Newcastle University

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“It’s like rubbing salt on the wound”: the impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown on asylum seekers and refugees

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Executive Summary

The research draws upon a UK-wide survey of service providers working with or for refugees, as well as interviews with service providers, refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow and Newcastle-Gateshead.

For asylum seekers and refugees, the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis overlap with many other challenges and inequalities that pre-dated the pandemic. These pre-existing hardships and the challenges presented by the pandemic, combined to leave many highly vulnerable in this time of crisis.

The response of the sector

- Nearly 90% of service providers felt that they had responded quickly and effectively to the Covid-19 pandemic. Remote working was the biggest challenge identified by service providers, followed by funding uncertainties, issues related to staffing and volunteers, and home schooling.

- Many service providers referred to providing food for service users, using Zoom for online classes and meetings, and continuing to offer, where possible, as many of the services that they had provided before the pandemic. 67% agreed that their volunteers played a key role in their response to the pandemic.

- Those providing services for refugees and asylum seekers have responded in a spirited and flexible manner to the challenges of the pandemic, prioritising the needs of their service users while paying attention to the wellbeing of their staff and volunteers. 91% agreed that their response had improved over time, and 84% had found new ways of working that they will continue to use beyond the pandemic.

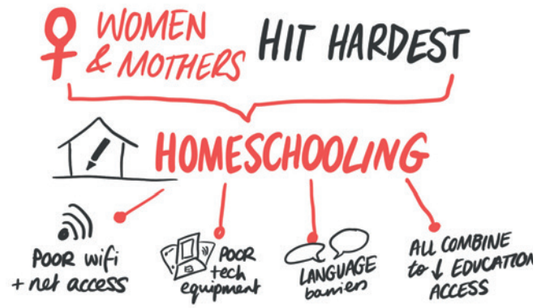
CLOSURE of PUBLIC SPACES

- The requirement to stay at home and the loss of access to physical public spaces and face-to-face activitie were significant factors for increasing isolation and loneliness. The loss of access to the physical premises of support groups that provide asylum seekers and refugees with opportunities to develop a sense of local inclusion and are important for socialising, mental well being, forming daily routines and accessing information, support, and education was particularly challenging.
- Asylum seekers who were alone were especially vulnerable to loneliness during lockdown. Single men who had been trying to claim asylum for several years, and who already experienced isolation and loneliness, were particularly affected.
- Those who arrived in the UK during the pandemic found themselves very isolated with many of the usual sources of advice and support not as accessible as they were before the pandemic.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

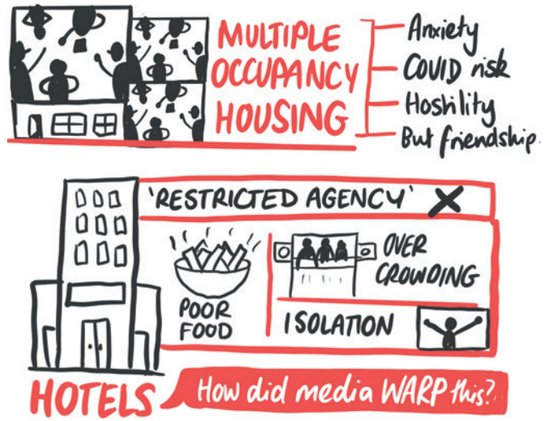
- Digital inequality, such as limited and intermittent Wi-Fi and data access and insufficient access to smartphones, personal computers, or televisions, meant that many asylum seekers and refugees were struggling to access the online spaces that have become especially important for connectivity and wellbeing during the pandemic.
- Digital exclusion is indicative of limited resources and income, but it is also reflective of the restrictive policies that the Home Office places on asylum seekers. Housing for asylum seekers is not provided with Wi-Fi, and asylum seekers are typically unable to sign up for broadband contracts.
- While digital inclusion campaigns made a difference to digital connectivity, many participants in the research continued to have difficulties with internet and smartphone/computer access.

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES



- Extra caring responsibilities during lockdown put pressure on asylum seeker and refugee women. Limited financial and material resources (i.e., money, food, computers, Wi-Fi etc.), poor-quality housing, limited English language skills, and limited support networks have made home schooling and general caregiving very challenging.
- Lockdown meant that many of the women – especially single mothers – had few opportunities to have a break from childcare and to have time for themselves. This negatively impacted on important coping mechanisms, such as visiting support organisations and everyday recreational activities, which put significant stress on the wellbeing and mental health of many of the women.

HOUSING & ACCOMMODATION

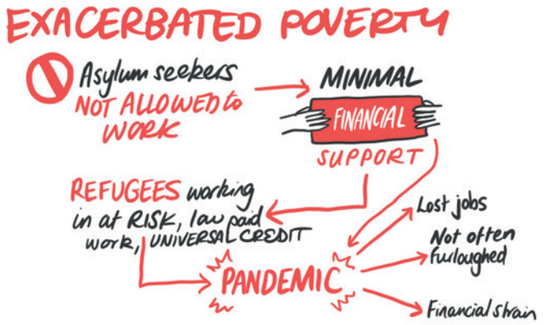


- Having to spend extended periods of time in housing that is of poor quality and contains broken appliances and damaged furniture has been extremely difficult for many of the participants. Repairs and maintenance that were requested during lockdowns were often not carried out, or there was a long period of waiting.
- In multiple-occupancy dispersal housing, the sharing of communal spaces and concerns about other occupants not following social distancing guidelines were creating anxiety about the possible transmission of the virus.
- Staying in hotels during a pandemic posed various difficulties for asylum seekers. Everyday issues included no access to a kitchen to prepare food, poor quality and suitability of food provided by the hotels, and no access to money, as those staying in hotels were initially provided with no financial support; this was heightened by experiences of social isolation and concerns about the transmission of the virus while staying in a hotel.
- For those granted refugee status, moving out of their asylum housing and finding new accommodation, such as social housing or private rental accommodation, and finding furniture and appliances, were made more difficult during the pandemic. This resulted in some people living without various essential items, while others were homeless for several months.

ASYLUM PROCESS

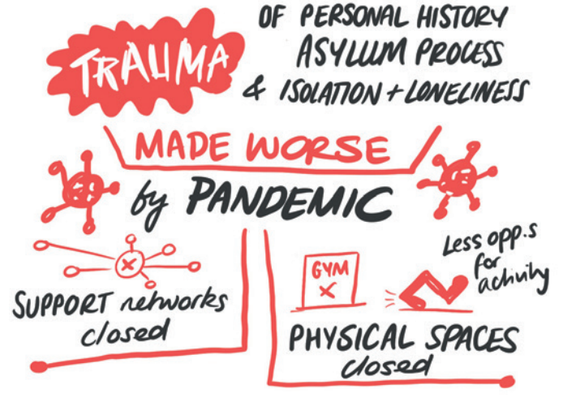
- The long, drawn-out legal process to claim asylum, appeal asylum decisions and find and receive advice about immigration matters was further protracted during the pandemic, increasing existing feelings of uncertainty, desperation, and anxiety.
- For those with refugee status, everyday experiences of waiting and uncertainty also increased during the pandemic. The transition from asylum seeker to refugee was further protracted, resulting in many being stuck in the asylum system despite gaining leave to remain. Waiting and uncertainty around employment opportunities and access to claiming benefits also increased.

FINANCES & EMPLOYMENT



- For many asylum seekers, the Covid crisis has added to their financial precarity. An increased need for food shopping, potentially an increased need to buy medicines, local shops increasing food prices, increased costs for those who have children with them throughout the day are all factors that are heightening their financial exclusion.
- Asylum seekers were not able to utilise online shopping or certain online services during lockdown and so had to leave their homes to purchase essential items, making them more vulnerable and exposed to the Covid-19 virus.
- For those with refugee status, the pandemic has put further pressure on their precarious finances and employment. Many participants lost their jobs at the start of lockdown and were not offered the opportunity to be furloughed.

