

Summary of Continuing Support Services and Adaptations for COVID Response from RAMA.





Refugee Action – Colchester is a well-established, respected local organisation that:

Is still offering daily support to vulnerable communities facing increased demand and challenges as a direct result of COVID-19

Is currently supporting people who are at high risk from COVID-19

Has high potential to continue to support communities with the direct and indirect impact of COVID-19

Our Clients are some of the most vulnerable people in the country. This can be for several reasons.

Refugees have often come with physical and mental health needs which make them susceptible to the Covid Virus and the difficult mental health aspect of isolation. Amongst our clients we have torture survivors, those who have lost all contact with their family and many with PTSD or OCD as a result of trauma they have experienced. We have pregnant clients, people with sickle cell anaemia, diabetes, and thalassaemia.

Asylum Seekers who we deal with are not within the National Asylum Seekers Support Service scheme, NASS, and may have become appeal rights exhausted. This means they are often without recourse to public funds and need assistance with getting in touch with solicitors, expert reports, housing, money, and the basics of life. Asylum seekers outside or inside the NASS system often share housing and end up sleeping on sofas or become street homeless, making them extraordinarily susceptible to the virus but also compromised in their own ability to stay healthy and observe basic hygiene.

Vulnerable Migrants are often those who have been here for some time but are here with sponsorship arrangements which are disrupted. This can be when the sponsor becomes an abuser and reneges on the spousal visa. It can also occur when a sponsor loses a job and is no longer able to offer financial support leaving the partner without any recourse to public funds.

Refugee Action – Colchester have a team that are working seven days a week at present and available via phone and/or through a network of trained volunteers for advice, immigration and benefit support and destitution support. We also have qualified therapists available to speak with those who need more help.



Current front page of our web site:
www.refugeeactioncolchester.org.uk



It is not easy to explain exactly what has changed in our practise due to the Covid19 crisis. It has stopped only a tiny element of our work and this relates largely to Education and Employment. Every other facet of our extensive provision is continuing.

The work we do must continue and we cannot just focus on the Covid19 impact. It is of paramount importance to get benefits, immigration issues, housing and health issues in as positive a condition as possible for our clients to prevent them becoming more susceptible to the virus and its effects.

The introduction of online and whats app groups to reach people, the increase in befriender contact and volunteers delivering food and prescriptions are new but have always happened on a smaller scale for families and individuals in need.

The work we do with Health visitors, mental health services, GP's and hospitals has increased as we make sure that our most vulnerable clients still have access to the service they need. Where there are delays and appointments are cancelled we step in and make sure we give extra support.

The biggest change for us as an organisation is that everything takes longer. A three hour change of conditions application now having to be done via whats app pictures and limited phone credit to send emails or poor connection means that the last of these applications took three days.

Case workers are managing situations that if they were present would be solved much more easily. Clients are having to cope without advocates next to them. It is a difficult time for us all. The extraordinary lengths the volunteers in our organisation go to to support the case workers and clients is exceptional.

Some examples of this work are an asylum seeker who is 8 months pregnant who has been moved out of area despite additional health needs to shared accommodation. We are now working with the hospital where she has been admitted, the Home office, a social care solicitor and Migrant help who run asylum accommodation to get her back to Colchester and the team who know her. Volunteers and befrienders are in constant contact with her, her husband and son in a hostel in London and we are doing work almost hourly to remedy the situation. Usually I would have gone to the hospital, got the documentation needed to prevent her removal from area but due to the virus we could not reach her consultant and they were moved a day later.

A family with unregularized and malnourished twins have been fearful of approaching social services, We met them only 7 weeks ago and have already applied for change of conditions so they have recourse to public funds and reached out to churches for support and are now liaising with social services.

A client recovering from TB was about to be made homeless and we intervened and made social services aware of her health needs and she is now in a care home. The Covid crisis means she would not be able to manage during lockdown as she also has mobility issues and must be shielded.

