

GMIAU 2021 Report

Covid-19 and the Hostile Environment in the North West

June 2021



Greater Manchester
IMMIGRATION AID UNIT

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Greater Manchester
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This is a story of the resilience of people and communities, despite the negative impact of Covid-19, Brexit and Hostile Environment policies. It's about the importance of free legal advice for people in times of crisis. And it's about not returning to how things were before the pandemic – because things were not working for many of us, including people subjected to immigration control.

GMIAU is one of the only providers of not-for-profit immigration legal advice in the North West. Like many organisations, over the last year we have seen challenges unlike any others we've faced in our 31-year history. That's made this report different to others we've produced. We want to document the pandemic and the impact it had on us as an organisation, on us as individuals, and on people who are affected by immigration control. So we've brought together the experiences of the people we support and of our staff, statistics from our legal and support services, and stories of our work from March 2020–March 2021 – a year like no other.

With the Home Office threatening an attack on the right to seek safety in the UK and a ramping-up of Hostile Environment policies, local solutions are more important than ever. The Home Secretary doesn't seem interested in listening to lived experience and community expertise – but we are. Our report shows how communities can resist a hostile national immigration framework and do things differently.

We have a strong set of values which run through all our work:

- ▶ We take on difficult cases and we don't give up easily.
- ▶ We make sure we have the knowledge and expertise we need to succeed.
- ▶ We work with people to maximise the talents, humanity and values of our communities.
- ▶ We campaign for improvements in immigration law and policy.
- ▶ We are not silent when we see injustice.



The impact of Covid-19 on people we support in the North West

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent year of national and local lockdowns did not affect everyone in our communities equally. It wasn't hard to see past the rhetoric of 'we're all in this together' and realise that those already vulnerable – for example people experiencing poverty, disability, precarious work, isolation – were far more at risk of harm from both the virus and the effects of the lockdowns.

For people we walk alongside, having insecure immigration status undoubtedly exacerbated the harms caused by the pandemic; not least because the UK's immigration rules and Hostile Environment policies intentionally create race, class and gender inequalities. The following information is taken from conversations with people we supported through our phone advice line or through casework.

Delays

In March–December 2020, 261 people called our advice line about, or mentioned, delays to their immigration applications caused by Covid-19. The pandemic inevitably created delays for people making applications – like those who needed new documents to prove nationality for the EU Settlement Scheme, or who struggled to stay on top of applications while managing the extra pressures brought by life with Covid-19. Crucially, Home Office decisions and court appeals were also delayed by months, leaving people in limbo. This included delays for people who had applied to have their No Recourse to Public Funds condition lifted – people in desperate situations waiting months for relief. It also created significant delays for people needing an interview as part of their asylum claim. This had a particularly severe impact on children who are on their own in the UK seeking asylum: for almost an entire year, children were left feeling scared and forgotten, unable to begin to build a life here.

It's been over a year now.
It makes me depressed.

I can't sleep well at night
because I think too much.

“

Emmanuel, who is claiming asylum and is represented by GMIAU

When Covid-19 started, I felt very bad mentally, because I was waiting to see if my interview could happen and that day never arrived. I was alone in my house. I don't have any family or friends in this country, I was very bored, and there were moments when I thought about ending my life.

In June it will be 2 years since I claimed asylum in England. My case continues to be delayed. I still have no idea what is going to happen. I can't sleep well at night because I think too much. It is very hard. You are waiting for something very important in your life – to also have the right to live as most humans – but you never receive a yes or a no. It is in your mind – how can you be okay?

It is very difficult to ask for asylum in this country. I have been to hospital various times for not sleeping. It's very difficult for them to understand me because if the person has never had this type of life they are not going to understand. I can't explain more because it is so sad that a human has this type of life.

”

The impact of Covid-19 on people we support in the North West

Economic precariousness

For people from all demographics, the pandemic caused a new economic precarity. But for people subjected to immigration control, financial problems don't just affect their quality of life – they affect people's ability to live in the UK at all. The immigration system is expensive. Losing jobs or working hours pushed people over the edge and many found themselves unable to meet the financial requirements of visas, or to afford the next visa extension fee.

The first national lockdown revealed the paucity of the UK's safety net for anyone who needed to self-isolate or whose workplace had to close. But many with insecure immigration status have no safety net at all, because they are subject to a "no recourse to public funds" (or NRPf) condition on their immigration status – they can't access benefits. This puts pressure on people to continue working – meaning many were unable to shield when at high risk, self-isolate when they had symptoms, or report unsafe working conditions.

I could not go out, I couldn't claim any benefits, I was living on £140 a month.

Even for key workers working in the NHS on immigration visas, the relief offered by the government was not straightforward to access. They were promised automatic one-year visa extensions and the waiving of the Immigration Health Surcharge. Two women, Lucy and Gladys, who contacted us, had been told that they were not eligible for the visa extension despite working in the NHS as a trainee nurse and healthcare assistant, and they didn't know how to apply for the surcharge exemption because no guidance had been published.



Ifedayo applied for leave to remain on the basis of her young daughter.

My case has been open since March 2020, when I applied for my fee waiver. I then applied properly in late May 2020. They only responded in July, saying they needed supporting documents. It's been over a year now.

It's not been easy. In October last year, I had Covid. I was ill with my daughter. I could not go out, I couldn't claim any benefits, I was living on £140 a month. It was really a hell of a thing. Sometimes you need help but the people you call might be at work, so I was just there battling with my daughter.

I'm not working because I'm waiting for my application. It makes me depressed. I don't know what is going on. They just keep somebody in suspense. I'm always unsure, I have anxiety. I think "what's going to happen to me?". I wake up and think "Oh God, I don't know what's going to happen today."

