



RAIS Lancaster

Refugee Advocacy, Information and Support

Annual Report 2019- 2020

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1. CONTEXT AND HISTORY

The purpose of RAIS is to provide advocacy, information and support services to refugees and asylum seekers living in Lancaster and Morecambe.

Its aims are:

- To provide advocacy and information for asylum seekers as they engage with the asylum process and for refugees as they accustom themselves to living and working in the UK.
- To encourage refugees and asylum seekers to develop strong links with the local community.
- To encourage independent living for refugees and asylum seekers where they understand our culture and can operate effectively within it with confidence.

Founded in November 2017, RAIS Lancaster has now been up and running for three years. In that time our processes and activities have changed and developed in response to increasing demand and changing circumstances.

There are now 35 houses and flats managed by Serco on behalf of the Home Office for asylum seekers in Lancaster and Morecambe area. As people receive decisions on their asylum claims they are required to move out of their Home Office accommodation, and new asylum seekers are moved in. Prior to the national lockdown the flow of asylum seekers appeared to be speeding up, while the number at any one time remains more or less constant at around 150. Newly arrived asylum seekers need access to legal advice and representation. They also need help to access local services such as schools and GPs. Those who get leave to remain and decide to stay in Lancaster often need further help, with housing normally being a priority. Those who are refused also need continuing support, especially access to legal advice.

During the second half of the current financial year, from March 2020 to the present, we have had to adapt to the restrictions and circumstances that have surrounding the current pandemic. Our response to the Covid-19 crisis is described in Section 2.7.

An important development in our service has been made possible by our association with Susan Liew, partner in Collingwood immigration Services and an experienced immigration lawyer. Since February 2020 she has provided legal representation for a number of our clients. She also offers consultation and pro bono advice on a regular basis, visiting our drop-in on Mondays.

2. MAIN ACTIVITIES

2.1 The drop-in

Apart from closure due to lockdown, we have continued to run two drop-in sessions each week in the Cornerstone Centre in central Lancaster, on Monday and Thursday afternoons from 3pm until 5pm. Before lockdown (i.e. from 1st November 2019 until 23rd March 2020) the drop-ins were very busy. During this 18-week period we dealt with 216 enquiries: an average of 12 enquiries a week. At busy times there were as many as 8 in a single 2-hour session.

The drop-in was closed from 23rd March to the 4th July.

From 4th July until the end of October our services were operating normally. However, the uptake was considerably diminished due to the pausing of Home Office activities as a result of the pandemic. During lockdown there were no substantive interviews, decisions, appeals or grants of leave to remain, and therefore no evictions from Home Office accommodation or requests for help from people who had been refused. However since we re-opened the drop-in we have received a further 80 enquiries. Home Office activities have resumed recently, and a number of people who were given leave to remain just before lockdown are now being evicted, and we anticipate an increase in drop-in enquiries in the near future.

2.2 The helpline

The telephone helpline runs Monday to Thursday from 10 a.m. to 12 noon. Clients use it as a means of making initial contact. It is also used for making appointments and arrangements and for interpreting at the drop-in, and to arrange other meetings which are part of our advocacy work.

The help line received an average of 8.5 calls per week. This includes calls and texts from asylum seekers and refugees, and phone calls from outside agencies (midwives, social workers, other refugee support organisations, the Housing Department etc.)

During the lockdown we offered an extended helpline to 10 am to 2 pm Monday to Thursday each week as this was the only way in which clients could get in touch. We experienced a significant volume of calls from individuals and families needing our support.

2.3 Advocacy and long-term support

Ongoing support for individuals and families continued to take up much of the volunteers' time during the last year. Support provided has included accompanying clients to appointments (for example with Housing Officers) and helping them to find and move into new accommodation when they have leave to remain. This work is often following up on initial enquiries made at the drop-in.

