

Our Work 2020–2021

The last year has been a year like no other. Throughout it all I have been continually inspired by the work of the staff and volunteer team at City of Sanctuary Sheffield.

This report is one attempt to try to capture that work.

In it you will see the evolution of The Virtual Sanctuary, get an idea of the numbers of people we have worked with and the breadth of this work, and hear first-hand from people seeking sanctuary about the impact of our work.

Please also understand as you read this that it captures only a fraction of the work at City of Sanctuary Sheffield which, in itself, is only a fraction of the work done by so many incredible organisations working in solidarity with those coming to Sheffield in search of safety and welcome.

There is still much to do and at City of Sanctuary Sheffield we will continue to work with resilience, agility and joy to strive for a city that is safe and welcoming for all.

Tom Martin, Director, City of Sanctuary Sheffield

The Virtual Sanctuary Timeline

Early April 2020

- Migrant COVID-19 Support Group
- Volunteer Support and Development

Late April 2020

- Homeschool Support Part 1
- The Information Project

September 2020

- SPRING Move On Support
- Virtual Clothes Bank

May 2020

- The Connections Team

January 2021

- Homeschool Support Part 2



1. The Connections Team



The Connections Team was established during the summer in order to **promote mental wellbeing among isolated sanctuary seekers in the city**, with a focus on individuals and families who may not be embedded within formal or informal support networks. Volunteers were given training by a qualified psychologist before being paired with sanctuary seekers and encouraged to make contact by phone once a week, in order to offer emotional and practical support, as well as flagging up any significant issues affecting service users so that further support could be provided. **A number of the volunteers involved in Connections Team are experts by experience of the immigration system**, and calls were made in a number of community languages other than English, offering a substantial amount of peer support and strengthening bonds among the sanctuary seeker community in the city.

Between June 2020 and April 2021 563 wellbeing phone calls were made to 72 individuals in Sheffield. Sanctuary seekers were given practical support with a wide range of issues, including health concerns, food bank referrals, clothes bank requests, assistance with technology, advice regarding workplace issues, but by far the most significant area in which support was provided was to do with mental health and the alleviation of loneliness.



Case Study:

Volunteer M was partnered with **sanctuary seeker D** in August 2020, after **M** initially made contact with the project in June. **M** is a medical student who had found themselves back at their parents' home during the first lockdown and was seeking ways to help alleviate social isolation during the pandemic. After being paired together **M** and **D** spoke on the phone once a week as well as meeting up for walks in person when restrictions allowed. **M** supported **D** with a number of practical issues, ranging from clothes bank requests to supporting **D** to practice for English language speaking exams. **M** said that while the initial communication was a little awkward, the two of them quickly developed a strong rapport which has grown into an "uncomplicated" relationship, which has been of benefit to both of them. **M** also reported finding a lot of support from the organisers of the Connections Team and noted the catch-up sessions for volunteers were particularly useful. **D** said that the Connections Team had provided significant "emotional support during the pandemic" and said everyone involved was "brilliant and they're doing amazing to support people."

2. Homeschool Project



The aim of the Homeschool Project is to **provide equipment, internet access and on-going tech support to all refugee and asylum-seeking families with school-age children in the area** throughout the pandemic. The Project has existed in two forms: 1) an initial period of fundraising and distribution of new equipment and data packages, and 2) a follow-up period, in which recipients of laptops and phones are given direct access to a Digital Inclusion Officer, who provides on-going support. This year we have provided **120 laptops** to over 100 households across South Yorkshire, successfully providing necessary equipment to every school-age child across our demographic. This is over **400 children**. Follow-up support from the Digital Inclusion Officer has been provided to 39 families in Sheffield who received laptops, mostly regarding assistance setting up devices and continued funding of data packages.

Case Study:

Asylum Seeker N has young children and was struggling with anxiety and panic attacks at the beginning of the pandemic. As well as receiving support from COSS to access a number of services, **N's** household received a laptop and internet connection, as well as on-going support, which enabled her son to continue his education. **N's** son said: "I want to send a big thank you for laptop and internet which allows me to study every day and send my homework to my teacher every day."