It's really frustrating. There are so many things I want to do. I lost my grandma back home (in Nigeria). If they'd granted me leave I would have been fine to travel. I want to buy things for my daughter. It's really really sad. It's not about the benefits – I could work. My mind would be at peace, the anxiety would stop.



The impact of Covid-19 on people we support in the North West

Relationship breakdown and abuse

Concerns were raised nationally and internationally about the danger for people stuck indoors with abusive partners during lockdown, and we saw the impact locally. For the people we support in the North West, immigration status exacerbated the risks they faced from domestic abuse and exploitation, cutting off escape routes or access to support. People who are in the UK on a spouse visa are often terrified to report or flee abuse due to the impact it may have on their immigration status.

From March to December 2020, 167 people called our advice line about family or relationship breakdown and 151 about domestic violence or abuse. Many were calling because what they were experiencing had caused them to lose their immigration status or they were worried about this happening; several had been threatened and told their partner would report them to the Home Office.

I'm very afraid for my life and my family's life.

Mental and physical health

During 2020, some Home Office policies affecting people subjected to immigration control have been in direct opposition to the government's broader message on public health. They've seemed willing to risk the health of people with insecure immigration status and, because we're all only as safe as our most vulnerable, the health of our communities. We saw this when a Covid outbreak infected half of the people seeking asylum being housed in Napier Barracks in unsafe conditions. In the North West, people we support have been threatened with eviction from asylum accommodation – at risk of being thrown into street homelessness while a pandemic raged. Others were told they needed to travel for in-person signing at Immigration Reporting Centres during national lockdown, their health seemingly of secondary consideration to the rhetoric of immigration enforcement.

“

Joseph, a man we represent, told us in January 2021:

The immigration signing centre want me to report every 2 weeks. The issue is that we are in lockdown – the government announced that we should stay at home. I am worried about going out and catching Covid when I go to the reporting centre. I have a family with small children, of which one is a high risk because he has asthma. My wife works with vulnerable children with mental health for the NHS, and I wouldn't want to get Covid and put her and the children she works with at risk, including her colleagues. I have been signing on since 2012 and up to this date, so I am not a risk to run away. I'm very afraid for my life and my family's life.

”

For some, the pandemic highlighted people's struggles to access healthcare. Hostile Environment policies result in the over policing of services. They make some people scared to access services for which they are actually eligible for fear of being reported to the Home Office. 41 callers to our advice line expressed concerns about healthcare, and several had been charged thousands of pounds for services. Our advice line records only pick up people who proactively called to find out their rights; we cannot know how many people did not access the healthcare they needed for Covid-19 and other conditions due to fear.

Facts and Figures

Advice line

In March 2020, our in-person weekly drop-in advice service turned into a phone advice line. Our caseworkers regularly took 25 calls per day, speaking to callers across the region who had questions about their immigration status.

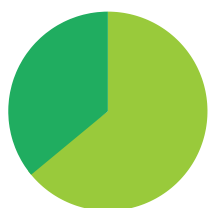
Our records of these calls give an insight into what people were going through during this time. These numbers run for the nine months from the end of March 2020 to the end of December 2020.

We took 3,097 calls on our advice line. Of those, 1,271 people got one-off advice. This means that they weren't represented by GMIAU; this advice was given on top of all our usual casework.

64% of calls related to immigration issues, 36% to asylum issues. Of the asylum-related calls, 17% – 103 calls – related to a fresh claim for asylum.

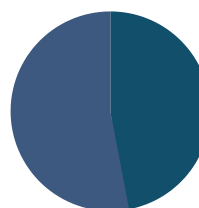
Slightly more callers were men than women.

Asylum
36%



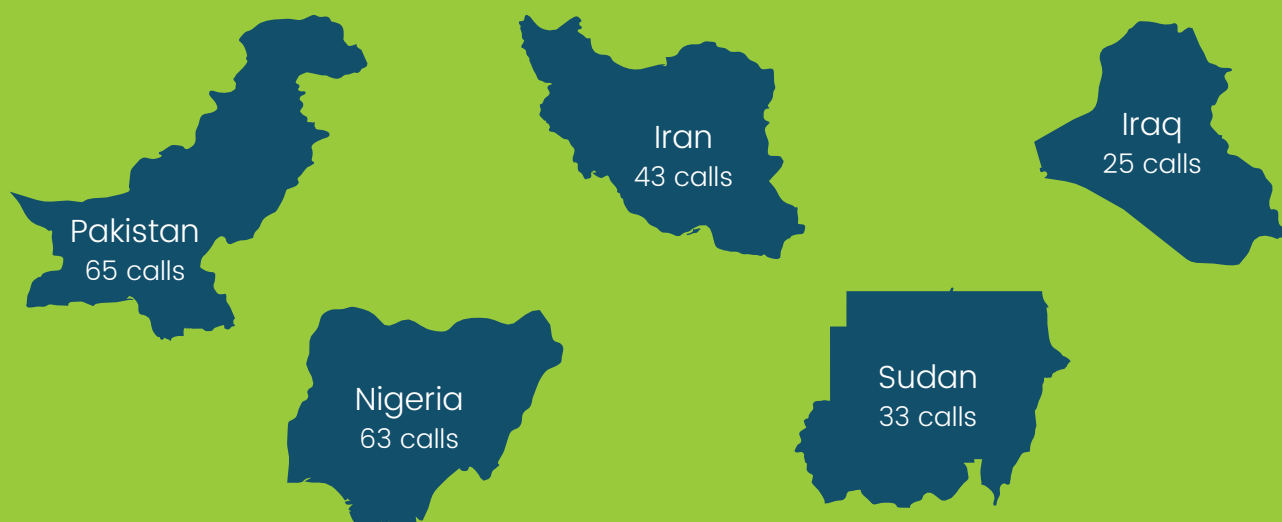
Immigration
64%

Men
53%



Women
47%

We received calls from people of a huge 103 nationalities. The most common were Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran, Sudan and Iraq.