Some issues are quickly resolved while others, especially those concerning complicated processes such as housing and benefits, can take a long time. One recurrent factor is that most modern bureaucratic procedures now require online access for form filling, and asylum seekers often do not have access to the internet except via mobile data on their phones, which is expensive. Much of our drop-in time is spent explaining and translating these processes and helping people to fill in forms online, sometimes with the help of interpreters.

19 individuals and families attended the drop-in more than five times in the past year. Support included help with the asylum process including new claims, housing, help for those with leave to remain (e.g. opening a bank account, claiming Universal Credit), and support for pregnant women and new mothers.

Support with housing continues to be a major part of our work. There is now a dedicated team of volunteers allocated to this project dealing with everything from initial housing registrations to helping set up direct debits for new householders. This team has most recently been helping a number of families where spouses and children have arrived in the UK to be reunited with people already here, under the Family Reunion scheme, and therefore in urgent need of family accommodation.

2.4 Welfare support

The asylum seekers and refugees often have needs that cannot be met by the minimal financial support they receive. Our Welfare Fund has been used to pay fares for a range of essential journeys and to provide medicines and health products that are not available on the NHS, as well as help for families and individuals waiting for benefits or dealing with initial household bills. We have also paid for emergency dental treatment while people were waiting for their exemption certificates.

2.5 Lancaster University Immigration Law Clinic

The Lancaster University Immigration law clinic is a collaboration between RAIS Lancaster and the Lancaster University Law School. The clinic is supervised by Georgina Firth who is a barrister and a lecturer in law at the University. The Law Clinic is registered with the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC).

RAIS Lancaster pays for the hire of the room, provides interpreters when necessary, and also provides volunteers to assist at the sessions. We decided after our experience of the previous year that running one session every two weeks would give the students more time for follow up and preparation. (This year for the first time law students were able to gain academic credit for their work with the Law Clinic.) We therefore agreed with the University on 9 sessions across the first two university terms.

Each client has an appointment of between 30 and 40 minutes. At this appointment he/she is interviewed by students from the Lancaster University Law School under Georgina's supervision. Interpretation is provided either face to face or by phone where necessary. All information shared at the clinic is treated with the utmost confidentiality.

After the clinic, the students research the case and draw up a letter of advice. Georgina Firth then approves and signs this letter and clients should receive it within two weeks of the appointment. The service is completely free.

This year the Immigration Law Clinic provided advice to 31 clients.

2.6 Provision of furniture and household goods

This is one area of our work that has expanded significantly over the last year. We now rent two storage units, and this allows us to collect and store donated furniture (and other household items) so that we can respond quickly to requests. Refugees leaving Home Office accommodation typically have nothing but their personal possessions. They often move into unfurnished accommodation, and do not have a network of friends and family in the UK who can give them support. In the past year we have provided furniture for 12 refugee households, and these and others have been provided with items such as bedding and kitchen equipment.

During lockdown we received a large number of donations from the local community, which meant we had to expand our storage capacity. We anticipate that once full Home Office activities resume the need for this service will be substantial.

2.7 Covid-19 support

The asylum and refugee communities have experienced additional difficulties during the Covid-19 crisis. They have been isolated, with the cessation of the social activities run by and for their communities before lockdown. In some cases it has been difficult for them to contact their lawyers and health service providers. Progress on asylum claims has been paused, and those who have been given leave to remain have been unable to move on to find accommodation and look for work. All this has increased the already very high levels of anxiety that many experience.

During the initial period of lockdown we extended our helpline hours. We continued to offer support to families and individuals, working remotely via phone and social media and, when permitted, visiting. Issues that we helped with included arranging for vulnerable children to attend school, obtaining school meal vouchers for families and arranging medical appointments.

As soon as the Cornerstone Centre reopened we worked hard to be able to safely reopen our drop-in. We have complied with the Cornerstone's risk assessment, and we follow rules about social distancing, mask wearing, hand sanitising and recording personal details and times of arrival and departure for test and trace. The space we work in is well ventilated and we are able to maintain social distancing. We have set up workstations with Perspex screens, and desk surfaces are sanitised between clients.

