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Title: **Asylum seeker poverty and bail reporting change activism**

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**Abstract**: This paper provides an overview of research that led to change activism in support of asylum seeker rights in Stoke-on-Trent in the UK. In 2018, the Government disbanded localised asylum bail reporting procedures leading to asylum seekers based in Stoke-on-Trent having to travel to Salford (approximately 100-mile-round-trip) for Home Office reporting. Interview research with 19 paid or unpaid professionals working with, or on behalf of, asylum seekers at operational and strategic levels provided evidence of significant issues faced by asylum seekers based on this policy and procedure change. Poor mental health, racism, increased poverty and gender inequality, modern slavery and exploitation risks and children’s education were compromised and exacerbated by changes to reporting proceedings. Evidence also demonstrated the changes to reporting arrangements led to resource implications for local services in Stoke-on-Trent and the Home Office itself. Findings were suggestive of Human Rights, Equality and Public Health concerns, alongside highlighting practice that stigmatises victims in a criminogenic way. Reinstating localised reporting was supported by all participants and researchers advocated for the Home Office to also consider tele-reporting options.

**Key Words:** asylum seekers, bail reporting, mental health, poverty, modern slavery

**Introduction**:

Europe experienced increased migration following wartime displacement during and following the second world war (Pearson, 2007; Cowen, 2014), which lead to agreements facilitating migration between countries to enable refuge for those in need (Cowen, 2014; Wasserstein, 2017). Policy in this context was based on experiential compassion regarding the horrors of war. However, news reporting of these post-war events suggests financial challenges from rebuilding schemes resulted in refugees not always being welcomed, but viewed with suspicion (Wasserstein, 2017). Migration, including the movement of those seeking refuge, has continued to be perceived as a security threat (Ceccorulli, 2009: 2). As such, European policy today pertaining to asylum seekers is typically based on deterrence principles, with the priority of national security, rather than free movement values. The British government has been critiqued for ‘*repressive’* thinking behind asylum seeker policy (Kourachanis, 2019; 223). Detention and offering time-limited protection (not permanent residence), are some strategies used in the UK (Robjant *et al*, 2009; 306) and this can portray the nation as a *“very unwilling host”* to asylum seekers (Zetter and Pearl, 1999; 235).

Under UK Immigration rules, asylum seekers are required to regularly report to the Home Office whist awaiting a decision on their application (HM Government, 2018-2019; Home Office, 2019a; Home Office, 2019b). In January 2018, Schedule 10 of the Immigration Act 2016 was enforced, whereby asylum seekers placed on Immigration bail experienced tougher restrictions. For example, harsh penalties can be imposed should asylum seekers be unable to attend their bail reporting and signing on appointment. All asylum support (including accommodation and living expenses) could be withdrawn, along with an unlimited fine, criminal record or a six-month prison sentence (HM Government, 2018-2019). These are stringent penalties for those who are likely to be traumatised from what has led them to flee their home nation, traumatised from travelling to the UK and experiencing stress from adjusting to a new culture. The Home Office determines the frequency of bail reporting for each person, whether that be weekly, monthly, or twice a year (Burridge, 2019). There are detention facilities onsite at the reporting office and asylum seekers can be detained if they do not meet requirements, which is anxiety provoking (ibid) and detention can also result from not attending reporting. Regular reporting, limited finances, tags and curfews are all mechanisms used by the government for national security (ibid; Hassleberg, 2014). These are similar strategies for how the UK manage community sentences for British nationals (Hassleberg, 2014). However, such community sentences are based on British nationals being found guilty of a crime, rather than a person fleeing inhumane conditions in their home country.

In 2018, the Government disbanded localised asylum bail reporting procedures based at police stations and asylum seekers based in Stoke-on-Trent had to instead undertake regular bail reporting via a 100-mile-round-trip to Salford (Jackson, 2018). This paper provides an overview of primary research that supported change activism for asylum seekers in Stoke-on-Trent to experience better bail reporting practices. Bail reporting issues experienced by asylum seekers and local organisations are discussed. The findings showcase how national policy impacts upon individuals and localities. The study aimed to identify recommendations for policy enhancement through consultation with people working at grassroots level.

Stoke-on-Trent is a more utilised dispersal area within the UK and a leading midlands City for dispersal per population head (Sturge, 2019b). Dispersal areas are often recognised as impoverished (Easton and Butcher, 2018; Pearl and Zetter, 1999; Cruddas, 2007) and Stoke-on-Trent has acknowledged health and social inequality issues (Hurst *et al*, 2012; Murray and Leighton, 2008; MacLeod and Jones, 2018), which can lead to challenges for local delivery services to the general population. With asylum seekers being regarded as the most disadvantaged group of people in Western society (Castles and Davidson, 2000;73), ensuring disadvantaged geographical locations are well resourced to effectively support all disadvantaged groups, inclusive of asylum seekers to redress inequalities is imperative. Government funded legal support to asylum seekers has reduced over the years, creating geographical differences and spatial injustice, which has implications for numbers of refusals of asylum and appeal (Burridge and Gill, 2017). Such experiences are noticeable in Stoke-on-Trent where asylum seeker legal support is located outside of the city, creating further travel and financial demands upon asylum seekers. Local Authority tensions with the Home Office can emerge because of insufficient resources to support asylum seekers in dispersal areas (O'Mahony and Sweeney, 2010) and in an area like Stoke-on-Trent, with existing high levels of service needs, not having additional resources for supporting those dispersed to the city is likely to be a resource challenge.

