

Solidarity in Pandemic Times: Asylum Seekers in Forced Accommodation During COVID-19

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Abstract

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have relied upon physical distancing policies in everyday life and have been underpinned by assumptions of people living in single-family dwellings in which they can 'safely' confine themselves but also that most people are able to exert some level of choice over their housing situation. There have been important interventions in challenging the assumed 'safety' of the home as a space of confinement based on existing literature on domestic violence, however less attention has been paid to the impacts on those who are living in forced accommodation, such as the 'no choice' system of housing for asylum seekers made destitute by the UK's internalised bordering regime. In this paper, I analyse the impacts of efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on asylum seekers in forced accommodation and the ways in which (in the absence/suspension of existing support structures and organisations) they, alongside members of their local communities, have attempted to address these challenges. In doing so, she will respond to a call from anarchist geographers to read for mutuality. Kropotkin identified 'everyday co-operation as a powerful counter-narrative to orthodox accounts of history that documented only the powerful and their conflicts'. For Springer, reading for mutuality during the COVID-19 pandemic allows us to 'consider this strange moment of uncertainty as one of possibility and hope' (2020: 2). The 'resurgence of reciprocity' we have witnessed during the pandemic marks a return to mutual aid that has been undermined by neoliberalisation. By paying attention to 'the entwinement of selfhood and otherness in multiple spaces and times', I show how mutuality during the pandemic as a culture of solidarity can also be uneven and contested. The research draws upon participant observation and interviews with members of a forum based on Tyneside, who have been campaigning to improve housing conditions for asylum seekers since 2015.

1. Introduction

Forced accommodation is part of the structural violence of the UK's immigration policies, which alongside the discursive violence of public and political debates on immigration in the UK, puts the lives of asylum seekers at risk in times of pandemic. These risks make it impossible for some asylum seekers in forced accommodation to adhere to strict government guidelines, creating and exacerbating tensions within communities and further inhibiting inclusive cultures of solidarity and mutuality. A focus on clinical vulnerability intersects with discourses on who is deserving of support and/or mutual aid in a pandemic context, further shaping exclusionary processes and practices of mutuality during the

pandemic. Public health responses, when the impacts upon minoritized communities are revealed, create populations as ‘problems’ to be addressed. They focus on ‘culturally’ targeted responses that situate the issues within the population rather than tackling the systemic violences that exclude and render these lives more at risk. The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated ongoing ‘slow crises’ (Brickell, 2020), one of which is the forced accommodation of asylum seekers. Government responses to the pandemic have depended on staying at home; with the home constructed as a place of shelter. This heightens the need for better understandings of the connections between public health and the geographies of home.

In this paper, I explore these issues through ongoing research in the North East of England, specifically Newcastle-upon-Tyne and surrounding areas. Prior to March 2020, I was engaged in a research project exploring the disorders of bordering (or immigration) processes and practices – both in terms of the disorders they produce, as well as the ways in which they are contested and resisted by various different actors. The data presented here is part of the ethnographic research being undertaken as part of this project. It arises from participant observation (virtual and at distance) with a campaigning organisation in the North East, as well as unstructured interviews with members of this organisation. In addition, secondary data has been gathered from various public and third sector reports and meetings, as well as from parliamentary debates and media.

The first section of the paper offers a summary and analysis of forced accommodation for asylum seekers in the UK, illustrating how the wider policy environment has shaped the specific issues that have emerged during the pandemic in the North East. This review is followed by analysis of the UK’s lockdown measures and supporting legislation and their relationship to the forced accommodation of asylum seekers. The final two sections address questions of mutuality and mutual aid; firstly, through a very brief introduction to the academic literature on this topic and then secondly through analysis of the impact of forced accommodation of asylum seekers on cultures of solidarity and mutuality in the North East.