Asylum seekers cannot get mobile phone contracts, and have to rely on pay-as-you-go packages. These are very expensive for people living on £37.75 per week Asylum Support (recently increased to £39.60). Unlike Universal Credit claimants, asylum seekers have received no extra support during lockdown, yet they needed to make additional calls to doctors, midwives, lawyers, support organisations, schools, etc. while face to face meetings are unavailable. They also need to keep in touch with their families and friends, mainly in their home countries, to combat isolation. Their Home Office accommodation does not provide internet access. Many of the places where previously they could access free WiFi, such as public libraries and community centres, were closed. RAIS successfully applied to the Lancaster District Urgent Response Fund for £1000 for our Digital Support for Asylum Seekers project which provides mobile phone top-ups, to be used for either calls or data. We have issued 43 x £20 e-vouchers, and have received many appreciative messages.

Since it has not been possible to run the Immigration Law Clinic in the 2020 autumn term, we are very grateful to immigration lawyer Susan Liew for continuing to provide *pro bono* advice and help to clients.

3. USE OF SERVICES

In the year to 31st October 2020 the RAIS drop-in dealt with 205 enquiries from 63 separate individuals: 21 women and 42 men. (These figures do not include partners and family members.) This represents a 29% increase in the number of service users (from 49 last year). The number of enquiries (i.e. drop-in visits) was down 25% (from 275) last year, which is only to be expected given that the drop-in was closed for over 3 months (and Home Office activity suspended for longer than that).

Of the 63 enquirers at the drop-in, 43 were asylum seekers, 18 were refugees and 2 were resettled refugees. A number of individuals and families whose initial contact with RAIS was as asylum seekers have been given leave to remain, i.e. refugee status, in the UK.

Some people come to the drop-in with one-off enquiries, some return several times, and many require on-going support over a period of weeks, as shown in Table 1. Table 1 and Figure 1 below show the breakdown of service users by the type of support given.

Type of support	Number
Single enquiry	19
2 - 5 visits	30
Long term support	14
Total	63

Table 1: Service users by type of support

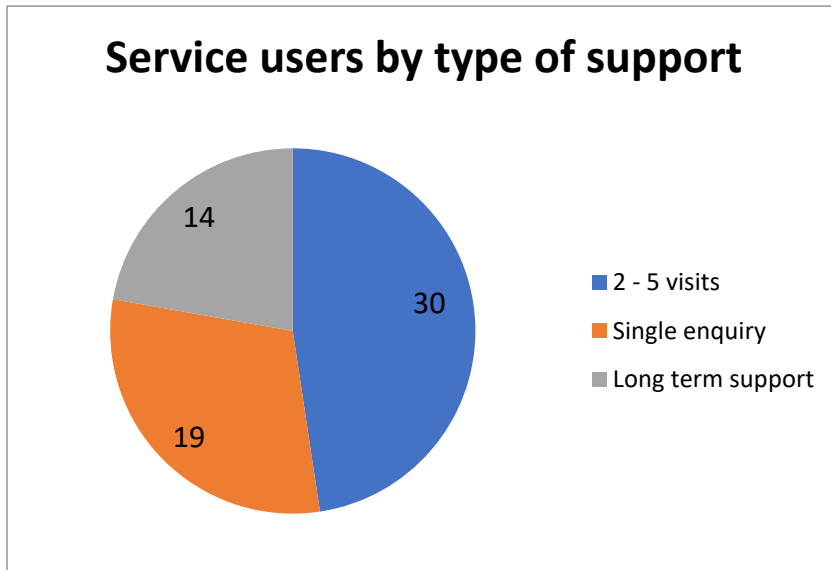


Figure 1

We have had enquiries from people from 16 different countries. These are shown in Table 2 below. The largest group are from Iraq (mainly Iraqi Kurdistan), followed by Sudan, Iran and Nigeria. For the first time in Lancaster we have been seeing asylum seekers from South America.