Another client whose child could be at risk of FGM has still received calls, in her home language with her and her family by experts from the national FGM outreach team to explain the dangers and legal ramifications of FGM. This would usually have taken place with the caseworker present and in person but it is still very important and so we have adapted this – it takes longer because the trust element is much harder to build on the phone. It has

been successful to the point that when she is able mum would like to have her own FGM looked at for potential removal of scar tissue and damage.

Multiple applications for Universal Credit have had to be made via phone. Although many clients have files with much of their information we have to take specific consent to do an online application for them. Usually this is done in person with us both at our office and the caseworker demonstrates the process, installs the app on the clients phone and assists them in making the application. It is infinitely harder by phone and will require follow up work for the client to understand fully. Another complication is that some of the clients now applying do not have all the required evidence needed to verify online. This means they have to call instead but language and comprehension of the questions without a caseworker present means numerous messages on their online journals by us. Again – an application that takes around an hour or two now takes almost a day with many follow up online check ins. For families who have worked at the lower income end of this to then wait another 5 weeks (because of their status most do not qualify for an advance or loan) is unfeasible. We then support with foodbank vouchers and by contacting council, landlords and utilities to explain delayed payments.

**Community
Liaison &
Representation**

IAG (Police)
Essex Excess Deaths
Colchester Emergency Response
Essex Emergency Response
Borough of Sanctuary
Translation of COVID Advice
Social Services
Colchester Homes
Faith Groups
MAF

Refugee Action – Colchester takes great pride in its many formal and informal partnerships. These help to make our community cohesive and really work. There is always a contact who can support a client. We work actively with many other organisations across Colchester, and we are also asked to represent our clients at a county level and as community leaders.

IAG – is the Independent Advisory Group where community leaders work with each other and local police to protect and safeguard clients and help create a greater understanding of local needs, dynamics, and the cultural aspects of these issues.

Essex County Council Excess Deaths working forum: Refugee Action – Colchester is part of the faith/communities

stream. Our inclusion in this ensures the authorities have a reliable route and an identified organisation to contact in order to ask for (or send out) information or messages to our community. Refugee Action – Colchester helps to ensure that any concerns or issues that groups might have regarding end-of-life arrangements and any excess deaths that may occur as a result of the current situation can be discussed/relayed with the forum, as necessary. We also work with the chaplain of the local hospice for the same outcomes.

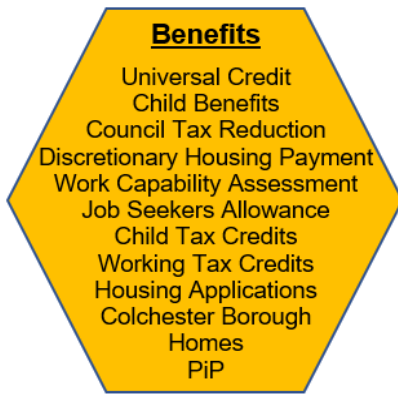
Essex and Colchester Emergency Response teams: Refugee Action – Colchester is now listed in the community response pack that confirms the organisations that are still functioning and provides details with what we can offer and our opening times.

Colchester Borough of Sanctuary: Refugee Action – Colchester runs this service from our Colchester offices. At present we are part of a shared Slack-Space sharing best practise and ways to get housing and destitution support for clients.

Translation Services: Refugee Action – Colchester have disseminated translated COVID19 advice in 13 languages so far and have also had Arabic advice – our most common language - recorded in order to provide an audio version for those with literacy or sight issues. We have a language line account available to all clients which can be used in conference calls. We have used it for medical, legal, and mental health appointments. We also have an Arabic speakers WhatsApp group with over 41 members and various other language groups and support groups for people to share concerns.



“Being outdoors always makes me feel better. When I’m outdoors in England I could be in Syria or Iraq or Turkey and I feel so much more at home.”