2. Forced accommodation for asylum seekers in Newcastle-Gateshead

Bernardot (2005) uses the terms constrained and ‘forced’ housing to refer to the mass housing of asylum seekers and refugees in camps and other forms of accommodation in France. Denial of access to employment, higher education and public funds in the UK force many asylum seekers into destitution and leave them no option but to enter into a forced housing system, which is embedded in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. This legislation emerged from concerns relating to the geographies and costs of housing asylum seekers and sought to ‘relieve the burden on provision in London’ (Home Office, 1998: s8.22). The white paper in which these concerns were laid out (ibid) also raised questions about the number of so-called ‘bogus’ asylum claims, as well as the backlog in processing claims. The 1999 legislation, therefore, sought to address these three issues. In relation to

housing, the aim was effectively to cut the self-imposed costs to the state of housing asylum seekers by moving them out of accommodation in London and the South East, where accommodation was significantly more expensive, into areas of surplus accommodation in the rest of the UK. '[The] concern is whether we should end up spending money from the public purse on keeping asylum seekers in very high-cost accommodation areas in London and the south east when there is perfectly satisfactory, lower-cost accommodation elsewhere' (Lord Warner, HL Deb, 1999: c833).

There were two mechanisms for achieving this within the legislation: 'no-choice' and 'reception zones'. In Section 97 of the Act, it states that the Secretary of State¹ must have regard to 'the desirability, in general, of providing accommodation in areas in which there is a ready supply of accommodation' (Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, s97(1b)). However, he may not have regard to 'any preference that the supported person or his dependants (if any) may have as to the locality in which the accommodation is to be provided' (ibid, s97(2a)). Section 101 introduces 'reception zones', otherwise known as dispersal regions. Through this, the Home Office is able to request that local authorities make accommodation available in their areas. As of 2016, 95 local authorities had agreements with the Home Office to provide accommodation in this way. In the 1999 legislation, the delegation of accommodation provision to local authorities, registered social landlords and housing associations was established in Section 100. An advisory cluster limit of one asylum seeker per 200 population was set, but variations to this, which have led to greater concentrations of asylum seekers in some areas, have been agreed with local authorities.

The legislation established that the preferences of asylum seekers should not be taken into account when deciding where to house them. However, their needs, particularly their medical needs, should be taken into account. The term 'dispersal' served really to obfuscate the processes involved, which for those who had already established themselves in the UK was forced displacement (Bowstead, 2015), and for those who sought asylum on entry was a form of forced mobility (Cassidy, 2019). Hence, I use the term forced accommodation to refer to this approach to housing asylum seekers.

These systems make solidarities with majority and other minoritized populations very difficult. Those with status in the country who have not sought asylum are often not aware of the processes and practices of seeking asylum and this makes one of the first steps in mutuality the generation of understanding. The dispersal system has been widely critiqued in the academic literature (cf. Phillips, 2006) for its impacts on social cohesion, the lack of support offered in dispersal regions and the uneven geographies of dispersal. The initial contracts between the Home Office and local authorities were renewed in 2005, but with reduced funding, which the Labour administration argued would save £37million in 2004-5.

¹ In this case the Secretary of State refers to the UK's Home Secretary, who is responsible for immigration and asylum.

This put increasing strain on the local authorities with the most asylum seekers, such as Glasgow. By 2010, relationships between the Home Office and some of the key local authorities providing asylum accommodation had become strained. There were two key issues: lack of willingness to manage housing by local authorities; and concerns about the levels of funding supplied by the Home Office to the local authorities.

In 2010, when the coalition government came to power, they sought to introduce austerity measures across government departments. The October 2010 spending review fixed spending for government departments until 2014-15. For the Home Office, which had an annual budget of £10.2bn, current spending was to be reduced by 23% and capital spending by 49% (HM Treasury, 2010). By 2010, the Home Office had 22 contracts (13 suppliers) to provide forced accommodation to asylum seekers, which were a mixture of local authorities, private providers and the third sector. In 2011-12, forced accommodation cost the Home Office £150million. In March 2012, the HO signed six new contracts (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support - COMPASS) with three providers (two each): Serco (Scotland and N Ireland; N-W England), G4S (N-E England, Yorkshire & Humber; E Midlands and E of England), Clearsprings Group (Wales and S-W England; London and S-E England). The COMPASS contracts sought to save £140million over seven years. In 2012-13, the saving was just £8million. G4S and Serco were new contractors with no experience of this type of provision struggled to implement the contracts from the beginning (National Audit Office, 2014).