Country of origin	Number
Iraq	23
Sudan	13
Iran	8
Nigeria	4
Eritrea	3
El Salvador	2
Afghanistan	1
Cameroon	1
China	1
DRC	1
Ecuador	1
Somalia	1

Syria	1
Trinidad and Tobago	1
Ukraine	1
Zimbabwe	1
Total	63

Table 2: Service users by country of origin

Enquiries cover a wide range of issues: Table 2 and Figure 2 show initial enquiries broken down by type. It can be seen that by far the largest category is requests for help with housing. ‘Help with the asylum process’ includes everything from helping to understand correspondence from the Home Office and lawyers to volunteers accompanying people to Home Office interviews or appeal tribunals. Other large categories are help with fares to report to Home Office officials in Preston or Liverpool and help with becoming settled after being given leave to remain (opening a bank account, claiming benefits, etc.).

Type of enquiry	Number
Housing	76
Leave to Remain	29
Help with the asylum process	23
Fares for reporting to the HO	21
Referral to lawyers	17
Fares for access to education	14
Benefits	11
Health issues (including pregnancy)	8
Family reunion	4
Employment	2
Total enquiries	205

Table 2: Enquiries by type

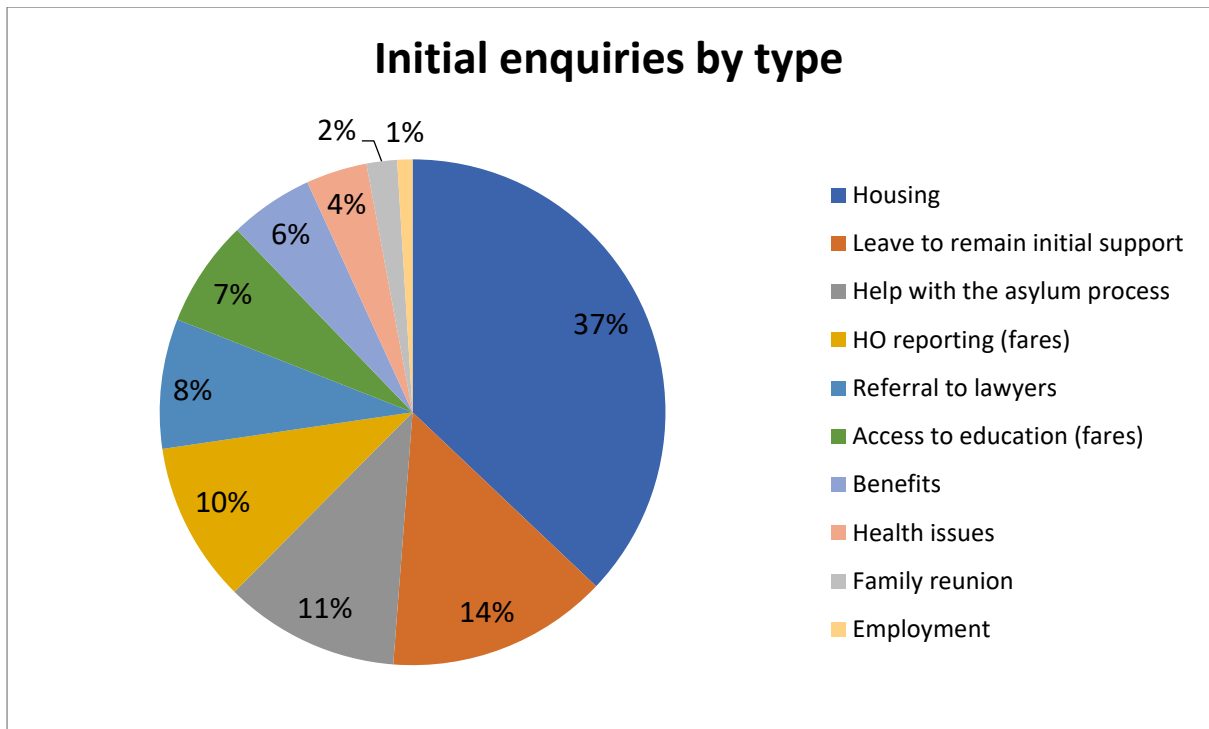


Figure 2

4. STAFFING AND TRAINING

4.1 Volunteer recruitment and training

RAIS is staffed entirely by volunteers from the local community. At the time of writing we have 20 volunteers.