HEALTH & WELLBEING



- For many, pre-existing mental health problems have been made worse during the pandemic, with the challenges highlighted in this report placing extra pressure on wellbeing and mental health.
- Understanding Covid-19 protocols and health advice was challenging, especially for those with limited English language skills, as was access to healthcare and general support.

1. Introduction

For asylum seekers and refugees, the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis overlap with a range of challenges and inequalities that pre-dated the pandemic. These pre-existing hardships and the challenges presented by the pandemic, combined to leave many highly vulnerable in this time of crisis. As indicated in the report title, Amma, an asylum seeker in Newcastle-Gateshead, said "It was difficult before Covid. With Covid, it's like rubbing salt on the wound.' Many of the refugees and asylum seekers we spoke to felt that their lives were already in a state of lockdown as they were restricted in many domains of life including housing, education, finance, and employment. For example, Joseph, an asylum seeker from Central Africa said:

> *'Yeah, but I can say that when you're living the life of an asylum seeker, it's a very limited life. We are limited. I can say, we are already in lockdown. You can't work, you can't study. You can't do anything. You're already in lockdown. There is only a few places that you can go to, but beside that, there's nothing else. There's nothing else. When the lockdown came, it made things worse again, for us, as asylum seekers, it made things worse.' (Joseph, asylum seeker, male, Central Africa, 40-49 years old, Glasgow)*

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, we set out to explore the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow, Scotland, and in Newcastle-Gateshead, in the North-East of England. We focused on these cities because they are key points of dispersal with established asylum-service infrastructures. We explored both the response of organisations that provide services to these communities – some of which are staffed or coordinated by refugees and asylum seekers themselves – and the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. In the following sections, we examine how lockdown and the pandemic more generally presented both new and continued difficulties for asylum seekers and refugees. We focus on various overlapping issues, including the response of the sector, closure of public spaces, isolation and loneliness, increased caring responsibilities, digital exclusion, housing and accommodation, the asylum process, finance and employment, and finally health and wellbeing.

2. How we did the research

To explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was important for us to allow refugees, asylum seekers, and service providers to express their opinions and share their experiences in their own words. To do this, we conducted interviews with 50 refugees and asylum seekers (30 in Glasgow and 20 in Newcastle-Gateshead) and with 20 service providers, 10 in each city. The sample of asylum seekers and refugees included 19 men and 31 women, 34 asylum seekers and 16 refugees. Their ages ranged from 19 to 50, and countries of birth comprised Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey, Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Jordan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Syria, Western Sahara, Indonesia, Libya, and the Kurdistan territory. To maintain anonymity of the participants, all the names used in the report are pseudonyms, and we refer to their region of origin rather than their specific country of origin to protect their confidentiality.

We also conducted a short nationwide survey of organisations providing services for asylum seekers and refugees. The survey was promoted through direct approaches to organisations, via mailing lists, social media, and networking groups that these organisations are often affiliated with. We received 95 responses from organisations across the UK, including those with a main office in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland and in each of the regions of England. The main services provided by these organisations included welfare support (57%); education and/or language classes (51%); food (46%); arts and cultural activities (41%); housing/accommodation (30%); counselling/therapy (17%); and medical/health services (16%). Those who completed the survey ranged from very small organisations with a handful of staff through to much larger agencies with offices across the country. Over 90% of the organisations that responded had volunteers helping to provide their services. To supplement our survey findings, we reviewed the online presence of 40 organisations that provide services for asylum seekers and refugees to gain additional insights into changes to service provision in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some key terms:

Refugee, according to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is any person who: "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."
In the UK, refugee status is given to those who are deemed to meet this definition. In the UK, refugees are normally given five years' leave to remain, at which point they must then apply for additional leave.

Asylum seeker is a person who has formally applied for asylum (i.e., to be given the recognition that they are a refugee) having left their country of origin and is waiting to hear about the outcome of their application. Everyone has the legal right to seek asylum. Asylum seekers are not allowed work, cannot choose where to be housed and cannot claim mainstream welfare benefits. A recent report confirms that many asylum seekers in the UK experience destitution: "Destitution means not having access to the essentials we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean without the support of others. This includes access to food, shelter, suitable clothing and basic washing facilities." (Refugee Survival Trust and British Red Cross, 2021: 7)

Section 95 support is a form of housing and financial support provided to asylum seekers if they do not have housing and cannot afford to meet their basic needs. This support stops once the claim for asylum has been concluded. Section 95 support includes accommodation and subsistence support but in the rare cases where an applicant already has accommodation, it will be subsistence-only support. This increased to £39.63 per week from £37.75 in June 2020.

3. The response of the sector

A key aim of our research was to consider how service providers who work with refugees and asylum seekers were responding to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to note that asylum seekers and refugees have played crucial roles in the running of many of these services both before and during the pandemic; they participate through volunteering, activism, and community engagement work, and several of the organisations were led by refugees or had staff in key roles who had a refugee background. With respect to the first lockdown in March 2020, 53% of service providers said they were confident about how their organisation should respond to the unfolding situation, while 51% said they had no option but to close their offices; many switched to online platforms and needed to find new ways of providing support. Nearly 90% of service providers felt that they had responded quickly and effectively.

Service providers were asked to reflect back to the start of the first lockdown and use words to express their feelings about the situation they faced: 'challenging', 'worried', 'community spirited' and 'frustrated' were the words and phrases that were the most popular. Some other sentiments expressed by service providers included:

> *'We had no choice but to work on the ground because of the desperate situation people less well off than us were in.'*
>
> *'Thereafter, we quickly became proactive in terms of providing sewing machines to refugee families with experience as tailors, and they made thousands of facemasks for the local Scottish community.'*
>
> *'As an organisation, I think we felt completely focused - yes there were challenges, but we were determined to overcome them because the individuals we support are so important to us. We were determined to work out creative ways to overcome any obstacles that the pandemic put in our way.'*

During the first lockdown, 89% of service providers were extremely or very worried about the impact of the pandemic on asylum seekers or refugees. 80% were able to maintain regular contact with service users. Although around 75% of organisations had to cancel in-person provision, an impressive 88% moved what they could online. Nearly 20% of respondents said that some of their staff were furloughed.

Remote working was the biggest challenge identified by service providers, followed by funding uncertainties, issues related to staffing and volunteers, and home schooling. Only 39% of respondents were confident that their organisation had the right resources to see them through the pandemic, and 34% were confident that their organisation had the right resources to support refugees and asylum seekers. 62% were confident that their staff/colleagues had the resilience to continue to work through the pandemic. 84% said that the response of their organisation had been effective. These responses collectively underline the incredible commitment and dedication of staff working in the sector, as well as the chronic lack of funding available to support their activities and service provision.

