitality Network

Jo Benefield,

Bristol Defend Asylum Seekers Campaign