

A selection of clients assisted – April to June 2020.

Our Advice Worker writes ...

One such person is Brodie. Born in the UK, he went back to his home country (USA) until at 10, he returned to live with his aunt. At 17, the relationship soured and he left. Looking for work, he found he was illegal – sought to regularise status and was given leave with a No Recourse to Public Funds condition.

At 19, he had an accident affecting one of his eyes; after numerous medical interventions, he lost the sight in that eye. He worked in the removals business as a self-employed person; he found that he could not earn enough or keep up the continuity of work to afford a stable place to live – in dark moments; he felt his disability was robbing him of work, counting against him. Therefore, as so many he came to rely upon the “kindness of strangers” – sofa surfing, moving from place to place – work became harder to get, he fell into the grip of depression and continual anxiety. Then COVID-19 swept into the UK. People who had given shelter became afraid and re-trenched, excluding anyone who was not family.

When he first approached us he was sleeping in the back of a friend’s car feeling suicidal. Under any circumstances, this is not life as it should be. Anyone living outside is at a much greater risk of catching the virus. We lobbied the outreach team to look for him and the advice given by the team to him was to contact the council. We did so on his behalf and he has now been placed in a hotel for the duration of this lockdown. However, he will still be facing an uncertain life once this is over.

We have consulted with an immigration solicitor. They believe that in Brodie’s circumstances this condition of no recourse to Public Funds should be lifted – they have taken on the case. Brodie wants to work – he is a proud person and wants to rely upon himself but he needs a little help. We have written a letter in support to go with his application to the Home Office. We will continue to do all we can to support him going forward.

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Many are new rough sleepers. I am going to talk about two. Below is a picture of a sleeping site sent to me by an old client of ours who for years has been working, paying rent and then lost a relationship and due to COVID-19 his job in quick succession – we hadn’t heard from him in over 5 years.

The site is dark, dingy, dirty and dangerous – I had to brighten the picture. We had pressed the local authority to meet this person’s needs but frustrated by gatekeeping and only when I was able to find out the identity of the Rough Sleeping Co-ordinator in that borough that things started to move as I could bring direct pressure to bear.



I reminded them of the responsibility as directed by the government and the funds they had been allocated to resolve this problem. However, I too was reminded of the fact that this is a big ask on local authorities and commissioned teams and how clients need to be flexible. The first offer was a hotel room with ensuite bathroom and tea and coffee facilities. The client stayed 1 night and then refused to remain there as it had no kitchen and laundry. No doubt that is a difficulty but not insurmountable – perhaps he could have relied on take outs, prepared foods and hand washed his clothing as I reminded the client. However, we persevered and after

much to-ing and fro-ing, we found somewhere further out with more amenities.

We worked with another client who had made a homelessness application – they were vulnerable and a substantial history of rough sleeping. They had already tried to get relief through Streetlink (the alert system for rough sleepers) and the housing officer was insisting on documents being provided in a certain electronic format without appreciating that might be difficult for someone on the street. We got him into temporary accommodation and hopefully will be able to help them to get these documents into a format the authority will accept. Last week, we got a local authority to accept responsibility for a no recourse to public funds couple – the husband has a diagnosis of prostate cancer and where the Home Office is taking a lengthy time to respond to a review.

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Let me tell you the story of one of our clients. He is a chef, work dried up when COVID-19 forced closure of restaurants. He found a room at a cost of £690 per month (not uncommon cost for private rented) and approached us for help. We advised him that this rent was above what the Local Housing Allowance of £512 per month for that postcode and he would have to bear any shortfall through his personal contribution. He was living in hope that lockdown would be lifted he could return to work and his income would allow him to cover that shortfall and contribute or cover all his housing costs. In London research has shown that on average, rents consume 62% of income compared to maybe just 23% in the North of England.

To enable him to get accommodation, we contributed a proportion of the up-front costs from one of our block grants towards his rent in advance. The local authority paid the deposit. We negotiated that he could move in using the funds we had promised as local authorities processing time can take up to 15 days. To assist him with the shortfall, we applied to the local authority for a Discretionary Housing Payment to cover his shortfall for a limited period. He was very short of funds, so we have organised supplies of toiletries, a grant to cover about a month of food supplies, an application for a clothing grant to be presentable for job-seeking and provision of essential move-in goods – support of this kind, I believe, will be required even more as lockdown eases up.

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We have a client who suffers from PTSD, has depression and anxiety but is still on the street. Why? The outreach team have attempted to verify him but have not actually seen him bedded down and therefore as he is clean and his clothes are laundered suspect he is staying with friends. He is not – he does have a friend who does have accommodation – our client is sometimes allowed to shower and his friend has laundered his clothes. He gets scared and therefore will move from place to place or get on a night bus so does not understand the protocol of “verifying”. He does not communicate well as English is not his first language and he finds it hard to follow instructions sometimes more often than not as he does not quite understand.

We have made a homelessness application to the local authority but as he made an application before and was advised to re-connect to his originating borough which just so happens to be near Manchester, they refused to assist. He was very stressed by his time outside London with no community, no church of his religion’s persuasion at which he could worship and the lack of welcome from the community in that area. Whatever one says, acceptance can be a long and rough road if you are not “one of us”. There may be a route to contest this decision in the light of this pandemic to send someone to the North West of England where the R-Rate is nearly twice as high (at the time of writing) as it currently is in the capital as we are aware that a law centre is looking into the validity of local connection as a factor in assessing a homelessness application during lockdown.

Right now, his situation is that we have made a number of referrals to housing projects for him. Happily one has a vacancy coming up this Wednesday and he is due to be given an assessment this Tuesday. We

are crossing our fingers, toes, and just about everything else that he will be offered this precious placement.

Laurie met us in February having lost the accommodation she had and having run out of funds. To give her breathing space we booked her into a backpacker hostel for the weekend, then we were able to find a place in a shelter. Unfortunately, during her stay in the shelter, she developed mental health issues. Once lockdown started, the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) team agreed to house her. In the meanwhile, in partnership with the shelter, we tried to work out a strategy whereby she could return to the USA without any restriction on her return to the UK (which would happen if the Home Office became involved).

She has been connected with an immigration advisor for advice on extending her visa during lockdown, what her immigration options are and how she could return to the UK to work, which is what she wants to do. Any representations to the UK government to provide legal status look unlikely to succeed given her limited time in the UK.

She now has a GP in the UK so that she can obtain medication, an application to the low-cost NHS scheme, and an arrangement with a local pharmacy so we can pay prescription costs. We have also had clothing and toiletries delivered to her temporary accommodation.

We have put out feelers to homeless organisations in the USA so that she can be supported once she returns from the UK – the response to date has been limited, no doubt due to their own crisis with COVID. We have taken expert advice from a mental health practitioner as to her level of distress.

We have met with her, agreed an onward plan to get her back home and with her permission tried to link her in with organisations that could help her and with the NRPF team in the UK who may be able to extend her stay post lockdown so thorough preparations can be made for her return to the USA. It's an unusual case but sometimes people just run out of funds and need help – the least we can do is to ensure they get home safely.

Laurie is hopefully going to be one of the lucky ones but many who are NRPF will find themselves returning to the street – people who have been refused asylum, have missed a critical date to make applications, who have had bad advice from solicitors, EEA citizens who do not meet the threshold for settlement status. We have a policy that a temporary intervention for emergency housing is not a solution – we very much feel it is important to link people in with good quality immigration advice so they can make an informed decision about their future. For many, we hope that this results in the best possible solution.
