

Researched and written by

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Refugee and Migrant Centre



NAVIGATING LIFE WITH NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS

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Better Together Initiative

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RESEARCH



BETTER

participatory methods in social care



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Executive Summary

Introduction: This report presents a collaborative research project undertaken by the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) and SIFA Fireside, facilitated and funded by the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and the University of Birmingham. Part of the Research Better Together initiative, the project explores the profound challenges individuals classified as having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) faced. It examines how their immigration status impacts various aspects of their lives.

Partners: The RMC, an organisation regulated under the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC), provides comprehensive immigration advice and support in areas such as health, benefits, housing, education, and employment. With a focus on helping migrants with NRPF, RMC has a rich history of 25 years, representing thousands of cases. SIFA Fireside, on the other hand, dedicates its efforts to supporting individuals recovering from homelessness. Their work aims to remove barriers to housing, education, and employment for vulnerable adults, including people with NRPF.

Process: The research, conducted from August 2023 to April 2024, sought to gather evidence on the issues affecting people with NRPF, understand the impact of their exclusion from public funds, and evaluate the challenges support organisations face. The ultimate goal was to propose new ways to improve the system and enhance collaboration between third-sector organisations and academia. The research used qualitative methods to involve focus groups, in-depth interviews, and a creative workshop with RMC and SIFA Fireside clients and staff.

Findings: Key findings painted a stark picture of the difficulties faced by individuals with NRPF. **Housing insecurity and homelessness** were prevalent, as these individuals could not access social security systems for housing support. **Financial strain and barriers to legal employment** compounded their struggles, while social isolation and limited support networks further exacerbated their plight. Participants often learned about their **rights and available assistance** only after engaging with charitable organisations, underscoring the system's complexity and lack of information. The study highlighted the transformative impact of **regularising immigration status and accessing public funds**, which significantly improved participants' well-being and quality of life. Interviews with staff revealed additional challenges, such as the severe lack of services for individuals with NRPF, limited access to legal aid, and the **emotional toll** on both service users and support staff that support them. It was also identified that **bureaucratic hurdles and prolonged decision-making** by the Home Office prolonged periods of homelessness and financial hardship.

The creative workshop, through collages, added depth to the findings, with participants' collages revealing themes of **systemic neglect, gender dynamics, personal resilience, aspirations for stability and success**, and the importance of nature and social connections. These visual representations highlighted the daily struggles, survival instincts, and hopes of individuals with NRPF.

In conclusion, the research suggests the need for new approaches to address the systemic challenges faced by individuals with NRPF. This project not only sheds light on the dire circumstances of people with NRPF but also provides a roadmap for creating a more supportive and inclusive system.

Introduction

Project background

This project is a collaboration between two charities, the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) and SIFA Fireside and was facilitated and funded by the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) and the University of Birmingham as part of the Research Better Together initiative.

Research Better Together is a project that shares knowledge on participatory research, facilitates stronger connections between social care researchers and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in Birmingham, and delivers training and support to researchers on participatory methodologies.

The research centres on those individuals who are ineligible for government financial assistance, commonly referred to as No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), and underscores the obstacles they encounter. It details how their immigration status and lack of access to public funds impact multiple facets of their existence, such as their overall wellbeing.

The research was conducted from August 2023 until April 2024.

Research partners



RMC specialises in the provision of immigration advice on matters such as human rights claims, applications under the EU Settlement Scheme, applications on behalf of victims of domestic abuse, and applications for citizenship for adults and children. RMC also provides support in other areas such as health, benefits, housing, education and employment.

A large proportion of RMC's work focuses on working with migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds, to help them resolve their immigration status and access employment and public funds. RMC has 25 years of experience and have represented thousands of cases on behalf of people with no recourse to public funds.

SIFA Fireside supports individuals in their recovery from the effects of homelessness. One of the aims of the organisation is to remove barriers to housing, education, and employment for people who have No Recourse to Public Funds. Alongside supporting UK nationals, the organisation also focuses on supporting individuals from Central and Eastern Europe, who make up the majority of their clients with No Recourse to Public Funds. However, they also assist people from diverse countries of origin, including those who are victims of exploitation and Modern Day Slavery.

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Terminology

Throughout this report, we use legal terms that need to be defined.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF):

Migrants in the UK with permission to stay under work, study and family routes, EU nationals and their family members with pre-settled status but no additional 'right to reside', overstayers and irregular entrants as well as asylum-seekers and refused asylum-seekers, are normally ineligible for most social benefits and public housing (public funds). This is called being a person with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).¹

Asylum-seeker: someone making a claim to be recognised as a refugee under the Refugee Convention on the basis that it would be contrary to the United Kingdom's obligations under the Refugee Convention for them to be removed from or required to leave the United Kingdom

Clients/service users:

individuals accessing the relevant support

Irregular Entrant: a migrant who enters the UK without permission to enter, while they are required to do so

Overstayer: a migrant who entered the UK legally with permission to enter (or a non-visa national) but remained in the UK beyond the validity of this permission

Public funds: the immigration rules define what is considered a public fund for immigration purposes which includes most benefits, tax credits and housing assistance paid by the state.²

Section 17 of Children Act 1989: the section of the law that poses a duty to every local authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need. This section gives the power to local authorities to provide accommodation and financial support to families with children in need including those with no recourse to public funds.