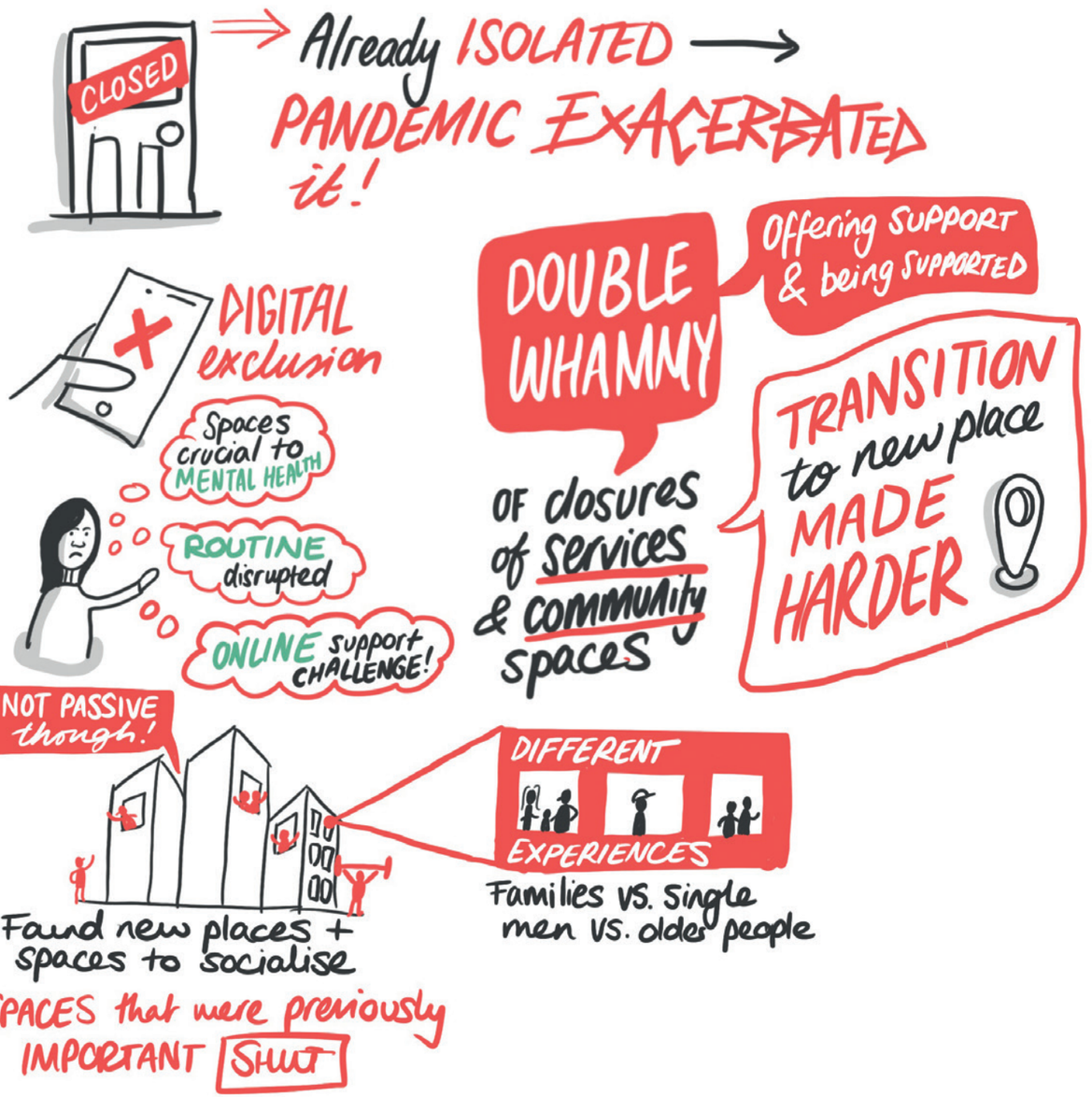
Many service providers referred to providing food for service users, using Zoom for online classes/meetings, and continuing to offer as many of the services that they had provided before the pandemic as possible. 67% agreed that their volunteers played a key role in their response to the pandemic. In addition, many service providers said they had reviewed their services, provided new services in response to the pandemic and even secured additional funding. Here are some examples of responses we received from organisations about some of the services they provided:

> *'We were providing food support electronically, providing devices and data, providing advice via telephone, introducing a freephone number to keep in touch.'*
>
> *'We've started a couple of new projects, including grocery deliveries. Weekly doorstep visits to refugees and asylum seekers mean that we can maintain a bit of contact. We're reminding people that they are not forgotten. We can support with any issues arising.'*
>
> *'We moved to the cloud, less reliance on paper and invested time and money in making sure our staff felt supported emotionally throughout.'*
>
> *'Our original focus was on supporting a small number of refugee families with wraparound care to help them become independent. At the start of the pandemic, we became aware of other refugees and families of asylum seekers living in our town. Some of them were not even receiving the £37 per week from the Home Office but had been relying on family and friends for support – and that became very difficult when the family and friends were hit financially by Covid-19. We therefore introduced a whole new programme to support this second cohort, taking them food (later supermarket vouchers) and providing laptops, tablets, clothes, furniture, textbooks.'*
>
> *'We developed additional provision of social opportunities (online cooking classes and yoga classes) for people seeking asylum/refugees.'*
>
> *'We were able to effectively run our helpline from remote working places and even coped with a rise in demand during the first lockdown.'*

When asked to reflect on the overall impact of the pandemic on their organisation, 78% of service providers agreed that it had encouraged them to review their priorities. 91% agreed that their response had improved over time, and 84% had found new ways of working that they will continue to use beyond the pandemic. 68% agreed that it focused their work on what really matters, and 60% agreed that they had made longer-term changes for the better.

Overall, these responses indicate that those providing services for refugees and asylum seekers have responded in a spirited and flexible manner to the challenges of the pandemic, prioritising the needs of their service users while paying attention to the wellbeing of their staff and volunteers. In many cases, the responses went well beyond the original remit of the organisations and stretched their already limited resources, as they stepped in to provide critical services and support. 75% of responding organisations were worried about the continued impact of the pandemic on refugees and asylum seekers. 99% expressed some form of concern about government support for asylum seekers and refugees, and 87% agreed that the treatment and management of asylum seekers by the government made them highly vulnerable in this time of crisis.

4. Closure of public spaces and increasing social isolation and loneliness



Asylum seekers and refugees experience high rates of social isolation and loneliness (Christodoulou, 2015). The onset of the pandemic and subsequent national/regional lockdowns heightened these issues. Our survey with asylum-service providers showed that 84% of respondents (76 organisations/groups) listed social isolation as one of the biggest challenges for service users. For most of the interview participants, the requirement to stay at home and the loss of access to physical public spaces and face-to-face activities were very challenging. In particular, the vast majority of the organisations that asylum seekers and refugees visit for support were no longer allowed to open their doors. Community groups, religious centres, English classes, counselling services, children's groups and support groups for food, clothing and hardship funds had to close. For many, visiting these spaces enables them to develop a sense of local inclusion and is important for socialising, mental wellbeing and accessing information, support, and education. In addition, these spaces provide important opportunities for learning English, for volunteering and forming daily routines. For those who are in the process of claiming asylum, and consequently have limited rights, money, and networks, access to these spaces can be of particular importance. Consider the following quotes from two female asylum seekers:

> *'Before Covid,... I used to attend community groups, especially the Kurdish Women's Group – I used to go there a lot, because they had lots of activities and stuff we could do. And coming to the UK, I felt really alone and kind of depressed, because I felt isolated. But that group was open, and we could go there, and I could meet my fellow people, the people that spoke my language, and I could communicate with them and... you know. Sometimes when I just spoke to them, my mind was kind of away from all the stuff that I had left back home. But now, I don't have this, and this is just dragging me down even more. Before, it was really good, because I used to go there a lot. We used to do activities, and we used to talk about mental health, English classes, and different activities. But now, I'm just home alone. It's really hard.' (Aska, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

> *'Because it felt like I'm doing something. I'm not just sitting at home and all the time thinking about how my case is going to be and what the next problem is going to be. It was just I kept myself really busy and to be honest it was for my own mental health as well. Because when you're an asylum seeker, all you've got to think about is how the Home Office is going to make a decision on your application. So, for my own mental health volunteering has always been very important to me. Because of all the Coronavirus and lockdown, none of that could happen.' (Nasrin, asylum seeker, female, South Asia, 20-29 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

As the quotes illustrate, loss of access to physical spaces of support has had a range of negative impacts. For Aska, her social isolation increased, and her mental health suffered as she no longer could visit one of the few places where she socialises and has contact with other people. For Nasrin, not being able to volunteer meant that she lost an important way to distract herself from the difficulties of her protracted asylum case, which was also an important strategy to look after her mental wellbeing.