Benefits are often a challenge even for those born here and with a full understanding of English. For clients who are unfamiliar with the language, the way in which the system works and the additional challenges of habitual residence tests and extra burdens of evidence it can be overwhelming to try and complete online forms. Add to that the fact that many do not have access to computers or smart phones capable of attaching documents and it can literally stop a perfectly valid claim.

Universal Credit - Since Lockdown we have assisted 9 clients to get Universal Credit after job losses. There are difficulties for refugees and migrants in these applications. One of these is the online verification service usually requires more evidence and length of stay in the

country than they can show. Many do not have a computer and would have used the library but that is closed. Then there are complications of language, the understanding of the questions and knowing that they should identify as vulnerable. Uploading documents is also almost impossible. Even then, once we have got past all these barriers most usually get a habitual residence test delaying their application by another week at least. This also rules out an advance payment meaning the first payment into their account is five weeks later. In the short term we assist by negotiating with landlords, utility companies and the council or in worst case scenarios we make a loan ourselves.

Child Benefit – Many of our clients do not know about child benefit and even if they do the evidence needed is often hard to provide. Our experiences have shown us alternative but valid ways of proving entitlement in some cases.

Council Tax Reduction – Since Lockdown we have had a sharp increase in the number of clients needing this reduction due to loss of earnings, partial or complete. The Borough Council know us well and accept letters from us in explanation when needed to explain evidence that is missing.

Discretionary Housing Payment – Once again, since Lockdown there has been an increase in applications for this benefit designed to prevent clients from falling into arrears. It is a short-term benefit and we assist with income and expenditure assessments needed as well as uploading documents when clients have no possibility of doing so alone.

Job seekers Allowance – There are still some clients who receive old style JSA. While UC has its challenges the 7 benefits it replaces still need managing for some families who have 4 or more children. Housing for these clients is always a balancing act between affordability and overcrowding particularly as after the first 3 children there are few increases in many benefits to allow for increased costs per child. Once again, our advocacy is important in negotiating reductions or applying for grants from charities to make sure people are not living in intolerable conditions.

Child and Working Tax Credits – These can present clients with different problems, CTC's pushing people over the benefit cap and WTC's need monitoring, so people understand their likely income.

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) – For clients with mental and/or physical issues our advocacy makes all the difference. From the initial call to ask for a form to make the application right through to completing the form, getting appropriate supporting statements from professionals, and then accompanying them to the final appointment. Citizens advice used to be the only other place that could help but our local office no longer supports these longer appointments and often refer people to us. We have had more than a few appointments where no interpreter is present or even faced racism or prejudice. Our advocacy and witness of this is paramount to getting these vulnerable clients.

Housing Applications – our Borough Council expects applicants to have a local connection and to have lived here for 6 years. We have worked with them so they have a better understanding of refugees who have not had any stable home for many years. To many of our clients our services enable them to feel at home and we become their local connection. We also understand the limitations of the local support and can make it easier for them to accommodate clients by offering temporary support and sometimes apply for additional funds to relevant charities.



It would not be fair to say that *all* our clients have **mental health or wellbeing** needs – any more than anyone else. However, last year - 2019, we monitored the amount of interventions, referrals we made into mental health services and found that on average around 40% of clients needed some kind of support ranging from a befriender due to isolation and anxiety, to a referral or support while accessing treatment from the local Psychiatric or Psychosis teams. We have also noted that often it can take up to 18 weeks to reach appropriate services. Even then accessing services with translation and cultural understanding can be difficult. We now work actively with both teams to support clients and therapists.

Counselling Services – we have two qualified psychotherapists – one male and one female who offer support to clients. They speak Arabic and Turkish. At present this is on a voluntary basis but with clinical supervision from Renos Papadopoulos a renowned practitioner from both Essex University where he is lead for the Refugee Care MA and PhD and a clinical lead at the Tavistock Centre in London.

CPN Liaison – we liaise with the Community Psychiatric Nurses of a number of clients providing context and often sitting in on sessions.