On a national level, despite British media reports suggesting the UK is at capacity and ‘flooded’ with asylum seekers (Baker *et al*, 2008; Khosravinik, 2009; Parker, 2015), a report by Sturge (2019a) to the House of Commons on asylum statistics demonstrated it not taking a fair share of those seeking asylum in comparison to European counterparts. For example, in 2018 there were 5 asylum applications for every 10,000 people residing in the UK, whereas typically in Europe, other nations take on 14 asylum applications for every 10,000 people (ibid). However, some localities have higher dispersal rates, and this may be influencing what MacLeod and Jones (2018) purport to be local perceptions of high levels of asylum seekers in the country and a desire for fewer asylum seekers (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). Media portrayal of asylum seekers further aggravates public hostility (Khosravinik, 2009) and exacerbates racism (Burnett, 2017), with representation including the concept of the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker, especially at times of economic recession (Croall, 2011: 222). Asylum seekers are media portrayed as posing a threat to the host country’s welfare system and public services (Parker, 2015). Concerns about immigration and the ‘outsider’ can fuel far-right racist ideology (Winlow, Hall and Treadwell, 2017; Fekete, 2018).

Interestingly, those arriving in the UK rarely know about benefits and entitlements available to them, and yet, this is often one of the drivers for policy reducing what is on offer to disincentivise those coming to the UK (Robinson and Segrott, 2002). Once an asylum seeker arrives in the UK, they do not have lots of choice, including to where and what they will be dispersed to (Klein and Williams, 2012). Pearson (2007;135) argues that harsher migration policy, inclusive of those seeking refuge has occurred to ‘build public confidence’ in the migration system, which is significant due to the 9/11 attackers getting through migration control. Madziva (2018) argues that asylum seekers have been treated more harshly and with more suspicion in the UK following this significant terrorism event, with evidence of religious discrimination in how authorities deal with people from Muslim-majority countries. Media and social media concerns expressed about refugees in the UK that could be terrorists were apparent in the Brexit campaign and increased racial hate violence and abuse following the referendum (Burnett, 2017).

There are also advocates in British society for asylum seekers (Fekete, 2018). Within the context of Stoke-on-Trent, there are services dedicated to supporting asylum seekers, some of which has dedicated NHS funding associated to the service delivery (e.g. Freeman and Wilshaw, 2008). Such advocates include charity sector organisations who requested research evidence to underpin a court-case to appeal the Home Office decision that Stoke-on-Trent based asylum seekers were required to undertake a 100-mile-round trip to Dallas court, instead of being able to report locally. This research had no funding allocated to it and was conducted with the justification of both civic responsibility and the provision of a student learning opportunity.

**Methodology**

Staffordshire University ethical approval was obtained to conduct in-depth interviews with paid and unpaid professionals working with asylum seekers from the Public, Voluntary and Faith Sector across Stoke-on-Trent. Interviews with 19 participants took place from March to May in 2019 via a 'snowball sample' (Noy, 2008), which facilitated representative views from 8 organisations. This is an acceptable sample size for a qualitative in-depth interview study (Dworkin, 2012). Anonymity was offered to participants with a reminder that localised partnership working arrangements could enable others in the field to be able to identify who said what. Our sampling strategy aimed for 'emergent, interactional' and 'political' knowledge to form through story telling (Noy, 2008). Professionals could tell us the story of their observations of what is happening to asylum seekers having to comply with the new bail reporting requirements and more general policy impacts that are analysed more extensively in a forthcoming book chapter (XXX, 2023).

Participatory elements within the research design included the initiation of the study being led by third sector request and there being sector involvement in shaping the interview questions with the academic lead. Several undergraduate student researchers on the project had prior and present experience of undertaking work placements with two asylum seeker support agencies and one researcher had previous lived experience of being an asylum seeker. The academic led on data collection, analysis, and the reporting of findings and as such, this was more of a consultative participatory piece of research, rather than fully participatory (Brown, 2021). Student researchers did some interviewing alongside the academic staff member to reach competence to conduct interviews by themselves. Due to project resource limitations and timeframes, most interviews were conducted by the academic lead.

Interviews were semi-structured and contained a range of open questions. Some questions correlated with solution focused approaches familiar in social care type settings (Hogg and Wheeler, 2010) and localised mental health service delivery to asylum seekers (Freeman and Wilshaw, 2008). The ‘miracle question’ was asked to provide a tool to help people think outside of the box with solutions (Braunstein and Grant, 2016). The semi-structured approach aimed to ensure there were set, approved, unbiased questions in a checklist to reduce researcher bias (refer to Kara, 2018; 80-82) and ensure emotional well-being of participants.

We interviewed paid and unpaid professionals, rather than asking asylum seekers directly about their personal experiences. This reduced ethical issues of discussing sensitive issues and not having access to interpreters to address language barriers (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). Three volunteers working with asylum seekers took part in the study and had direct lived experience of asylum seeking and we assigned numbers followed by initials LE (lived experience) to these participants to help with recognition of their enhanced insights into the situation. Emotional well-being for the lived experience staff members was ensured via organisations they worked for. Emotional distress avoidance was also catered for via the nature of the questions being about their professional observations, rather than their own asylum-seeking personal experience. However, some did choose to disclose personal experience. There were a couple of occasions when two participants from the same organisation requested being interviewed together.