Various staff and volunteers of support groups highlighted the difficulties of closing their physical premises. For instance, Jean who is a refugee from Central Africa and runs a community group in Newcastle-Gateshead described the impacts of closing the group's community centre:

> *'I mean that's without a choice [using online spaces]. If they tell me, "Do you choose to do that?" I won't choose that. I feel a lot of distance to people. Our community group is about a subculture, people come from social isolation and this Covid, it really increases our social isolation which is not good mentally and other things. When you come together, you laugh, you see other friends, maybe sometimes you shake hands, but now, because of the Covid, you cannot at the moment which is really sad. We don't have a choice... I mean for our members, it's a second home. To them it is their second home. When you cannot access your home, you know what I mean. So it's sad...' (Jean, refugee, male, Central Africa, 40-49 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

Jean highlighted that at the heart of what the community group offers is a physical space to bring socially isolated people together, which he believed is not easily replicated online. Indeed, in the survey of service providers, over half mentioned lack of internet access and Wi-Fi as a significant challenge for their service users; moreover, remote working was by far the biggest challenge for service providers, with nearly 85% of respondents selecting this option. This illustrates that for the most vulnerable and isolated in society, access to physical public spaces of support is of particular importance for their wellbeing, which has – of course – been jeopardised during the pandemic.

The same too can be said about urban public spaces and venues that are important for socialising, spending time in, and learning about the new city and country in which asylum seekers and refugees find themselves. For instance, social spaces such as gyms, football pitches, cafes, and retail shops play an important role in forming everyday routines and building relationships. In the following quote, Ahmet, a male asylum seeker, talked about the difficulty of not having access to social spaces and social activities, such as having a coffee with a friend:

> *'It's been really hard for me and for asylum seekers because already we don't have money to spend outside but in the past, we had freedom, at least we can go out, get a coffee sometimes with our friends but not anymore, we are stuck in our houses, we can't go out.' (Ahmet, asylum seeker, male, West Asia, 30-39 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

In the next quote, Hagos, a male refugee, highlighted how his daily routine has been affected:

> *'Oh, yes, obviously. I was going to the gym and I also lost two courses from college, art and fashion skills, and English, so yes, the two courses, we are not doing them any longer. Also, I was going to the gym and sometimes, once a week or every so often, I was going to Phoenix Club, it's a martial arts gym. Also, I had started a job, but the job's closed now. So, it has changed, all these things, it has changed 360 degrees.' (Hagos, refugee, male, East Africa, 20-29 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

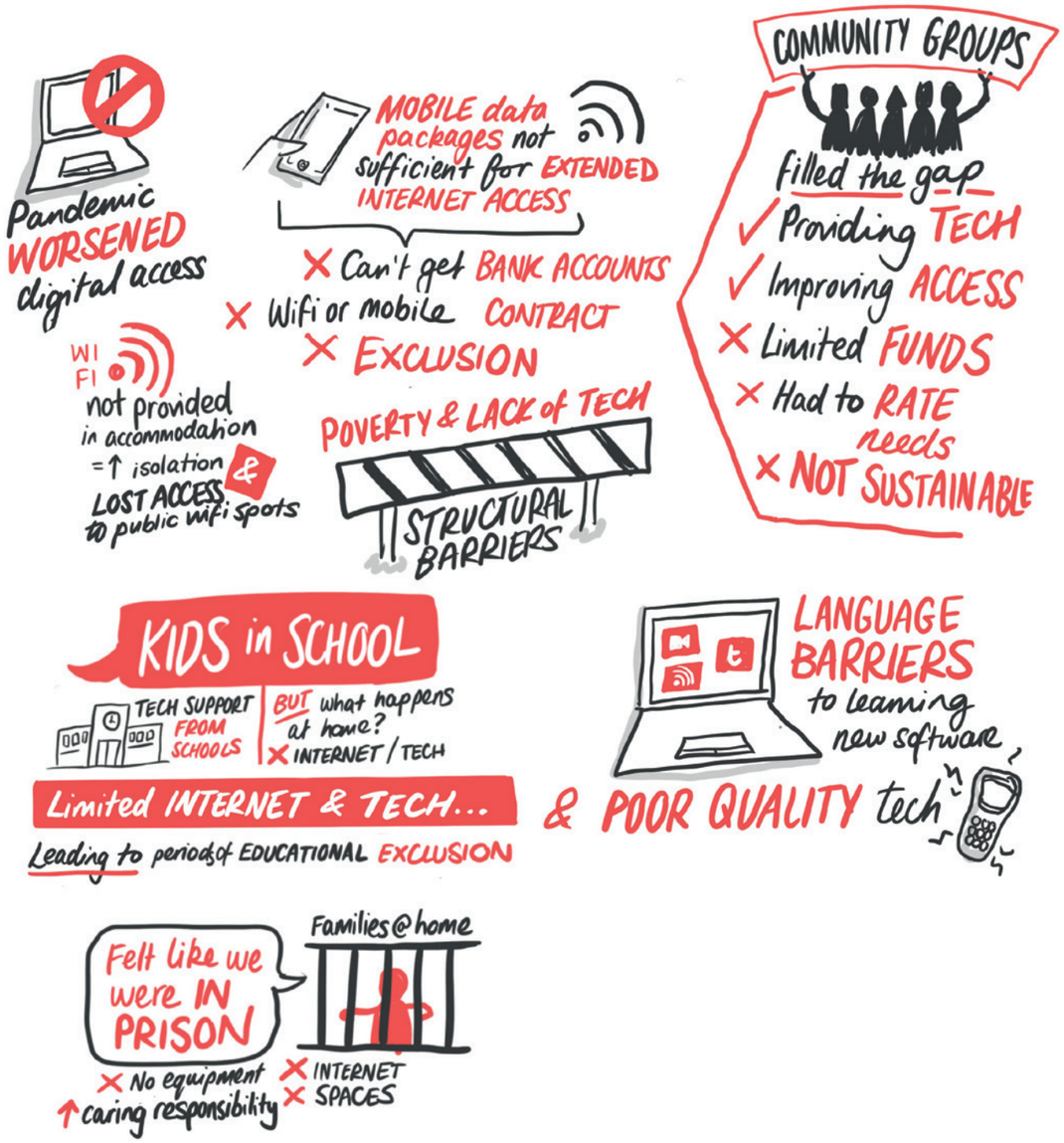
Asylum seekers who were alone and did not come to the UK with family members were especially vulnerable to loneliness during lockdown. Single men who had been trying to claim asylum for several years, and who already experienced isolation and loneliness, were particularly affected. For example, Balan who has been seeking asylum for over 11 years and lives in dispersal accommodation in Glasgow, talked about how his isolation and loneliness had been made worse during the pandemic:

> *'I'm in a situation that I have no one to talk to if I want to talk to someone, I have no one, so it's really hard. Most of the time I feel really low. I'm on the medication for depression and anxiety and all sorts of things. Before lockdown, if I was feeling low, I would just go to the mosque, see people there. I would go to the park, but the area in Glasgow where I live, there is no mosque near here. I feel like I'm just left by myself alone.' (Balan, asylum seeker, male, South Asia, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

Those who arrived in the UK during the pandemic found themselves very isolated, with many of the usual sources of advice and support not as accessible as they were before the pandemic. For example, Rebin – a male asylum seeker who came to the UK with his family – talked about their experiences of arriving during lockdown:

> *'It was very difficult [arriving during the first lockdown of the pandemic] because a lot of organisations who are supposed to be helping asylum seekers, I tried many of them, to phone them for different kinds of help, for example with the kids most importantly who are very bored but these organisations, none of them were answering the phone… so I was going school by school to see, with the very little English I have, to see if they would take them.' (Rebin, asylum seeker, male, 30-39 years old, Middle East, Glasgow)*

5. Digital exclusion



Digital inequality meant that many asylum seekers and refugees were struggling to access the online spaces that have become especially important for connectivity and wellbeing during the pandemic. Many had limited and intermittent Wi-Fi access, relying on Wi-Fi provided in public buildings like libraries and buying mobile data packages from their very limited personal budgets. In addition, many did not have sufficient access to smartphones, personal computers, or televisions. Consider the following quote from Obioma, a single mum asylum seeker in Glasgow:

> *'Yeah, talk about the pandemic, there's actually a lot of challenges especially when the pandemic started last year, I think about February or March. When we were first placed on lockdown it was very terrible and why I use the word terrible is because there was no opportunity for you to have contact with anybody because we did not have the devices. We only have a phone that didn't really have internet on it. Just a simple phone and so it was like you were locked in. It was like a prison because you couldn't go out. If you don't have any TV, you didn't have internet, you don't have access to any form of information. So, we're just locked in, including the children. The children had to go through this terrible moment too.' (Obioma, asylum seeker, female, West Africa, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

As highlighted in the quote, the requirement to stay at home coupled with experiences of digital exclusion – especially during the first lockdown – meant that Obioma and her family had very limited contact with the outside world, compounding feelings of isolation and loneliness. Obioma described the situation as 'like a prison'.