Translation Support – we have access to Language Line which offers phone and written support. We also have qualified professionals who volunteer services at school meetings, arranging both physical and mental health appointments for clients.

Community Support - we hold regular community events attended by up to 140 people. We also have smaller events that focus on families, men only or women only. We have held Computer classes for both groups and there are also Craft and Conversation well-being classes for women. These have been attended by some women who for a variety of reasons have not had an opportunity to attend a social gathering for up to five years. Craft and Conversation moves online this week and a WhatsApp group has been set up to share news and support. Craft kits have been sent out

Befrienders and First Responders – We have an active group of volunteers who have attended a series of training events to understand the role and support we offer. Each befriender has a family or individual with whom they are maintaining contact and where possible visiting to bring food and other supplies – at an appropriate distance. At present prescriptions are being collected for people without cars or too ill to collect, foodbank parcels are dropped off, activities for children are shared and conversations and relationships maintained.

Online Groups – We now have two online groups and several WhatsApp groups keeping in touch with people and checking in on them. These specifically to reach clients more effectively through the Lockdown

Together We Grow – our local country park has an initiative we have joined to support our families in isolation by sending them kits to grow plants and vegetables at home. Each of the families usually attends a Forest School regularly and this is to keep as much of the contact with living plants as possible. We will be supplying all equipment needed direct to the door. We also plan to extend this reaching vulnerable men who have mental health issues, providing social distanced small forest schools where they can learn new skills in hygienic safe outdoor environments.

ERWN – Essex Refugee Wellbeing Network - we are working with the Refugee Council, University of Essex, and our local CCG to create a service for mental health and well-being support for refugees. This has been thought about and planned for over a year and many of our current activities will be formally adopted as part of this project. Two therapists will be available to counsel clients with interpreters. Activities like pottery, art therapy, yoga, tai chi and music have already been offered to make a timetable of supportive activities.

Physical Health

Shopping Support
Hospital / GP Liaison
Pharmacy Support
Health Visitor Liaison
Community Activities
Forest School

Shopping Support – for people needing to shield or isolate we are offering support. Some of our clients do not have a bank account and as many shops have stopped taking cash, we have also started doing shopping for them while researching prepaid cards.

Hospital / GP Liaison – many clients are awaiting treatment for non-essential but significant medical issues and we have helped them understand delays, assisting them to communicate if greater medication is needed in the meantime. We also accompany clients to appointments and take notes for them and get these translated where needed.

Pharmacy Support – Some clients must move often, and their pharmacy can end up being far from home. We collect or arrange delivery and blister packs for those in need.

Health Visitor Liaison – we liaise with health visitors around inoculations, immigration restrictions and ongoing cases and FGM.

Community Activities – We have regular community evenings, forest school events, and arrange swimming trips, farm visits and picnics.

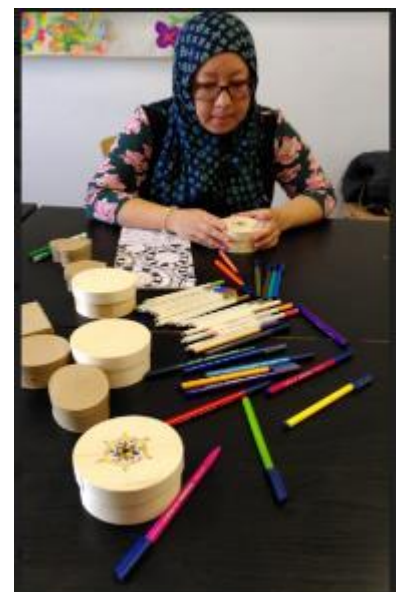
Forest School – we run a forest school each month enabling people to learn about local parks and outdoor spaces and cook outdoors while their children have a wonderful time!



“It brought us an opportunity to do arts and crafts which most of us have no time usually to do with children around.”

“Going to the group meeting was like a dedicated me time but enjoyed with a lovely group of ladies.”