Meeting housing supply demands in a number of areas was only achieved through sub-contracting. The financial constraints of the 2012 contracts meant that asylum accommodation became more concentrated within areas where accommodation is cheap and more readily available. Existing dispersal areas were asked to accommodate and support increasing numbers of vulnerable people. The number of asylum seekers accommodated under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 at any one time has increased steadily since 2012.²

In addition to the issues relating to the areas into which asylum seekers were dispersed, several organisations raised concerns about conditions in dispersal accommodation. These are summarised in a report that was published by the Home Affairs Committee in 2017. In the report the Committee describe how they 'have received evidence that people are being placed in accommodation that is unfit for habitation or which ends up in such a condition due to poor maintenance' (ibid: 26). In relation to the standard of the accommodation provided the report further notes issues with vermin, asbestos, cleanliness, poor quality or

² The number of local authorities which have agreed to participate in dispersal has not increased at the same rate. In September 2016, 121 authorities out of 453 (27%) had asylum accommodation within their boundaries. According to the Immigration Minister, in November 2018 the total number of authorities who were willing to participate had risen to just 150 (33%) out of which 129 were actively supporting dispersal.

unusable furnishings and facilities (ibid). The Committee also reported on failures to deal with complaints and that some asylum seekers were subject to abuse and/or intimidation when making complaints; they also raised concerns about the efficacy of the inspection regime. Finally, there were also serious concerns about the lack of consideration given to the needs of individuals when allocating them accommodation and overcrowding. The Committee highlighted that they had received reports of transgender and heavily pregnant women being forced to share rooms with unrelated strangers, as well as those suffering from PTSD and other mental health complaints. In addition, people with mobility issues were allocated inaccessible accommodation. Whilst the COMPASS contracts stipulated that individual circumstances must be taken into account when placing asylum seekers in accommodation, the evidence given to the committee suggested that this was frequently not the case.

The COMPASS contracts were initially set to run for five years (2012-2017), but just as they had done in the previous contract cycle, the Home Office did not have alternative arrangements in place by the end of the contracts and they were extended for two years until 1st September 2019, in spite of all the issues described above. On that date, the contracts were replaced by two new contracts with four providers. The Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC) cover just six regions, four of which will be supplied by two of the COMPASS contract-holders: Serco and Clearsprings. G4S, the firm whose award of the COMPASS contract caused the most concern as they had no experience of housing or supporting vulnerable people, lost out to Mears Group, a social housing maintenance contractor and provider of care accommodation (Home Office, 2019). Alongside the new AASC contracts, the Home Office also introduced a new Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance services (AIRE) contract, which was awarded nationally to Migrant Help. Rather than the 5-year contracts that had previously run, the AASC and AIRE contracts are for ten years at a cost of £4billion (ibid).

The conditions described in the report by the Home Affairs Committee were found in much of the housing in the North East of England, but the history of contracts for forced accommodation also left a particular legacy in the North East, where the contractor G4S supplied some of the housing and the rest was supplied through a sub-contractor Jomast. The latter had been supplying accommodation to asylum seekers in the North East since 2010, when they had been awarded an interim contract by the Home Office after the end of the previous contract period. Jomast is a Teesside-based property development company that rose to national prominence in January 2016, when it was found to have painted the doors of all their asylum seeker accommodation in the North East with red paint.

In 2017, Newcastle City Council introduced a policy of no forced room sharing for unrelated adults. Whilst other local authorities had done the same and the main contractor, G4S had for the most part been compliant. The refusal of the sub-contractor Jomast to comply

brought them into conflict with the local authority in 2017-18. Newcastle City Council issued overcrowding notices pursuant to section 139³ of the Housing Act 2004 on 10th November 2017 and refused a variation to a licensable house of multiple occupation (HMO) used by Jomast to house asylum seekers pursuant to schedule 5(21) of the Housing Act 2004 in a decision dated 7th December 2017. In a first-tier property tribunal held on 22-23 March 2018, Jomast opposed Newcastle City Council's notices. Although there were some errors noted that made the notices invalid, the judge decided to address the key issue, which was 'the question of sharing bedrooms by unconnected occupants who are the same sex over the age of 21 and who in law comprise separate households' (Decision of the tribunal REF?). The lawyer for Jomast, Mr. Bayne, set to establish that the real decision-maker is the Home Office and not the housing provider. 'Further, in this case the Home Office had the last word on these properties via the COMPASS contract, not the Applicant. The Tribunal should be wary of imposing additional burdens on commercial providers of such accommodation' (REF). Here we also see an appeal based upon the commercial nature of the contracts. In addition, the tribunal clarified the legal status of asylum seekers in this housing a not being equivalent to that of tenants.