Digital exclusion – or what Mulvey et al (2020) call digital poverty – is indicative of limited resources and income, but it is also reflective of the restrictive policies that the Home Office put on asylum seekers. For instance, housing for asylum seekers is not provided with Wi-Fi, and asylum seekers are typically unable to sign up for broadband contracts. Consider the following quote:

> *'As asylum seekers, we are not allowed to make any contract and for any good broadband you need to make a contract for 18 months not 12 months and to have a credit history, you need a bank account.' (Raim, asylum seeker, female, South Asia, 40-49 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

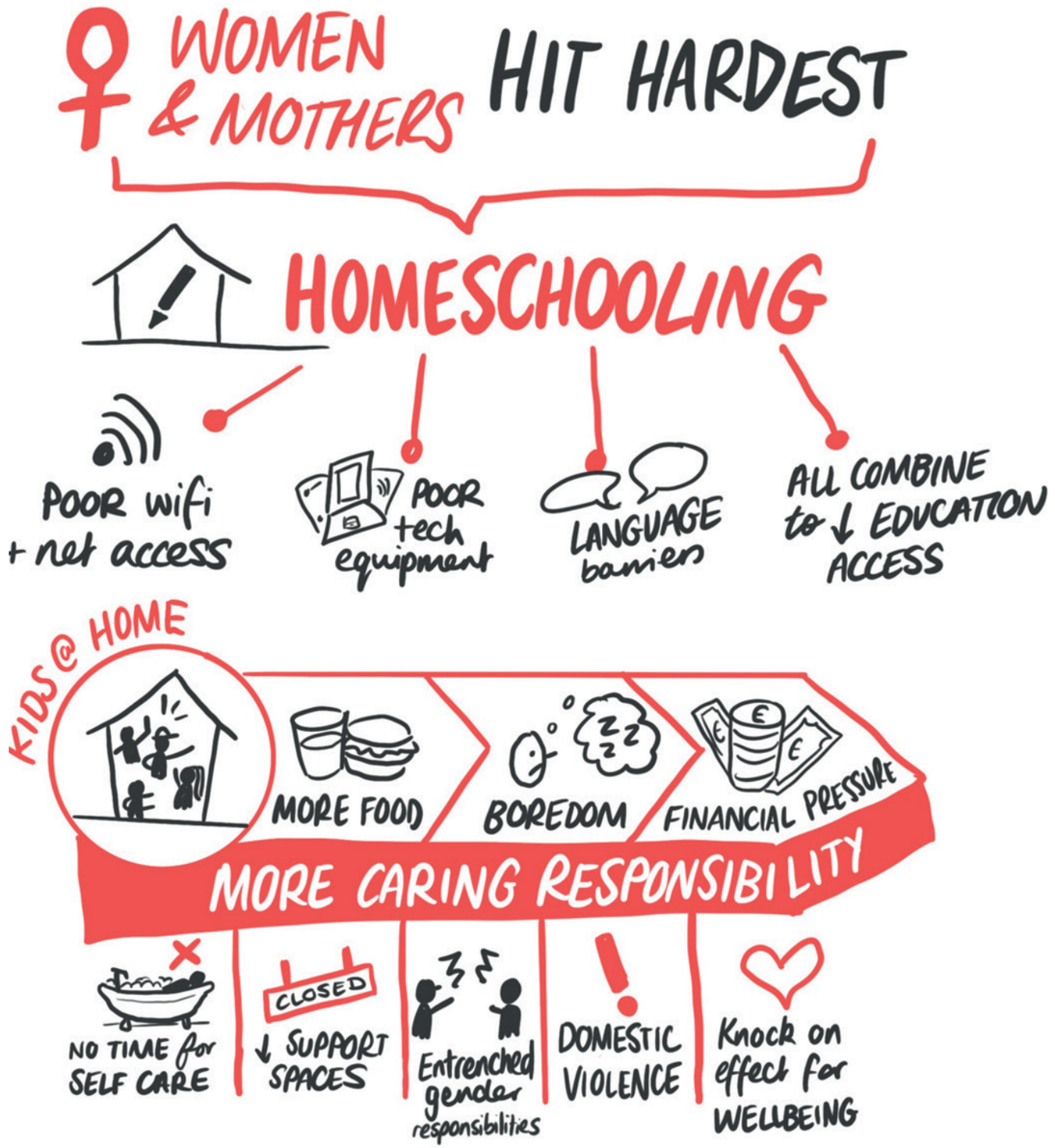
Through the support of digital inclusion campaigns, the online and digital connectivity of many of the participants improved as the pandemic went on. Various organisations in Newcastle upon Tyne, Gateshead and Glasgow provided asylum seekers and refugees with mobile data packages and digital technology, such as smartphones and tablets. While these campaigns made a difference to the digital inclusion of many asylum seekers and refugees, many participants continued to have difficulties with internet and smartphone/computer access. Consider the following quotes:

> *'It's very difficult especially for the kids because even until now we don't have a TV. A number of days ago we were given a laptop and some internet data from a place in Drumchapel, but because of the megabytes the speed is very low. It's not enough to even entertain the kids. The laptop is very slow, it doesn't work at all, so it's not really of much use. It's an old type but even the data as well because of how slow it is it's not useful to the kids to relieve their boredom.' (Kani, asylum seeker, male, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

> *'Sometimes I'm begging, I'm begging the different organisations for help, it just depends. I say that I'm struggling with the data, can you come assist me with that? It all depends. If I'm lucky someone will send me data, and that is good, but it's not something I'm getting all of the time, it's very, very difficult for me.' (Joseph, asylum seeker, male, Central Africa, 40-49 years old, Glasgow)*

In the first quote, Kani illustrated how his family only had one laptop to share and no television. The laptop ran very slowly, so it did not work well, and it was not suitable for entertaining his children. In the second quote, Joseph highlighted his dependence on the irregular provision of internet data and the difficulties this created for him.

6. Increased caring responsibilities



Extra caring responsibilities during lockdown – such as home schooling and additional childcare and housework – put significant pressure on asylum-seeker and refugee parents (Mulvey et al, 2020). This was particularly an issue for asylum-seeker and refugee women, given that they generally have more caregiving responsibilities. Most of the women who participated in the research lived with their children. Many were single parents with limited material and financial resources, alongside limited support networks, which made extra caring responsibilities very challenging. The closure of schools and home-schooling were particularly difficult. All the women struggled financially, and several families did not have sufficient access to computers, smartphones, and the internet, making it difficult for their children to access online classes and educational resources. For some, having limited English language skills also made it hard to assist their children with learning and to liaise with schools and teachers. For instance, Lania – a single mother and refugee – said:

> *'No one has helped me and no one has been in contact with me education wise. One of my kids is in P5, one of my kids is just going into P1 and the other one is in high school first year. The one in high school, they say everything is online, you need to do homework online but as you can tell, I can't speak English and that language barrier, I can't support my kids. They can't even access online for them to do education. My children have fallen behind dramatically because firstly I can't help them because of my English and secondly because we don't have internet access and third because we don't have an iPad or anything like that. We just use the phone. Even we're struggling with that.' (Lania, refugee, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