There are some exceptions to this such as means-tested benefits that are not considered public funds for immigration purposes.³

Refused asylum-seeker: a person whose asylum claim has been refused and all appeal rights are exhausted

1. Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 s.115 < <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/33/section/115> >
2. Immigration rules para 6 < [https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-introduction#:~:text=Public%20funds%E2%80%9D,subparagraph%20\(ii\)%20above](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-introduction#:~:text=Public%20funds%E2%80%9D,subparagraph%20(ii)%20above) > & UK Visas and Immigration, Public Funds, updated 5 October 2023 < <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-funds-2/public-funds> >
3. NRPF Network 'Benefits that are not public funds' < <https://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/information-and-resources/rights-and-entitlements/benefits-and-housing-public-funds/benefits/benefits-that-are-not-public-funds#guide-content> >

Objectives

The main objectives of this project are:

- Gather evidence on the different issues affecting people with NRPF;
- Understand how a prohibition on accessing public funds impacts different aspects of people's lives such as mental/physical health, access to housing/homelessness, employment, relationship with family/friends and social networks;
- Gather evidence on if/how regularising one's immigration status and getting access to public funds impacts their life and well-being;
- Gather evidence on the challenges that support organisations face when working with people with NRPF;
- Analyse all data to identify and shed light on challenges faced by individuals and organisations;
- Provide recommendations on a new model that could work and challenge the existing system;
- Use this research to draw on themes and inform wider research efforts and collaboration between the third sector and academics.

Methodology

Research Design

This project used qualitative methods to gather evidence and analyse findings.

RMC conducted two focus groups with clients of the Immigration Department who were either in the process of regularising their status and/or accessing public funds or clients who previously used RMC's services to this end. Whilst the first focus group was completed with 10 participants, the second one was completed with 6 participants. RMC also conducted two in-depth interviews with Immigration Caseworkers that have experience with supporting people with NRPF in their immigration matters. Both staff members interviewed have lived experience of UK's immigration system with one of them having lived experience of NRPF.

SIFA Fireside carried out three semi-structured interviews with three clients, with experience living with No Recourse to Public Funds, and two staff members. Whilst one staff, a Restricted Eligibility Navigator and Migrant Pathway Worker, was relatively new to the role, the other, now a Homeless Intervention Worker, previously held the same role as the first staff member. Additionally, SIFA Fireside conducted a creative workshop with seven clients, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and challenges through collages. This activity offered richer, more nuanced insights.

Participants in focus groups and client interviews received a £10 voucher as a token of appreciation for their time, while participants in the research activity were awarded a £20 voucher. Additionally, all clients had their travel expenses covered.

The purpose of these activities was to gather relevant data on their experiences and challenges as individuals with NRPF.

Data collection

The data was collected and analysed by the authors of this report. Both organisations completed all the activities in their premises.

The purpose of the research was explained to the participants orally and in writing and their written consent was obtained before the commencement of the activity.

Trauma Informed Practice and Psychologically Informed Environments approaches were adopted throughout the data collection to ensure that activities are designed and delivered in a way that takes into consideration the emotional and psychological needs of the service users engaged in the project.

The existing safeguarding procedures of the respective organisations were followed to ensure that participants were not re-traumatised.

Limitations

The principal investigators faced significant challenges balancing the demands of this research with their full-time employment. Resource constraints further compounded these difficulties. Notably, the study initially included three organisations, but one had to withdraw due to resource limitations. Moreover, coordinating the research between two separate organisations presented challenges in maintaining the consistency and homogeneity of the report.

Due to the duration and scope of this study, the sample size is limited. Additionally, as previously mentioned, participants for the focus groups needed a proficient understanding of English, as it was not feasible to conduct the focus groups with a dedicated interpreter. This requirement may have influenced the study's findings.

Findings

Sample

The focus groups comprised clients from different backgrounds prohibited from accessing public funds for different reasons. We held two focus groups and included participants with a good understanding of English as interpretation was not available.

Clients' Focus Group (RMC):

Participants	Ethnic Background	Age
Female	Black African	35 - 44
Male	Black Caribbean	65 or over
Female	Black African	55 - 64
Female	Black Caribbean	55 - 64
Male	Black Caribbean	65 or over
Female	White	45 - 54
Female	Eastern European	34 - 44
Female	Black Caribbean	45 - 54
Male	Black Caribbean	24 -34
Female	Black African	55 - 64
Female	Black Caribbean	55 - 64
Female	Indian	55 - 64
Male	Pakistani	35 - 44
Female	Black African	35 - 44
Female	Pakistani	45 - 54
Female	Black Caribbean	55 - 64

Clients' interviews at SIFA Fireside were conducted with three male participants of Eastern European backgrounds and with NRPF. While Client 1 was awaiting the EUSS decision, Client 2 had lost his passport, and Client 3 had pre-settled status.

Clients' one to one interviews (SIFA Fireside):

Participants	Ethnic Background	Age
Client 1	Eastern European MK	35 - 44
Client 2	Eastern European DS	35 - 44
Client 3	Eastern European IS	24 - 34

Staff interviews:

A total of 4 members of staff were interviewed across both organisations.

RMC	2 Immigration caseworkers
Sifa Fireside	Staff 1: Restricted Eligibility Navigator and Migrant Pathway worker Staff 2: Former Restricted Eligibility Navigator and Migrant Pathway worker

Creative Activity (SIFA Fireside):

The creative workshop was attended by seven male clients, where participants used collages to express their personal experiences and challenges.