Our advice line records from March–December 2020 show us what issues people were facing during this turbulent time. Some of the most common are shown on this page.



Hundreds of calls were about delays brought about by Covid-19 – cancelled appointments or interviews, Home Office backlogs, waits for decisions. Many were left waiting for months, dealing with an uncertain immigration situation on top of the uncertainty of life in lockdown. At the intersection of race, class and immigration status, our callers were at higher risk of the secondary effects of the pandemic, like economic difficulties and job loss.



The information recorded on our advice line also helps us to track how the government's "Hostile Environment" approach to immigration collided with Covid-19. For many people we support, the restrictions placed on all of us by the pandemic compounded years of restrictions and insecurities tied to their immigration status.

The UK immigration system is notoriously difficult to navigate. Our records show a particularly high number of people struggling with applications that should be simple, like renewing their leave, and many concerned about being able to afford high application fees.

Immigration processes and routes to settlement	1005
Accessing benefits	177
Fees	157
Accessing employment	74
Enforcement – deportation, detention	71
Accessing housing/Renting	53
Accessing Healthcare	41

A year like no other: 2020–2021 timeline

In March 2020, COVID-19 was spreading and the UK went into an unprecedented lockdown. In the year since then, restrictions have bounced back and forth in response to waves of infections – and Greater Manchester was in lockdown for all but 25 of the 365 days from March 2020 to 2021.

From a GMIAU perspective, here's what happened for people we support in the North West of England, and what our response was – as an organisation and as individual staff members.

Spring 2020

As everything started to shut down in **March**, immigration and asylum services were no exception. Asylum reporting and interviews were suspended for both adults and children, Service and Support Centres were closed, and so were UK Visa Centres.

But people were still expected to comply with deadlines. Visas are not automatically renewed, so people had to renew them to avoid becoming an “overstayer”. For GMIAU that meant our services could not stop.

GMIAU Chief Executive Denise says, describing the early days of the pandemic: “There was a point when it just felt completely and utterly overwhelming.”

But in just a few weeks we managed to move our in-person and location-based service to operate remotely. Staff contacted all the people they represented so they would know how to keep in touch over the phone and email; our weekly drop-in service became our phone advice line.

Conversations with funders and emergency grants meant we could weather the initial legal aid funding crisis caused by the courts and Home Office shutting down.



We had to learn quickly and adapt fast, and we questioned our assumptions that things have to be done a certain way.



In **April** it was announced that NHS and other frontline workers would have their visas automatically extended. They wouldn't have to pay an application fee or the Immigration Health Surcharge – giving unprecedented security to some, who had gone from “low skilled migrants” to “essential key workers” in government rhetoric overnight. But we found that in practice, these promises weren't always kept, and the much-needed relief was sometimes prohibitively difficult to access.

A year like no other: 2020–2021 timeline

Spring 2020 (continued)

In **May**, things started to slowly open back up again, including Visa Application Centres. But decisions on asylum, EU Settlement Scheme and immigration applications continued to be delayed, leaving people in fear and insecurity.

Over on the **GMIAU blog** we were reflecting on what we could learn from what we were going through.

COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that the divisive politics of austerity and the hostile environment have left us all less safe and more vulnerable. There have been opportunities to make gains against the Hostile Environment that seemed wildly optimistic at the start of 2020. We've never been more grateful for our relationships with others fighting for social justice in Greater Manchester.

In **June**, protests exploded across the world, including large protests in Manchester, following the killing by police of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Conversations were opened up about racism in all aspects of life in the UK. The movement speaks to our anti-racist roots as an organisation, and it re-galvanised us to talk about the racist underpinnings of the UK's immigration system as experienced by the people we support.

“

Joe, Destitution Caseworker

In the records from our phone advice line, Joe's name comes up a lot, particularly in the first months of the pandemic. The caseworkers answering the phone would often refer the caller on to Joe, because the main issue they were facing wasn't their immigration status – it was destitution. Joe would help them to get asylum support accommodation or access public funds.

"It's been a bit of a rollercoaster to be honest. There was a lot to get used to at the start and dealing with the increased workload and the learning to work remotely definitely overwhelmed me, but I got used to it and it seems normal now. At the start of the pandemic I was doing loads of asylum support work and things like change of conditions applications (to lift people's No Recourse the Public Funds condition). People would be genuinely destitute and needed food bank vouchers issuing, or referring to other services.

One of the saddest cases that I've done this year was a woman who had lost her husband, a mental health nurse, due to Covid. We tried to get her granted indefinite leave to remain, which was the Home Office policy, but they just ignored us for months. She was getting more and more desperate, we did the change of conditions application, that was ignored for a long time. Eventually she was granted indefinite leave to remain. There were just months of pure unnecessary stress for her and her kids."



A year like no other: 2020–2021 timeline

Asli, Operations Manager

Asli, who manages referrals and the Refugee Family Reunion project, found it challenging when she came back from maternity leave in May 2020. She'd missed the transition and had to adapt immediately to remote working. *"It was stressful at first,"* she said, but *"after a few months it got okay."* There had been a significant increase in referrals – she gets at least 30 email referrals a day.

With a new baby in the house, phone calls were difficult. *"The environment is not the same. I can get bored without being able to speak to someone, change the scenery or just have a walk around the office."*

"Having face to face is important for people in a vulnerable position or going through the asylum process. They can see in person that you are sorry if you cannot help... You do not know if the messages have been passed over properly through multiple telephones, whereas this is not the case with face-to-face referrals."