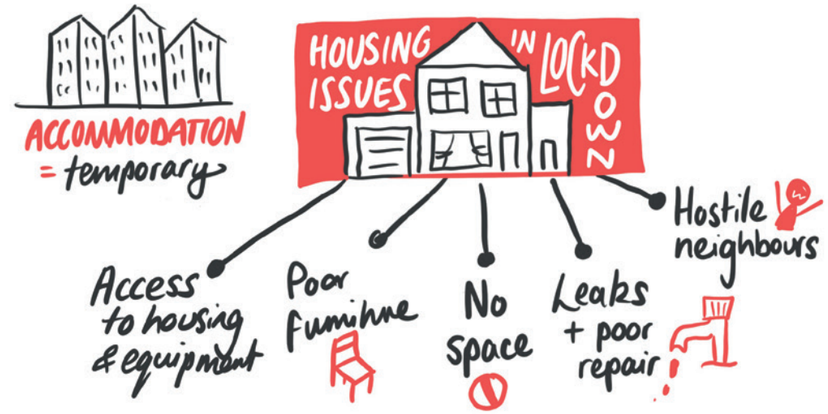
As she said, Lania had difficulties accessing support, she had no internet or computer, and did not speak English, all contributing to her children falling behind in their education. Keeping children occupied and fed at home with very limited resources was another challenge. For many, extra caring responsibilities put additional financial pressures on their already limited budgets. For example, Evin – a single mother and a refugee – talked about the increased financial pressure to entertain and look after her children at home:

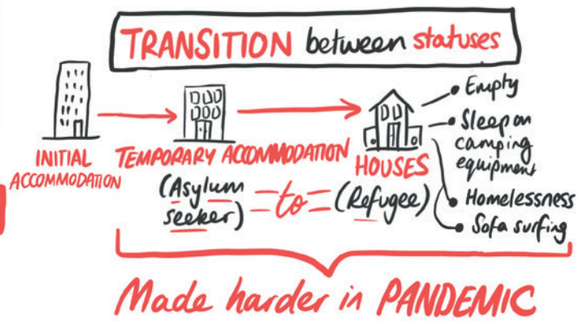
> *'I feel like there's more financial pressure on me as a parent because there are more demands because they are home, the children are bored, obviously they need more money to spend on food. Because they are bored at home, they have nothing to do, they ask for toys and different stuff. I'm on Jobseekers Allowance so it's not that much I get. Financially I feel like there is a lot of pressure.' (Evin, refugee, female, Middle East, 20-29 years old, Glasgow)*

Lockdown and the closure of schools meant that many of the women – especially single mothers – had few opportunities to have a break from childcare and to have time for themselves. This negatively impacted on important coping mechanisms, such as visiting support organisations and everyday recreational activities, which put significant stress on the wellbeing and mental health of many of the women. Obioma – a single mother and asylum seeker – stated:

> *'Yeah, it was much easier when they went to school because that time when they go to school, then my brain can settle down, refocus and realign with the things that are left for me to do. To do my own things. I get it done. If I have to go to one of the organisations and engage and meet other people, I can do that. During the lockdown, all that is not possible. So, it's been difficult on me also, especially on my mental health, it's not been easy.' (Obioma, asylum seeker, female, West Africa, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

7. Housing and accommodation





Many asylum seekers live in housing and accommodation that is considered poor quality and disadvantaged (Home Affairs Committee, 2017). For those who have been granted refugee status, it can be a struggle to access suitable housing, and refugee experiences of homelessness and destitution are not uncommon (Refugee Council, 2017). In the research, opinions about housing were varied, ranging from those who were relatively satisfised with where they were living to those who were extremely worried about the condition of their housing. For those who were experiencing housing difficulties, lockdown and the legal requirement to stay at home had exacerbated the challenges posed by their accommodation. In multiple-occupancy dispersal housing, the sharing of communal spaces and concerns about other occupants not following social distancing guidelines was creating anxiety about the possible transmission of the virus. For instance, Ahmet – a male asylum seeker living in Newcastle-Gateshead – reflected on the difficulties of multiple-occupancy housing during lockdown:

> *'I don't feel safe at all because we are six and some of my flatmates are going out regularly… Six people living under the same roof and it is not safe in these Coronavirus times. It's impossible [to stay safe] because we are using the same bathroom, kitchen, everything. We are passing time in our own rooms but sometimes we are going around the house and we are using the same sinks in the bathroom. We are trying our best to clean the bathroom regularly but I think if someone gets Coronavirus, we will all end up with the virus.' (Ahmet, asylum seeker, male, West Asia, 30-39 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

Having to spend extended periods of time in housing that is of poor quality and contains broken appliances and damaged furniture has been extremely difficult for many of the participants. Repairs and maintenance that were requested during lockdowns were often not carried out, or there was a long period of waiting. This was leaving asylum seekers in houses with repair issues for several months, all of which was exacerbating the poor quality of the housing. Consider the following quote from Raim, a female asylum seeker and mother in Newcastle-Gateshead:

> *'…the house conditions were unbearable. If you call them [the housing group], they will not sort your issue immediately. For six months one of our bedroom roofs was leaking and nobody came to fix it. It was not leaking from a corner of the roof; it was a straight line starting from one end and goes to the other end of the room. In the middle of the night when it's raining, I've had to put a basket or box in the middle of the room… This was in lockdown and lockdown was a simple excuse that they used to say that they don't have anyone to come out.' (Raim, asylum seeker, female, South Asia, 40-49 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

Broken furniture and child safety hazards were putting significant stress on asylum-seeker parents. Aska – an asylum seeker in Glasgow – who had a baby during the first lockdown, lived in a flat containing only the most basic furniture, much of which was in need of repair. The bed was in such a bad condition that she and her baby often had to sleep on the floor. In the following quote, Aska discussed the difficulty of her housing:

> *'My first main issue is accommodation. As you can see, I'm living in a flat, and you can see that it's pretty empty. And I have a child, and the house is not safe for the kid to move around, so I always need to carry her. Like, accommodation-wise, I don't feel safe that I am in this house. Because of Covid, they have delayed everything. I have brought it up a few times that I don't feel safe in there, but things have been delayed…' (Aska, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

Some participants were housed in buildings within hostile communities and had experienced racism and hostility. Lockdown – of course – meant that people had to spend more time at home, so living in environments with hostile neighbours added further to the challenges of the pandemic. For example, Lania, who is a refugee living in Glasgow, talked about experiences of racism in her housing block and how she felt that the pandemic was stopping any chance of her being moved out:

> *'I am really stressed out about the accommodation. I feel like it's not going to be fixed any time soon because of Covid… The place we live in is a three-storey apartment block. We live on the highest level. The people in the block are really difficult to live with. Randomly they put rubbish in front of our door so we don't go out. I've been racially harassed a lot. I feel like I'm not welcome. They keep giving me racial abuse. It's just really difficult. Accommodation wise I've never been happy.' (Lania, refugee, female, Middle East, 40-49 years old, Glasgow)*

Since March 2020, the Home Office has increased the use of hotels as sites of 'contingency accommodation' for asylum seekers. The increased use of hotels is primarily due to the 'lack of flow' and speed in the asylum system, rather than a rise in asylum applications (Refugee Council, 2021). Many participants in the research had stayed in hotels, and these were primarily people who had arrived in the UK just before or during the pandemic. For the majority, staying in hotels during a pandemic posed various difficulties. As hotels are generally intended for short stays, staying for several weeks or months was especially challenging. Everyday issues included no access to a kitchen to prepare food, the poor quality and suitability of food provided by the hotels, no access to money as those staying in hotels were initially provided no financial support, experiences of social isolation and concerns about the transmission of the virus while staying in a hotel with many other people. In the following quote, Omar, a male asylum seeker, reflected on his experience of staying in a hotel:

> *'… they put me in a hotel… In this hotel they just give you food without money. A problem in the hotel is the food is not good. And it's not enough. Most asylum seekers do not normally eat this type of food. For example, people from the Middle East are from another culture, they have different food. Also, you know, with lockdown, and putting people in hotel, they are not able to be active. You stay in a small room… It's very bad for people in hotels because, you know, you are in prison not in a hotel. You can stay in [a] hotel and be ok for one week, ten days, two weeks. But if you're in hotel for more than six months, five months, four months, it's not a hotel. It's a prison because you just have four walls.' (Omar, asylum seeker, male, Middle East, 40-49 years old, Glasgow)*