Participants	Ethnic Background	Age
Participant 1	Bangladeshi	55 - 64
Participant 2	Eastern European Polish	35 - 44
Participant 3	Eastern European Polish	24- 34
Participant 4	Eastern European Romanian	24- 34
Participant 5	Pakistani	24- 34
Participant 6	Eastern European Romanian	24- 34
Participant 7	Indian	35 - 44

Focus Groups and Interviews with clients

The thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed several recurring themes and concerns among the interviewed individuals.

Here are the key themes identified:

Impact on Wellbeing / Emotional Distress and Anxiety

'Immigration has made us fearful'

A strong theme that emerged from the focus groups and interviews was the impact that the NPRF condition has on people's wellbeing.

All participants spoke about the anxiety experienced due to their uncertain immigration status. They felt that the process of regularising their status or accessing public funds was 'draining' and resulted in the, 'aging before their age'.

Client 1 (SIFA Fireside), who was awaiting a decision on their EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) application stated:

"I worry about the future, what's going to happen, I'm anxious when I think about it, I also become impatient and hopeless."

Client 2 (SIFA Fireside), who was in the process of applying for Settled Status and obtaining a new passport, talked about thinking about their immigration status 'every day', indicating the constant mental burden they carry. Equally, Client 3 (SIFA Fireside) despite holding pre-settled status shared concerns about potential removal saying,

"I think about it very often. I'm worried about being deported and not being able to live the life I want."

Participants also shared moments of emotional distress. They also shared how they felt 'like a burden' and that their living situation was 'shameful, demeaning and demoralising'. They noted several occasions where they felt they were 'treated like criminals' because they had no legal immigration status, and how they felt people were 'looking down on [them]' and 'treating [them] like trash'. All participants agreed that they were constantly scared and fearful due to their uncertain immigration status.

'You cannot have enjoyment in life, you are pretending all the time.'

'The room closed in on me with the stress. I couldn't stay in the room, I had to run'

It appears that this emotional strain has profound effects on their overall well-being, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness.

Impact on Wellbeing / Emotional Distress and Anxiety

Prohibition of accessing public funds is often linked with homelessness as people cannot access the social security system to get housing support and/or have no immigration status and no right to rent. Participants in the focus groups shared experiences of homelessness with some sofa surfing, some relying on family or friends for accommodation and others being street homeless or sleeping in their car. Some of the participants with children were able to access support from the social services.

Housing instability and experiences of homelessness directly impact the well-being of the three interviewees. Client 1 (SIFA Fireside) expressed concerns about being asked to leave their accommodation at any time,

"My housing situation isn't stable. I may be asked to leave the current one at any time."

Client 2 (SIFA Fireside) and Client 3 (SIFA Fireside) shared their experience of homelessness, with the former stating,

"Yes, I am currently homeless. Sometimes I sleep at the train station other times I stay with friends," and the latter revealing "I rough slept for a few days within the last 2 years."

Client 1 (SIFA Fireside) and Client 3 (SIFA Fireside) were housed but expressed worries about the stability of their living arrangements. Client 2 (SIFA Fireside), on the other hand, was homeless and described sleeping at the train station and relying on friends for temporary accommodation, highlighting the challenges faced by those without stable housing.

Clearly, the instability of their housing situation is a major concern for them. Access to stable housing is crucial for their well-being and is closely tied to their immigration status, as they may face eviction or difficulties in finding accommodation due to their NRPF status.

Homelessness not only affects physical health due to exposure to harsh weather conditions but also takes a toll on mental health, further contributing to feelings of insecurity, isolation, and vulnerability.

Financial Strain and Employment Barriers

All participants faced challenges in securing legal employment due to their immigration status or lack thereof.

Many participants shared that were working cash-in-hand as they had to support themselves and their families even if they were not legally allowed. Many participants noted that they 'just wanted to work' and did so as soon as they were allowed to.

Others reported that they remained unemployed, often due to caring responsibilities, leading to financial strain and instability.

Recruitment agencies and employers often enquire about their immigration status, making it challenging to access formal employment opportunities.

The inability to secure stable employment impacts their financial well-being, further exacerbating stress and hindering their ability to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare.

'Everyone has to borrow money. If you don't have anyone to borrow from you are stuck'

–

'How can I pay if I have no work... vicious circle.'

Participants also shared the financial difficulties they faced whilst being NRPF. Either because they are undocumented and cannot access the labour market or because they have no access to public funds, all participants struggled to provide for themselves and their families.

Many had to borrow from friends and family to be able to meet daily essential living needs.

They have found it very difficult to keep up with the cost of living and the high utility bills which has resulted in them accruing thousands of pounds in debt.

One of the participants stated they had to pay six months' rent in advance because they were unemployed. The prohibition from accessing the social security system has left them with high bills that they struggle to pay.

'All I can give them is the share code confirming that I have an active EUSS application. I currently work cash in hand, 20 hours a week' - Client 1 (SIFA Fireside)

–

'I did construction and factory work in the past, but I have not worked for the past 5 or 6 months because I do not have papers to show that I can work legally' - Client 2 (SIFA Fireside)

–

'I have a right to work but it's proven difficult to find legal employment without settled status. I work on a cash-in-hand basis from time to time' - Client 3 (SIFA Fireside)

–

'Every single person in this country works even if they say they are not. Give them a National Insurance Number to pay back to the country'

Social Isolation and Support Networks

'It affects my children's livelihoods, school is aware, [it affects] everything.'

