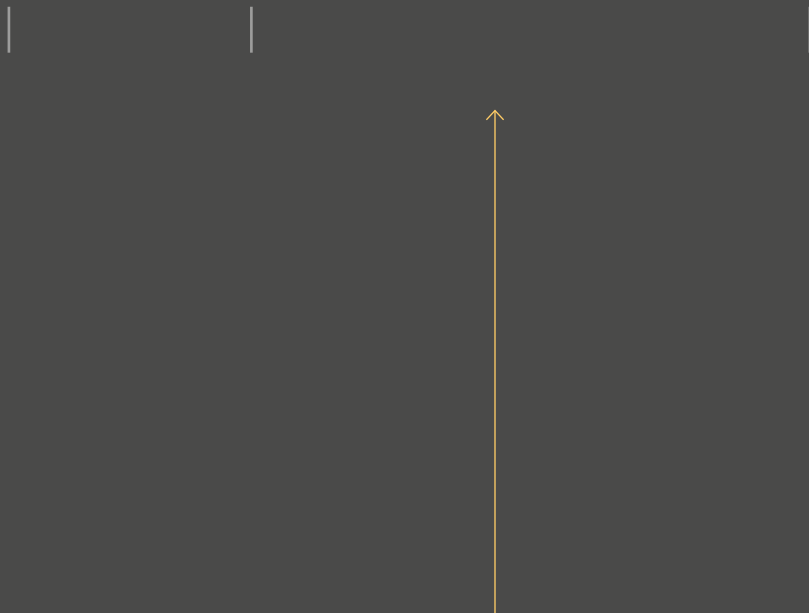


**I WAS HERE FOR A
YEAR... AND I STILL
DIDN'T KNOW: ”**

Improving the availability and
access to support for people
seeking asylum and refugees
in Greater Manchester





You can download this report and open it in your Adobe Acrobat Reader to be able to use our top navigation bar.

Click or tap on these buttons to access each section, this will significantly optimise your experience digesting the content of this report.

Contents

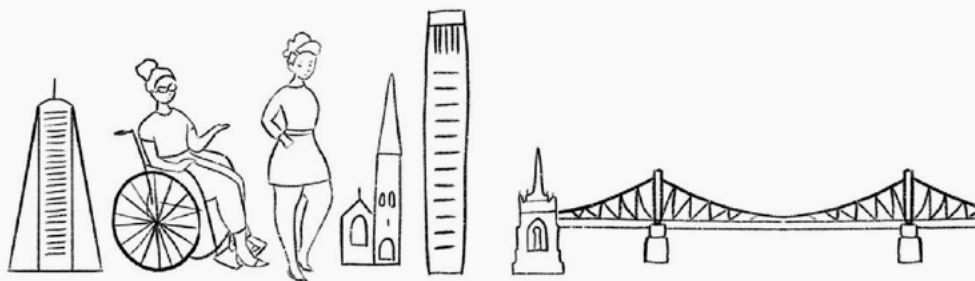
Overview	4
Key findings	6
Recommendations and response	7
For stakeholders in Greater Manchester	7
For the Step Change Consortium	9
Acknowledgements	10



Overview

The Greater Manchester Refugee Step Change Consortium is an initiative by 11 charities and an Experts by Experience group (EBE) that works together towards a joined-up and collaborative ecosystem of support for refugees and people seeking asylum, increasing access and equitability across Greater Manchester.

The North-West region, of which Greater Manchester (GM) is the largest sub-region, has the second highest population of dispersed people seeking asylum in the UK. The scale and reach required in GM is significant, with the city-region home to approximately 8,000 people in asylum support alone, thousands who have settled as refugees after being granted asylum, and thousands more who are destitute as well as unaccompanied children supported by Local Authorities (LAs). Place-based support has developed in different parts of the city-region but has not always been complemented by city-region-wide initiatives, with the refugee and asylum voluntary and community sector (VCS). As a result, people receive very different services and support depending on which area they are dispersed to as charities develop their support offers independently. Furthermore, almost all refugees say they don't know what's available to access across GM, nor do most organisations that signpost refugees to services.



To better understand and address the situation in GM, the Step Change Consortium undertook a mapping exercise that involved:

- User Research with EBE to explore behaviours, needs, challenges and barriers when trying to access support.
- Research into the number and geographic spread of asylum seeker and refugee populations across GM.
- Mapping of existing service provision in the Greater Manchester area.
- Mapping current refugee service 'Hub'¹ provision, processes, and demand within Step Change Consortium partners.
- Research of existing digital solutions, platforms, service directories and referral mechanisms.