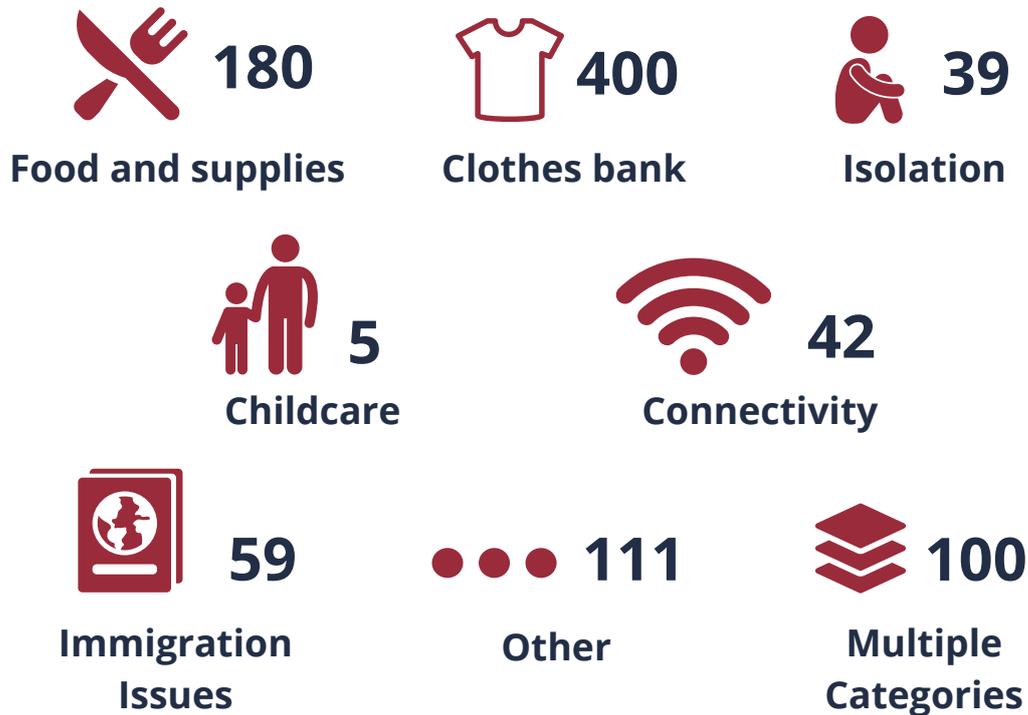
3. Migrant COVID-19 Support Group



The Migrant COVID-19 Support Group provides **mutual aid to refugees and asylum seekers in Sheffield**. The project is co-ordinated by experienced and trained volunteers, many of whom are experts by experience of the immigration system. The primary role of the Migrant COVID-19 Support Group is **to provide practical assistance to individuals and families who have found themselves unable to access necessities or services during the pandemic**. Over the past year over **940 individuals and families** have received support from the project, with an emphasis on the provision of food and supplies and assistance with navigating the immigration system. **Many of these people have received multiple types of support from the group**, and have contacted the Migrant COVID-19 Support Group numerous times.



Categories of Support Provided by the Migrant COVID-19 Support Group



Volunteer Case Study:

Volunteer J was assigned to monitor the running of the Migrant COVID-19 Support Group one day per week. She reported a very hectic and busy “crisis period” during the start of the pandemic in April 2020, with an urgent need for food in particular: much of this work involved the delivery of cooked food or groceries to sanctuary seekers, as well as working with partner organisations including food banks, Foodhall and Open Kitchen. In the following months things started to settle down slightly, with the majority of requests become less urgent. Referring users to other organisations in the city—particularly Baby Basics—became a significant task of the group, as did providing service users with working mobile phones. **J** praised the quick establishment of a centralised hotline during the period of great uncertainty at the beginning of the pandemic; she suggested that an improvement could be made by streamlining the technology used to run the support group, while recognising that the system was inevitably put together fairly quickly. She said: “COSS has done amazing work with this dedicated effort to keep communications open with a vulnerable population in the city. The Migrant COVID-19 Support Group has established a strong sense of virtual community. It’s great that there’s a central point in the city that refugees and asylum seekers can contact on a single phoneline.”



