

the **Asylum Link Merseyside**

2020

covid-19 diary



Thanks from everyone at ALM

The ALM Corona Diary March to May 2020

Often around this time of year, when the days are stretching out, the central heating's finally turned off and the things you planted in April that did nothing for weeks, are reaching for the skies, there's a slight panic as we realise Refugee Week is only just around the corner: where did we put the BBQ tools, did anyone book the room at Thurstaston and what's the cheapest price for a double-decker bus?

This year it will be a far less frantic affair but then that's not really a good thing. This letter is really to catch everyone up with what's been going on and look at what the rest of the year might hold.

As the news about the virus became more and more serious, we realised we would have to start closing parts, if not all of the centre, to minimise the risk of transmission through contact. The last day for the ESOL classes was set as 16th March as an early stop before the Easter break. It looks very much as if the classes won't open before September at the earliest and in the meantime we have been finding alternative ways to keep in touch and keep teaching.

When the lockdown started on the 23rd March, we tried producing takeaway meals but the numbers fell rapidly and we stopped that very quickly. Another change was moving the destitution food pickups from weekly to monthly. This reflected the need to minimise contact and travel, but also because the cash and carry's had stopped delivering all the food we were ordering. We could no longer provide everything people needed each week; also who can carry 4 weeks shopping! So we decided to provide two weeks food alongside 2 weeks cash - £20/week. At least this way people could buy their own food.



This is actually quite a good way of being flexible with the food, but it is more expensive so we have moved again to fortnightly pickups of food only. Between 30 and 50 people have used the pick-up days during the period.

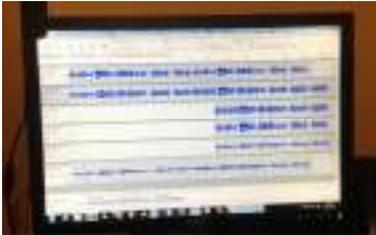
We have also started with individual food deliveries, to mums with young children, people who are self isolating and those with mobility issues as well as to the destitute. One household of 9 women had a resident with Covid, and so we began food deliveries for them. We've also distributed mail, meds, clothing and so on.

We've received enquiries for help from other organisations, primarily via MRSN who have coordinated volunteers from their newsgroup as well as from ALM, dealing with requests coming via the City Council and LCVS. Serco have failed to provide much assistance to the people they house, and then only in a dire emergency.



We've been able to buy more equipment, laptops, telephones and small PCs, which will enable more of the caseworkers to get online from home, log into the system and deal with the 40 or so calls each day for advice guidance and information. Some calls have been desperate and initially we struggled to get people housed and safe. We had some incredible help from the City Council, Councillors and MPs to escalate cases and get people off the street.

The Choir have kept in touch over a Whatsapp group and have managed to put together a couple of songs by singing into our phones and reassembling all the individual parts at a later date. There have been a few tunes, including another we wrote ourselves; some better than others it has to be said.



The Bike Mechanics have been huddled away in garages all over Merseyside fixing inner-tubes and repairing wheels ready for emergence into the summer. Even a bit of buying and selling of Bikes on ebay. We had a lovely offer of guided bike rides when the lockdown is eased and we may not be too far off that now.

The English classes have continued over Zoom or Whatsapp with 60 Beginners and 50 Intermediate students being distance tutored by the Teachers, who have also been keeping in touch to check if people are ok and managing in these unusual times. We also used some of our emergency funding to purchase books which give the classes set texts to work from instead of scanned documents.



Contact has been important – keeping in touch and keeping together. The Teachers and Caseworkers have been staying connected with students and others. Some of our refugees have phoned the staff and volunteers to make sure we're ok!



Philippa – Social Worker “I've been contacted by 2 service users in the past couple of weeks – one a woman we supported into s95 accommodation last year after she had been refused multiple times and another family we helped with a referral into s17 support a few months back. Neither had any needs and just emailed to say

hello, thanking us for our work and saying they're thinking of us throughout this pandemic.

We've provided regular updates via Facebook and mailouts to the volunteers, as well as updating our website with Covid-19 advice and links to online learning materials for ESOL students.

The Hotels coming online in April was a bit of a surprise and there are 9 hotels in use across the North West, taking Section 4 (refusal and end of process) clients as well as Section 98 (new arrivals). Initial Accommodation filled up rapidly and the first we became aware of it was our section 4 applicants being sent to a Hotel in Daresbury, just off the M56.

People were more or less dumped. The food was bad, no account was taken of diet; for example requirements for diabetics. There was no access to laundry facilities, no female hygiene products. Nor did we observe any social distancing or PPE on show. Again we pushed hard to get the statutory services involved and at least some form of scrutiny of what was taking place. We also visited and took people things they needed.

Two more hotels came on line; Southport and Hoylake. Hoylake is much closer and we were quickly able to contact local volunteers and network. The local CCG were contacted to sort out (or perhaps restate) paths into healthcare, dealing with prescriptions and medical forms.

In Hoylake, apart from a few early threats of violence, the local people have been fantastic and not only sourced clothes, games, and messages of welcome, but now produce evening meals for the 50 or so residents of the hotel. Syrian families placed on Wirral through the Relocation Programme produced a Syrian Feast at the beginning of June.

Southport has been a different matter and we heard of 2 people leaving the hotel there because of racist abuse. We are currently investigating to see if there is assistance we can provide.

There have been other 'nice' things happening – a house clearance (thank you Julie) with new furniture provided much needed wardrobes and tables for our Women's accommodation. Lever Brothers were contacted and provided a pallet of soap (thank you Anthony) which came to us, City Hearts and other charities. All in all, we have coped well during the lockdown and continued to adapt and stretch the range of services provided. It is testament not only to the volunteers and staff who work here, but also to the supporters and donors who keep us going. Thank you all.