[T]he Tribunal notes that the arrangements under review in this case do not have the character of tenancies. The evidence of Mr Monk was useful in this connection. The occupants occupy the properties at the discretion of the Home Office. Individual occupants can be (and quite often are) instructed to move elsewhere by the Home Office at very short notice. The Applicant is essentially acting as a subcontractor to the Home Office to provide a certain number of units of accommodation for use by asylum seekers. The requirement can vary significantly from week to week. The Applicant *has no direct contractual connection with the occupants*. The arrangements are shortly known as COMPASS contracts. The occupants apparently come to the accommodation after undergoing a screening process overseen by the Home Office. The Home Office may specify that specific named occupants should have a single room. In essence the accommodation is to fulfil a Home Office requirement for temporary accommodation' (*emphasis added*, 43 in the decision document).

Again, the burden of assessment is placed upon the Home Office and the unique legal form of the forced accommodation emerges as well, i.e. that there is no contractual relationship between the occupant and provider. The tribunal did, however, consider the notices to be 'well-intentioned', but noted that this was not supported by existing law. 'The Tribunal ultimately decided that in the context of overcrowding notices, the law did not prohibit

³ Section 139 of the Act gives the parameters for the issuance of overcrowding notices. It states, 'The local housing authority may serve an overcrowding notice on one or more relevant persons if, having regard to the rooms available, it considers that an excessive number of persons is being, or is likely to be, accommodated in the HMO concerned'. (Section 139(2), Housing Act 2004). NCC issued notices with respect to both properties where unrelated adults were being forced to share bedrooms, as well as one where they believed that Jomast intended to force asylum seekers to share bedrooms.

unconnected persons of the same sex from sleeping in the same room' (REF) and the notices were quashed.

When, therefore, forced accommodation transitioned from G4S to Mears in September 2019, they were left to deal with the legacy of the sub-contractor Jomast. Unable to reach a deal with Jomast, Mears Group were forced to displace some asylum seekers into transitional accommodation as they sought to procure and renovate more properties for the forced housing of asylum seekers in Newcastle, Gateshead and the surrounding areas. By March 2020, some asylum seekers remained in transitional forced accommodation in the region, and this failure to fully transition all asylum seekers accommodated under these contracts into suitable, safe accommodation has had a devastating impact on the risk to life posed by the current pandemic. It is important to understand these differing historical trajectories, but also the uneven landscape of forced accommodation for asylum seekers prior to the pandemic. Those who have remained in transitional accommodation have predominantly been single asylum seekers, as families, especially those with children, were prioritised during the transition. However, this unevenness was also shaped by Jomast's refusal to adhere to the no room sharing policy, which meant that many single asylum seekers were also amongst those who needed to be moved to temporary accommodation when negotiations with Jomast failed.

At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, some asylum seekers in the North East continued to be housed in the unsafe accommodation that was present under the previous COMPASS contracts. In particular, the transition left some single asylum seekers in hostel-style accommodation with failing electrics, rat infestation (due to a failure to have bins/rubbish collected and removed on a regular basis), inadequate food storage and cooking facilities. All of these issues were present in forced accommodation provided by the AASC contractor when the decision was taken by national government to implement lockdown measures in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

3. Shelter in pandemic times

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have relied upon physical distancing policies to prevent the spread of the disease. Instructions from the UK government, like so many others, have assumed that home offers a place of safety and protection in which the occupants can shelter from the pandemic.

That is why we are giving one simple instruction – you must stay at home. You should not meet friends or relatives who do not live in your home. You may only leave your home for very limited purposes, such as buying food and medicine, exercising once a day and seeking medical attention. You can travel to and from work but should work from home if you can. (Boris Johnson, Prime Minister letter to the nation on Coronavirus, March/April 2020)

Such instructions made staying at home a ‘political act of solidarity and care’ (Brickell 2020, n.p.). However, lockdown rules and their enforcement were also legislated for very rapidly in the Coronavirus Act. The health protection restrictions direct that people are not able to leave the place where they are living *without reasonable excuse*. In defining what a reasonable excuse may be, at the very bottom of the regulations, a reasonable excuse also includes *to avoid injury or illness or to escape a risk of harm* (The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations, 2020).