Case Study:

Woman D has been living in a woman's refuge since we referred her to the National Referral Mechanism. Throughout the pandemic we were able to support women seeking asylum in this refuge. We were able to provide them with clothes, food parcels, hygiene products/toiletries, games and toys for the children and activity packs that helped them during periods of isolation. One woman said that our work with them was "most welcomed by the ladies here, we really needed these items as the weather is now moving warmer into the summer & we can do more outdoor, which is great therapy for the mind, body & soul. Thanking you so much for your continued support to our Refuge. Stay blessed & awesome as you are."

4. Information Project



The Information Project provides **up-to-date service and public health information to people seeking sanctuary and organisations** working with them across the city. Through it we distributed leaflets giving up-to-date details about how to access essential services for people seeking Sanctuary in Sheffield three times over the last year. Each time, this leaflet was circulated to asylum accommodation within Sheffield (**approx. 900 households**) and via partner organisations. It was also circulated through community organisations working under the umbrella of VAS, mental health services via Sheffield Flourish and through NHS services via the Mulberry Practice.

We also provided information responding to the need for accurate public health information in community languages. We provided information delivered through partner organisations about Covid regulations (3 times), self-isolation advice, potential scams relating to COVID and a beginner's guide to Zoom. We made sure that this material was available in community languages. This information was delivered in partnership with SAVTE via mobile phone through the community and to people housed in asylum accommodation.

The Asylum Journey website was updated to respond to the Covid-19 emergency. New pages were created to deal with Covid related information and services were updated regularly with emergency information. In the initial phase our focus was on essential services and then we began to develop further resources relating to mental health. Over the last year we recorded **3,612 unique users of the Asylum Journey website; a 31% increase**. Our number of hits to pages (including repeat users) went up from 11,512 to 13,432; a 17% increase.



5. Citywide Coordination



During the pandemic City of Sanctuary Sheffield have worked with so many inspiring organisations to **coordinate a response to the pandemic that ensures people seeking sanctuary are included, connected and supported.**

Network Building

We currently chair and facilitate the Service Providers Group; a collection of around **48 people from 21 organisations** supporting people seeking sanctuary. This group met weekly at the beginning of the pandemic and now meet fortnightly. Attendees have called this ‘an incredible partnership network’ and say that they are ‘so impressed that CoSS has managed to build such an informed and informative network’. Alongside this we continue to support the wider Refugee and Migrant Forum with weekly information sharing mailouts and calls to action.

Campaigning and Advocacy

We have **challenged government, both local and national, throughout the pandemic on their treatment of people seeking sanctuary and been strong advocates for the rights of those individuals.** We challenged them on the continuing eviction of asylum seekers from their accommodation and successfully fought for those with No Recourse to Public Funds to be housed during the pandemic. We have joined national voices campaigning about inadequate asylum accommodation and we will continue to resist the governments New Plan for Immigration which we believe to be unjust, inhumane and in contravention of the 1951 refugee convention. We have advocated, and will continue to advocate, for individuals within the system to have access to the services and support they are entitled to.

Case Study:

Asylum Seeker M contacted us in distress. She had been referred to the hospital due to complications with her pregnancy. Sadly, she subsequently had a miscarriage. She was presented with a large bill by the hospital and threatened with enforcement action if she didn't pay. We were able to get her support through Maternity Action who were able to take up her case with the hospital, preventing any action been taken. She said “Thank you so much for everything you have been doing for me”.



6. The SPRING Project



The Sheffield Project for Refugee Integration and Growth (SPRING) is a collaboration of six organisations helping refugees settle into the local community. It has been running since January 2018 and has worked with over 1000 new refugees in that time. This year, the pandemic and resulting lockdowns had a huge impact on the SPRING Project. Firstly, all assessments and support work moved on line; and secondly, the Home Office initially paused all decision making and asylum evictions, with the latter recommencing in Autumn 2020. Despite this between the start of the first lockdown at the end of March and up until the end of 2020, **129** new people accessing SPRING were assessed and supported by CoSS with referrals made to the other SPRING Partners.