The multifaceted problems that people with NRPF are facing can often impact also on the family and family relationships. Participants shared how lack of independent income can increase dependency on their partners and how this impacts their marriage and has often led to a breakdown of the relationship. Some participants also acknowledged that they

remained in unsuitable relationships due to the pressure and this dependency.

Having no recourse to public funds and/or immigration status also impacted the children in these families. Participants stated they have to 'put a strong face for the children' and that 'it's hard to explain to children when they get older about NRPF'.

However, not everyone has a family in the UK to provide accommodation or financial support and have to rely heavily on charities such as SIFA Fireside for basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. For instance, Client 1 (SIFA Fireside) stated,

"SIFA Fireside's help has been enormous. I don't know where I would have been if it wasn't for them. I have a roof over my head, I'm clean and sober."

Hence, highlighting the support received as crucial for their well-being. This is also emphasised by Client 2 (SIFA Fireside) as they said,

"I rely on the support I am receiving at SIFA Fireside."

Client 3 (SIFA Fireside) appreciated the support received from friends:

"I receive emotional support from loved ones. My friend is helping me navigate the complex system in the UK."

Despite receiving support from friends and charitable organisations, the three interviewees at SIFA Fireside expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness. Client 3 mentioned strained relationships with family members due to distance, while Client 2 described the difficulty of losing contact with friends and relying on temporary accommodations.

Social isolation can contribute to poor mental health outcomes, including depression and loneliness, further impacting overall well-being and quality of life.

Navigating the system and Access to Services

The limited awareness of available support was evident among the participants of the focus groups and the interviews. They express uncertainty about what assistance they are eligible for and often find out about their rights after accessing support from charitable organisations.

Participants in the focus groups stated that they were unaware of the provision of free immigration advice. Some didn't access advice for years due to not having the funds for the legal fees and others spent thousands of pounds, borrowing from family and friends. One of the participants noted that they spent around £38,000 in legal fees while trying to resolve their immigration issues, describing the experience as 'a nightmare'.

Some participants pointed out the disappointment of being granted only 2.5 years leave to remain after all this effort, money, and often residence in the UK. Some of them had already been living in the UK for 20 years, only to start their 10 year route to settlement with their first grant of 2.5 years of permission to stay. Participants said that 2.5 years of permission to stay is 'unreasonable' and the 10 year route to settlement and the high fees are 'money making'.

People also stated they were unaware of their entitlements, such as a fee waiver request towards an application for permission to stay or an application for change of conditions to lift the restriction on accessing public funds after permission is granted.

'Suddenly you find out about fee waiver, if you don't know how can you apply for it?'

One of the interviews, Client 2 (SIFA Fireside), mentioned losing their documentation, resulting in difficulty accessing services, while Client 1 (SIFA Fireside) expressed frustration with the delays in their EUSS application due to past criminal convictions. This stressed their challenges in understanding and navigating the immigration and legal processes.

Accounts of fear even when accessing services were striking. Several participants shared that schools or doctors will contact the authorities for advice on their immigration status which would make them fearful. This fear exists even when they access charities like RMC, scared of the unknown. One of the participants remembered first coming to RMC, referred by her social worker for immigration advice:

"I was entering the building and I held my daughter's hand tight. I was scared they will take her away from me because I had no documents."

Further, participants noted the arduous task of gathering evidence for all the immigration applications, some of them with a financial cost (eg some GP surgeries charge for supporting letters). Some to prove their residence, others to prove their destitution. As one participant put it, 'all my time is consumed gathering documents'. For some, getting this evidence is an almost impossible task. 'I can't get all the documents so I will stay NRPF.'


The aforementioned challenges are coupled with the lack of access to public funds which affects individuals' ability to access essential services such as healthcare, leading to unmet physical and mental well-being.

Participants described a spiral of debt, ill health and paying for hospital treatment while not being able to work, which created a vicious circle. Some participants spoke about health charges they accrued while undocumented and the stress that this caused not only because of the 'debt on our head for the rest of our life' but also because NHS debt of over £500 can be grounds for refusal for an immigration application.

Hope for the Future/ Impact of Regularising Immigration Status

Despite facing numerous challenges, all participants view obtaining immigration status and access to public funds as life-changing events that significantly improve their well-being and quality of life.

One of the participants noted that they started immediately working after obtaining legal status and have not stopped ever since. This has allowed them to support their family and start building their life. Another participant spoke about being able to get married after getting permission to stay. Whilst undocumented, the Home Office did not approve their marriage notice, so after 20 years of being together the couple was finally allowed to marry.



'We come in [to RMC] with tears, we go out with smiles'

Participants also spoke about ending the sleepless nights of worry and stress. They now have access to public funds and can start gradually paying off their debts and keeping up with their living costs. They can now 'sleep on their own bed' and plan the future.

Sharing their experience and the 'big impact' that regularising their immigration status and accessing public funds has had, one of the participants explained:

'I could never afford to buy something for my child. She would say 'mummy can I please have this' and I would say 'maybe next time' and I knew this next time will never come. Now when she says 'mummy can I please have this?' I say 'yes' and get it. Seeing the joy in her face, is the best experience ever'

During the interviews, Client 1 (SIFA Fireside) emphasised the transformative impact of obtaining settled status, stating,

"It will be a life changer. I will be able to lead a normal life. I will be able to get a normal job."

For Client 2 (SIFA Fireside), it was accessing benefits and employment:

"Everybody tells me, you cannot get housing because you do not receive benefits. Get your status and you can receive benefits."