As Brickell (2020: n.p.) has highlighted, ‘[t]he protection that home is expected to offer is not experienced equally’. Indeed, early on in the pandemic, there were important interventions in challenging the assumed ‘safety’ of the home based on existing literature on domestic violence (Goldsack, 1999; Wardhaugh, 1999; Warrington, 2001). However, the focus on this particular form of *harm* came to dominate the legislation and and guidelines for its operation.

The government acknowledges that coronavirus household isolation instructions can cause anxiety for those who are experiencing or feel at risk of domestic abuse. There is never an excuse for domestic abuse, no matter what the circumstances are. Household isolation instructions as a result of coronavirus do not apply if you need to leave your home to escape domestic abuse (Home Office, 2020).

The police are responsible for enforcing Regulation 6. Police officers and police community support officers have been issued with operational guidance advising them to: “keep an inquisitive, questioning mind-set,” and to consider whether any safeguarding issues are in play. The guidance notes that “it may not be safe for everyone to be at home.” In such cases – including domestic abuse – police should not use Regulation 6 but should “revert to normal process and legislation dealing with vulnerable people.” (Lipscombe, 2020: 1)

Such guidelines, whilst important, can create definitions of ‘harm’, which obscure harms that might present other risks to safety and shelter in the home. Indeed, it is unsurprising that a policy-making definition would ignore the harmful conditions in forced accommodation provided under contract to a government department.

In addition, one final point I want to make in relation to the policy-making environment surrounding the pandemic, relates to the creation of a definition of vulnerability, which focuses on clinical vulnerability to the virus if it were to be caught rather than structural conditions that might render particular people vulnerable to catching the virus. Caring for the clinically vulnerable was held up as a collective responsibility.

Tackling coronavirus is a national effort and everyone has their part to play. The more people follow the public health advice, the less need to bring in draconian actions that I am

keen to avoid. Of course, we must not forget the simple things that we can all do—washing our hands, following the public health advice if we have symptoms, and looking out for the most vulnerable in the community (Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, HC Deb, 16 March 2020).

In response to demands to address some of the structural vulnerabilisation of certain groups, such as those with no recourse to public funds, which includes asylum seekers. The Secretary of State for the Home Department made the focus on clinical vulnerability clear.

The Government have made it our priority to protect the vulnerable throughout this national emergency, but we do not believe it is necessary to suspend the NRPf condition to do so. It is right that migrants coming to the UK are financially independent; however, practical support, such as rent protections and the coronavirus job retention scheme, apply to those NRPf conditions. We have allocated more than £3.2 billion to local authorities and £750 million to charities to support the most vulnerable (Priti Patel, HC Deb, 8 June 2020).

As we shall see, these discourses of harm and vulnerability relating to coronavirus intersected with popular understandings of vulnerability in the context of mutual aid and responses to the pandemic locally in the North East.

4. Cultures of solidarity and mutuality

Before I move to my analysis of the impact of forced accommodation on mutual aid during the pandemic. I wanted to outline some of the literature on mutual aid, mutuality and cultures of solidarity. In his paper on COVID-19 and mutual aid, Simon Springer argues that '[i]n times of crisis, mutual aid is pragmatic and comes to define our responses at a community level and as a species precisely because it is the most paramount element of our survival' (Springer, 2020: 2). He bases this on the work of Petr Kropotkin (1902), who argued that as well as competition, throughout evolution there were examples of the importance of mutual aid and cooperation amongst and between species in order to survive. For Springer, it is reciprocity that will enable us to overcome the pandemic and he claims that understanding of the need to 'expand our circle of care beyond family and friends' is growing (Springer, 2020: 2).

Springer appears to make the assumption that we might expand this circle equally to care for all through mutual aid. However, as we shall see, mutual aid initiatives are often embedded in existing social hierarchies and understandings of who is deserving that are exclusionary, and during a pandemic can also be life-threatening.

Historical analyses of social movements have often pointed to these uneven cultures of solidarity. Kelliher (2017) in his analysis of solidarity between London and the coalfields in the 1970s argues that the mutuality between activists was a culture of solidarity, which was uneven and contested. Sundberg (2007) has emphasised difficulties in organising across

difference and the power symmetries that shape solidarisation as a process. We need to consider that 'support in exceptional times depends at least in part on the networks built up over a longer period' (Kelliher, 2017: 111). Solidarity emerges from mutual relationships, which are constructed and negotiated. Solidarity over one particular issue, such as labour solidarity can co-exist with exclusions, such as on the basis of race (Griffin, 2015). Therefore, in reading for mutuality, we need to be sensitive to that fact that 'solidarity can entrench hierarchies of power as well as challenge them' (Kelliher, 2018: 3). As we shall see below, cultures of solidarity are contingent and produced through struggles (Oosterlynck et al, 2017).