In addition, SPRING volunteers managed to provide **at least one phone call to over 1000 people accessing SPRING** to give information about Covid-19, the lockdown and to offer practical and emotional support through the Connections Team and Migrant COVID-19 Support Group, and by making referrals to SPRING and external partners. CoSS also successfully recruited our new SPRING Front of House Welcome and Support Worker, Blessan Babu, who commenced work in January. Since January 2021 City of Sanctuary Sheffield has managed to support **111** people to register onto SPRING. CoSS has conducted over **125** hrs of phonecalls including **30** in different languages with the help of an interpreting service. CoSS and SPRING have, through the British Red Cross, provided 13 new laptops and free online digital accessibility training for women to protect them from digital exclusion and social isolation.

SPRING has also been supporting volunteers to open bank accounts remotely for newly granted refugees and to help with the initial assessment of newly granted refugees in preparation for the lifting of restrictions.

Case Study:

Refugee N, his wife **W**, and his family came to the UK to seek asylum. After waiting for three years, they received a positive decision. **N** and **W** have two children aged 2 yrs and 5 months.

Living in a new cultural context and having English as their second language put immense pressure on this family. The family was initially placed in temporary hotel accommodation with two small children and no facility to cook food. The family also had no recourse to public funds, and were without heating for three days. CoSS, through SPRING, escalated the situation to council senior management. This resulted in the reinstating of their heating with immediate effect and stopped further letters from the council about their bills. This family was also not able to apply for universal credit or child benefit for a number of weeks as two of the family members' biometric cards (BRPs) had not arrived. With the help of Citizens Advice, SPRING managed to support them with a hardship fund through the British Red Cross and managed to find further support from through children's social care service to help meet their day-to-day needs. SPRING also contacted their solicitor who raised this BRP issue with the Home Office. By mid-April the whole family managed to get to get their BRP cards and they started receiving their benefits at the beginning of May 2021 after five months of delay and stress.

6. Volunteer Development



Volunteers have continued to be active and engaged throughout the pandemic, developing new skills in order to support the work of CoSS. Across our numerous roles, our dedicated volunteers have contributed an estimated **average of 80 hours per week** to support CoSS and our members.

As well as enabling the Connections Team and Migrant COVID-19 Support Group discussed above, volunteers have helped at the Virtual Clothes Bank; provided interpreting support; used paid interpreters in order to carry out their vital work; fundraised for CoSS; updated information and created content on the CoSS website, social media accounts and the Asylum Journey website; written reports and case studies; and provided Health and Wellbeing support. All of these roles required us to develop new and bespoke training sessions which were delivered over Zoom. These enabled volunteers to support our work and learn new skills. We also developed and delivered a new Virtual Induction to existing and new volunteers recruited during the pandemic. In addition, a new full day workshop on working with trauma was developed and delivered; and we partnered with Shelter for a four part-course around Shelter's work, homelessness prevention, social housing, and tenancy rights.

In turn CoSS has supported our volunteers and provided development opportunities throughout the pandemic. We have kept in touch via WhatsApp, the volunteer newsletter and Google Groups, and regular meetings. We have organised socials such as online quizzes and coffee mornings. We provided advice and practical support for volunteers in need including a Christmas Hamper. We have overcome barriers by providing phones, minutes and data and lending laptops to support volunteer engagement. During the pandemic, many CoSS volunteers have gone on to achieve paid employment in the charity, refugee and immigration sectors. Their volunteering experiences, and in some cases, references provided by CoSS were invaluable in their success.

Volunteer Case Study:

Volunteer N is an asylum seeker who volunteered with CoSS before the pandemic. At the start of the lockdown, she was anxious, depressed and having panic attacks. CoSS supported her with food and practical support via the Migrant COVID-19 Support Group, and emotional support through regular contact. The Homeschool Project also provided a laptop and data for her school-age son. **N** was soon able to resume volunteering with the Virtual Clothes Bank and the Connections Team, and was provided with a phone, minutes and a laptop to carry out this work. She is now providing vital emotional and practical support to CoSS members and is one of two CoSS representatives regularly attending the Mental Health Partnership Network meeting.

N said: "Volunteering really helps me to redeem my self-confidence and helps with my mental health. I feel better about myself when I am helping others and I feel blessed for being a part of the CoSS team"