Our volunteers reflect the diversity of our community in Lancaster, and include retired people, workers and students, coming from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

All volunteers who have face to face contact with clients are DBS checked in line with our volunteer policy.

Volunteers complete an application form and interview before being accepted. Volunteer training consists of an initial briefing, followed by on the job training: attending drop-in sessions and shadowing experienced volunteers working with clients. A review meeting with each new volunteer is held after six months.

The staffing and activities are administered and organised by two coordinators, who also provide support to the volunteers as needed.

4.2 Interpreting services

At present we have several volunteer and paid interpreters from among our volunteers and from the local community for Arabic, French, Farsi, Spanish and Chinese, and a professional interpreter in Manchester for Sorani. The bulk of interpreting is done over the phone. We also use a professional interpreting service when the local people are not available.

5. FUNDING

We are particularly grateful to the Walney Extension Community Fund for core funding of £8200 to cover our running costs, and for their generous extensions to the original funded period to address issues arising from the pandemic.

We would also like to thank the Eric Wright Trust for a grant of £600 to support our Welfare Fund, and Lancaster District Urgent Response Fund for £1000 to fund our Digital Support project.

We are pleased to be in receipt at present of a grant of £7000 from the National Lottery Community Fund.

6. WORKING WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Over the year from November 2019 to October 2020, RAIS has worked with many organisations. We have made and received referrals and obtained advice and funding.

A representative of RAIS Lancaster attends meetings of the Lancaster City Council Multi Agency Forum.

We are also represented on the committee of Lancaster and Morecambe City of Sanctuary.

RAIS is affiliated to Lancaster District CVS.

We are grateful to Lancaster District CVS for much helpful advice, to East Meets West; Lancaster University Law School; the North Lancashire CAB; the Cornerstone; Lancaster Baptist Church; St Thomas' Church Lancaster; Christ Church Lancaster; Lancaster City Council Housing Department; The Olive Branch; the British Red Cross, Preston; James Allen of Cheetham Hill Advice Centre, Manchester and to the many members of the local community who have donated, supported our fundraising events, welcomed refugees into their homes, and helped us in so many different ways with their continued cooperation, generosity and support.

Special thanks to Susan Liew of Collinwood Immigration Services who has provided much-needed legal advice.

7. FINANCIAL STATEMENT

RAIS ACCOUNTS 16th October 2019 - 15th OCTOBER 2020 (£)

RECEIPTS		EXPENDITURE	
Grants		Equipment purchases	1,856.96
Walney Extension	4,200.00	Budgeted running costs:	
Eric Wright Trust	600.00	Room hire	1,319.50
CoS	153.00	Interpreters	616.32
Urgent Response Fund	1,000.00	Phone contract	285.41
National Lottery	7,000.00	Office expenses	344.84
Hypothecated donations	349.38	Bank charges	52.11
Personal donations	1,992.00	Insurance	99.31
Fund raisers:		A/S travel	116.10
Fiesta	554.31	Volunteers' travel	241.50
Interest	0.01	Printing/publicity	575.53
TOTAL	15,848.70	Web hosting	74.33
		Covid safety	195.25
		Law clinic	300.22
		House moves	2,125.37
		Miscellaneous	17.90
		Sub-total	8,220.65
		Welfare fund:	
		Fares	1,110.70
		Family support	1,268.45
		Dental/medical	386.00
		Miscellaneous	76.00
		Sub-total	2,841.15
		TOTAL	11,061.80
NET SURPLUS	4,786.90		
ASSETS at 15/10/20			
Of which:			
Bank accounts	13,138.46		
Petty cash	40.60		