Summer 2020

Although Sopra Steria's UK Visa and Citizenship Application Services were operating, it was nearly impossible for people to get free appointments. The alternative was extortionately expensive appointments – costing £770 for one family. For those who couldn't pay or find an appointment, this left them without documentation to prove their entitlements. Our Senior Solicitor David said: *"Some of them who had no status before are still stuck with no right to access anything. They could've had recourse to public funds months ago."*

Maria, Social Worker and Service Manager

Like Asli, Maria also left for maternity leave and returned (in October) to find everything changed. *"I had to figure out how everyone had coped and what systems they were using now. It was hard at first – I could hear the kids screaming downstairs and they knew I was up here. It's better now though, because they're in nursery."*



"Some things are really good." Maria has been running training on the EU Settlement Scheme for local authorities and social workers. Using Zoom, she can *"put training on that will reach loads of people, only takes a few weeks, and I don't have to worry about booking venues or put a lunch on... The last one had people signing up from very far away. Glasgow, South East authorities, even the Isle of Wight."*



A year like no other: 2020–2021 timeline

Autumn 2020

In October, we released a report: [Six Positive Immigration Changes Introduced During Covid-19](#). We showed why changes that had been made out of necessity – mainly involving a shift towards digital processes and away from unnecessary physical interactions – should be made permanent.

Our experience shows that the new processes enable more efficient, agile working within the Home Office and the courts, support legal aid being used more effectively by legal representatives, improve the environmental footprint of the immigration system and ultimately enable people to make timely, thorough and evidence-based applications.

Isobel, Senior Caseworker

Isobel told us about the impact of lockdown and working from home on herself and her clients.

"My clients are struggling to different degrees. Children are struggling more, especially those who are approaching 18 and who are worried about that.

I'm not very technologically savvy – it was quite difficult to get to grips with online interviewing, and having to explain it to people. But now it's great. People are quite grateful to be able to have an interview in the privacy of their own home. People who struggle with childcare don't have to bring their children to the office. The downside is that you're a face on a screen. The

relationship is more problematic, particularly with children.

I love working from home. I realised I could do all sorts of things. I started a sourdough, I cook a proper meal, I do a walk every single day. It just gives you more time for your life and that's amazing. And I am way more efficient and organised now. But I really, really miss having a team around me."



2021 so far

A new national lockdown started in [January](#), but asylum interviews continued to take place and decisions were coming in – as the Home Office attempted to work through a huge backlog. But many people felt endangered by having to travel for interviews that would then take place by videolink. And at the time of writing many are still waiting.

In [March](#), the Home Office's New Plan for Immigration was announced. It lacks detail and ignores the voices of those with lived experience of the immigration and asylum system. And it threatens to make it even harder for people fleeing conflict and oppression to seek safety and find community in the UK. We're fighting the proposals and we'll continue to do so.

Reflecting in [March](#) on a year since the first lockdown, GMIAU Chief Executive Denise said:

'The last year has shown that the core of the organisation works. It isn't about a building. It is based on communication. Even though the pandemic is not over, there's a sense we understand it now. It's familiar to us and we have the people who will work together to ensure the fabric of what we have will survive next year as well.'

Facts and figures

GMIAU's legal services in 2020-21

In a year like no other, our numbers look different to normal. Fewer Home Office decisions and Tribunal determinations have meant that fewer cases have been resolved. But caseworkers and solicitors have been working as hard as ever to secure justice for the people they represent.

In the year March 2020–March 2021 we opened 880 cases. 240 of those cases were resolved. Of these, 149 resulted in a grant of leave to remain – 86 grants were for permanent or indefinite leave to remain, a lifeline for people during the uncertainty of the pandemic.

For comparison, in the same period from 2019–2020, 1798 cases were opened, and all but 268 of them were closed. This speaks to the delays in the Home Office and courts caused by Covid-19, meaning many more people in the North West may have been, and may still be, living in uncertainty and fear.

This year's 880 cases included people of 79 different nationalities. The most common 5, in order, were Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Nigeria and Pakistan – corresponding to the top 5 nationalities of callers to our advice line.



1 Iran (138)	6 Eritrea (39)
2 Sudan (73)	7 Afghanistan (35)
3 Iraq (69)	8 Somalia (25)
4 Nigeria (64)	9 Ethiopia (24)
5 Pakistan (60)	10 Turkey (23)

The cases opened were for a variety of application types. They included:

86 applications for leave to remain

56 applications for leave to remain based on domestic violence

181 first time asylum applications

31 fresh asylum applications

141 UASC (unaccompanied asylum seeking children)

Brexit

The following sections – Brexit, Children and Young People, and Accommodation and Homelessness – are themes that ran through our work in 2020 and through the pandemic.

In 2019, the government launched the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) for European/EEA nationals living in the UK to safeguard their rights after Brexit immigration changes. It's supposed to ensure that anyone who was in the UK before 31 December 2020 can secure their immigration status. But any scheme risks people falling through the gaps. The deadline is 30 June 2021. After that point, anyone affected who has not made a successful application will find themselves in the UK unlawfully. This means being subjected to Hostile Environment policies which risk people losing the right to work, the ability to rent private accommodation, access bank accounts, welfare benefits, higher education and other services.

With the June 2021 deadline approaching, we've been joining up with national efforts to make sure people in the North West aren't left behind.

The application is simple, but we're worried about people whose lives are complicated. It's not easy for everyone to access identity documents, or evidence how long they've been in the UK. This might include people who have experienced homelessness, mental health problems, or addiction.