Lastly, Client 3 (SIFA Fireside) anticipated improved employment opportunities and stable housing:

"I'll be able to get employment. I'll be able to get housing and have my own place. There will be more perspectives for me once I've got settled status."

They all anticipate that gaining settled status would lead to positive outcomes such as increased employment opportunities, stable housing, and the ability to lead a more normal life without constant fear of deportation or homelessness, Hence, a sense of stability, security, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

In summary, the study highlights the multifaceted impact of immigration status on the well-being of individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds. From emotional distress and housing insecurity to financial strain and social isolation, the challenges they face have significant implications for their mental, physical, and social well-being. However, there remains hope for a brighter future with the prospect of regularising their status and accessing essential support services.

Additionally, the narrative provided sheds light on the complex challenges faced by individuals with precarious immigration status by emphasising the importance of access to legal support, social services, and pathways to regularisation of the status of vulnerable populations. Our study demonstrates that regularising the immigration status and accessing public funds are seen as crucial steps toward improving the lives and well-being of those with No Recourse to Public Funds, providing them with stability, security, and a sense of belonging in their communities.

Interviews with staff members

SIFA Fireside: Interviews were conducted with two members of staff. Staff 1, a Restricted Eligibility Navigator and Migrant Pathway Worker at SIFA Fireside, is relatively new to their role, and working with individuals classified as No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) in the UK. Their responsibilities include advocating for clients with Migrant Help, especially when asylum accommodation is declined, and assisting with European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS) applications by collecting necessary evidence. Staff 2, now a Homeless Intervention Worker at SIFA Fireside, previously held the same role as Staff 2. They described their experience with NRPF clients to have been extensive and fast-paced, involving the identification of NRPF individuals at the SIFA support centre, determining their immigration status, and assessing the type of support they could be entitled to, with regards to their individual circumstances. One staff member had international experience, having worked in a supportive role overseas with people experiencing homelessness, while the other had firsthand experience of homelessness.

RMC: Interviews were conducted with two Immigration Caseworkers with experience supporting individuals with NRPF in their immigration matters. Both staff members had personal experience with the UK's immigration system, and one of them has specifically experienced living with NRPF.

Availability and access to services and lack of funding

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was the lack of services available to people with NRPF. Migrants with NRPF are often destitute and/or homeless and are in need of immediate support. Statutory support is limited to people with children that could potentially access support through s.17 of Children Act 1989 or adults with care needs.

When asked to identify the main challenges faced by individuals with NRPF, one of the interviewee shared the following:

"Destitution, Homelessness, Poor general wellbeing." - Staff 1(SIFA Fireside)

The most difficult to support cohort is healthy, single adults with NRPF who are left rough sleeping. No homeless shelter in Birmingham is available to them or the cities close by. This cohort is left vulnerable and often ends up being exploited as they are left desperate for any help. This includes overstayers and refused asylum seekers with no route of return to their home countries. In fact, staff members interviewed spoke to the financial difficulties service users face which often results in them being at risk of exploitation and even victims of modern slavery.

"No one is taking responsibility for them. They are vulnerable due to their immigration status, they lack health and well-being support, and are often experience modern-day slavery and exploitation. Many fall into drugs and alcohol, and bad company leading them to anti-social behaviour" – Staff 2 (SIFA Fireside)

Charities can support with food vouchers and some provide small grants to certain groups of people with NRPF such as refused asylum-seekers or victims of domestic abuse. But the capacity is limited and the support usually short term.

Further, practitioners talked about the difficulty in referring people with NRPF to local authorities for support. Even when statutory support should be available, accessing this support can be challenging with a lengthy process that needs to be navigated.

However, RMC has experience of collaborating with local authorities and staff members stressed the benefits of having direct contact with social workers to allow for effective communication and mutual referral pathways.

Interviewees also shared their experience of people with NRPF frequently being referred by other agencies to SIFA Fireside, creating expectations that staff cannot always meet, as they do not provide accommodation or direct immigration advice. This limitation often leads to difficult conversations with clients, particularly regarding the lack of available housing.

"Other agencies signpost people to SIFA Fireside, setting an expectation. We don't provide accommodation or immigration advice, therefore our support is limited to external referrals. It can be really hard to break the news to the clients." – Staff 1 (SIFA Fireside)

Whilst RMC can provide immigration advice, staff at the charity highlighted challenges in supporting people with NRPF discharged by hospitals straight to charities like RMC as they cannot find anywhere else to refer after the treatment is complete.

A factor exacerbating the pressure is the lack of funding for statutory services but also for charities that have stepped in to fill the gap and provide support to people with NRPF. Whilst reflecting on their role, one of the interviewees stated:

“There were limitations to what I could do. For instance, I could not accompany clients to appointments due to lack of resources. These clients cannot always navigate themselves, often they require befrienders. I would give them maps printed in their language however, they did not always make it to their appointments” – Staff 2 (SIFA Fireside)

Lack of legal aid and free immigration advice

Another major challenge that people with NRPF face is access to legal aid or free legal advice. The cases that are in scope for legal aid are limited and include protection (asylum) claims and trafficking/modern slavery but not applications based on family life (partners/parents and children of British or settled people) or private life (long residence in the UK).