Best practice in the field of sociology (BSA, 2017) and criminology (BSC, 2015) relating to informed consent, debrief and referral support were applied to the research design. Participants were informed they could review and amend their transcript to address concerns over whether organisational funding could be compromised if anonymity was at risk through the interview content. This review opportunity was taken up by several participants and formed part of our transcript checking process. Themed analysis occurred on the data set as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The academic lead researcher discussed the data with co-researchers transcribing audio recordings and revisited audio recordings and transcripts to identify issues being highlighted by participants and grouped and coded the data accordingly. A report was written, which can further allow for reflection and honing of themes (ibid). The report contained the broader issues that asylum seekers face, along with reporting challenges. Further revisits to transcripts then developed the main themes specific to reporting changes. Cross-referencing of the themes then occurred through exploration of existing literature within the UK.

**Findings and Discussion**

This paper focuses on findings related to impacts of bail reporting upon asylum seekers, their families and the organisations that support them. Cost and reputational impacts to the Home Office are also considered. The main themes identified in analysis are:

* Detrimental impacts to asylum seeker physical and mental well-being
* Detrimental impacts to asylum seeker poverty, food and hydration levels
* Language challenges with documentation, travelling and when reporting
* Increased stigmatisation and criminalisation of asylum seekers
* Impacts to families with children in terms of disruption to education
* Increased vulnerability to crime, abuse, exploitation, and deportation
* Resource strains for support organisations and dispersal localities
* Resource and reputational consequences for the Home Office

Overarching financial restraints imposed by the government on asylum seekers (Hassleberg, 2014), contextualise findings in this paper. Asylum seekers are *“among the most legally and socially disadvantaged people in western societies”* (Castles and Davidson, 2000;73). Current UK policy allows basic financial and accommodation support to asylum seekers while their asylum claim is being processed. However, those with failed claim outcomes join a cashless system, with minimal support to encourage people to return home. Participants in this study discussed how asylum seekers on full government support via Section 95 get less than British National income support rates, which is insufficient to live off, irrespective of accommodation costs being covered. Participant 4, an operational manager within the voluntary sector commented:

*“… current asylum seeker support rates are roughly 50% of what would be income support rates at the moment, and if you think that income support is the minimum income the government thinks that you can live on… That gives you an idea of how ridiculously low that is and how difficult that is for person in the current climate to try and survive on… So, if you're an asylum seeker, a single asylum seeker you get £37.75 a week to live on and that covers travel costs, clothing, food…” (P4).*

Females were identified as further disadvantaged due to menstruating sanitary costs. Cheung and Phillimore (2017) confirm gender inequality impacts upon female asylum seekers in the UK. In relation to reporting at Dallas Court, gender inequalities were noted relating practicalities of travelling with babies and children. Interviews clarified that all asylum seekers struggle to pay for the basics, let alone additional costs from travelling to bail report. Existing literature highlights the State is *“practising a deliberate policy of destitution”,* which is in opposition to human rights and dignity (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007;110). Allsop *et al’s* (2014;3) UK research concluded that *“reducing the incidence of poverty would i) improve the quality and fairness of the asylum process and ii) lead to improved refugee health, wellbeing and integration”.* The additional financial outlay of travelling beyond the locality to report at Dallas Court, further compounds financial crisis for asylum seekers due to Government policy.

Participants explained the Home Office reimbursed a limit of £18.50 for the 100-mile-round-trip, which is not enough to cover the journey in many cases. Particularly when asylum seekers lived far away from the train station and might need to catch a bus. It was believed that asylum seekers living within 3 miles of the railway station were not eligible to be reimbursed for this element of the journey and were expected to walk (P1, P13 & P14). Once in Salford, people may need to catch the tram or bus to get to Dallas Court (which was believed to cost approx. £4.50). Asylum seekers with no recourse to public funds were not eligible for any financial support for the journey whatsoever.

*Dietary, hydration and physical well-being concerns:*

Participants explained that asylum seekers already have insufficient financial resources for a healthy diet and their physical and mental health is compromised by the trauma they have experienced, including the trauma from their journey to the UK and the reasons they needed to flee home. It is no surprise that participants felt that the 100-mile-round-trip to Dallas Court for reporting is detrimental to people’s physical and mental well-being. A mental health specialist commented:

*“The journey to the UK and living conditions once here have a negative impact on people’s immune system, mobility, physical strength and balance. From a psychological perspective being forced to navigate travelling to yet another alien environment with limited funds, and with so much at stake, and at the behest of powerful figures is all too reminiscent of their journey to the UK. The scope for re-traumatisation is huge… and will impair recovery significantly. I cannot conceive of any senior health practitioner suggesting that the journey to and from Salford, without assistance, would not have a negative impact on the people affected by this decision. I would be willing to state that most, if not all, health practitioners would agree with my view that the journey would be damaging to peoples' health and wellbeing. The journey also represents a high level of risk to the travellers which is unnecessary and avoidable.” (P16).*

The trauma and physical demands from travelling was producing a set-back in recovery for people. Asylum seekers were skipping meals to fund travel costs that were not covered by the government. People might go without food for one or more days to pay for travel. Due to the reimbursed money from the Home Office not being an instant repayment, detrimental impacts on diet and not being able to afford necessities continued for several weeks afterwards.