5. Solidarity, mutuality and forced accommodation in pandemic times

This final section of the paper explores the impact that the forced accommodation of asylum seekers in Newcastle and surrounding areas had upon the landscape of mutuality during the Coronavirus lockdown. In particular, it elucidates how forced housing intersects with wider views on asylum and immigration, as well as more recent constructions of harm and vulnerability to create contingent solidarities and mutualities.

a. Forced accommodation and cultures of solidarity

Food poverty was an issue amongst asylum seekers prior to the pandemic; this was exacerbated by price rises and scarcity before and after the introduction of lockdown measures. However, the need amongst asylum seekers in forced accommodation was not even, as one volunteer delivering food parcels to hostel-style accommodation for asylum seekers explained.

Literally they need everything. £5 per day is not enough for one person. They usually eat outside. The cheapest sandwich is £3.50. You don't have a separate fridge to put your food in.

Here, the structural conditions in the accommodation meant that the asylum seekers housed there were used to eating outside the hostel prior to lockdown and had no space for secure storage of food within the accommodation itself. This meant that these asylum seekers were more likely to leave the accommodation more frequently, but price increases also meant that their need for food support was extremely acute.

In addition to food storage, the accommodation itself remained infested by rats due to the lack of bin collections and there were problems with cleanliness. Many of the occupants of this accommodation went to stay with friends for periods of time to escape these conditions because of fears regarding their health. Another volunteer with the campaigning organisation commented on the presence of the housing provider.

I mean the managers are supposed to come once a month or so. I saw the housing manager once in three to four months. I took him on a walk around the hostel and showed him what was wrong. He just takes his salary without knowing anything. How could he be responsible for 66 people? How could you stop the virus in this situation?

That some asylum seekers were unable to join the ‘political act of solidarity and care’ (Brickell 2020, n.p.) of staying at home as unsafe and inappropriate accommodation was a direct inhibitor to the development of cultures of solidarity, exacerbated by a lack of accessible information given by the housing provider. A volunteer in a mutual aid group noted excess policing in the area where they lived and were distributing food and toiletries packs.

So, there were some issues with asylum seekers being reported to the police by locals because they would see them together in groups outside.

The harm highlighted in discourses and legislation focused on a particular form of harm – domestic violence. The harms of forced accommodation for asylum seekers inhibited the development of solidarity with some members of the local community, but also within the accommodation itself. Concerns over cleanliness and disputes over the delivery of food parcels and their storage led to arguments and tensions within hostel-style accommodation.

b. The contingency of mutuality

Mutual aid groups were set up and intended to be organised based upon an area or place. However, it became clear to one volunteer that those volunteering to run and support one group were doing so based upon particular perceptions of ‘their area’ and who belonged. Some of these hierarchies appeared to be classed.

[W]hen they say [ward in Newcastle], they don’t mean the estate. They naturally don’t mean the estate. They want to use the name of a ward boundary, but they don’t want it to mean the ward boundary, they want it to mean whoever already matters to them, in the ward boundary.

Whereas others appeared to be racialised and/or based upon immigration status.

And they can make invisible the neighbours who don’t look like them, that’s natural [...] those people are naturally not who they’re talking about. And they can make invisible the housing that is right next to them, because that’s clearly an estate or those are tower blocks.

In many cases, support continued to be provided based upon existing solidarities. There is an example of one asylum seeker (Hamid, 2020), who provided food parcels to other asylum seekers and refugees across the Newcastle and Gateshead during lockdown. Many support organisations were forced to close but some continued or switched to offering food and

toiletries' packs. However, one volunteer sought to challenge these exclusions in their local mutual aid group.

[S]ome of what I was doing with [campaigning organisation] has now integrated into the mutual aid groups, because I just don't like anything being ghetto-ised. I was fighting with people in the mutual aid groups initially, about the idea that it was somebody else's problem if the neighbourhood is also full of migrants. [T]here's so much racism and xenophobia in people that it's a lot of effort to get them to see that when I'm talking about the community or when we're talking about the neighbourhood, that that includes homeless people and migrants, whether or not they speak English, and that like, it is our problem if we can't communicate with people, and it is our problem if people don't have access to the internet, like, that's not somebody else's problem.