Even when people have cases that could be in scope for legal aid, accessing it is almost impossible due to the limited numbers and/or capacity of legal aid providers.⁴

Accessing regulated immigration advice is essential for everyone but especially for people with NRPF that often have complex cases and not resolving their immigration status results in prolonged destitution. Some of the staff interviewed felt that more could be done

“The government must recognise that they should support those who are undocumented with regards to their individual circumstances, including those with an illegal status. Emphasise support rather than punishment.” – Staff 2 (SIFA Fireside)

While there are some organisations providing free and regulated immigration advice it is not enough to meet the demand. This, in conjunction, with the urgent need to access advice and regularise their status, can sometimes result in them being exploited by unscrupulous advisors that charge legal fees but provide no redress.

4. Dr Jo Wilding, ‘No access to justice: How legal advice deserts fail refugees, migrants and our communities’ May 2022 < https://assets.website-files.com/5eb86d8dfb1f1e1609be988b/62a1e16cba8478993c7d512c_No%20access%20to%20justice-%20how%20legal%20advice%20deserts%20fail%20refugees%20%20migrants%20and%20our%20communities.pdf >

Lack of awareness of rights

Staff members have also noted that service users are often not aware of their entitlements and options before they approach charities. Many migrants struggle financially, accrue debt or become destitute because they are not aware that they have options such as accessing support from the local authority, for example under s. 17 of Children Act 1989, applying to lift the NRPF condition from their permission to stay, apply for permission to stay.

Further, there are certain misconceptions preventing them from accessing their entitlements. Many are reluctant to access benefits, even when they are allowed to access public funds due to a perception that claiming benefits could have a negative impact in their future immigration applications. A similar misconception is that if they pay for the application fees and not request a fee waiver the Home Office will view their case more favourably and a decision will be faster. People often borrow money from friends or take bank loans to pay these fees, unaware of their rights.

At SIFA Fireside, in particular, it has been identified that service users' accurate immigration statuses are often very difficult to ascertain. Staff 2 (SIFA Fireside), emphasised the complexity of accurately determining clients' immigration statuses and the continuous need to stay updated on immigration policies. They highlighted the following:

"There are a lot of cases that come through the door and clients' accurate immigration status is often very difficult to ascertain."

- Staff 2 (SIFA Fireside)

This emphasises the ongoing struggle to provide adequate support due to the complex and ever-changing nature of immigration policies and the limited resources available to service providers.

Delays in decision making/Bureaucratic Hurdles and Systemic Barriers

A major challenge identified by the practitioners, is delays in decision-making at the Home Office. Migrants often have options to access public funds either by making an application for permission to stay and regularising their status or by applying to change the conditions of their permission to stay to allow them to access public funds. However, the current processing time for these applications, usually under the family or private life route, is 12 months.⁵

Additionally, some of them may opt to apply for a fee waiver before submitting their application if they cannot afford the fees which can add up to six months to the waiting time. A decision on an application to lift the NRPF condition on permission granted is currently taking 6-8 months. After migrants regularise their status or are allowed to access public funds, they face further delays in accessing benefits such as Universal Credit which usually takes 6 weeks for the first payment.

The prolonged decision-making process exacerbates the difficulties faced by individuals with NRPF. Hence, contributing to longer periods of homelessness and destitution. Both Staff 1 and Staff 2 at SIFA Fireside highlight homelessness as a critical challenge. With the Home Office taking up to 12 months to process applications for permission to stay or change conditions, individuals with NRPF are left without access to public funds, leading to severe financial hardship and insecurity.

5. Home Office Visa processing times: applications inside the UK, 10 February 2024 < <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/visa-processing-times-applications-inside-the-uk> >

Emotional Toll

The emotional distress and anxiety that service users experience are detailed above.

However, all the above create an emotional toll on advisors as well who constantly have to navigate a complex system, with very limited services available, and often come to terms with the fact that support for people with NRPF is sparse or even non-existent.

Advisors must spend hours and days with service users in distress, in precarious living situations and/or with traumatic experiences and be a listening ear for them. As one staff member stated, *We end up being counsellors instead of caseworkers*. The vicarious trauma experienced by advisors and support workers should not be underestimated.

The narratives of both staff interviewed at SIFA Fireside underscore the empathy and dedication they bring to their roles. Their international experience, *I have experience working with people from different countries and experience of casework*. – Staff 1 (SIFA Fireside)

and personal history of homelessness, *"Having been homeless myself and having interacted with people from various backgrounds on the streets helped me communicate with different nationalities"*- Staff 2 (SIFA Fireside) enhance their ability to connect with clients. However, this deep emotional connection also makes them susceptible to vicarious trauma. The emotional toll of consistently engaging with clients' distressing stories and circumstances can lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Creative Workshop

To complement the interviews and focus groups, a creative activity was incorporated into the research. Seven SIFA Fireside clients, who are ineligible for public funds, were invited to create collages that represent their thoughts, feelings, and experiences concerning their situation and life in the UK.

Given that all participants' first language was not English and may not have been proficient, it was identified that a collage would enable them to convey thoughts and emotions that might not be easily expressed through words alone, offering richer and more nuanced insights. Additionally, the interactive nature of collage-making would likely make the research process more enjoyable and participatory. Hence, fostering a sense of safety and inclusivity.