Some asylum seekers walked up to 6 miles within Stoke-on-Trent to avoid bus fare costs and after the train journey they walk to the reporting venue. They then stood in a que outside the Dallas Court reporting centre. The wait can be up to an hour to ensure the allocated time slot is met and this concurs with examples from London and Bristol in the UK (Burridge, 2019). Inside Dallas Court there is ‘*reduced seating’,* resulting in further standing and there is no hydration availability according to participants with lived experience. Asylum seekers would not be able to afford to purchase refreshments to hydrate on route.

A further consideration is how poor clothing and footwear impact upon a person’s health and well-being when making a 100-mile-round-trip. For example, one charitable working leader described:

*“… we had a man in today who is having to report, and his shoes were just not adequate for bad weather… we don’t get donated really very often is a decent pair of shoes that are going to fit people… I said, ‘you- you’re limping what are you limping for?’… he sort-of damaged his feet by having to walk sort-of hundreds of miles and the feet were never quite the same again, you know” (P17).*

Standing for long periods can be detrimental to feet and there are physical consequences to not having the right footwear (Anderson et al, 2017). This could have wider cost implication for the NHS regarding future treatment. However, any treatment is likely to be unsuccessful if the person continues to not be able to afford adequate footwear. In summary, this is a time consuming and physically demanding journey for a person with poor diet, limited finance and insufficient appropriate clothing for the journey, which is damaging to a person’s health and well-being.

*Mental health implications and fear of detention:*

Mental health concerns relating to trauma in asylum seekers is widely acknowledged within the psychiatric field (Robjant, Hassan and Katona, 2009). However, participants told us that not all asylum seekers disclosed mental health challenges due to fears of disclosure negatively impacting asylum claim decisions. Those who did disclose got referred to a well-regarded specialist mental health team (Freeman and Wilshaw, 2008).

Significant mental health implications resulted from asylum seekers travelling to Dallas Court, with some asylum seekers feeling increased anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Participant 1 talked about an asylum seeker who ended up admitted to a local mental health hospital due to a suicide attempt, stemming from fears of being detained whilst reporting:

*“Somebody who, who, who’d not been unwell for a long time and was volunteering and doing well, ended up being admitted into Harplands. Because he just thought that he would go there and they would snatch him, and he would be detained and nobody would know because he was in Manchester, none of his friends would know… he got himself terribly worked up and ended up trying to kill himself.” (P1).*

Increased anxiety occurred due to the reporting centre having detention capability and some asylum seekers did not return from reporting. Participant 4 said *“…We've heard of clients who we saw on the Tuesday and were in detention by the Thursday because they reported on the Wednesday…” (P4).* Participants described how asylum seekers would be accessing their service and then seemingly disappear because they were detained whilst reporting. This had a negative impact on the emotions of staff, as well as to peers who then felt more anxious about whether they too would be detained.

Participant 4 also talked about how the length of journey and fear of detention leading to a mental health setback for an asylum seeker who was making progress with their trauma recovery:

*“… it set off paranoid thoughts that he was going to be detained and he threatened suicide… Luckily, we were able to negotiate that it wouldn't be every two weeks, we got it down to every six months reporting… but he has to have someone to go with him to manage the journey because he gets disorientated and is on a lot of medication… Leading up to his reporting he was very anxious. Had it been locally, I don't think he would have suffered the same level of anxiety, which then spiked his other mental health issues… this just kicked it all up again and it was purely because of that change in venue.” (P4).*

Professionals negotiating reduced reporting for asylum seekers generally had mixed outcomes, but even when reporting frequency reduces, the length of journey remained detrimental to recovery. Whilst community mental health professionals can assist with prescribing and general management, it is often a person’s network of relationships that assists with managing one’s mental health in the community (Brooks et al, 2020). As such, voluntary and faith sector staff escorting vulnerable asylum seekers to Dallas Court is incredibly helpful in the absence of social capital. However, this level of support is labour and resource intensive for organisations in comparison to when localised reporting occurred.

*Stigmatisation and criminalisation:*

Participants explained that asylum seekers who have been traumatised by corrupt law enforcers and unfair imprisonment in their home country are fearful of the police in the UK. This contextualises some of the anxiety surrounding detention, particularly when reporting centres detention facilities on site. One volunteer at a charity with lived experience talked about a) feeling like others viewed asylum seekers as criminals because they observed asylum seekers reporting in police stations historically and b) that the present reporting facility at Dallas Court in Salford has a lot of security features and a detention facility which implicates crime:

*P7LE: “… reporting, err, it’s not a pleasant feeling when you go regularly, you feel that you are an ex-convict and are paroled and you have to go to a police station and being seen that you are entering and reporting regularly in any centre, it shows, and I get a profile…”*

*SP: “The reporting at Salford, that also has as well as the asylum seeker reporting it is also a place for people that have convictions to report as well, isn’t it?”*

*P7LE: “You can always see features of high security and the mere fact that you’re accessing this vetting process makes you feel that I’m a suspect (SP: Yeah) and it will keep insinuating that feeling that you are being watched as a suspect and that would take us very far away from the fact of the meaning and concept of asylum seeker who is a victim (SP: Yeah). Who has been victimised and traumatised and they have left everything… And that would put them… from being a victim… to being perceived (SP: Yeah) as criminals who are suspect until they have prove that they’re innocent.”*

Asylum seekers felt criminalised and traumatised by the experience of bail reporting. The language in official documentation of ‘bail’ was highlighted as problematic and criminalising. Bail is used within the criminal justice system for people alleged of a criminal offence and remaining in the community while awaiting trial, a practice and term used in various countries (Bottomley, 1968). A seemingly incongruent term to describe essentially a victim review process to determine whether refuge in the country can be granted. A missed bail report can lead to serious consequences, including a £5,000 fine, detention and deportation according to participants.