After asylum seekers are granted refugee status, they must move out of their asylum housing and find new accommodation, such as social housing or private rental accommodation. This is generally a difficult process and going through these changes during lockdown was especially challenging. Alaya, who is now a refugee and lives in Newcastle-Gateshead, explained how furnishing their new house with very little money and no access to charity and second-hand shops because of lockdown meant that they had to live without various essential items. For example, they had to sleep on blow-up beds and use a mobile electric stove for cooking for several weeks. John, who is from North Africa and lives in Newcastle-Gateshead, was granted refugee status during the first lockdown in 2020. Due to the difficulties of lockdown and navigating the housing market for the first time, John initially was unable to find any suitable accommodation and he ended up staying on his friend's sofa until he found a flat in the autumn of 2020. Consider the following quote from Alaya:

> *'Yes. We were struggling to get a cooker. We were using an electric stove for like the first two months I think and then in terms of beds and stuff we had airbeds because we couldn't get anything delivered. We couldn't buy this stuff. There were no charity shops open to actually go and buy something from. So, it was very difficult for the first few months.' (Alaya, refugee, female, South Asia, 16-19 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

8. The asylum process

With the shutdown of much of the economy and temporary closure of many civil and government departments, waiting and uncertainty – which are common everyday experiences for asylum seekers and refugees anyway (Rotter, 2015) – have increased during the pandemic. In particular, the long, drawn-out legal process to claim asylum, appeal asylum decisions and to find and receive advice about immigration matters is further protracted. With some waiting several years for the first decision on their asylum case, and others trying to claim asylum for over 10 years, the temporal impacts of the pandemic were acutely felt by many asylum seekers. Consider the following quote from Yekta, a female asylum seeker living in Glasgow:

> *'So, number one [issue during lockdown] has been the application, the Home Office application we have made. So, our asylum claim has been delayed dramatically and it's just causing us lots of uncertainty about our life and our future… We did our asylum interview one year and a couple of months ago. My lawyer has emailed them a couple of times, asking them, "What's the outcome of their interview?" Like, when will the decision be made? But apparently, they said they would contact us by December time. But we've not received any response yet. So, I've just come to the conclusion that they're not working and they've stopped everything. It's not a good feeling to have. You know what it's like to wait for something for so long and this is our life depending on it, our future, my children's futures depending on it.' (Yekta, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

As the quote illustrates, extra waiting and uncertainty because of the pandemic have increased existing feelings of desperation and anxiety. For Yekta and her family, this has made them feel more disillusioned about the asylum system and more uncertain about their future, which as she states, is 'not a good feeling to have'.

For those with refugee status, everyday experiences of waiting and uncertainty also increased during the pandemic. In particular, the transition from asylum seeker to refugee was further protracted, resulting in many being stuck in the asylum system despite gaining leave to remain. For example, in the following quote, Jala explained that after five months of being granted asylum members of her family had still not received official documents and they had still not moved out of their temporary asylum accommodation:

> *'It's been difficult for me because I was granted asylum five months ago. My stuff is moving really, really slow because when you get granted asylum everything changes, your housing, your finance and all that. It's been five months that I've been granted but my husband and my kids, they haven't received anything yet. So, they have been granted leave to remain, but they haven't received anything formal to allow them to move on to the next stage. We're still in temporary accommodation and haven't been moved on yet. It has been really slow. They are saying they have no staff. The Home Office has been really slow moving on people that have been granted asylum.' (Jala, refugee, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

Refugees also experienced increased waiting and uncertainty in relation to employment opportunities and access to claiming benefits that they were now entitled to, all of which exacerbated stress and anxiety about finances and meeting basic needs.

9. Money and Employment

Asylum seekers and refugees commonly experience poverty and struggle to meet basic needs (Allsopp, Sigona & Phillimore, 2014). Asylum seekers are legally barred from working and, if they are supported under section 95 of the government's immigration and asylum policy, they receive £39.63 a week, amounting to little more than £5 a day. For many asylum seekers, the Covid-19 crisis has added to their financial precarity (GMIAU, 2021). An increased need for food shopping, potentially an increased need to buy medicines, local shops increasing food prices, increased costs for those who have children with them throughout the day, are all factors that are heightening their financial exclusion. In the following quote, Yezda, who is a single mother and asylum seeker, highlighted the financial pressure of the increased need for food, especially with her children being at home and no longer at school:

> *Financially, it's been really difficult, since my kids spend most of the time at home and they don't get the meals they used to get in school. So, financially, there has been more pressure, because you need more stuff, because you are staying in the house more. And, you know, when you are bored, you just tend to eat more, and that means spending more money. The children need snacks and different food. But it's really hard for me to explain to them that I can't afford a lot of things and that we need to really watch out for what we eat and how we spend our money. Like the rest of the people, we can't buy, like, a big shopping, so that we don't need to go out often. We need to do our shopping on a daily basis, to figure out our budget. (Yezda, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

Yezda pointed out that she cannot do a 'big shopping' with her asylum-seeker budget, making it difficult to follow government guidelines that recommended infrequent shopping trips. The difficulties of lockdown while having to live day to day was mentioned by many participants. For instance, consider the following quote from Falza, a female asylum seeker in Glasgow:

> *'The money was little even before the pandemic but now the pandemic has happened, they're telling us to not go outside, only for essentials. So, if I say I'm not going to go outside and I'm going to do the shopping for a week, I can't do that because I need to see my budget, I need to live daily or maybe two days and then I can go and shop so I know how much money I have left and how much I can spend. Also, I have a small fridge. I can't do a month's shopping and just leave it there because we have no space.' (Falza, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 20-29 years old, Glasgow)*

Many asylum seekers have become more reliant on the support of community, charity, and religious groups to meet their basic needs during the pandemic. In some cases, asylum seekers and refugees have also stepped up to help pack and deliver food parcels within and beyond their neighbourhoods. The extra provision of food and essential items has been of particular importance and is often in addition to other services provided by organisations in the sector. For example, during the first lockdown a refugee-run charity group in Gateshead had been delivering more than 100 food and essential item parcels every week to asylum seekers and refugees in the local area.

Asylum seekers are very restricted when it comes to having a bank account and thus do not often have debit or credit cards. This meant that they were not able to utilise online shopping or certain online services during lockdown. They were forced to leave their homes to purchase essential items, making them more vulnerable and exposed to the Covid-19 virus. This is another example of how structural inequality impacted on asylum seekers' ability to stay safe during the pandemic. Consider the following quote from Carim, who is a male asylum seeker living in Glasgow:

> *'For example, me compared to others I don't have a bank account and I can't get one simply because of the restrictions put on me by the government. So, for example, I can't sit in the house and order something from Amazon or something I need elsewhere, eBay or whatever. Most other people are able to do such a thing, when they may need something, they would be able to purchase it easily.' (Carim, asylum seeker, male, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

For some asylum seekers and refugees, crucial financial support – such as the provision of free bus passes – was stopped during the pandemic. For instance, some colleges stopped providing free bus passes when classes moved online, and campuses closed. This had a significant knock-on effect for asylum seekers, resulting in increased expenses to use public transport, difficulties accessing essential items and generally limited mobility within the city. Consider the following quotes from two female asylum seekers:

> *'…before Covid they give me this card for the bus, for Stagecoach, so that coming to school would be much easier and it would be something that I feel good to do. Now, it's something I struggle to do… I've been paying to go to college now. Before Covid, they give me the Stagecoach pass for one year. I'm supposed to be given another one this year, but they said no more card. They're trying to cut costs. So, they don't give me money for the card again.' (Amma, asylum seeker, female, West Africa, 30-39 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