The analysis of collage activity completed by the research participants revealed several distinct themes, reflecting diverse personal experiences, emotions, and aspirations. These major themes are outlined as follows:

TALK TO US

Participant 1

NO ONE TALK WHEN U NEED THE MOST
NO BENEFITS NO HOUSING

PEOPLE LIVES INTENTS SLEEP IN PARKS



TRIANGLE OF SADNESS

WITH NO HELP AND LIVING
IN A STREETS MOST OF PEOPLE
DO CRIME AND DRUGS



Struggles with Social Systems and Survival

Participants expressed feelings of being neglected or unsupported by social systems, emphasising their hardships. For instance, participant 1 highlighted a lack of communication and support from social services, leading to homelessness and crime. The phrases "no benefits, no housing" and "Fight to the finish" suggest a struggle for survival and a desperate battle against systemic neglect. The "Triangle of sadness" metaphorically represents the despair and entrapment felt in these circumstances. An interesting fact here is also that the image used to represent the "Triangle of sadness" is a tent in a park, a makeshift shelter people use when they have nowhere else to go, highlighting the harsh reality of living without a permanent home.

For individuals living in the UK with NRPF, fighting and surviving become integral aspects of daily life. These individuals face significant challenges in accessing basic social benefits and public services, such as housing, healthcare, and education. Navigating a complex and often hostile bureaucratic system, they must frequently advocate for their rights in the face of discrimination, systemic barriers, and social exclusion. Survival involves constant struggle, often relying on informal networks, community organisations, charities, or precarious employment. This can include enduring exploitative working conditions, homelessness, or inadequate medical care.

Gender Dynamics and Identity

Gender roles and perceptions play a significant role in participants' self-identification and experiences with others. Participant 2 contrasts negative experiences with men ("Men in my life are trouble") with positive attributes of women ("Women are lovely, cute, boss queen"), indicating complex gender dynamics and a sense of empowerment in identifying with strong female figures.

The recurring presence of these feminine figures in the collages highlights the crucial roles women play in the participants' lives as sources of support and care. Mothers, sisters, and partners are depicted as pillars of strength and nurturing. These images emphasise the importance of human connections and support networks, especially in the absence of adequate social services and public funds. Strong female figures symbolise empowerment, resilience, liberation, and determination. The client's self-identification as a tiger further symbolises strength and resilience which are also explored by the other participants.



Participant 2


Resilience and Personal Strength

Similar to Participant 2, several participants used animal metaphors and other imagery to express their inner strength and resilience. Participant 3 compared themselves to a cheetah, emphasising speed and survival skills. Added to that, the reference to Allan Watts' parable stresses a philosophical approach to enduring hardships: confronting challenges directly without succumbing to pain.

The wild cat, it seems, symbolises various attributes that resonate with the participants' experiences, including resourcefulness, self-reliance, survival instincts, resilience, strength, and alertness. These attributes reflect the participants' need to be vigilant and adaptable in their challenging circumstances, drawing on inner strength to navigate their environment

YOU'RE LIKE **Cheetah** IN MY MIND!!!
(MESSAGE TO THE WORLD)

**World's
fastest
battle and
How to
survive**



A STUDENT ONCE ASKED HIS BUDDHIST MASTER:
IT'S TERRIBLE HOT IN HERE AND HOW SHOULD WE ESCAPE THE
HOT? HEAT?
AND THE MASTER SAY:
- GO STRAIGHT INTO THE FURNACE!
- OK BUT THEN HOW SHOULD WE DO WITH THE BURNING FIRE?
- NO FURTHER PAIN SHALL BE EXPERIENCED!
- Allan watts!

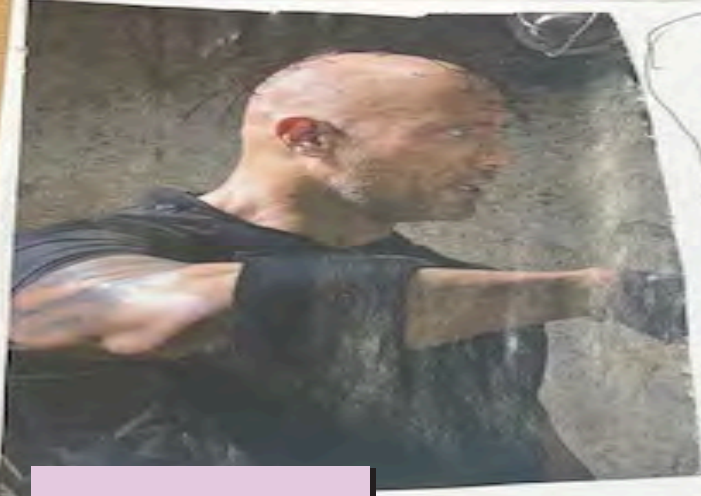
Participant 3

IT COMES A POINT WHEN AND WHERE
LIFE MEANS DEATH
AND DEATH MEANS LIFE!

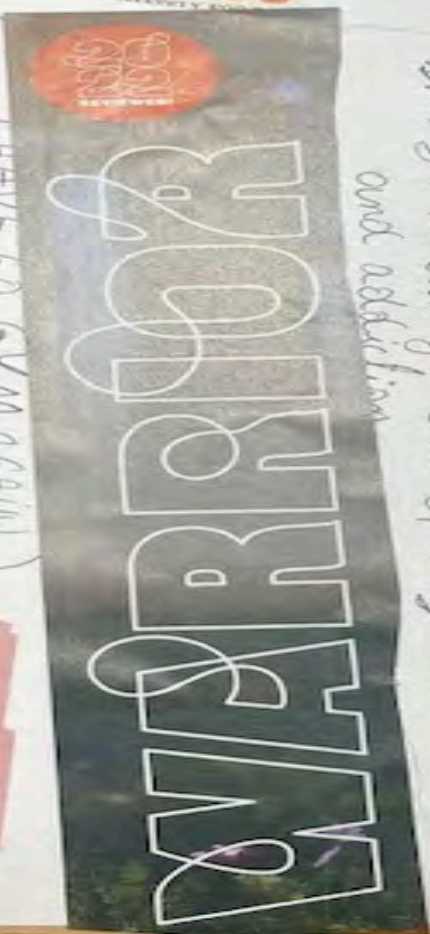


I NEED HOLIDAY VOUCHER

FIGHTS



I HAVE GO GYM AGAIN
BECAUSE I LOST 20KG IN 2 MONTH



I think that if a person is mentally strong, he can get out of any situation and addiction

Participant 5



Participant 5 on the other hand, embodied resilience through images of strength ("Strong man") and a warrior mentality, indicating a belief in mental fortitude to overcome difficulties and addiction.