GMIAU staff have been going every week to the Booth Centre and SPIN (Supporting People In Need), two homelessness charities in Manchester, as part of the 'A Bed Every Night' commitment to prevent rough sleeping in Greater Manchester. They've been helping EU nationals there to make their applications to the EUSS, often needing to chase up documents and evidence of residence.

The Home Office may claim that the EUSS is easy to navigate, but our experience shows something different. Our advice line saw 198 calls about Brexit in nine months, often from people who had lived in the UK for years and who had little understanding of what they needed to do to ensure they could continue to live here.

We heard from callers originally from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.



Brexit

We've had a particular focus on children in care and care leavers, groups who are both at risk of missing out. We've been working with local authorities to try and make sure as many children and young people in their care as possible make successful applications. Here's what we've done:

- ▶ Worked with social workers and personal advisers, trawling spreadsheets to identify affected children, co-producing guidance and delivering training, developing a tracking tool for social work teams
- ▶ Supported directors of children's services to measure and understand the performance of their local authority in supporting the European children in their care
- ▶ Worked with Manchester City Council on a pledge to speak out in support of their children and young people
- ▶ Worked with the Department for Education and the Home Office, using research from our work representing children in care and care leavers, to show how they are being left behind by the EUSS.

Covid-19 is, as always, part of the story here. It's created huge delays in services, and this is a particular problem with visa services and embassies, which may be needed for people to get valid identity documents proving their European nationality. But with the Home Office refusing to extend the deadline or give automatic status to vulnerable people, we're committed to fighting for as many people as possible to access the EUSS.

And afterwards? We know that a large group of people will go from being in the UK legally to being undocumented overnight. No one knows just how large that group will be. But we're committed to advocating for people caught up in the aftermath of Brexit, just as we do for people who are undocumented because they've had their asylum claim refused, because they've grown up in the UK without regularising their status, or because they've got on the wrong side of the Hostile Environment.

Anna's story

Anna, 15, is originally from Latvia. She came to the UK when she was eight and has been in the care of children's services for the past three years. Marie, her social worker, was aware that Brexit might affect Anna's situation but as she was unsure what to do, she focused on Anna's immediate needs and left her immigration issues "for another day". When her supervisor circulated an email from GMIAU, Marie said it was "a God send".

A solicitor explained to Marie that without an application to the EUSS, Anna would end up unlawfully in the UK. But the only ID document Anna had was her Latvian passport, which had expired. The Latvian embassy said getting a new passport would take two months. And then Covid-19 meant restricted travel and limited access to services, extending the wait even further.

Anna also needs written evidence of how long she has been in the UK. So before Anna can apply, Marie has to contact schools, doctors' surgeries and health visitors to get evidence of the additional years Anna spent in the UK before she came into the care of social services, so that she can get the status to which she is entitled.

Children and Young People

At GMIAU, we represent children and young people with their asylum and immigration cases. As well as our immigration solicitors and caseworkers working on cases for children who are on their own in the UK seeking asylum – which made up around a quarter of our overall caseload in 2020 – we also offer support in other aspects of life including accessing education, healthcare, support services, and socialising. We have our public law solicitor Laura to help with age assessments, social worker Maria to help with other support including the All4One youth group, and a social work placement student.



175 cases

opened for children
March 2020–2021

141 UASC

(unaccompanied asylum
seeking children)

30 cases

were closed for children
in that time

Lockdown was hard for the children we support. Lots of them had to wait many months for asylum decisions, because the Home Office suspended asylum interviews. Caseworker Isobel said: "(For some) it's been over a year now. That's not okay. I had messages when I turned my phone on this morning from a child saying 'I'm really upset, I've been waiting and waiting and waiting.' And he has."

In March 2021, our research found that we were supporting **75 children** who were still waiting for a decision on their asylum claim. The average time they had waited was **410 days**, and the longest wait was **564 days**. **27 had turned 18** while waiting for a decision, meaning they were no longer automatically entitled to legal aid for legal representation in their interview. Their solicitors and social workers documented the impact of being stuck in limbo for over a year – children were experiencing depression, anxiety, physical health problems, and relationship breakdowns. Remote asylum interviews for children finally started in some areas of the North West in March 2021.

Children and Young People

The All4One youth group has been unable to meet in person for their regular activities for over a year. GMIAU social worker Maria said, "I think a lot of the young people will be feeling isolated, they can't easily go and meet up with friends... These are kids already facing barriers and feeling isolated and alone in the UK. Some might be lucky with the (foster) families they get placed with, others are in harder situations, like with families who don't speak their language."

However, for some, who may not have previously been able to access support because they were located far from Manchester, virtual activities have been a plus. "Doing stuff virtually allows people to access support who never previously would have." While restrictions were lifted the group were able to meet in Manchester City Centre. "It was just nice to do something different," Maria said.



Public Law Solicitor Laura has also been concerned about the impact of lockdowns on children and young people. "Education stopping has been a massive thing for them," she said. "They're really isolated, and I was worried that the ones that were being age disputed weren't getting help because the frontline organisations aren't open that they are normally referred by."

31

new referrals to the All4One group from March 2020 – March 2021

Age Assessments

We give advice and representation to young people who have had their ages disputed either by the Home Office or local authorities. These young people are on their own in the UK, seeking asylum. Some are referred to us whilst in local authority care, some have been put into adult accommodation, some have been left street homeless or detained in immigration removal centres. All are confused about why they have had their ages disbelieved.

It's a traumatic process, but young people in the All4One group have found it reassuring to talk to other people who have gone through the same thing. But not everyone has access to this support. So, with help from staff at GMIAU and the pro bono support of Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, nine young people from the All4One group put together a guide to the age assessment process which was launched in September 2020.