Detaining asylum seekers is a human right and public health concern due to mental health impacts (Keller *et al,* 2003). Legitimacy of detention for most asylum seekers is questionable as dangers to the public are not verified (Malloch and Stanley, 2005). Participants in our study suggested detention was often unnecessary and due to administration issues, such as awaiting a document:

*“…the majority of people in immigration and detention are there, erm, under administrative rules, it’s for administrative purposes, so it’s at the kind of, the convenience of the Home Office if you like…” (P10).*

Participants voiced concern about the over usage of detention for administrative purposes and the negative impact of the fear of detention. This is a compounding factor to the anxiety surrounding bail reporting.

*Language barriers:*

Travelling with language barriers also exacerbated anxiety. Crowther (2019;107) found language barriers impair most asylum seekers are a compounding factor to discrimination, including access to services. Discrimination by the public occurred through Asylum seekers experiencing racism on their journeying to and from Dallas Court. Participants also discussed how the ability to read letters that detailed reporting requirements and appointment details was impaired, which meant some missed appointments. Services not writing letters in one’s first language, when English is limited, can be perceived as a form of discrimination.

Language barriers compromised safe travel, along with ability to formally report racism issues experienced. Language barriers compounded the ability to complete paperwork, and to comprehensively articulate one’s case when making asylum claims. Language issues have significant implications when being asked to sign paperwork and complete documentation for travel reimbursement. Participant 10 reinforced this issue, by talking about a client who could not decipher a document they were asked to sign at Dallas Court:

*“I’ve had a client go to report… he phoned me saying that they were asking him to sign something… he just couldn’t tell what it was. Now he speaks English, and he can read English, but he just couldn’t tell what it was… I spoke with the immigration officer and they were trying to get him to sign his erm, erm ETDA. Which is an Emergency Travel Document Application… that’s basically him signing to say that they can prepare a travel document for him… There’s only one reason that the Home Office would be wanting to, you know… fortunately, he had been referred into the NRM, so I was able to say this… in the NRM you are protected from deportation.” (P10).*

This Home Office error caused distress. In this case the asylum seeker was exempt from deportation due to evidence of modern slavery victimisation being formally investigated. Asking people to sign paperwork that they cannot read, could be perceived as an abuse of power.

*Family challenges regarding children’s education:*

Specific bail reporting issues related to children missing out on education due to accompanying parents for reporting. Participants 8 and 9 described a woman accessing their community project with minimal English and two school-age children. She found reporting at Dallas Court *“very stressful”* due to navigating schooling requirements and any travel delays impacting upon picking her children up from school. Project staff assisted her phoning the Home Office to request an appointment reschedule. The Home Office staff member was cited as being *“very nice”* and accommodated a cancellation of the appointment that week, but further monthly appointments were required. Temporary stress relief occurred, but further appointments needed managing.

Participants explained that asylum seekers do not have much social capital in their communities to assist with childcare, so some parents took their children out of school to accompany them, which required additional travelling funds. Participant 4 said:

*“… so they have either had to make the decision to take the children out of school to take them with them, or not report because they haven't got anyone to pick the children up. It's a really difficult situation for lots of people to make decisions, and decisions that they shouldn't have to make. You know from our perspective we think it's quite irrational to move it to a venue that is so far out of area…” (P4)*

Participants viewed the cessation of localised reporting as unjust because it puts unnecessary strains on individuals and families. Parents taking children out of school for the journey risked being fined from the school. Participant 11 from the public sector talked about how attending school is a requirement and the Local Authority and schools themselves fund places for children, which can be cost intensive due to the extra support children need. There was no additional funding support from central government to the local authority and schools. Whilst families directly receive some additional government support funding, they also have more outlay. For example, purchasing school uniforms. Therefore, paying for children to travel for reporting had a significant detrimental impact on finances.

*Crime, abuse and exploitation*

For asylum seekers on a weekly Section 95 allowance, the journey to Salford presents financial challenges and some are sexually exploited to pay for necessities and travel:

*“…they have to take a bus at least from [northern part of the City] to the train station which puts them into £4.50 bus ticket… that cuts down possibly 90% of their daily income, leaving them with 50p… not mentioning the train tickets, or the bus tickets and that puts them into a situation when they feel that they are running out of the daily resources… with this 50p they have to decide whether to buy food with the 50p, or to top up a mobile with the 50p. Or sometimes if they are in need for a taxi, and that really puts them into a situation where they are panicked sometimes, or anxious. To feel that they are going to need someone to support them financially… how they will pay it back? Will they pay it back with interest? Will they pay it back by physical labour helping washing dishes for someone? Or even sexual…”* (P7LE)

It is evident from this lived experience expert that asylum seekers are forced to make difficult decisions that can lead to exploitation from loan sharks, sexual abuse, and modern slavery. Participant 15 pointed out that repressive policy impacting upon poverty is *“… encouraging those people to enter into modern day slavery situations”* (P15). More broadly in the UK there is evidence that sexual exploitation and modern slavery can be a result of limited finances provided by the State (Redcross, 2014; Taylors 2009; Querton, 2012; Refugee Action, 2006; Phillimore and Goodson, 2010; Crawley, Hemmings and Price, 2011).