Aspirations for Stability and Success

Imagery related to stability, comfort, and success reveals participants' aspirations for a better life. Participant 4's sun-shaped collage, featuring positive affirmations ("Take charge and building your confidence") and images of food, homes, and nature, suggested a desire for stability, growth, and a nurturing environment.



Participant 4

Participant 7



Participant 7's image of a person in a formal suit juxtaposed with a casually dressed young person implied a connection between success and appearance, as well as the journey to professional achievement ("Success leaves clues").

Nature and Escapism

Nature is a recurring theme, symbolising peace, escape, and a desire for a harmonious environment. Participant 6 included images of nature, flowers, and peaceful scenes, such as sitting in a park surrounded by mountains, which convey a longing for tranquillity and a reprieve from life's pressures. Participant 5's camper van image and a car driving away, denoted a need for a holiday and an escape from everyday stressors.

Nature and the colour green stand in stark contrast to the harsh urban realities of Birmingham. Participants with restricted eligibility often lack the means for leisure activities or holidays, resulting in limited access to natural environments, rest, and peace. Despite these hardships, nature represents hope and renewal. The colour green, often associated with growth and vitality, symbolises the participants' aspirations for positive change and resilience in the face of adversity.



Participant 6

Social Connections and Isolation

Participants reflected on their relationships and feelings of isolation or connection. Participant 1 mentioned isolation due to lack of communication ("No one talks to us when we need it the most"). Participant 5 displayed a complex view of relationships, as seen in the image of the "Just married car with the groom but the bride is cut off," suggesting ambivalence or detachment from traditional marital roles.

The collages, despite potential variations in individual symbolism, collectively represented shared objectives, struggles, and experiences within the broader context of destitution and social injustice. Each piece offered a profound insight into the participants' lives, shedding light on their resilience and the systemic challenges they face. This creative approach not only enriched the research data but also empowered participants to articulate their realities in a meaningful and impactful way.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This collaborative research project, facilitated by the BVSC and the University of Birmingham, and undertaken by RMC and SIFA Fireside, has provided profound insights into the challenges faced by individuals with NRPF. Over the span of several months, the study gathered extensive qualitative data through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and a creative workshop, highlighting the multifaceted struggles experienced by this vulnerable population.

The findings illustrate the severe impacts of the NRPF status on individuals' lives, including housing insecurity, financial strain, social isolation, and the emotional toll of navigating complex bureaucratic systems. The prohibition from accessing public funds not only exacerbates homelessness and destitution but also perpetuates a cycle of exploitation and marginalisation. The testimonies of clients and support staff underline the urgent need for systemic change to address these persistent issues.

Moreover, the project reveals the critical role of support organisations like RMC and SIFA Fireside in providing essential services and advocacy for individuals with NRPF. Despite the significant challenges, these organisations offer a lifeline, helping individuals regularise their immigration status and access vital resources. The creative workshop component of the research further highlights the resilience and aspirations of people with NRPF, demonstrating their hopes for stability, success, and a better future.

Through the findings of these activities as well as our longstanding experience working with people with no recourse to public funds we have the following recommendations:

Improve infrastructure to tackle homelessness and poverty:

- Increase funding for local authorities to be able to provide support for destitute families and individuals and provide emergency accommodation to homeless, vulnerable individuals irrespective of immigration status;
- Increase funding for organisations supporting people with NRPF and allocate resources specifically for housing and essential services to alleviate immediate needs and reduce homelessness and destitution among this population;

- Explore innovative housing solutions for individuals with NRPF, such as partnerships with housing associations, the use of vacant properties, and short-term accommodation schemes;
- Create integrated service hubs where people with NRPF can access multiple services in one location, including healthcare, legal advice, and social support;
- Establish emergency support mechanisms, such as crisis funds and rapid response teams, to assist people with NRPF who are facing immediate threats of homelessness or destitution.

Improve access to information and advice:

- Increase capacity for legal aid by increasing the fees paid for each case and reducing the bureaucracy involved in the auditing process to ensure there is an adequate number of legal aid providers;
- Improve access to clear and accurate information on gov.uk website on entitlements and options for people with NRPF in relation to immigration applications, support from local authorities, financial support available.

Improve access to statutory support:

- Increase capacity for mental health support by reducing the waiting lists and ensuring people can access necessary services promptly;
- Improve partnerships and communication between social services and organisations supporting people with NRPF to allow mutual cooperation and more efficient referrals.

Changes in policy and practice:

- Advocate for policy changes to provide individuals with NRPF temporary support, including access to housing and basic benefits while awaiting decisions on their immigration status;
- Process fee waiver applications, applications to lift the NRPF applications and applications for further leave to remain faster;
- Remove the NRPF condition for all human-rights based applications (family applications, private life applications, medical claims).



SIFA
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