They made a guide for other young people with tips on what to expect and how to deal with it. But they also wanted the adults and professionals involved in the age assessment process to understand how it feels to be disbelieved and, if an age assessment has to happen, how it can be done better. This led to the development of three information sheets with the #SixThings young people want social workers, appropriate adults and interpreters to know about the age assessment process.

Unable to give the guides the in-person launch event they deserved, we held an online launch. We were lucky to be able to hear the voices of some of the young people who helped to put the guides together. On the next page are two stories from young people GMIAU supported.

Arman's Story

I came from Iran, at around 2017. I went to the police station and handed myself in as a refugee but they thought that I was lying about my age. I found help in Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit. They helped make sure I had a place to stay with people my age and sent me into education. When I went there everyone was very helpful and they couldn't have been better. I appreciate all their help so much, I will never forget the help that they have given me.

Through different meetings with a social worker they asked me various questions and that's when they knew I wasn't lying about my age. I think that this guide will help others that are struggling, to see the social workers and foster workers as help and not as their enemy. I think not giving up and being honest till the very end is extremely important. Don't give up and keep pushing forward, don't be lazy and keep trying to get your point across, be respectful and honest.

Hiwa's Story

When I came here, I had no documents on me, as I left them inside the lorry. Here they did not sort me out for about two years. As soon as I made a friend in one place, I was transferred. It was very unpleasant for me.

When I left my country, I was scared. Here, they arrested me, and they used to say "we will send you back" and things like that, and that is why this time was a very scary time for me.

It would be good, when you place someone here, to keep them in the same place for a while and not move them so soon – not transfer them until their age is accepted. Also, during the time until they carry out the age assessment, if they know how long it will take, to keep the person busy. Either by games, or taking them to a college or a gym, or to a group. It would be very good because the person would not be fed up so much. These are good things to do until the age assessment is properly sorted.

I hope that whoever comes to this country can carry some evidence (ID documents) to avoid being transferred so many times from one place to another. That is all from me.

Names have been changed.



Children and Young People

Citizenship

We've been working to secure British citizenship for children who are eligible.

We've partnered with Kids in Need of Defence (KIND) UK. KIND uses a pro bono model to leverage support from commercial law firms under supervision from immigration specialists – like GMIAU solicitor **Melissa**. She's providing training, supervision and consultancy to lawyers at DLA Piper in Manchester and Liverpool as well as Sidley Austin in London. It means children and their families get access to free legal advice and representation to assess their options and make the applications they need. Melissa says:

"Many of the undocumented children we see have either been born in the UK, or have lived here since they were small children. Unsurprisingly many identify – and are identified by those they live, study and play alongside – as British. Until they hit a problem.

At some point not having immigration documents cuts across their opportunities. You want to go to university? Where's your ID documents? Starting your first job? ID documents. Setting up a bank account? It's those documents again.

When they turn 18, the Home Office immediately treats them as adults with adult consequences, including removal from the UK to countries they may have never even been to. As friends with citizenship move on with their lives, make plans and flourish, they're left living in limbo."

We've also been working with local authorities to encourage them to identify and support children in care and care leavers who are eligible for British citizenship, and to fund and champion pathways to citizenship for them.

Good practice: Manchester City Council's pledge

In March 2020, we worked with Manchester City Council on a pledge to speak out in support of their children and young people affected by Brexit immigration changes.

It was a chance for a local council to lead the way and showcase what best practice care looks like. The pledge read:

To our children in care and care leavers affected by Brexit immigration changes. In Manchester our looked after children and care leavers will not become part of the next Windrush generation because of Brexit immigration changes.

We were delighted that a year later the council used this learning to update the pledge, promising to:

- 1 Identify all looked after children and care leavers with insecure immigration status
- 2 Connect them with legal advice so they can be supported to make the most appropriate immigration applications and challenge immigration refusals
- 3 Support those who are eligible to apply for British citizenship
- 4 Continue to provide access to leaving care services





Mohamed, Social Work Placement Student

Mohamed's experience is a first for GMIAU – he started and finished his social work placement during the pandemic, meaning he has always worked remotely.

Despite this challenge he enjoyed his placement and was able to provide support to many who needed it. He told us how.

"Newly-arrived young people need a lot of support. They need someone to help them register with GPs, they need someone to register with education. At the moment, most of the support we do is by phone or video call. I came to the UK through the Gateway Protection Programme, a refugee resettlement programme, so I understand what the young people are undergoing and the support that they need. I grew up in a refugee camp and I understand first-hand the barriers that newly-arrived people face in the UK – the cultural shock, new environment, and the immigration system.

With my GMIAU placement providing support to young people seeking asylum, my role is to help provide social and emotional support and to help them understand the system, signpost to other services and communities, to bridge the gap while waiting for their asylum decision. Some of the young people we support have negative attitudes towards social services. I know some end up staying home and not seeking services or help. For example, people living with HIV or TB, or victims of sexual abuse, need someone who understands their situation and encourages them to access services. I wanted to dispel misconception and clarify ambiguities so young people knew where to seek support. There are a lot of barriers between the newly-arrived people and social services.

The feedback that people give is the most amazing thing. For example, a woman that I was supporting last week – she'd just arrived, and she didn't know where to start. In the same day, the woman got food. The next day, I registered her children with a school. She kept sending thank you messages – thank you, thank you, thank you. So I feel like I'm doing the right thing. I'm so proud of the social team in GMIAU."