“I miss the chats, the laugh, the jokes, sharing of recipes and experiences but most of all being around likeminded sisters.”



Destitution Support

Challenge of NRPF
Destitution Payments
Foodbank / Shopping Support
Donations of Clothing / Furniture /
Toys / Other Equipment
Social Services Applications
Social Services
Section4/95 funding
DDVC

Challenge of NRPF – people with no recourse to public funds (appeal rights exhausted, irregular migrants, sponsorship partners, spousal visa partners) can sometimes work but most often have no right to work or to claim benefits. They have only the most basic access to healthcare and no access to housing. In certain cases, if a partners circumstances or an individual's circumstances change there is a need to make a challenge to this status. The work usually takes the form of a destitution test. Since the Covid19 lockdown we have challenged 3 cases and have a further 5 to do. They take in these no contact situations around three days to submit.

Destitution Payments – we make destitution payments of £35 per week to people for whom we are working to alleviate their destitution.

Foodbank / Shopping Support – we can offer Foodbank vouchers but also shop for items more familiar for new arrivals from specialist shops.

Donations of Clothing / Furniture / Toys / Other Equipment - our active Facebook page and newsletter run regular appeals for clothing, furniture, toys and specific items which we offer clients unable to purchase these items.

Social Services Applications – we make regular safeguarding applications for families to access housing and support for people whose stay is being regularised but who are currently without recourse to public funds.

Section 95/4 Funding – we make these applications for individuals who stay with friends or family but need subsistence support as neither they or the people who host them have sufficient funds to feed them. Or we get them access to a hostel.

Destitute Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC) – last year we had five cases of women with spousal visas who experienced domestic violence. Two men went to prison and all were at the least cautioned for their actions. The result of these protective actions by the police and other services is that the men then ended their spousal visas leaving the women without rights to stay in the country and often destitute and often with children to look after too. The Destitute Domestic Violence Concession is an application that protects the woman in the short term and allows her access to public funds. This means we can then work with local housing and benefit teams to get these in place while the case is proved. After the process is finished (which takes around 3 to 6 months) the women receive ILR – Indefinite Leave to Remain.

“Thanks for putting smiles on our faces this weekend. I thought the children would be hungry tonight.”

Migrant who has NRPF and was destitute with her 4 children



Immigration

UK Citizenship
EU Citizenship
Asylum Claims
Referrals to free legal services
Indefinite Leave to Remain
Translation Support
Section 17 support
NASS liaison

We have formed some wonderful partnerships with organisations over the last 3 years that mean that immigration applications and matters we cannot deal with are now dealt with by the **Red Cross** or **RAMFEL** (Refugee and Migrant Forum for Essex and London).

Both the Red Cross and RAMFEL come to our offices in Colchester regularly and hold clinic days.

We also work with the **Law Clinic at Essex University** offering them opportunities to support our advocacy and immigration work both on clinic days and subsequently when we do follow up work and gather evidence.

There are also many applications we can do from our office. We have developed some expertise with irregular migrant families and **Separated Children** who have just left care.

Leave to Remain and Indefinite Leave to Remain – Gathering evidence to apply for continued leave to remain.

UK Citizenship - refugees who have completed 6 years of constant leave to remain can apply to become citizens. We help with both the application and the preparation work.

Asylum Claims – supporting people make asylum claims who have not yet had the opportunity or have fallen out of the system

Referrals to free legal services – we work with several firms offering legal aid support and advice both to us and clients

Translation Support – We always have translation and interpreters available by phone or in person

“I have always felt I was illegal. But now I know I am a human being with rights, and I feel stronger. Now I am on the route to being regularised my life is starting over; my children are safe at school and we have clothes and a place to stay that is our own.”

Irregular Migrant



“I had no hope in my life until I came to these offices. Now I have a solicitor and friends. I am thankful for the day I came here.”

Asylum Seeker separated from his children