[P]eople were like, 'oh, I'm pretty sure the Home Office feeds these people', and I'm like, 'you think the Home Office is delivering food parcels?' 'Allow me to explain: the Home Office's charitable wing is very small' (more laughing) 'No, no one else is feeding them', and people were like, 'no, no, no, the [local migrant and refugee support organisation] takes care of everything', and I was like, "they shut their doors weeks ago." [...] I just really tried to integrate everybody as much as possible, so that we were all looking out for each other, and that's gone really really well.

Reading for mutuality (Ince and Bryant, 2019) in the context of COVID-19 illustrates the contingency of solidarity. Within mutual aid groups there was an expectation amongst some members regarding to whom support should be given. These expectations were framed by wider public and political discourses, but also by perceptions that caring for 'others' should be part of targeted support organisations, many of which were not operating.

c. Mutuality: Vulnerability, need

As vulnerability was such a key element in the framing of the government's response to the pandemic, it also emerged in conversations amongst mutual aid groups and networks as they tried to set up structures of support in communities. In some cases, concerns about vulnerability were linked to existing structures on safeguarding. One volunteer in Newcastle explained their frustration with these conversations.

[W]e ended up caught for ages in a conversation about vulnerability that was very stupid, and very offensive, about the idea that the people who need help are vulnerable, and because they're vulnerable, we've identified their vulnerability, and once you've identified their vulnerability, you cannot have contact with them because vulnerable people need to be contacted only by the proper authorities cos of safeguarding concerns.

People were like, 'no no no, but we need to identify vulnerable people in order to not have contact with them, and then pass their names on'. And I'm like, 'you want me to go through my neighbourhood, figure out who needs help, specifically deny them help, because

someone else, who is not going to help them, is the only safe pair of hands to drop off a food parcel?' And like, what are the safeguarding concerns of a no-contact delivery of food? Do I not trust people to know whether or not they're hungry? Do I think that they lack capacity so much because of their vulnerability that they can't say, 'yes, please bring me food?' [...] it was so terrible, so terrible.

Discussions on vulnerability amongst mutual aid groups reflect some of those we see in relation to immigration as they delineate certain people as deserving/undeserving of that aid, rather than looking at *need*. And as we saw in the previous section, this determination of whether someone is deserving/undeserving is developed on limited understanding of the structures that might be driving their need for support.

One mutual aid volunteer in another part of the region with lived experience of the asylum process explained how these ideas also impacted upon his engagement with one man when delivering him food he had requested through a local group.

I have one experience where this guy he answered the door and he was angry and asking me what I was doing. I think he was angry because a black person was helping him. You know the area I live in is mostly white people and I was the only black person in the Mutual Aid group.

However, this volunteer continued to view the *needs* of those he helped as part of the mutual aid group.

I know how people are suffering. If you have money but you can't go out and buy food then you will also starve. We have to serve each other in the community.

This volunteer, and others, noted how the system was failing to keep many people safe and not just those who might be defined as clinically vulnerable. One volunteer suggested that people were 'confusing the tactics that have been developed to reduce liability with what keeps us safe. And not being able to understand that those are not the same thing'.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I have sought to elucidate how the forced accommodation of asylum seekers in the UK left some asylum seekers in the North East unable to safely shelter at home during the pandemic, creating tensions in local communities and inhibiting the cultures of solidarity that underpinned essential mutual aid networks. These systemic harms and exclusions intersected with other social hierarchies during the pandemic in ways that impacting not on the health of the asylum seekers concerned but also the communities within which this accommodation is located.

As Brickell (2020) has argued, the pandemic has shown that without the right to home, other rights are much harder to achieve; home is the 'intimate core' of liveable life. So, whilst Springer may be right in his assertion that the pandemic has marked 'a profound revival of mutual aid in our political awareness' (Springer, 2020: 3); the mutuality underpinning these efforts has been uneven and contested.

Public Health England have suggested that 'The effects of hostile environments against immigrants, particularly failed asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants, might affect settled BAME populations adversely through heightened prejudice and societal tensions' (Public Health England, June 2020). However, the effects of hostile environments extend well beyond heightened prejudice and societal tensions to systemic failings in forced accommodation that heighten the risk to life for some asylum seekers during the pandemic.

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