Suzie, Trainee Solicitor

Suzie is training with GMIAU through the Justice First Fellowship, which is run by the Legal Education foundation. She started her training in January 2021, so she's only met her new colleagues through a screen. *"It is different through the screen – it isn't quite the same. But everyone has been really welcoming, and I still feel a part of the team".*

Because she is on a training contract, in normal life she would be able to speak to her supervisor David anytime, and ask him any questions she had. They have adapted to lockdown by having a phone call at the end of each day: *"I feel like I can ask questions and get help whenever I need."*

She was excited to get the traineeship at GMIAU. *"The corporate route of law has never appealed to me. I've always wanted to help those who are really in need of legal support to access justice."*

"I remember finding out that a meeting with a solicitor could cost a few hundred pounds – that creates a barrier to justice for so many. Being able to do the work without worrying about whether people can afford it is great".



Accommodation and Homelessness

At GMIAU we support people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness and destitution. We help them to access accommodation and services. Many people with insecure immigration status, or who have been refused asylum, are at particular risk of being excluded from essential services. The Covid-19 pandemic changed this work more than ever.

"The pandemic emphasises disparities", Public Law Solicitor Laura says, "in terms of treatment of people because of race, but also the complete inequality in the country." The early months of the pandemic saw many facing destitution, with especially dire consequences for those for whom precarious work overlapped with precarious immigration status. But this year has also seen unprecedented support for people experiencing street homelessness – the Everyone In campaign proved that communities can be protected from the worst destitution with enough determination from those in charge. We've fought, and continue to fight, for the people we support to access that protection.

No Recourse To Public Funds (NRPF)

We support people who have a No Recourse to Public Funds condition on their immigration status to apply to have this lifted. Especially in a pandemic, this policy leaves many destitute, and it can take several months for the decision to lift the condition to be made. In June 2020, we wrote about the impact we were seeing.

Lockdown has been really hard for the Sharif family. Mum, dad and two children are all subjected to an NRPF condition. Until he had a stroke, dad was the only member of the family in work. Mum is too sick to work, the eldest child is full-time carer for her parents and the younger child is a student. The family are dependent on food banks. We applied for their NRPF conditions to be lifted at the start of lockdown. The Sharifs have still not had an answer.

People with an NRPF condition have to work to survive. That is how the system is designed. There is no benefit safety net to support them so, despite living in the middle of a public health crisis, people work – regardless of underlying health conditions and despite COVID-19 symptoms. The only response to these injustices is to scrap NRPF, right now and for all.

Good practice: GMCA's statement on evictions

In December 2020, we were pleased to see that Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) had made a statement committing to protect people from asylum evictions. "The Government must not resume evictions for those with a negative decision at a time when the risks of Covid-19 and of rough sleeping and destitution remain."

We said: "The statement from Greater Manchester leaders is a powerful reminder of how change is possible, even in times of great uncertainty, when we decide to stand together."



Accommodation and Homelessness

A Bed Every Night

We've been involved in A Bed Every Night, Greater Manchester's ambitious scheme aiming to make sure street homeless people have a place to sleep. It launched in 2018. In its first two years, the people running it realised that they needed provision for people with No Recourse to Public Funds, who were unable to use traditional homeless accommodation which is based on eligibility for housing benefits. Now, they have funded bed space for people with NRPF, and GMIAU has been funded to help them with their immigration and EU Settlement Scheme cases.

Asylum support and evictions

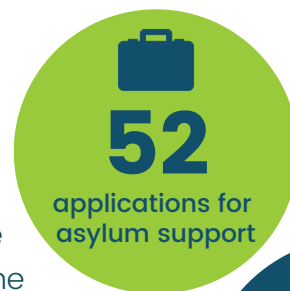
Asylum support refers to financial support and accommodation for those waiting for asylum decisions, or who have been refused asylum but cannot return to their home country. During the pandemic, eligibility for asylum support was extended as it was understood that it would be a breach of human rights to make someone street homeless during this time, as well as putting the local community at risk.

In the early months GMIAU assisted many people to access this accommodation. But once restrictions had relaxed, the temporary pause in evictions of people whose asylum claim had been refused was lifted. In autumn 2020, people in asylum support accommodation began to receive notices that they would be evicted. Even when Manchester's Covid-19 rates were rising exponentially and the highest in the country, the Home Office was trying to go back to "business as usual".

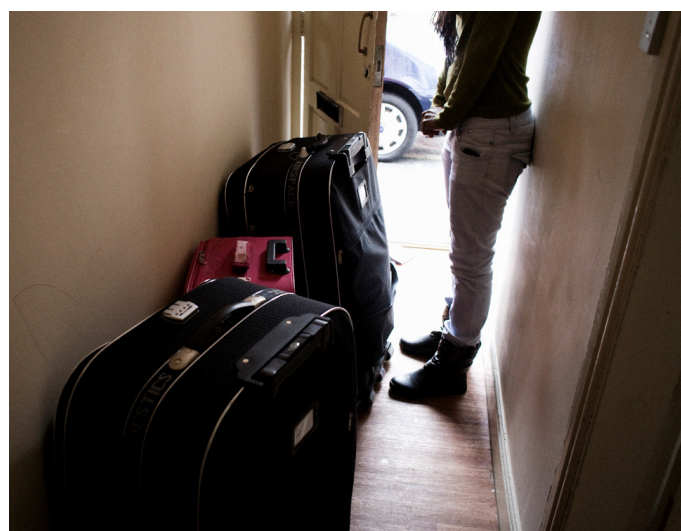
At the time, Destitution Caseworker Joe said:

"The Home Office resuming evictions is utterly ridiculous and just highlights how inconsistent the government has been while managing this pandemic. Many of the people we help are now living on edge, terrified that they will soon become street homeless if the Home Office discontinue their support."

But legal action by GMIAU, Greater Manchester Law Centre and others successfully stopped evictions happening then, and at the time of writing they've continued to prevent anyone being evicted. This means that people have been able to stay safely in their accommodation through the winter and the second wave of the virus, from November 2020 to May 2021. And we're still doing all we can – reaching out, giving advice and working with other organisations – to protect people from the evictions that are likely to restart.