Crime engagement prevention for many occurs through fear of deportation (Crawley, Hemmings and Price, 2011). However, some feel they have no choice. Reducing restrictions to paid work could help to reduce such vulnerability to exploitation (Koser, 2007). The sexual well-being of asylum seekers is a Public Health concern and a human right violation to be subjected to sexual violence and exploitation (ibid). Having no recourse to public funds could be increasing the likelihood that bail reporting travel costs can lead to sexual exploitation. A manager of a charitable organisation confirmed vulnerability to sexual exploitation:

*“…Erm I know of a guy…he ended up … in a situation where he… was going to erm, these parties where there… was homosexual activity and erm… he would say, ‘ how else am I supposed to survive?’ and he’d been trafficked… because, erm, he was destitute… everything was just stripped away from him really, and erm, and this is one of the things for the asylum seekers where they have no recourse to public funds…” (P10).*

This example highlights that there are failed asylum seekers who have already been slavery victims, and their failed status leads to further exploitation and victimisation. No recourse to public funds does not motivate people returning to unsafe home nations, as such, it’s intentions are not actualised, and legitimacy of usage is questionable.

*Impacts on Stoke-on-Trent services:*

Charitable organisations were picking up additional costs due to localised reporting being moved to Dallas Court in Salford. O'Mahony and Sweeney (2010;306) point to resentment at costs at local levels when “*immigration is seen as a quintessential national government issue*” and this view was apparent for localised public and voluntary sector services in our study. Stoke-on-Trent, as a dispersal area, does not get additional funds for education, safeguarding and community cohesion which concerned participants. More specifically, costs to local organisations included staff accompanying vulnerable asylum seekers on the journey and compensating for some of what is not reimbursed by the government to asylum seekers through any additional donations. This was not viable for all asylum seekers due to the limited resources that organisations had, particularly due to cutbacks to services already experienced.

Participants 8 and 9 talked about additional donation money being used to pay for local bus tickets to alleviate some of reporting journey costs not covered by the government. They highlighted that this created additional account auditing work for their organisation in processing bus ticket evidence. Furthermore, staff capacity issues were experienced by most organisations due to assisting asylum seekers in getting Home Office reimbursement. Participant 4 explained that communication from the Home Office on how to be reimbursed was *“very slow”* and “*confusing*” and they went on to say that:

*“… the Home Office haven't been great at making sure people are being reimbursed in a timely fashion and haven't been great at making sure that that money is there in the invisible wallet that no one can see… there’s a part of the Aspen card that is reserved just for travel… sometimes it was there, sometimes it wasn't. So, the impact on local services to try and manage that, to support people with that so they could travel and get the travel reimbursed, was a huge increase on our resources as well.” (P4)*

The charity sector spent time explaining new processes to asylum seekers and offering support. The change occurred seemingly overnight with no warnings to local services, or asylum seekers:

*“It's been massive! When we first got wind of it was just through one client coming in with the letter to say his reporting had changed and this was going to affect everybody in this area. We hadn't heard anything from the Home Office, or anyone at that stage, so it was quite a new thing and we knew it was going to impact everybody. And then the Floodgates opened, and people were coming in quite high numbers to say ‘all of the sudden we no longer have to go to a Northern area custody suite and it’s now all the way over to Manchester’. Reporting is a quite an anxiety provoking activity for many asylum seekers…” (P4)*

This seems to exemplify poor change management and it could be interpreted that obstacles to reporting and reimbursement means that innocent people are being set up to fail.

Pressure was put on NHS and charity sector services regarding providing additional mental health support, as per the examples of asylum seekers feeling more suicidal and anxious. A mental health specialist commented that whilst costs at the point of the research were not known:

*“…there will be both direct and indirect cost implications related to the care of people whose condition has deteriorated due to the impact of making people travel to Salford with or without support. NHS services including A&E, acute psychiatry and primary care services will see increased demands when peoples' biopsychosocial health deteriorates. We must also consider the impact on third sector bodies and their staff, the host community and peers who will be left to deal with the repercussions.” (P16)*

Cessation of localised reporting meant that money on core service activity was compromised. Participle 5LE said:

*Researcher: “so do you think that it hindered [organisation name omitted] for being able to be doing some of their other basic work that they were doing?*

*P5LE “yeah, yeah. So, definitely… I think that's where the frustration came in and then every time they can't support all of the people that have to travel to the appointment because they physically couldn't do it, so that's why even some of the staff ask them to come to [name of organisation omitted] and they would carry them in the car.”*

Organisational staff across the sector felt frustrated and stretched by the additional demands that the overnight change in reporting had created. The systems were not straight forward to understand or navigate, and delays in reimbursements and insufficient reimbursements added to the pressures of an already financially challenged area of work at NHS, local authority, and charity sector levels.