> *'Before the pandemic and before Covid, my life was a bit easier because I used to attend college and when you attend college they give you a free bus pass. So financially that was a bit better because I didn't need to spend a lot of money. I had a bus pass, I could do my daily stuff, but now I don't get it so it's harder.' (Seher, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

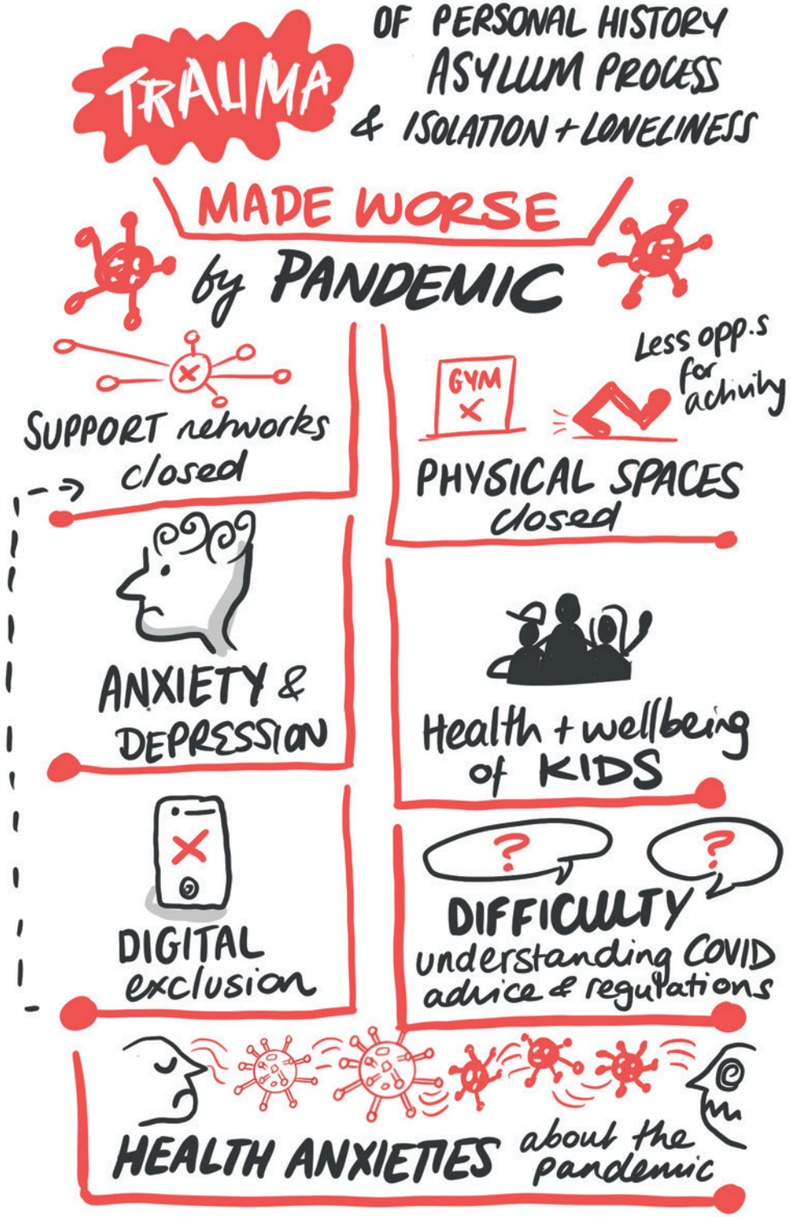
For those with refugee status, (i.e. those who are permitted to work and claim mainstream benefits), poverty, joblessness and low-paid employment are not uncommon (Allsopp, Sigona & Phillimore, 2014). For many, the pandemic has put further pressure on their precarious finances and employment. Various participants lost their jobs at the start of lockdown and were not offered the opportunity to be furloughed. Finding work had been a long and difficult process since receiving refugee status for many, so the loss of employment due to the pandemic was a significant financial and psychological blow. For example, consider the following quote from Yaran, who is a male refugee in Glasgow:

> *'I was a barber, but because of Covid, the barber shop is closed. So, I lost my job. This is the hardest thing for me. I mean I really, really enjoy every morning going to work and chatting to lots of customers. I mean I'll be honest, I feel embarrassed now I'm on Universal Credit… I'm sure it's going to be very difficult to get a job. I have to get a job and apply for my wife's visa to extend it. I'm sure it's going to be very, very difficult.' (Yaran, refugee, male, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

As Yaran pointed out, he is now on Universal Credit and he is very worried about finding new employment, especially as he needed to have a job to support the renewal of his wife's visa. Many refugee participants expressed worries about managing bills and expenses while living on Universal Credit. Gulnar, a female refugee in Newcastle-Gateshead, lost her job at the start of the pandemic and has since struggled to manage on benefits. Gulnar stated:

> *'I lost my job and after that I've have difficulties because I have a new council house, so I have everything on a lease, so the lease is still going on and I'm totally, at the moment, on benefits. After paying the lease, bills, and everything else I have nothing left… I'm struggling with electricity, mostly, I'm also struggling with food as well.' (Gulnar, refugee, female, South Asia, 40-49 years old, Newcastle-Gateshead)*

10. Health and wellbeing



Many asylum seekers and refugees have traumatic personal histories, having fled persecution in their countries of origin or having lived through distressing life experiences connected to personal or familial persecution (Tomkow, 2020). Moreover, the process of claiming asylum and living as an asylum seeker is often stressful and difficult. On top of this, during the first lockdown in March 2020, only 13% of service providers agreed that asylum seekers and refugees were clear about the public health guidance relating to lockdown. For many, pre-existing mental health problems have been made worse during the pandemic. The various overlapping issues that we have discussed in the report have exacerbated feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation. Loss of support networks, closure of public spaces, digital exclusion, increased uncertainty and waiting, increased caring responsibilities, experiencing lockdown in poor-quality housing and accommodation, and increasing financial difficulties have all put extra pressure on wellbeing and mental health. In the following two quotes, participants reflect on the mental health impacts of isolation and not having daily activities or access to certain public spaces:

> *'At the moment, almost all the charities are closed because of the pandemic. It's not easy when you are in the house all the time, and you don't have any TV, you don't have any radio, you don't have anything. It's very stressful. All the time you are living with depression day by day, day by day, day by day, and you don't know where to go and seek help.' (Joseph, asylum seeker, male, Central Africa, 40-49 years old, Glasgow)*

> *'I would say the damage had already been done to those of us who were cut off with the sodding pandemic, and the damage that was done, I'll say it was emotional and psychological damage, anxiety, isolation, fear of what's going to happen, being isolated. All that impacted on our lives including the children before measures came into place to kind of alleviate it.' (Obioma, asylum seeker, female, West Africa, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

Difficulties accessing prompt NHS mental health support were a common problem, and many were increasingly reliant on the wellbeing support and counselling of charity and community groups. Various groups set up extensive telephone welfare check-up schemes, while groups with trained counsellors provided online and telephone therapy and counselling sessions. Consider the following quote:

> *'Yes, Freedom from Torture, really helped me. When I'm depressed… I have a therapist, I talk with her and we have a meeting once a week.' (Esme, asylum seeker, female, Middle East, 30-39 years old, Glasgow)*

Various participants also talked about physical health problems and the challenges they posed during the pandemic, including contracting the Covid-19 virus. A particular concern was about difficulties in accessing healthcare and receiving general support. For some, and especially for those who did not speak English, understanding Covid-19 protocols and health advice was challenging. Information about the pandemic in less commonly spoken languages was not always available. All this contributed to health anxieties about the pandemic. Consider the following quote from Saver, a female refugee in Glasgow:

> *'Also, I am really scared of going outside to the shops because I'm scared that I'm going to get Covid and I'm going to get unwell. Who is going to be looking after the children because I'm alone and I have no one else? So, I'm scared. I'm scared if I go out and some thing happens to me and there is no one there that will help me because I have no one.' (Saver, refugee, female, Middle East, 40-49 years old, Glasgow)*

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