The full version of the report presents a summary of the key findings for stakeholders working with refugees and people seeking asylum in GM. The data was collected between May and December 2022. It is informed by the challenges voiced by people seeking asylum and refugees, and their insights into what needs to be improved. The report discusses three key issues, highlighting critical gaps, challenges, and recommendations of how to address them: 1) poor quality information about services; 2) insufficient availability of services in relation to demand; 3) barriers accessing services including referral pathways. It then shares how the Step Change Consortium is already responding to some of the findings, as well as recommendations for other actors in the refugee and asylum support sector in GM.

¹ The Step Change 'hub model' refers to a model of support that is based in communities. It ensures in each borough that there is service provision that provides a minimum level of support to ensure some level of standardisation and equal access across the region

It is important to note, that this is an extremely challenging time for those seeking asylum in the UK, and those that support them. In particular, the implementation of the Government's 'Illegal Migration Act' and related initiatives can be expected to have tangible and very negative impacts on people seeking asylum, the voluntary sector and our LA partners, and sustained advocacy by all actors in GM to reverse this harmful legislation and reduce its impact will be essential. The recommendations of this report provide only part of the solution to ensure people seeking safety in GM are adequately supported to embrace their new lives, but this evidence provides us a good place to start. In the face of this extremely challenging context, we as a consortium believe collaborative and joined up working of all those moving to improve the lives of those seeking safety in GM is essential.

The findings and recommendations from this report are intended for stakeholders in GM that are working to support refugees and people seeking asylum. We hope the information provided will contribute to an evidence base that will inform the development and improvement of service provision.

Due to data sensitivity reasons surrounding some of the data that was used to inform this research, the consortium has chosen not to publicly launch the full version of the report. If you would like to receive a copy of the full version of the report with data breakdown and more in-depth analysis, please email the Step Change programme manager **MonicaR@refugee-action.org.uk**



Key findings

1 Poor quality and availability of information about services

- People seeking asylum and refugees are not being provided with information about what services are available or how to find out about them, especially when they first arrive in GM.
- Information provided by Serco² Housing Officers was reported as generally limited, not very helpful and sometimes contradictory to the actual rights of people seeking asylum. The information binder supplied in Serco accommodation was often limited and out-of-date.
- Current web-based and digital solutions providing information on services are not known or used, and internet search engines are not an effective means of finding out about services. Service provider websites are not always optimised for web searches or designed with service users in mind (being targeted towards those who support service users), and some service users face challenges with paying for data and/or lack digital skills.

2 Insufficient availability of services in relation to demand

- There is a deficit in legal aid at a national level which is being felt in GM. This deficit combined with the generally underfunded immigration legal advice provision at the local level is causing a significant strain on minimal resources, with some providers recording waiting lists of up to 300 to access support.
- Demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses exceeds supply; particularly for pre-entry and entry levels, evening classes and informal community-based learning that supports learners to develop their confidence and language skills. Distance learning has opened opportunities for learners unable to attend a classroom-based courses, but some would require extra support to access courses (devices, internet access and digital skills).
- The most frequent presenting issues at Step Change Hubs are for asylum support, homelessness, move-on and legal advice, and the most frequent unmet needs reported are for housing (for people who have had their asylum claim refused and recently recognised refugees), legal advice and counselling/therapy.

- There is a need for better quality data to be shared securely within the sector on asylum seeker and refugee populations to aid with the better planning of service provision and response to need.
- The main barriers for people seeking employment in GM are English language skills, as well as childcare and health issues causing issues for their employability.

3 Barriers accessing services including referral pathways

- People seeking asylum and refugees face barriers to accessing place-based services – even when they know about them – because of the isolated location of dispersal accommodation and the cost of and deficiencies in public transport.
- Physical places with face-to-face support are needed to complement any written or digital solution to service information. If someone goes to them, they should get consistent service and consistent information. Face-to-face provision and the opportunity to spend time with others can improve individuals' levels of wellbeing and sense of connection to the communities where they live.

² Serco is a private service provider that currently holds a government contract for the provision of Asylum Accommodation and Support Services in the Northwest (AASC)

Recommendations and response

For stakeholders in Greater Manchester

Funding

- **Increase local funding where there is increased dispersal:** In cases where there is an increase of dispersal population to GM boroughs, Home Office/LA to fund voluntary and community sector service provision in these boroughs to provide necessary services.
- **Increase legal aid and immigration legal advice funding:** Ministry of Justice to properly invest into legal aid at a national level. GMCA and LAs to support immigration legal advice at a regional, city-wide and borough level.
- **Ensure funding to Voluntary and Community service provision that is localised:** funders to ensure sustainability of place-based service provision by funding localised service providers.