*Home Office cost implications:*

Participants predicted that swifter and more accurate government processing of asylum claims would reduce bail reporting timeframes and associated costs and trauma by enabling asylum seekers to gain paid employment becoming less reliant on government resources. Sturge (2019a) highlights case review length issues resulted in a judicial review. There is also the cost to State reputation, especially when wider policy and legislation is compromised. For example, gender inequalities when additional financial costs of being a female are overlooked, or mental health needs are not met sufficiently when reporting. Furthermore, the sustainability and local procurement agenda is compromised by removing local reporting. The removal of localised reporting increased vulnerabilities to modern slavery and other exploitative and hate crimes, as such, the change in policy increased vulnerability and safeguarding concerns. State reputation of having evidenced based policy becomes undermined.

Best practice in strategy and policy development in health and social care includes consultation with stakeholders and service users which can have cost saving advantages for service development (Tritter and Koivusalo (2013). Typically, the government develop asylum seeker and immigration-based policy, and the local authority implement it (Pearl and Zetter, 1999). However, the Local Authority is less involved when it comes to asylum seekers bail reporting to the Home Office. Participants said local level consultation did not occur for the changes in reporting. It was implied that a London trial occurred before the national roll-out. Participants felt that London was not a good benchmark to base policy on due to local areas not having similar travel infrastructure and support services. Had local consultation taken place, many issues could have been resolved and local organisations would not have taken the Home Office to court, which is costly for all parties.

National media coverage of reporting changes and the 100-mile-round-trip expectation on asylum seekers in Stoke-on-Trent points towards it being an injustice (Bulman, 2018; Bulman, 2019), which further implicates the government as uncaring and hostile towards asylum seekers. A lived experience expert participant said the reporting requirement outside of the local area meant that asylum seekers felt the government did not care about them:

“*they said like it seems like the government just doesn't care about them and they think that the government pretends to be protecting them, or wants to give them sanctuary, but in essence the government just doesn't care about them and it's like their suffering”* (P5LE)

When policy decisions are made that have significant negative impact upon asylum seeker mental health, well-being, trauma levels, financial survival ability, children’s education and the services that support asylum seekers, then that puts State reputation at stake. It makes a mockery out of government leader statements that the UK is regarded for ‘extraordinary compassion’ towards asylum seekers in need (Easton and Butcher, 2018).

*Change recommendations and change actualisation:*

There was overwhelming support from participants that localised reporting being reinstated would be helpful. Whilst localised reporting had stigmatization issues, it was easier and less traumatic for both support services and asylum seekers. L7LE reflected on personal experiences of local reporting:

*“I still remember the point when I was signing at the police station and… if you have an appointment conflicting with that signature and it’s too late for you to contact the NHS and reschedule a very important appointment like MRI, like heart check etcetera, you can always go to that person at the police station a day or two days before and you share with them that. So, they either reschedule for you, or put it into another slot. This is something resourcefully possible locally, but you cannot go to Manchester a day before…” (P7LE)*

Localised reporting facilitated trust building between asylum seekers and the police and a more accommodating approach to life situations that arise. Whilst some Home Office staff were seen as friendly, they were not seen as accessible, especially with language barriers making communication more complex. Participant 16 felt that if localised reporting resumed:

*“The negative impact seen in travel to Salford will have been eliminated and staff from all services will experience improved health and job satisfaction. Cost benefits of local services will have been identified and reported and used to inform services in other areas. I don't believe that this response does justice to a miracle as it is entirely feasible.”* *(P16).*

Participants felt frustration that often there are logical and feasible solutions that the government seemingly ignore. Participant 4 said:

*“… If Dallas Court decided to … end the Dallas Court reporting issue and put it back to locally… immediately people would feel the benefit. Not just the clients themselves, but also for us guys who are in doing it and fighting these battles that are really unnecessary. So, I think if policy were to change its going to impact positively for asylum seekers, so people wouldn't suffer so much with the health problems and health issues, there would be generally more sort of happier and healthier in their Outlook and more likely to engage… what tends to happen is when you get beaten down by the system for so long, they tend to give up and retreat. I think that's quite sad because these people are such a lot to offer. It affects different people in different ways if single mum already has a lot to deal with let alone the asylum process and everything else that throws, or a single Dad's for example, or even families, so anything that alleviates additional pressures that the asylum the UK Asylum process, you know, presents, is going to be a benefit to people.” (P4)*

Our findings from the research were reported to the Home Office via the beginnings of a judicial review (which was then suspended). In our report, we also advocated the potential for telecommunication-based reporting. This recommendation was actualised with the vulnerable asylum seekers being able to do a Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke-on-Trent assisted telephone report to the Home Office.

**Limitations of the Study**

Data saturation occurred from the 19 interviews, indicating a robust sample size (Dworkin, 2012). Although, snowball sampling can lead to bias and similar viewpoints being portrayed (Noy, 2008). Having 8 separate organisations represented helped to reduce organisational mindsets dominating findings and ensure the sector was well represented to reduce bias. Snowball sampling does have implications on anonymity (Noy, 2008). With a small sector, it is likely that people can identify others and whilst this compromises anonymity, we a) informed people about this before they consented to participate and b) offered opportunity for transcript review and alternations to be made by participants to protect their anonymity and safeguard any organisational financial repercussions from government funding streams.

