

The Wolverhampton BRIEFING

Issue 2 Winter 2020/21



Welcome to the second Wolverhampton Briefing, the quarterly communication which provides an update on vital research taking place at the University of Wolverhampton.

Focused on social justice, the core values of the Institute for Community Research and Development (ICRD) mean it works with and in our local communities to deliver effective community-based transformational projects, drive policy developments, and promote social mobility.

The ICRD was launched in 2017 to ensure that the University of Wolverhampton's research has a direct impact on the lives and life chances of individuals in the region.

The research themes of the Institute are: criminal justice and violence reduction; migration and welfare; and inequality and social analysis.

Research objectives

During the Covid 19 pandemic, our Institute decided to investigate how those most in need were impacted and how we could use this knowledge to improve the situation. This Briefing focuses on two projects; one looked at evidencing the innovation and enterprise shown by the West Midlands local community in response to Covid 19, while the other investigated local authority responses to people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) during the first national lockdown.

West Midlands local civil society response

The West Midlands has been one of the hardest hit regions in terms of Covid-19 cases and deaths, and many reports indicate that it will suffer the worst economic and social impact in the coming months and years.

The region saw an incredible

Impact on people with NRPF

Migrants with 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) are at high risk of destitution due to their exclusion from most welfare benefits and statutory housing support.

The NRPF rule is a provision in the UK immigration rules which prevents most temporary migrants from

response from mutual aid, faith and community groups, neighbourhood groups and the social economy; from food distribution networks for those shielding to the provision of ICT equipment to facilitate home-schooling.

The West Midlands Combined Authority's (WMCA) Public Service Reform Directorate wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the innovation and enterprise shown by the social economy in response to the pandemic, to ensure that the value of that response and the resilience of neighbourhoods that has been built can be harnessed for the long term.

Our research, which we worked on in collaboration with Coventry University and BVSC, aimed to:

- Explore good practice and collaboration across the region;
- Identify exemplary case studies showing different types of response;
- Inform how the WMCA and partner agencies could learn from that practice;
- Set out short to medium term and recovery actions that should be taken as we move forward to the 'new normal' of a fairer, greener and healthier West Midlands.

accessing a list of social security benefits, homelessness assistance and social housing.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made life significantly more difficult and precarious for people with NRPF. Many have lost income, employment and accommodation, while non-statutory support services have been forced to close. The number of people with NRPF in need of assistance to meet their basic needs has increased.

Local authorities have statutory duties towards two categories of people with NRPF: families with 'children in need'; and adults with care needs. There are, however, significant variations in how these duties are implemented, with many migrants in need of support unable to access their entitlements under normal (pre-pandemic) circumstances.

A key problem in this area is that local authorities are not funded by central government to provide support to people with NRPF. This issue became more urgent during the pandemic as local authorities were called upon by central government to provide support to a third group of people with NRPF who would not normally be eligible for assistance: single homeless adults without care needs.

Key findings

West Midlands Local Response

There was a strong sense that collaboration was a positive of the response, with new found flexibilities and a willingness to get things done in a very challenging situation. Civil society responded with urgency, agility and creativity. There was a new found solidarity across this diverse sector and a 'reset' in relationships between organisations and with the public sector.

Our final recommendations are rooted in the principle of 'building back better' and focused on three themes:

Theme One: The way we work – collaboration and beyond



To empower leaders across civil society and the social economy, we recommended the WMCA play a role in supporting opportunities for leaders from within civil society and the social economy to meet, discuss and share information in a spirit of collaboration.

Theme Two: The way we deliver in a COVID-19 world

Recognising the different but equally valuable contributions of the range of organisations across civil society, delivering at different times, to different people, we recommended investment in community development – creating more connected communities that are then well placed to respond in future.



Theme Three: The way we prepare



Recognising the financial impact of the crisis and the creative responses of individual organisations, but also the climate of uncertainty, we recommended that WMCA work with the sector to provide learning, training and



capacity building amongst organisations, and develop a strategic relationship with wellbeing providers to address mental health challenges.

Impact on people with NRPF

There was a lack of information available for people with NRPF:

5 out of 151 local authorities in England had publicly-available NRPF policies which were accurate, up to date and contained referral contact details.

More than 40% of local authority websites did not contain any information at all about NRPF. Only seven per cent of local authority websites surveyed in April had information on Covid-19 related support for people with NRPF, and this only increased to 12 per cent a month later.

7% of local authority websites surveyed in April had information on Covid-19 related support for people with NRPF, and this only increased to 12 per cent a month later.