Information sharing, advice, and coordination

- **Secure sharing of data on service user populations:** Home Office/Serco/GMCA/RSMP to securely share more granular data on service user locations to ensure VCS can prepare for better service responses.
- **Provide up-to-date and accurate advice:** Serco to provide up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive information about available services (including asylum support, legal advice, community and wellbeing services and individuals' rights) to people seeking asylum and refugees, especially on their arrival induction.
- **Improve coordination across the sector:** GMCA/RSMP and LAs to ensure functional coordination mechanisms between statutory providers, voluntary sector, and people with lived experience of the system to share information, ensure collaborative working and address any key concerns.
- **Voluntary sector to consolidate a broad and regular voluntary sector forum** to share challenges, and address areas of concern involving frontline staff as well as at the strategic level.
- **Voluntary sector to work on strengthened connectedness of services,** especially on referrals across GM.
- **Voluntary sector to continue to work on local and regional initiatives that strengthen collaborative working in relation to immigration legal advice provision.**

Service provision, gaps and barriers

- **Improve efficiency of support:** Migrant Help (MH) to reduce long waiting times for support and general user experience.
- **Address critical service gaps:** All relevant stakeholders to address gaps in ESOL, immigration legal advice, housing (for people after a negative or positive asylum decision) and counselling services.
- **Voluntary sector to continue to develop place-based service provision:** ensure that localised services have strong referral relationships with cross-GM service provision.
- **Address barriers to online services:** All GM service providers to address barriers to accessing online services due to lack of digital skills and data affordability. Also, to improve online visibility of services, for example improving search optimisation and functionality of online services for service users by service providers to ensure service users can find them.
- **Address barriers to travel:** To address the issue of the unaffordability of travel causing barriers to accessing services, Home Office to increase asylum support rate to reflect cost of living³, GMCA/LAs to consider ways to reduce travel costs (e.g., pilot facilitating free bus travel as undertaken in Glasgow) and funders to include service user travel support costs in voluntary sector funding.
- **Address barriers to employability:** Increased ESOL provision with a focus on employability; increased awareness of employability services; as well as addressing issues of childcare needs and health issues as barriers to peoples' employability.

³ We recommend that the asylum support rate is raised to at least 75% of the over 25 rate of mainstream benefits, which it was originally set at. An amount of support should be added to cover participation in social, religious and cultural pursuits.



Recommendations and response

For the Step Change Consortium

Development of GM Connect Platform – referrals, signposting and data sharing

To address the clear need for people seeking asylum and refugees to know what services are available or how to find out about them, the Step Change initiative is developing a set of digital tools that will help with signposting, connectedness, and clarity of services across GM. Detailed mapping from this research of previous platforms and responses will inform the design of these tools to ensure they are accessible, sustainable, and safe. The development of these tools is being explored through a co-design group that includes strategic leads, frontline practitioners and EBE members.



Development of the Hub model and place-based services

- Step Change partners will consider what the balance of digital, remote, and place-based responses is required, especially in relation to barriers to travelling to hubs.
- Explore best practice in relation to ensuring those in hotels can access place-based services and support as well as feed in voluntary sector voice to multi-agency meetings on hotels.
- Advocacy to support those living in hotels, especially in relation to ensuring adequate advice and support is being provided, including access to legal advice, asylum support and access to Asylum Support Enablement (ASPEN) cards.
- Ensure new GM platform is connected to other digital platforms such as GM ESOL.
- Continue to strengthen referral pathways between Hubs and GM-wide support, especially on most pressing issues presenting at Hubs such as Asylum Support.

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the work of **Dominic Riley, Asylum Services Manager at Refugee Action**, and member of the Step Change Consortium, who designed the research process, collected, and aggregated the data.

Therese Mahon was instrumental in supporting the analysis of the data, the writing of this report and helping the consortium to understand the meaning of this data for cross-GM service provision. **Andy Bell** at Side Labs also supported the data aggregation process.

We would also like to thank the **members of the Experts by Experience group** who shared their experiences through interviews, as well as all **strategic leads of the Step Change Consortium** that contributed time and information for the purpose of this report.

Monica Reeves in her role as the Step Change Programme Coordinator supported all phases of this report including data collection, analysis, report writing and publication.

This work of the Step Change Consortium is made possible by **funding from the Lottery Partnerships Fund**.



Credits

Photography

Photography by Anderson

Report design

Ellen Blanc