Asylum seekers sharing their own stories more and conducting ethnographic fieldwork with an interpreter could have enhanced findings further. However, some professional participants had undergone the trip themselves to support others, and some unpaid staff were lived experience experts, so insights were enhanced by what they shared. Project Resource implications meant that enhanced participatory practice at full partnership level (Brown, 2021) could not be achieved, nor interpreter support for interviews, or ethnography travel expenses.

The miracle question was included to help people think outside of the box with their considerations to what the future might look like if a miracle happened. Answers were swift to come forth from participants, as such, this was indicative of participants having well-established pre-set ideas. Considered viewpoints based on lived and learned experience of working in the sector strengthen arguments for change. However, it was the telecommunications recommendation that the Home Office adopted, which was not raised directly by participants. Capturing longitudinal evidence of impacts of tele-reporting from participants would enhance the project further by establishing impact.

**Conclusions**

A less localised approach to bail reporting for asylum seekers under Home Office requirement raised human right, public health and equality concerns from staff supporting asylum seekers in Stoke-on-Trent to make the required 100-mile-round-trip to Dallas Court. The 19 experts interviewed for this study worked with asylum seekers at operational and management levels and wanted localised reporting reinstated. Most participants were paid employees from the third and public sectors. Several volunteers interviewed were also experts by lived experience. Whilst localised reporting had stigmatisation issues for Asylum Seekers with reporting at the Police Station, it was less traumatic and resource intensive for both the asylum seeker and support staff. The main issues professionals identified were negative impacts upon poverty, physical and mental health, vulnerability to crime and stigmatisation and disruption to children’s education.

Asylum seekers on poor diet and limited (or no income) from the government were required to report every two weeks, through to several times per year. Whilst there were some successes with organisations negotiating reduced reporting for some asylum seekers and cancellations where necessary, onus was on third sector employees to make these negotiations without government funding to provide this support work.

Asylum seekers are allocated a time slot for reporting and if they missed their appointment entirely, or were late, a fine of up to £5,000 could be imposed, or detention (potentially resulting in deportation). Detention risks led to anxiety for asylum seekers and staff were emotionally affected. Detentions were also used for administrative purposes, such as a person awaiting a document for the Home Office to review. Administrative reasons for detention present legitimacy issues.

Writing official letters regarding bail reporting to the asylum seeker in the persons first language, ensuring interpreters are present at reporting meetings when documents are having to be completed and signed, and changing terminology to have less criminogenic association would be welcomed to reduce the pains of reporting and to enhance anti-discriminatory practice. The term ‘bail’ is problematic with the UK and other nations associating it with crime. Changing terminology and practice would be beneficial for asylum seeker mental well-being and assimilation in society.

The Home Office offered reimbursement for some of the journey, but reimbursement was not instant, which further exacerbated poverty challenges for asylum seekers. The system was difficult to navigate and often required local organisations to support asylum seekers with interpreting and completing documents. Organisations also assisted with phone calls and accompanying vulnerable asylum seekers to Dallas Court. This put financial and resource strains on local services, along with using donations to pay for elements of reporting travel not covered by the Home Office.

Asylum seekers went without food and some asylum seekers with school-age children took their children out of school to accompany them when reporting to avoid missing school pick up time. This is detrimental to the children’s education, but an understandable parental response when limited childcare support is available due to poor social capital. Professionals were aware that some asylum seekers were vulnerable to loan sharks, illegal work, modern slavery and sexual exploitation to generate income to bail report. Whilst repercussions from crime involvement is preventative to engagement with crime for many, some felt no choice due their deprivation status. Thus, further criminalising and victimising an already vulnerable group of people in society. It is a public health and human right violation to be subjected to sexual violence and exploitation (Koser, 2007) and localised reporting reduced these rights being violated.

Upon receiving evidence in court on the impacts of Dallas Court bail reporting upon Stoke-on-Trent asylum seekers and associated support services, the Home Office responded by allowing for tele-communication reporting from Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke-on-Trent for most asylum seekers. This demonstrated flexibility in responding to service feedback and was welcomed by organisations and asylum seekers. Had consultation occurred before policy change implementation, the co-shaped reporting arrangements could have reduced trauma and organisational costs. We advocate that piloting in London is insufficient for national roll out and that high dispersal rate areas should feed into policy and practice developments. This is particularly important to avoid setting asylum seekers up to fail and protecting State reputation. This study demonstrated that individual organisations with a desire for social justice can create incremental changes that improve reporting through negotiations of reporting frequency, through to changes in reporting mode when collective efforts are made to bring about change.

Our findings advocate the Home Office review related asylum seeker based policy to enhance asylum seeker well-being, improve integration, reduce othering and criminalising asylum seekers and facilitate asylum seekers being able to contribute to the economy. Current policy has negative implications for achieving aims of other related policies, such as, the Equality Act and Modern Slavery Bill. A more consistent and whole-systems approach to policy would be welcomed. Particular attention is needed to ensure asylum seeker-based policy and policy rationale does not align with far-right ideology that is perceived as racist by academics (refer to Castles and Davidson, 2000).

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