Numbers of service users with NRPF who had Covid-19 symptoms were relatively small, but those who did have symptoms were particularly likely to die or become seriously ill:

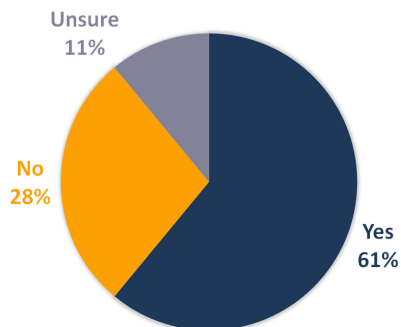
More than 50% of organisations that responded knew of service users who had been diagnosed with Covid-19. Although most knew of relatively small numbers who were experiencing symptoms, of those who did, more than half had become seriously ill or died.

People with NRPF struggled to access food, shelter and subsistence support during the pandemic:

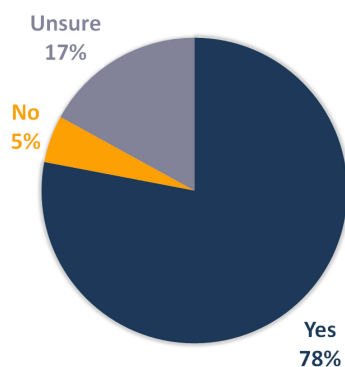
More than 8 out of 10 organisations identified this as a concern for their service users.

Responding local authorities that have seen an increase in the number of referrals from people with NRPF during the pandemic

61 per cent of responding local authorities reported that they had seen an increase in the amount of people with NRPF being referred to them during the pandemic, while 28 per cent reported they had not seen an increase and 11 per cent were unsure.



Responding local authorities that have seen an increase in costs for supporting people with NRPF during the pandemic



78 per cent of responding local authorities reported that they had seen an increase in their spending to support people with NRPF during the pandemic, while only five per cent reported they had not seen an increase and 17 per cent were unsure.

Next steps

West Midlands Local Response

The impact of the research was enhanced through a process of sharing and refining the recommendations with WMCA and a wide range of stakeholders from civil society in an online focus group in early September. The findings were used by WMCA to feed into their submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review, and their wider work on the Levelling Up and Green Agendas. They have used the findings to call for a resilience fund to support communities in the recovery from Covid 19, and in February 2021 they launched a Community Recovery Innovation Challenge to stimulate creative responses from community organisations as a direct response to our report.

Impact on people with NRPF

Our research focused on the period during which the UK was in its first 'lockdown' but the problems we have highlighted have by no means come to an end. Local authorities continue to be underfunded and the destitution experienced by people with NRPF has not abated. It is unclear what will happen to homeless adults with NRPF who have no statutory entitlement to support as public health concerns subside.

Our research indicates that while some local authorities are trying to respond to this issue in a way that respects people's rights and dignity, others do not wish to continue to support people with NRPF, with a number planning to encourage families to leave the country through the Home Office's 'voluntary return' programme. Many local authorities have expressed concern that they do not have the resources to continue to support people who have been excluded from mainstream social security without additional funds from central government.

In the view of many of our research participants, only an urgent end to the NRPF rule can adequately address the problems that have been highlighted by Covid 19.

Following on from our findings on support for people with NRPF during the pandemic, ICRD Research Fellow Andy Jolly has been funded by the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care to develop the NOREAM model of social work practice to provide better support for families with NRPF which can be adopted by local authorities across the country.



Stephen Timms, Chair of Work and Pensions Committee, Chair, Work and Pensions Committee, speaking during Coronavirus Outbreak: DWP Response in the House of Commons on 26 November 2020

"Today's motion highlights our call, also made by the Home Affairs Committee, for the no recourse to public funds immigration condition to be suspended for the pandemic."

"Some three million extra people have had to claim universal credit this year, but families working legally, with no recourse to public funds on their immigration status, do not have that safety net. They may get discretionary council help, but provision varies immensely."

"Indeed, Andy Jolly at the University of Wolverhampton has found that many families refused council help, so our report made this call: 'The Government should publish or at least clarify existing guidance for local authorities on what support they can provide for people with NRPF, including...whether measures such as the hardship fund are classed as public funds or not.'"

Councillor Maria Crompton, WMCA portfolio lead for public service reform and deputy leader of Sandwell Council



"People across the region have organised themselves to look after their neighbours during"

the pandemic, creating new collaborative links between them, their communities, and the public services and businesses that underpin their lives... In trying to build back better, we need to understand what has worked well, and what the WMCA can do through its investments and partnerships to nurture and make space for that."

The ICRD would like to thank the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for their support in the NRPF project.

Get in contact

If you would like to get involved in research at the University of Wolverhampton, please email Adreen Hart Rule, Media and Communications Manager: comms@wlv.ac.uk



University of Wolverhampton Research

From pioneering research into brain tumours to seeking sustainable solutions, our research community's discoveries are having a positive impact on people around the world.

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