

## Asylum Link Merseyside

May 2020 Report to SAS from Ewan Roberts

### Activities at ALM during the Corona Lockdown

**Food** – we moved the food store from a weekly pick up to monthly (providing two weeks



food and two weeks cash 2 x £20) Some people we delivered directly to – individuals who have mobility issues and those in the houses. We've applied and successfully been granted some small funds to cover the cash pay-outs which we would not normally make. An average of 40 people have accessed the monthly food pickups with more requesting deliveries. The reason for going to monthly pick-ups was:

- to cut down contact and travel as per guidelines and
- because buying in bulk had become difficult – often the cash and carry was supplying only half the quantities we asked for so we started stockpiling, continuing to buy produce during the 'cash' weeks, which meant we had enough for the next monthly drop.



During the last two months, we've continued to take deliveries of fresh food from Costco, Jaks, ASDA and Fareshare. This is largely distributed to our houses, or to the Initial Accommodation hostels.



At the beginning of the restrictions we tried to run a takeaway service but people didn't come and by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> day the numbers were in single figures. Thinking about it, if you do not live close to ALM, would it be worth a bus fare or a long walk for a single meal? On balance we felt this was the main issue. We had already stopped most face to face casework and the social activities like ESOL classes, bike

store or choir by the time the full lock-down started.

**Housing:** The four houses are still running although there are less people in them. Some had made section 4 applications (3) which came through, others (2) appeared to be living elsewhere. There's a great temptation to look around and see who else could be put in the house but that wouldn't take account of the people already in the houses – how would they feel about a potentially infected person entering the house, when we have been at pains to make them stay put as per the Government guidelines. One person was told to leave because they repeatedly spent days away from the house with friends or other people. Getting the safety measures over to people has been difficult – we have translated advice from Doctors of the World and spoken advice from NACCOM on the ALM website. We provided extra cleaning products and masks for those in the houses.

We eventually decided to suspend anyone new going into the house unless it is a dire emergency, concentrating on routing people through to section 4 support. This has its own challenges. The missed pickups were getting ridiculous. They were being arranged multiple times and Serco (the housing provider) just didn't turn up. In the end we felt it was a deliberate tactic because they had no accommodation for people.

We took this to the MPs – Riverside and Wavertree - and the council, who in turn pushed buttons locally with Housing Options and with bigger fish in Serco than we were capable of contacting. This seemed to prompt a response and Serco started housing people in a large Hotel – they have block booked it. Gradually the outstanding pick-ups were organised although more keep coming – we continue to work with the council to get these progressed.

This was a particular worry as some of the people concerned had physical health issues: heart problems, diabetes, recovering from cancer, TB – several if not all the people involved had mental health issues ranging from depression to PTSD and possible psychosis. Whilst I accept that there is currently a complete lack of accommodation, we are unsure that the hotel is the best way forward, especially if separation measures are not enforced, or if new arrivals are also being placed there. I visited the hotel once to drop off mail and was not permitted out of the car park but I could see people in pairs, clearly not being kept apart.

The casework team have moved to online/telephone delivery for most work. We have been able to prepare our equipment and work from home for all the staff and a growing number of ALM volunteers. Equipment has been an issue but one which we are working our way through. Staff have been able to use their own home computers and laptops, to log in to the office network and access the database and client casefiles. As long as there are a couple of us at the office each day, we can sort almost anything out.

An example of this is a woman whose application for Renewal of Leave Fee Waiver was rejected. She came to the Centre, handed in her documents which were scanned and uploaded to her casefile on the database. From this, a volunteer caseworker working from home was able to construct a response to the Home Office and submit the required information the same day.

Normally things can be done over the phone. The new VOIP phones are extremely flexible and once programmed, can be plugged into the internet at any location. This allowed caseworkers to take phones home and new phones destined for the expanded second floor have instead been handed out to staff and volunteers. The combination of phone

and remote login is working really well. However the old tech we have is pretty slow and so we have to wait on the arrival of better kit to get more people involved. There's also a cost to this.

Since the restrictions came into force on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, we have worked with over 90 people for casework and probably around the same again for informal advice. Early on we went through an exercise of identifying people who had been in during the last year, with underlying physical health issues and came up with a list of around 20 people whom we got in touch with and offered assistance or reassurance. Most were happy to be contacted and the majority had what they needed although they were unsure what the future held – would they be able to get food or meds as required? We are contacting them again in the coming days.

**Mail:** Mail deliveries to the centre stopped for almost 3 weeks – a new postal worker now removed from the route - so mail has started to arrive sporadically again. We are phoning people to ask if they want their mail delivered. Some do and others want their mail read out to them over the phone.

In general we have been undertaking deliveries for individuals as they ask. We have received a number of requests from people contacting the council routed to MRSN and then on to our volunteers. We do the shopping for a couple of people and have got clothes/cots for others

Although the **English classes** formally stopped at the beginning of Easter, the teachers kept in touch with many of their students through phones and WhatsApp groups, and ran informal classes, setting work. This has progressed into a more formal style of teaching with books being sourced to work from set texts – we were successful in an application to the Steve Morgan Foundation and some of the funds will be used to purchase and deliver the books.

So the activities that stopped, were all those things associated with the social aspect of the centre – meals, group work, and activities – all the things that were fun or enjoyable! We are left largely with destitution, casework and the remote ESOL classes – these have



carried on to the best of our ability as well as deliveries – and have been adapted as appropriate. Just on the casework front; when we get back to a functioning centre again, I am ordering screens to put in the reception and casework areas as an extra measure of protection.

We have started taking **food and cloths donations** again, but on Wednesdays and Thursdays only, between 10 and 12 at the back gate. One jolly thing we managed to keep going over the internet was the ALM **Choir** and a couple of weeks ago we recorded a song by warbling into our phones and assembling all the voices and parts remotely.

This was put into a video and is available on on the ALM [Facebook page](#) or on YouTube <https://youtu.be/-OPvIIR494>