*numbers run
from March
2020 to
March 2021*



Campaigning

Our campaigns in recent years tend to have something in common. They centre on ending the government's Hostile Environment, which is at the root of many of the policies we see causing misery to individuals and families, as well as damaging communities.

What is the Hostile Environment?



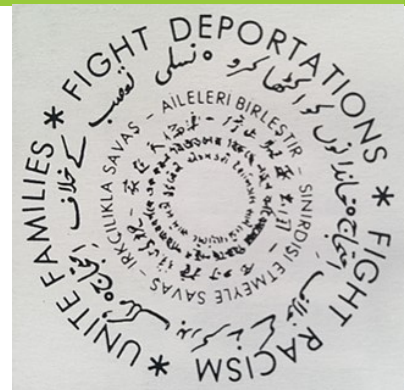
The Hostile Environment is a series of laws and policies designed to exclude people from accessing services and benefits based on their immigration status. Its aim is to make life unliveable for “undocumented” people – those without official leave to remain in the UK.

It introduces the need for immigration checks in almost every area of daily life: access to employment, accommodation, healthcare, banking, driving licences, marriage, and benefits is now contingent on being able to prove your status. It brings border control inside the country's physical borders and turns untrained people – businesses, healthcare providers, landlords and other officials – into immigration enforcers.

It's what led to the Windrush scandal – people who had been here for many years found that their lack of official documentation began to cause them more and more problems. People lost their jobs and homes and sometimes their ability to live in the UK.

The Hostile Environment is aimed at people without immigration status – some of the most vulnerable people – but it also has a wider impact. It leads to people being denied services they're entitled to, or denying themselves access due to fear of being detained or deported. It's a racist policy that ultimately means people who “look” like they may not be British being questioned, investigated and obstructed from living a normal life.

We've been involved in national campaigns to remove some of the most unjust aspects of the immigration and asylum systems. 230 organisations joined the #VaccinesForAll campaign to make the Coronavirus vaccine accessible to everyone. We joined the call to #CloseTheBarracks when the Home Office saw fit to accommodate hundreds of vulnerable people seeking asylum in disused and unliveable army barracks, and we're part of the #TogetherWithRefugees coalition to fight for the right to seek safety in the UK.



Campaigning

We're also part of the call to #LiftTheBan on people working while their asylum claim is pending. One doctor affected by the ban wrote in our blog:

“

I want to speak with you. But I can't tell you my name. I live in Greater Manchester. I'm a mum. I'm a doctor. I'm seeking asylum.

The government is still making a decision on my asylum application which is why, to protect me and my children, I'm writing this anonymously. And here's what I want to tell you – I'm a doctor who, in the middle of a global health pandemic, cannot work.

Let me tell you about my life as a doctor in the country I am from.

Both myself and my husband have over 15 years experience as doctors. We both speak three languages. He is a consultant cardiologist. I am a radiologist specialised in abdomen/pelvis and obstetrics & gynaecology sonography. But government rules mean there is a ban on people seeking asylum being able to work.

The ban makes no sense. Life combating COVID-19 needs to be a life that looks after everyone and lets us all participate according to our gifts and talents. If the government lets me, I am willing and able to make a valuable contribution and help with the pandemic. I'm willing to work as a doctor anywhere the NHS has need.

”

To raise awareness about the impact of the Hostile Environment on children and young people, we ran a Christmas Crowdfunder campaign. We used the campaign to share the stories of young people we support through our blog series, The Long Journey to Safety, which takes you through a young person's journey as they search for safety in the UK. We were delighted to raise £5,000 and touched by the many messages and gestures of support from our friends in the North West and beyond.

You are amazing GMIAU, thank you for all the brilliant work you do!

I applaud, admire and respect the work you do. My deepest sympathy for the refugees and my prayers for a better and more peaceful life.

Everyone deserves support to start over again after traumatic circumstances.

Some of the stories in this report originally featured on the GMIAU blog. For more stories of our work and for updates on our campaigning work, go to gmiau.org/blog

I came to GMIAU in 2011 with my 2 year old son seeking asylum. GMIAU supported me and I got positive decision within 6months. Today I am in my second year in university studying social work. Thank you very much.

Thanks and acknowledgements

We are grateful to all the organisations and individuals who have stood alongside us in the last year. Our work would not be possible without our relationships in the North West and beyond. We'll continue to fight for a fairer society. In the face of the Hostile Environment we'll keep showing that there are compassionate alternatives to the current system which are based in community and humanity.

Funding from the following organisations has enabled our work to continue even when the pandemic impacted our usual sources of income. Thank you to:

AB Charitable Trust	Henry Smith Charity
Aurum Charitable Trust	Legal Education Foundation
Community Justice Fund	Lloyds Foundation
Barrow Cadbury Trust	The National Lottery Community Fund
Families Together	Network for Social Change
KIND	Oglesby Trust
Esmée Fairbairn	Refugee Action
Estée Lauder MAC Aids Fund	Sam and Bella Sebba Charitable Trust
GM Mayors Fund	

The team at GMIAU continue to inspire hope for the future. Tireless work goes into every case, without ever losing sight of the person and their experiences. Thank you to staff members Suzie, Mohamed, Maria, Isobel, Joe, and Asli for sharing their experiences in this report, and to volunteers Maxwell Goddard and Challoner Zon for helping to put the report together. And thanks to Emmanuel, Ifedayo, Joseph, Arman and Hiwa for sharing their own experiences of the immigration system.

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Please email rivka@gmiau.org if you have any questions about this report.



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